

# The Bible and Same-Gender Marriage

*Mary A. Tolbert*

*Keynote address delivered at Wisconsin's Statewide Conference on Same Gender Marriage  
December 4, 2004*

“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; wherever you go I will go, and wherever you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

I am sure that everyone here has heard these beautiful words from the book of Ruth in the Old Testament. Most of you, indeed, have probably heard these words most often during marriage ceremonies or weddings, since those are the settings in which this passage is typically read in Protestant churches. Marriage seems the perfect setting for this passage from Ruth because the words underscore the intimacy, fidelity, commitment, and deep affectional connection that primarily define modern conceptions of marriage. Yet, in the book of Ruth itself, these passionate words of affection, intimacy, faithfulness, and commitment unto death are spoken by one woman to another woman. It is profoundly ironic that words describing the depth and breadth of a biblical same gender relationship are now most commonly employed by the church in blessing legal marriage, an institution from which, sadly, same gender couples today in the state of Wisconsin and 48 other states are barred.

Moreover, the Wisconsin State Legislature is presently considering a constitutional amendment that would not only prohibit same gender couples from marrying, a right they do not even have at the present time, but would also destroy whatever minor protections some same gender couples have been able to find through domestic partnership agreements at their businesses and in some localities. This constitutional amendment is, on the one hand, completely unnecessary and, on the other hand, profoundly mean-spirited. While setting out to harass and imperil the families of some citizens of this state is bad enough, what distresses me as a Christian so deeply is the enlistment of the Bible as one of the major excuses some people use to justify such an outrageous and unprovoked attack on the security and welfare of their neighbors.

Let's be very clear about this: nowhere in the Bible is same gender marriage prohibited, or even mentioned, for that matter. In order to argue that the Bible prohibits civil recognition of same gender relationships, one is reduced to arguing from silence. But we also need to be clear about another fact: the traditions of marriage actually found in the Bible, the ones the Bible does talk about, bear little or no resemblance to what modern Western people understand marriage to do and be today. Marriage between one man and one woman as envisioned by people today was never the ideal relationship in the Bible. Moreover, marriage is not, as some commentators, politicians, and even religious leaders, have recently contended, an “unchanging tradition of thousands of years.” Rather, marriage, like all other social institutions is quite variable and has gone through many different forms over the course of history and across many cultures.

For the ancient Mediterranean world from which the Bible came the primary purpose of marriage was the production of legitimate heirs and the management of the household. Sexual compatibility, mutuality, intimacy, and certainly sexual faithfulness, at least for men, were neither values nor concerns of ancient marriage. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible polygyny, the presence of multiple women in the family, was the most common pattern of marriage. Whether we look at patriarchs like Jacob or religious leaders

like Moses or kings like David, we have ample evidence for a common pattern of multiple wives. The most formidable example of this pattern can be found in Solomon, David's son, who had, so the Bible tells us, 700 wives and 300 concubines. While concubines were not the same as wives, who produced legitimate heirs for their husband, concubines were officially connected to the husband usually by family contract and were often treated in much the same way as wives. In addition to all of these legitimate wives and concubines, ancient males both in Israel and Judah and in later Greco-Roman times had plentiful access to other sexual workers including slaves and prostitutes. As the famous quotation from Greek writer Demosthenes makes clear: "This is what it means to be married: to have sons one can introduce to the family and the neighbors, and to have daughters of one's own to give to husbands. For we have courtesans for pleasure, concubines to attend to our daily bodily needs, and wives to bear children legitimately and to be faithful wards of our homes." This multi-leveled sexual arrangement hardly describes the current state of marriage in America, as I think most people would agree.

Today, mutuality, intimacy, life-long companionship, shared economics, and sexual pleasure are generally listed as central values for marital relationships. Even the creation of progeny is not as high a value in many discussions—especially Protestant discussions—of contemporary marriage as mutuality and intimacy have become. Because some married couples in our seriously over-populated world have made the moral choice to forgo childbearing and because marriage between people incapable of childbearing, like the elderly or impotent, is still valued and encouraged, the production of offspring as the *sine qua non* of marriage has dropped out of many discussions of contemporary marital values, even Christian marital values. However, the production of legitimate heirs within a decorously ordered household was the most important function of marriage in antiquity.

