

The Bible – air balloon or millstone?

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His publications include:

God Treads Softly Here (SPCK, 2004)

Keeping God Company (SPCK, 2002)

Imagining God: Stories from Creation to Heaven (SPCK, 1997)

Speaking of God: A Collection of Stories (Triangle, 1992)

Some years ago in Salisbury Cathedral I heard a lecture by David Jenkins. I shall always remember how he began. He thumped the lectern and cried: “We have made God into a thug!”

And now we have turned the Bible into a monster.

There is a difference, however, between God as thug and the Bible as monster, and when we come to consider the Bible, an unnerving one: God is no thug, nor is there any thugishness about her at all; but the Bible, for all its countless treasures, is a deeply

flawed collection of works, with much that is in it that should give us genuine cause for alarm. Let me give two brief examples, neither of them having anything to do with the issues of sexuality, or sexual ethics.

In October 1998, in Chester Cathedral where I work, I was sitting with a small group of year 5 children, 9-10 year olds, leading a workshop with them on storytelling, and on telling stories about God in particular. To get their minds working I asked them, ‘What comes into your head when I say the word "God"?’ Quick as a flash, without the slightest hesitation, one girl said: ‘He’s up in heaven and he’s on a throne and it’s big and gold all over and he sends people down, down, down to hell.’

Please God, no-one ever puts such a notion in the head of James, my two year old grandson. But, alas, there is a wealth of biblical material in both testaments, and in this case especially in the New Testament, including the gospels themselves, which might encourage or foster such a belief. When I hear this from Revelation 14 (9-11):

‘Those who worship the beast and its image . . . they will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed with the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever.’

I cannot but think of Auschwitz and the smoking chimneys of the crematoria; only in *this* death camp, God is the commandant, and Christ, the Lamb, and the angels are his SS guards.

My second example is much on my mind at present. On Tuesday last week, we hosted a presentation in the Cathedral, at which Stephen Sizer, Vice Chair of the Friends of Sabeel, UK, and Henry Guterman, a prominent member of the Manchester Jewish community, spoke about Palestine/Israel. It had attracted a good deal of attention among Zionists, both Jewish and Christian, and they were there in some force. Nahida, a Palestinian woman, was there also. She did not dare attend the question and answer session at the end, afraid that she might be shouted down again, as she had been at a meeting in June in Liverpool when Stephen Sizer had spoken. But people were invited to submit questions on cards. This was hers:

‘According to the United Nations there are four and a half million Palestinian refugees. I am one of them. I hold a UN registered refugee card. I have been exiled for 39 years. My family have lived in Palestine for thousands of years in Beit Eksa, a village north west of Jerusalem. I am denied the right to return home. How can that be justified when any Jewish person has that right, even if they have no connection with the land? How can anyone deny my memory and the memory of my people?’

There were people there, Jews as well as Christians, who would have claimed she had no place in her land, because God had given it to the Jews and the Jews alone; the Bible says so – and under their breath some of them might have added, ‘And we have full permission from God to drive out or destroy you; the Bible says that, too.’

The Bible is a most dangerous book. It is one of the most dangerous books in the world. (the other is the Koran) and it has been used for centuries, if not millennia, by Christians to wreak fearful havoc.

How can we reclaim it?

First, by being honest about it. Let us own up to its weaknesses and dangers, and not just in the lecture theatres of secular universities, or at academic conferences, or in books designed for an academic audience, but in the pulpits of our churches and chapels. Let us not seek to defend the indefensible.

Let us also question our prejudices and our presuppositions.

Let us seek out the good news wherever it is told, and let us celebrate it for all we are worth.

And let us, with the help of our Bibles, search for the mind of Christ, and through the spirit, the energy, the passion of Christ (the ambiguity is deliberate), let us be transformed.

These challenges are nowhere more urgent today than in the area of sexual ethics and issues of sexuality. I am frankly fed up with the unthinking way in which biblical material is so often appealed to, especially to do with issues of sexuality, and with the willingness of good men and women to do nothing, to refuse to challenge the homophobia that is such a scandal in parts of the church, and which is doing such damage to both its life and its mission; and I am appalled by the hurt that is being caused to so many.

I am not gay myself, but my wife and I have friends who are, and I have met a gay couple who were expelled by their denomination; a Salvation Army captain, who lost his job, his home and his family when he came out; gay and lesbian Christians who go to church every Sunday, but dare not reveal the fact that they are living with same sex partners; others who have been driven out of their local churches, or who have been persistently refused communion; yet more who never worship with other Christians except in the safe confines of a fellowship for gays and lesbians and its very occasional weekend gatherings. I have run my finger along the sharp edge of their pain. That is why I think and speak and, I hope, act, as I do.

