Modern Day Moabites: The Bible and the Debate About Same-Sex Marriage

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Abstract

With the debate about same-sex marriage raging in the United States, this paper asks whether the canonical scriptures of Judaism and Christianity offer any justification for blessing same-sex unions. It looks to the ways that the Bible is used by proponents and opponents of same-sex marriage. It analyzes the hermeneutics of the religious left and the religious right, particularly as they grapple with the “clobber texts” of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. It then turns to the biblical book of Ruth, which critic J. Hillis Miller describes as having “been alienated from itself, translated from itself” through new uses. The paper puts the book of Ruth to yet another new use/misprision, using it as a prooftext to support same-sex marriage. The book has already been upheld by lesbian readers of scripture because of the intimate relationship between the protagonists, Ruth and Naomi, but this paper “misreads” the text differently. Ruth describes how a marriage made between an Israelite and a Moabite brings about the line of King David, one of the most important figures in the Bible and the man from whose line the Messiah is expected to come. The biblical law, however, is unequivocal: Moabites are not permitted to enter into the community of Israel. Juxtaposing the levitical laws (ostensibly) prohibiting homosexuality with those banning Moabites from Israel, this paper argues that the religious left could hold up the book of Ruth as a biblical model for allowing marriage that seems explicitly forbidden by biblical law.

Keywords
Ruth, Leviticus, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, Christian right, religious left

For the fourth time in the history of the United States, the nature of marriage is up for debate.1 In the early nineteenth century, the nation

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1) The discussion is not, of course, limited to the U.S. As of this writing, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, and South Africa have all legalized same-sex mar-
defined marriage as a contract between two consenting non-African-American adults of opposite gender. African-Americans were forbidden to marry. The first challenge to this definition arose soon after: in 1852, before it became a state, legislators in the area that is now Utah defined marriage as a contract of mutual support between a man and one or more women (none of whom could be African-American). The United States outlawed polygamous marriage in 1862. (Consequently, prior to becoming part of the Union, Utah adopted the definition of marriage accepted by the other states.\textsuperscript{2}) Then, following the Civil War, amid considerable opposition, the legal rights of whites were extended to include African-Americans. Thus, from 1868 onward, marriage became a contract between two consenting adults of the same race and opposite gender. The third reconsideration came in 1967, when the civil rights movement brought about a new definition of marriage as a legally sanctioned union between any two consenting adults of opposite gender, regardless of their race. Now, for a fourth time, Americans are struggling to determine who has the right to marry whom. As the president urges voters across the country to support the Defense of Marriage Amendment,\textsuperscript{3} state legislators and representatives are debating how to respond.

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\textsuperscript{2} The church banned polygamy in 1890; Utah joined the Union in 1896. Members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) continue to practice polygamy. The majority of the sect lives in Arizona, where polygamy is illegal but the state constitution cites no penalties for practicing it.

\textsuperscript{3} President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996. It asserts that no state or other government in the U.S. need recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex even if that marriage was recognized by another state and that the federal government may not recognize any same-sex or polygamous marriage. President Bush's Defense of Marriage Amendment derives from his (not entirely historically accurate) conviction that marriage in the United States has always and exclusively designated the union of one man and one woman. The amendment, which failed to pass a senate vote on June 7, 2006, is his attempt to ensure the DOMA not be in-
to the precedent Massachusetts and California have set in issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.\textsuperscript{4} The debate is loud and extends well beyond the nation's courts of law and houses of government to the press, the pundits, and (perhaps most frequently) the pulpit. In the United States, despite the fact that states' issuing of marriage licenses gives marriage a secular identity, the right of gays and lesbians to marry has in effect become a religious question.\textsuperscript{5}

This paper looks to the whole of the Hebrew Bible—the common canonical scripture of those engaged in the debate: Christians, Jews, and Western-culture secularists; the religious right and the religious left; literal, metaphoric, and skeptical readers of scripture alike—for a common ground from which to converse, and possibly even for a model for social action. It first offers an overview of the three primary readerships engaged in the debate about homosexuality and same-sex marriage: religious conservatives, religious liberals, and secular hermeneuts. It then looks to Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, the texts our three readerships perceive to be (respectively) most unequivocal, most thorny, and most incomprehensible. It goes on to examine in some detail the rhetoric used in academic and popular sources alternately to uphold, contextualize, validated by "activist judges." In his call for a constitutional amendment protecting marriage, the president cautioned, "After more than two centuries of American jurisprudence, and millennia of human experience, a few judges and local authorities are presuming to change the most fundamental institution of civilization." http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/02/20040224-2.html.