Early Christianity actually deviated remarkably from this general cultural understanding of marriage as the production of heirs to bring greater status to the family. Indeed the earliest Christians, especially Jesus and Paul, being themselves unmarried men, as the Bible portrays them, tended to reject marriage in favor of celibacy and especially later, virginity. After all, in the gospel of Matthew (19:10-12) when the disciples object to Jesus' teaching forbidding divorce and re-marriage (a teaching many Christians today skim over without serious notice), Jesus recommends that the best option for life, though few may be able to adopt it, is to become eunuchs for the kingdom of God. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 suggests that while marriage is not a sin, it is better for Christians not to be married. For Paul, marriage and family brought with them the complications of the world, distracting Christians from their primary duty of living *in Christ*. Since Paul and many other early Christians expected the return of Jesus on the clouds of glory at any moment, the production of offspring or the concerns with family honor and wealth were of little importance or value. Paul did, however, recognize one possible reason for marriage among Christians: it was better, he said, to marry than to burn with passion. For those Christians whose passions were too strong (1 Corinthians 7:36) for their own will to control, marriage was an acceptable path for channeling and ultimately, perhaps, destroying passion. In other words, for Paul marriage became a kind of remedy for lust. This suggestion makes more sense than might at first appear. As we have already noted, in the first century Mediterranean world, free men of some means married primarily for lineage and offspring, not for passion. They were completely free to satisfy their passions and desires outside of marriage with prostitutes, courtesans, mistresses, and all the other classes of available sexual laborers, slave and free, male and female. To limit passion and desire only to the one marriage partner was for a man a severe sexual curtailment, which might well result in the eroding of passion altogether.

And the eroding of passion was exactly what Paul and other early Christian writers had in mind. For many early Christians only marriage as a discipline of chastity, denying all passion and sexual pleasure, was acceptable in a Christian context. St. Jerome famously said that any man who loved his own wife too much was in fact guilty of adultery. Jerome came to this conclusion by interpreting the words of Jesus in

the Gospel of Matthew that anyone who lusted in his heart was already an adulterer. Passion and lust, whether outside the context of marriage or even within it, were the deadly sins which concerned the church. The corollary to this negative view of passion and pleasure was the position that the only moral sexual act was a passionless one for the purpose of procreation alone; sexuality out of passion or for pleasure was deemed profoundly immoral. Since procreation was most responsibly undertaken in the context of a secure marriage, the logic that only sexual acts within marriage for the purpose of procreation could be morally acceptable became the argument of the church for much of Christian history. At the heart of this argument lies a mighty affirmation of chastity and an equally strong rejection of pleasure, two views at complete odds from most of contemporary U.S. society.

Indeed marriage itself as an institution was of little consequence to the Christian church during its first 1000 years. Perhaps the focus on chastity, celibacy and monasticism, which only grew in fervor as the expected return of Jesus was continually delayed, encouraged the church to downplay the importance of marriage and family. Whatever the reason, marriage did not become an official sacrament of the church until the early 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.. Interestingly and ironically given our current debate, the early Puritan settlers in this country had a similar perspective on marriage to that of the early church. The free church Protestant ministers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries generally refused to attend, much less perform, marriages (or for that matter funerals). The Puritans, who were the first East Coast settlers in this country from Western Europe, saw no biblical warrant for performing marriages of any kind, and in Roger Williams's colony of Rhode Island, clergy were actually forbidden by law from performing marriage ceremonies, since marriage was viewed as much too worldly an institution for the church to be involved with. In these early Puritan and Anabaptist colonies marriage was left in the hands of civil authorities. Of course, marriage in this country is still in the hands of civil authorities rather than the church, even though many Americans may not actually realize that fact. It is the civil government that determines who can marry and who cannot, as lesbian and gay people know only too well and the proposed constitutional amendment in the legislature confirms; it is the government that decides under what conditions marriages may be ended and who must pay what to whom. Members of the clergy who perform weddings actually become agents of the state when they sign a marriage certificate, and other people bonded by the state who are not members of the clergy are equally empowered to perform weddings. In fact, though many gay and lesbian couples in Wisconsin have been married in church services over the past 30 years, none of those marriages is deemed legal under state law. It is the state and not the action of churches that determines who is and who is not married in this country. Yet even with that reality, most of the arguments used to support this present mean-spirited effort to harass legislatively the gay and lesbian citizens of Wisconsin use religion, and especially Christianity, to rationalize their attack.

If neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament contain much support for the contemporary understanding of marriage in US society, and neither say anything about same-gender marriage, positively or negatively, where does all this biblical witness against same-gender relationships come from? That is a very good question. As many of you may know, the Bible actually has very little to say about homoeroticism or same-gender sexuality of any kind, and what little it does say in a couple of verses in Leviticus or Romans, for example, is fraught with ambiguity and cultural particularities. For instance, if Lev. 18:22, which apparently prohibits anal intercourse (“you shall not lie with a male the lying of a wife”), is to be taken over as a moral law in contemporary culture, why would we not also as a culture take over “kosher” eating practices, since much longer sections of both Lev 17 and 19 prohibit eating the “blood” of any animal? If we are as a society perfectly content to let those people who wish to keep kosher as a religious practice, do so but not to force everyone to abide by these Levitical rules, on what grounds do we single out one verse of the passage for universal obedience, outside of any particular religious context?

The religious particularity of the Levitical rules is matched by the strong cultural and historical conditioning that gave rise to them. The truth of the matter is that equal and loving relationships between same-gender people as we know them today did not exist in the same way in the cultures of Mediterranean antiquity. The single most important concept that defined sexuality in the ancient Mediterranean world, whether we are talking about the kingdoms of Egypt or of Assyria or whether we are talking about the later kingdoms of Greece and Rome, was that approved sexual acts never occurred between social equals; it was not a matter of gender choice but instead a matter of social class. Sexuality, by definition in ancient societies required the combination of dominance and submission. This crucial social and political root metaphor of dominance and submission as the definition of sexuality rested upon a physical basis that assumed every sex act required a penetrator and someone who was penetrated. Needless to say, this definition of sexuality was entirely male—not surprising in the heavily patriarchal societies of the ancient Mediterranean. Nevertheless this assumption that the difference in status between the dominant penetrator and the submissive penetratee was essential to all sexual behavior was prevalent in most sources from at least the Egyptian empires of the Second Millennium BCE all the way through the late Roman Empire and beyond. Of course, we must recognize that the vast majority of the laws and other texts from antiquity that give us some insight into sexual roles were written by elite men. Whether or not the convention of dominance and submission as the defining aspect of sexuality was actually embodied in all sexual acts across these societies and not just in the writing about all sexual acts remains unknown. Our knowledge is constrained, as always in history, by our sources.

Because sexual acts were defined as the combination of dominance and submission, sexual acts between men could have and often did have strongly political overtones. For example, the early Egyptian legend of the relations between the gods Horus and Seth demonstrate the political use of anal intercourse as a way of embarrassing a rival political power.<sup>1</sup> Horus, as you may remember, was the son of Isis and Osiris, and Osiris had been murdered by his brother Seth. So, now, Horus and Seth were contenders for supremacy among the gods. One of the episodes in the myth relates the time when Seth invited Horus to his home for what appeared to be a conciliatory meal. However, the real purpose of the meal was to further Seth's royal aims by providing him with a situation in which he could anally rape Horus while he was sleeping after dinner. Seth's sexual dominance over Horus would prove to all the gods that Horus was unworthy to be supreme among them and that Seth was the truly superior one. While this particular stratagem did not work out to Seth's advantage in this myth because of the fortuitous intervention of Isis to protect her son, the story does demonstrate what became a very common usage for male/male sexual intercourse in the ancient Mesopotamian world particularly, that is, the demonstration of the political dominance of one group over another. In a similar vein from Greek culture there is a famous picture that celebrates the victory of the Athenians over the Persians in 460 BCE. In the picture a Greek soldier with erect penis in hand approaches from the rear a distressed, defeated Persian soldier who is bent over waiting to be raped by the Greek. The picture is not pornography but politics because it was intended to show, through the imagery of male-male sexual intercourse, that the Greeks now dominate the submissive Persians. In myth, law, treaties, monuments, and pottery decorations, political and military domination was often conventionally symbolized by sexual domination of one man over another. It was one way in which individual men and nations could prove their dominance and claim to honor over their foes or competitors. Indeed, one biblical scholar has suggested that the Levitical prohibition against anal intercourse was actually intended to prohibit the use of this kind of sexual struggle for dominance and honor among Hebrew men, eliminating one potential area of division and friction within the nation in order to preserve social harmony. Hebrew males were not to dishonor other Hebrew males by treating

