

FIVE UNEASY PIECES: ESSAYS ON SCRIPTURE AND SEXUALITY

Nigel Wright, Michael Kirby and Bill Countryman
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After the title, interest in 1970s art house cinema is quickly put aside, and the five pieces are revealed to be seven, including the introduction and

foreword by Michael Kirby and Bill Countryman. This collection puts forward a case for a more progressive reading of contentious scriptural texts, which are the focus of dispute of same-sex issues, and are focussed on that debate particularly within the Anglican communion. As is the way of such a writing, a response has already been forthcoming from the opposite corner in the form of *Sexegesis* (<http://www.sexegesis.com/>).

The five essays which provide the title deal with contentious texts: Gen 19, Lev 18:22 and 20:13, Rom 1:26–27, 1 Cor 6:9–10 and 1 Tim 1:8–11. In itself this is revealing, for it shows how an issue which seems limited in its biblical appearances has come to dominate the Anglican theological landscape. The book is aimed at a popular market, most likely discussions in parishes and church groups about issues around sexuality. As such, what is on offer does not move the more technical academic debate far.

As an example, Megan Warner's chapter on Genesis ("Were the Sodomites really Sodomites") does not offer substantial advances on the debate which played out in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in 1997: the issue remains one of whether or not *yd'* always includes a sexual element. This would still appear unresolved. Sometimes this dated feeling includes the bibliography: it is interesting that Alan Cadwallader's piece does not include engagement with Anthony Thiselton's magisterial commentary on First Corinthians (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) which stresses that the behaviours criticised by Paul have a strong connection with wealth, power and status. The omission is all the more puzzling given Thiselton's status as an Anglican commentator on hermeneutics, and his avowed intention of giving a starting point to such issues in his commentary, and the detailed consideration given to vice-lists in the Greco-Roman world. The answer may lie in the fact that Cadwallader uses a heavy-handed critique of etymology to rule out all possible engagement with OT texts, whereas Thiselton, without committing the etymological fallacies of which Cadwallader rightly warns, still views the Judaic materials as important interpretive tools for these difficult verses. A further significant item in Thiselton's analysis is the point that Paul's attitudes to sexuality in 1 Cor 6 embrace other behaviours which affect the body, all associated with idolatry—a factor which is not addressed by Cadwallader's reductionist focus on honour and property. This is an important point, because the atomising of Rom 1, with an almost exclusive focus on the verses about sex, provides the same distortion. Romans 1 is about idolatry and embraces other behaviours, too. Yet, these have failed to attract the attention or controversy raised by sexuality.

One of the things that is particularly striking about this collection is, however, its narrow theological focus. It is worth pointing this out by reference to treatments of sexuality in classical literature. These have seen huge sea changes in the philosophical underpinning of such discussions. As John Rundin noted, in a review of Verstraete's *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West* (in *Phoenix* 62, no. 3/4 [2008]), the constructionism of Halperin, Foucault and others seems to have been, at least in part, rejected, with the implication that there is no longer such a great gulf between modern and ancient sexualities. The index of *Five Uneasy Pieces* suggests no engagement with this contemporary shift. This may be too abstruse, or simply reflect the fact that church debate has never really accepted the ideological claim that the scriptures are rendered completely alien on the basis of modern theory.

However, a second point made by Rundin is worth quoting: "In their eagerness to find congeners in the ancient world, scholars with a position based on identity politics sometimes overlook the rhetorical purpose of the evidence in its own milieu and assume it is pointing to some real thing" (p. 425).

This is particularly in evidence in the theological exploration of Rom 1:26–27 undertaken by Peta Sherlock. It shows both how much the church debate and handling of these verses has been restricted by an atomised focus on sexuality (see above) and hijacked by this literalist tendency. Romans 1 is a rhetorical passage. It deals with a subject (idolatry) which has a history of being treated with hyperbole and rhetoric (consider Ezek 20), yet the debate in the modern church persists (with the collusion of both liberals and conservatives) in treating such passages literally.

Perhaps what is needed to move debate on is not the recycling of closed theological arguments shaped by an atomising biblical literalism and modern identity politics (be they of the right or the left) but a genuine rhetorical reading of the texts.

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