In the end of the day we are not talking about issues, or doctrines, or the authority of the Bible, but about people. If we forget that, we are lost.

But let us return to the Bible, and to those four challenges listed before:

- to face up to its weaknesses and dangers
- to question our own prejudices and presuppositions
- to seek the good news where it can be found, and to celebrate it
- to seek the mind of Christ and be transformed by it

Those who use the Bible to condemn homosexuality and homosexuals, often appeal to it, either explicitly or implicitly, in support of heterosexual marriage. But here the Bible is against them. Can you think of one heterosexual relationship that is explored in any depth in the Bible which you can say is exemplary? The priests and ministers, or lay preachers

among you: you’ve got a nice young couple sitting in your study wanting to get married. Can you open your Bible anywhere and say to them: ‘Here you are. Be like them’? I can’t. Well, I can, but it’s not with stories about heterosexual couples, unless I turn to the poetry of the Song of Songs, which many would say is somewhat problematic. And why is all this so?

For the simple reason of the Bible’s patriarchy: because almost everywhere it is assumed that men are of greater value than women; because the Bible presumes that power and authority lie with men, including authority over women; indeed, it asserts quite openly, in both Testaments, that men possess, and must exercise, such authority. Only in one place, in its exploration of relations, including sexual relations, between women and men, does it place them on an equal footing and issue a fine protest against the brutalities and nonsense of patriarchy. That place is the Song of Songs, a series of erotic love poems, composed almost certainly by women, and celebrating in passionate and exquisite lines the subversive, pre-marital sexual love of a couple of teenagers, where the girl has escaped from the confines of the family, and from the brothers who would board her up to protect her virginity, and has run into the arms of the boy she loves. It contains some of the most beautiful love poetry ever written, but not quite what those who insist sex be confined within heterosexual marriage were looking for.

Yet there *is* good news, also. The harder we peer at the gospels, the more we become convinced that Jesus of Nazareth challenged the prevailing attitudes towards women, counted women amongst his disciples and most devoted followers, and did away with the differences of status between them, so that very early on in the life of the church his

followers could claim, ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, *there is no longer male and female*, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’ (Galatians 3:28).

And there is very good news also for gays and lesbians, in the stories of David and Jonathan and of Ruth and Naomi. Will our prejudices or preconceptions allow us to hear that good news? If we find it unthinkable that the Bible should celebrate same-sex relationships, then the answer is ‘no’. If we have been persuaded by those few verses in Leviticus and the Epistles, which have received such inordinate attention, that the Bible is itself homophobic, then the answer again will be ‘no’ – unless David and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi can change our minds.

The most illuminating discussion of the David and Jonathan stories I have come across is in Theodore W Jennings Jr’s: *Jacob’s Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel*, Continuum 2005. I fully agree with him when he describes the meeting of Jonathan with David in 1 Samuel 18 as ‘love at first sight’ (p25) – at least on Jonathan’s part. Or when he writes, ‘we are dealing with no platonic friendship, but with all the elements of passionate romance,’ (p 33) and then goes on to say, ‘a gay-affirmative reading of the text does not do violence to the text, and even enables us to gain a greater appreciation for the moral ambiguity and psychological complexity of the narrative.’ (p 34). In other words, if we see Jonathan and David as two men passionately in love with one another – Jonathan from the first, and David once he has transferred his affections and loyalty from his wife, Michal, to Jonathan – then many details in the text, including

the precise Hebrew terms it uses, terms drawn from erotic love poetry such as the Song of Songs, fall into place.

But for sheer beauty and power the David and Jonathan stories cannot rival the story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth’s declaration of love for Naomi in Chapter 1 is the finest, the most profound and moving in all scripture:

‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die –
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you.’ (Ruth 1: 16-17)

It is the only speech in scripture that approaches our wedding vows. Indeed, it approaches them, meets them, and goes beyond them, for it exceeds their ‘till death do us part.’ And it brings Naomi back to life. Not at once. When it is uttered, Naomi is sunk in bitter grief and despair, and at first she remains so. But as we move through the four chapters of this love story, slowly we witness Naomi’s resurrection, until at the end the women of Bethlehem celebrate her and Ruth as a couple, and declare of the child born to Ruth and Boaz: ‘A son has been born to Naomi,’ as if Naomi is the father and the husband. And what is responsible for this extraordinary ending? Nothing but the love of Ruth, her care for her mother-in-law; her being prepared to take risks, when Naomi’s despair has sapped all her mental and physical energy; her affectionate mischief in winding her up, twice, when she comes back home to report how things have gone; her refusal to give up on

Naomi; her steadfast loyalty. The book of Ruth is the great love story of the Bible and it is a story of love between women. (The seduction of Boaz and Ruth’s marriage to him are only entered into in order to protect and prolong the relationship between the two women and ensure their survival).