---

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, translated by K. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 19-20

them like wives. The underside of this law, of course, is that wives were normally and naturally to be dishonored, or perhaps, better said, that passivity, which was dishonorable for a man, was assumed to be the natural condition of women. Whatever the rationale behind the prohibition, it arises from and speaks to a particular social and cultural situation very different from our own—and a social and cultural situation, it should be pointed out, which treated women and especially wives as solely male possessions.

Given the significant historical and cultural problems with the Bible's very few comments related to same-gender relationships and its complete lack of comment on same-gender marriage, how can some Christians argue that the Bible prohibits such marriage? It turns out that most of the Christian advocates for heterosexual privilege in marriage law rest their case for the importance and exclusivity of heterosexual marriage today on just two verses from the creation stories: Gen. 1:27 and Gen 2:24, verses, which Jesus also quotes in his argument with the Pharisees over divorce and re-marriage in Mark 10:6-8 and Matt 19:4-5. The part of Gen 1:27 that Jesus quotes says, "he [meaning God] made them male and female." For some conservative commentators, just the fact that God, according to the Genesis creations accounts, created two genders, male and female, is sufficient to rule out same-gender relationships. The logic of that conclusion, however, is very peculiar. After all, most same-gender relationships are just as dependent as opposite gender relationships on the presence of two genders, males and females. The simple fact that God in Genesis 1 is said to have created males and females does not in any way rule out love between two males or two females; indeed for many same-gender couples the distinctions between men and women are precisely what attracts them to people of the same gender in the first place. If Gen 1:27 does nothing to strengthen the argument against same gender relationships, what about Gen. 2:24? Gen 2:24 says that "a man shall leave (or abandon—a strong verb in Hebrew) his father and his mother and cling to his woman and they shall become one flesh." This verse in Genesis immediately follows, as its conclusion a verse in which the man recognizes the newly created woman with the words, "She is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for from man she was taken." Since in other places in the Old Testament the concept of being the same bones and flesh of someone else is a common metaphor for kinship (for example, later in Genesis 29:14, Laban greets his nephew Jacob as "my bones and flesh"; and in 2 Samuel 19:12-13, David greets some of the men of Judah as "my brothers, my bone and my flesh"; see also, Judges 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1; 1 Chr 11:1), Jesus uses this verse from Genesis in his argument with the Pharisees about divorce to evoke similar kinship ties for marriage. Basically Jesus is saying that divorce is impossible because marriage is less a legal commitment than a kinship or "blood" relationship. Since uncles cannot divorce their nephews and sisters cannot divorce their brothers, husbands also cannot divorce their wives. Only death can break kinship bonds; no writ of divorce can do it.

While Jesus' use of Gen 2:24 does seem to imply that he thinks the verse describes marriage, Paul also quotes this same verse from Genesis when he is trying to persuade the men of the Corinthian community to stop visiting prostitutes; Paul says, "Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two shall become one flesh'" (1 Cor 6:16). Rather plainly for Paul in this case, Gen 2:24 does not refer to marriage or any kind of kinship relationship but instead to sexual intercourse itself. Moreover, when Paul quotes Jesus' views forbidding divorce (1 Cor 7:10-11), he does not cite Gen 2:24 as a supporting argument. Thus, Paul explicitly uses Gen 2:24 in describing prostitution but avoids using it when discussing marriage, divorce, or remarriage. Evidently, for him marriage is not what Gen 2:24 concerns.

If we look at the verse in its own context in Genesis, marriage is also rather clearly not what it is about. Now, how do I know that? Well, the verse says that a man will abandon his father and mother and cling to his woman, and that pattern is the exact opposite of what happened in marriage in antiquity. Marriage in Israel and beyond was exogamous and patrilocal, that is, the wife left her family/tribe and

joined that of her husband. While Western society is no longer strictly-speaking patrilineal, the practice of wives taking on the last names of their husbands is a remnant of this older patrilineal custom. If you heard today that a man had totally abandoned the name of his father and mother and taken on the name of his woman (not a hyphenated name or some third name), you would not assume that a typical marriage arrangement was being described (you might assume that this indicates some serious break between the man and his blood family). Similarly, for an ancient audience, the statement that a man abandons his father and mother and clings to his woman would not suggest marriage or any kind of typical familial relationship. Many scholars have struggled with the meaning of this verse in Genesis and most of them have concluded that it cannot be a reference to marriage, since it was unheard of for the husband to leave his family and join that of the wife. So, in the end if we really pay close attention to what the Bible actually says, even this one verse upon which the case for exclusively heterosexual marriage is primarily built proves also to be a problematic and crumbling foundation.