\textsuperscript{4} In many states, opposition is widespread. In others, presenting alternatives like civil unions and partner benefits is seen as less objectionable than extending marriage rights to same-sex couples. Vermont was the first of the states to recognize civil union for gays and lesbians. Five years later, in October 2005, Connecticut followed suit. At present, California, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, and New Hampshire all have some form of relationship recognition for same-sex couples in state law or policies. (This data from the Human Rights Campaign is current as of May 2008.)

\textsuperscript{5} Which is not to suggest there is no dissent from the secular sphere. There is, of course, a substantial non-religious voice in the debate about same-sex marriage, with a religious rhetoric to be found in overtly religious and ostensibly secular sources alike. The webpages of virtually every politically conservative and fundamentalist Christian organization arguing against same-sex marriage have a section devoted to social scientific (that is, secular) argumentation.
and dismiss “what the Bible says about homosexuality.”

The rationale for using these sources, as against exclusively scholarly ones, is two-fold. First, the popular media is more current: websites are constantly being updated, newspapers are published daily. Second, the debate about same-sex marriage is taking place in the “real world.” More political gains and losses will be earned as a result of the ideas posted online or in the popular presses than in scholarly publications (many of the books cited in this paper offer popular takes on religion and can be found in most mainstream bookstores). This paper then moves from these well-explored prooftexts to the book of Ruth, which provides what Rebecca Alpert calls “an opening” in the Bible: a point of entry for an alternative reading. It uses Ruth as a model for thinking about marriages that are forbidden not only by tradition but by scripture as well. The deuteronomic laws forbid a Moabite from entering the congregation of Israel, and yet the book of Ruth not only describes but celebrates the entry of a Moabite into the community. Moreover, it traces the lineage of King David to the union of an Israelite and a Moabite. Hence this paper asks whether the book of Ruth might provide a locus for discussion among the divergent interpreters of scripture, and possibly even act as a catalyst for change.

Three Readerships, One Bible?

Even before the national debate about same-sex marriage began, the past decades saw religious groups across the spectrum defining their stances on homosexuality. When, in 2000, the announcement of a symposium on Jewish and Christian approaches to homosexuality at the University of San Francisco was met by public outcry and indignant

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6. We ought to be wary of speaking of the Bible as a monolith. Written over centuries, it provides a diversity of views. Nonetheless, our “Judeo-Christian” culture thinks of the Bible as a single book with a particular perspective, and hence persists in trying to discern “What the Bible says” about a wide variety of topics.

press coverage, organizer David Robinson, S.J., asserted, "If a simple gathering of inquiring minds can push media hot-buttons in such a fashion, it seems all the more imperative that the pursuit of reasonable, humane, and spiritually sound conversation continue." As churches and synagogues nationwide have grappled with how to understand and respond to gay and lesbian congregants (and clergy), attitudes toward homosexuality have become a significant dimension of religious self-identification for institutions and individuals alike.

Again and again, the deliberation turns on understandings of the Bible. In assessing why the Protestant tradition has largely excluded homosexuals from its congregations, biblical scholar Jeffrey Siker has noted that "the central stumbling block has been, and continues to be, the role of traditional biblical interpretation within the various Protestant traditions." A quick scan of conservative Christian websites makes obvious what Siker indicates: the Bible lies at the center of most conservative Protestant discussions of homosexuality. Thus the inviolability of biblical law becomes the basis for the conservative religious argument against homosexuality and for marriage defined exclusively as the union of one male and one female. By reading biblical texts as they do, with the understanding that the Bible is the word of God and thus has constant and eternal application, members of the American Christian right arrive at unambiguous answers to the questions surrounding same-sex marriage.

Although it is the Christian right that has been most audible in its response to the call for same-sex marriage, religious conservatives are

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10) Which those engaged in the debate seem to locate as much in narrative material as in legal.
11) Throughout this paper, the term conservative (or conservative readers of scripture) will primarily be used to designate members of the Christian right, fundamentalists, and evangelicals. The term will also encompass Jews whose use of religious texts is more thorough, whose ritual observance is more extensive, and whose social values are more traditional than liberal denominations. In this context, 'conservative' is intended to point not to a political perspective but to particular modes of reading the Bible
consistent in their view of the Bible as condemning same-sex sex. Religious conservatives (Protestant and otherwise) who understand the Bible to have divine origins and to be universally binding use the Bible as evidence of three things: that the “Judeo-Christian tradition of marriage”\textsuperscript{12} involves a man and a woman only; that male and female bodies (as created by God) are designed to allow men and women to “become one flesh” (Gen. 2:23) and thereby to procreate; that scripture (as pronounced by God) specifically denounces homosexual behavior.\textsuperscript{13} They turn to a core group of biblical prooftexts as evidence that, because God ordained heterosexual marriage at creation and also proclaims homosexual acts to be an abomination,\textsuperscript{14} homosexual marriage is a theological impossibility.