I remember, some time ago, speaking about this story to a gathering of mostly gays and lesbians, and seeing one woman leave the room. She was quite overcome. She had had a woman partner for 30 years. They were both devout Christians. But she had never dreamed that one day she would be told that the Bible contained a story which affirmed their love for one another and celebrated it without condition or hesitation.

And what of the mind of Christ? I wish for the moment to give but one example. It has nothing to do directly with sexual ethics, or issues of sexuality. It is, perhaps, all the more powerful and persuasive for that. Our own prejudices or presuppositions cannot interfere so easily. It is a story I keep coming back to again and again, whenever I speak on the subject. It is the story in Luke 13. 10-17 of the healing of a crippled woman in a synagogue on a Sabbath day. The woman has been bent double for eighteen years, and has presumably been coming to synagogue all that time. It is the first time Jesus has visited this particular synagogue, and he will have never seen her before. But she catches his attention, he calls her over, lays his hands on her, and heals her. Standing up straight for the first time for so many years, she begins to praise her God. But the leader of the synagogue is unnerved by that, and turns to the crowd, telling them not to come on the Sabbath if they wish to be healed.

The story is not written from a neutral perspective. Nothing in the Gospels is. Luke is here clearly on the side of Jesus and against the leader of the synagogue. But let us try to be fair to them both. They are both devout Jews. They both know their Torah, and in particular its laws about the Sabbath and the Ten Commandments. Those commandments, in both versions, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, place great emphasis on the Sabbath and state quite plainly: ‘You shall not do any work.’ For the synagogue leader healing is work, and thus should not be done on the Sabbath. His scriptures are clear. But for Jesus they make it equally clear that the Sabbath is a celebration of the time when the ancestors of his people were released from slavery in Egypt, set free from the back-breaking, spirit-grinding toil of the slave camps. So for him, what better day of the week to set free from her bondage ‘this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years’?

Why does Jesus interpret the scriptures one way, and the synagogue ruler another? Or, to put it another way, what do their different interpretations enable them to do, or prevent them from doing?

The story has these words when the crippled woman comes onto its stage: ‘When Jesus saw her . . .’ Jesus’ faith enables him to see the woman, recognize her as a daughter of Abraham held in terrible imprisonment, see her potential, see how she might straighten up, dance again and praise her God. Jesus’ faith draws him to her and her to him, and in their meeting the work of God is done, and the woman’s tears flow like water from the temple and her alleluias ring round the synagogue, as for the first time in eighteen years she looks her God in the eye.

And what of the synagogue ruler? His faith entertains no hope for the woman. She’s been bent for eighteen years, and no doubt will die still doubled up. But worse, when she *is* healed, his faith leads him to turn his back on her. He turns *to the crowd* and tells them to come another day if they want to be healed. He should be picking the woman up in his arms and inventing the tango with her! Instead, his faith prevents him from rejoicing, excludes him from the party, leaves him blind to what has happened in front of his own eyes, and unable to come to terms with wonderful reality.

If we are to seek and begin to find the mind of Christ, then we will be able to see, for example, the reality of those gay and lesbian partnerships which unhesitatingly, if they were heterosexual, we would call ‘good marriages’; we will be able to see them for what they are and to celebrate them as showing forth something of the love of God and his astonishingly multi-faceted creativity.

In a society which can be so casual about infidelity and so mindless of the consequences; which does not quite know how to value friendship aright or affirm its importance; where so many children are given television in their bedrooms but are starved of time with their parents; where the horrors and the prevalence of domestic violence are only beginning to be faced, the Church has enough that is challenging to say, enough hard words to enunciate.

With the mind of Christ, and transformed by his spirit, his energy, his passion, let us confront what is truly destructive, and let us, without hesitation or any yes-butting, celebrate what is good.

Let us allow passages in the Bible, such as the stories of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, and Jesus and that bent woman, to lift us above the society in which we live, as in a gloriously coloured, flame-roaring air balloon, so that we see its contours more clearly and get things into perspective.

Let us not join that synagogue leader of Luke 13 and hang our scriptures like a millstone round our necks to drown ourselves and others in the mire of fear and disgust.

For Paul Badham, editor Modern Believing.

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