Let me return to what I said at the beginning: there is no prohibition in the Bible against same-sex marriage. The arguments marshaled to try to make the case from the Bible must rely either on a few problematic verses that seem to prohibit or demean homoeroticism, as it was understood in the ancient world, or on a verse drawn out of the Genesis creation accounts that current advocates for heterosexual-only marriage want to make a universal definition of marriage, when it was clearly not even the definition of marriage prevalent in the ancient Mediterranean world itself. Consequently, all of these attempts, when examined carefully fail to persuade.

Unfortunately, not many people examine them carefully. While I fully believe that many Christians (and non-Christians) love the Bible, I also believe that not many of them actually read it. So, claiming the support of the Bible, even with very weak arguments, can be influential for many people who hold the Bible in reverence but never really bother to study what it says. But the problem is more serious than that: I think, and history supports me on this, that you can prove pretty much anything you want from the Bible, if you are sufficiently creative and willing to take material out of context and read the present into it. I actually learned this truth about the Bible very early in my life. When I was about nine, a friend came to me to tell me that the Bible proved that women could smoke. I said, “no, I don’t think the Bible says anything about smoking.” “Yes,” she said, “it does”; and she opened her Bible (KJV) and pointed to a verse in Genesis, which read, “And Rachel lit up upon her camel.” So, at a very early age, I learned a very important lesson about the Bible: it is a powerful book that can be made to prove anything, if one is sufficiently bold and creative.

Maybe because of that early lesson, I am more likely to apply as normative to my life only those parts of the Bible that have extensive support and clear universal applications. For example, when Jesus says in the gospels that all the law and the prophets can be summed up in two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, I take those commandments very seriously indeed. When I read in Micah the words, “What does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God” I take those words very seriously. When I read Amos calling out on God’s behalf to “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream,” I take that imperative very seriously as well. I believe that loving God and neighbor, working for justice, loving mercy, speaking and walking in humility, and never treating others in ways I would not myself like to be treated create a powerful moral direction for Christian life in this world. You know, Jesus, in rejecting purity regulations concerning food in the Gospel of Mark (7:14-23), makes a very important point that all Christians in the U.S. today would do well to reflect upon. He says that nothing outside of people by going into them can defile them; only the things that come out of people, out of their hearts, can defile them. On the same principle, I believe that no loving, consensual, mutual sexual act, whether between people of the same sex or people of the opposite sex, is in itself defiling or evil. However, what comes out of the heart in the demeaning of others,

in slander about other people's lives, in mean-spirited actions to destroy those you don't like and often don't even know, in dehumanizing those you create into your enemies, those things do indeed defile a person and twist and distort their soul.

Christianity, for me, is not about purity; it is not even about piety. It is about love, God's love for us and our love for God and our neighbors, whoever they may be. Moreover, working for justice and spreading compassion and mercy are the natural outcomes of that love. And it is a love that can drive out fear, fear of difference, fear of the unknown, fear of the other. If what your religion brings out of you is only hate and fear, it is not a religion worthy of God—nor is it a religion worthy of the Bible. I have faith in a God who calls us all to a future of justice, mercy, compassion, and most of all love. I invite all of you to work with me for that future here in Wisconsin and across the country. What is at stake here is not simply the lives and families of lesbians and gay men, bisexuals and transgender people, as vitally and irreplaceably important as they are, but what is at stake in these battles is also the very soul of Christianity itself. Will it be known as a religion of hate, fear, and repression or will it be known as a religion of love, justice, and mercy? What we do now may well determine Christianity's future for years to come.

---

**Mary A. Tolbert** is *George H. Atkinson Professor of Biblical Studies and executive director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at Pacific School of Religion.*