\textsuperscript{12} This problematic phrase is found across the web. Mark Jordan has enumerated many of its fallacies: appeals to this alleged Judeo-Christian tradition “presuppose any number of confusions and reductions. They conflate Jewish with Christian, of course, even though the two groups of religious teachings and practices, diverse in themselves, typically differ in their assumptions about marriage or their prescriptions for it... The appeals further presume that ‘marriage’ was essentially the same over the disparate cultures and several millennia traversed by the two religious traditions. They make it seem, finally, if only in their self-assurance, that all Jewish or Christian reasoning about family or sanctifying sexual desire must come down against same-sex unions” (Mark D. Jordan, “Introduction,” in Mark D. Jordan (ed.), \textit{Authorizing Marriage: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 1. The use of the term here merely acknowledge the degree to which it is rampant in the public debate about same-sex marriage.

\textsuperscript{13} It is important to note that, in their treatment of the topic, many opponents of homosexual marriage (and homosexuality generally) are careful to distinguish between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice.

\textsuperscript{14} When citing the relevant texts (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13), conservative Christian websites and other literature unfailingly use translations that render מְאֹרָר as “abomination,” even though the NIV, which is often used liturgically and for Bible study, renders the phrase קְרֵבָה “that is detestable.”
When the religious left (a category of people not always easy to identify\textsuperscript{15}) entered the debate about same-sex marriage, it had tended to respond to conservative critics with a liberal political message of justice, equality, compassion, and so forth, rather than with overtly theological claims. In the years since Robinson's remarks, however, believers who accept homosexuality (and, currently, proponents of same-sex marriage) have begun to engage the issue not merely through a "reasonable and humane conversation" but through a "spiritually sound" one as well. For the most part, among liberal churches and synagogues,\textsuperscript{16} this spiritual examination has had the prophetic message of social justice as its scriptural foundation. The primary message is the acceptance and integration of the alien, the one who stands at the fringes of our society. In its fullest biblical articulation, it demands that one not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor (Zech. 7:10): all told, these prophetic instructions provide a model for encountering Otherness. In these times, the homosexual is the Other. Thus, from a biblical starting point, liberal readers argue that those privileged with the rights and protection of the law ought to extend not merely mercy and kindness to the Other, but justice as well. In this case, justice is the right to marry.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} When Rebecca Alpert edited \textit{Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), the publisher's marketing materials asked, "If there is a religious left, why don't we hear more about it?" Since then, through the workings of Rabbi Michael Lerner and Beliefnet.org, among others, the religious left has gained some visibility. In a more recent article on Slate.com, Steven Waldman outlined the various people and groups that comprise the Religious Left ("The Religious Left: It is Fruitful and Has Multiplied," Slate.com, April 5, 2006).

\textsuperscript{16} Reconstructionist rabbi Rebecca Alpert has argued in favor of same-sex marriage precisely because it promotes the family-centric values of progressive Judaism (see "Religious Liberty, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Case of Reconstructionist Judaism," in Kathleen M. Sands (ed.), \textit{God Forbid}, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]). In December 2006, a panel of Conservative Jewish rabbis gave permission for same-sex commitments ceremonies to be performed by the denomination's rabbis. Rulings upholding traditional stances against homosexuality were also given the same day.

\textsuperscript{17} One would do well to consider whether marriage is a desirable end goal for all: Dale B. Martin has argued that "contemporary Christianity in the United States—whether Protestant or Catholic, liberal or conservative—has so aligned the basic message of Christianity with the family and 'traditional family values' that it is currently in a state
More and more, however, the religious with social liberal commitments and social liberals with religious commitments are moving from a generalized message of concern for the oppressed to a sincere grappling with the thorny question of what scripture has to say about homosexuality—a crucial aspect in any biblically-oriented debate about same-sex marriage. The shift in attention is inevitable, as the Bible is at once the centerpiece of most Jewish and Christian congregations and the text most responsible for excluding gays and lesbians from many congregations. Thus in today’s social, religious, and political climate, liberal interpreters realize that “Jews and Christians who base their lives on a serious (but not literal) reading of the Bible have no choice but to wrestle with scriptural passages in the Torah and the Gospel that categorize homosexual acts as sins.”

The wrestling involves a variety of hermeneutical moves, including situating those biblical texts that appear to condemn same-sex sexual behavior within their ancient historical and social contexts; reading them mythologically or metaphorically; understanding them to be finite (and timebound) rather than universal (and eternal) in their application. Often the basis for
this constituency seeing the Bible as historically determined and therefore limited in its contemporary application has a philological foundation: liberal exegetes are quick to note that none of the biblical languages has a word for homosexuality\textsuperscript{21} and the term does not appear in an English translation of the Bible until the publication of the Revised Standard Version in 1946.\textsuperscript{22} That one has to look so hard to find homosexuality in the Bible prompts the reverend Peter Gomes to ask, "When the Bible speaks of homosexuality, does it mean what we mean when we speak of homosexuality?"\textsuperscript{23} In firmly situating the Bible as a product of a particular (ancient and possibly even primitive) historical and sociological environment, liberal believers are able to consider the Bible while at the same time bracketing its application for contemporary culture.

Believers—on the right and the left—are no longer alone in considering the Bible. Jacques Berlinerblau, in his recent manifesto, \textit{The Secular Bible}, argues that "indifference to all things religious is no longer a viable option for secularists."\textsuperscript{24} Rather, he argues that "the secularist's

\textit{...}

\textit{ators, being human, sometimes err. Though many denominations hate to admit this, I will prove that this is a definite problem.}

3. We are called to reason together (Isaiah 1:18).

With these rules guiding his investigation of the commonly taught precept that "God says that a man that lay with a man or a woman who lay with a woman will surely die and that they are an abomination unto Him," Dixon arrives at a conclusion quite distinct from many Protestants applying the same hermeneutic principles: "What I learned from reading the Scriptures more carefully, more prayerfully, and even in their original languages, is that this teaching is simply wrong." (http://www.religioustolerance.org/dixon_03.htm)

\textsuperscript{21} Historian John Boswell notes, "Throughout the Middle Ages, the closest word to 'homosexual' in Latin or in any vernacular, was 'sodomita.'" According to Boswell, the term "has connoted in various times and places everything from ordinary heterosexual intercourse in an atypical position to oral sexual contact with animals. At some points in history it has referred almost exclusively to male homosexuality, and at other times almost exclusively to heterosexual excess." (John Boswell, \textit{Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality}, [Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2005], p. 91.)

\textsuperscript{22} Victor Paul Furnish, \textit{The Moral Teaching of Paul} (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

\textsuperscript{23} Peter Gomes, \textit{The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart} (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), p. 147.

lack of familiarity with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and religion in general... constitutes a looming political liability.”25 He advocates secular biblical literacy, underpinned by an unwavering conviction that “the objective existence of God—as opposed to the subjective perspective of him—is not a legitimate variable...: the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is a human product tout court.”26 As (for him and his cohort, at least) the Bible is not the word of God, Berlinerblau sets out to clarify what, in fact, it is. His secular hermeneutics asserts that the Hebrew Bible is an assembled, not authored, document: a pasting together of disparate texts (or fragments of texts) by countless unknown authors (or redactors or reciters) over an indeterminable amount of time. Consequently, the secular hermeneut considers the Bible to have unintentional meanings,27 and she is therefore resistant to placing any stock in “what the Bible says.” Furthermore, this “composition by aggregate has resulted in biblical texts that quite literally have no sense”28: the “inadvertent manner... [of] the Bible’s convoluted process of composition”29 generates such a multiplicity of meanings as actually to result in a deficit of meaning.

In Berlinerblau’s view, anyone who “starts from the premise that the text is meaningful, coherent, and true to the words of an ancient Israelite or Jew is practicing theology.”30 From his atheistic and ostensibly atheological position, Berlinerblau sets out to demonstrate to secularists that the Bible is open to interpretation—and, moreover, that many interpreters of the Bible themselves “go about contesting or refuting dominant readings of the Bible,” performing an “art” that Berlinerblau calls “counterexegesis.”31 By way of example, he points to the wildly divergent assessments of the very same texts offered by conservative and

27) As Berlinerblau reiterates throughout The Secular Bible, the Bible’s “multiplicity of meaning is entirely attributable to composition by aggregate. This would mean that the Bible’s polysemous quality is unintentional. Its authors never intended to offer posterity such a munificent bounty of significations” (p. 47).
29) Berlinerblau, The Secular Bible, p. 52.
liberal readers. In his overview of our topic—homosexuality—Berlinerblau juxtaposes the views of Robert Gagnon, author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, whose analysis of biblical verses led him to assert “there is clear, strong and credible evidence that the Bible unequivocally defines same-sex intercourse as sin”\(^32\) with those of Tom Horner, author of *Jonathan Loved David*, whose consideration of the very same scriptures led him to conclude “the Israelites lived within a ‘culture that accepted homosexuality.’”\(^33\) Thus the goal of the secular hermeneut is to attain a biblical literacy that allows her to recognize and refute traditional exegesis and contemporary counterexegesis. Only thus informed can she properly engage—and dismiss—claims about what the Bible says about a particular topic.

In our case, recognizing the degree to which the debate about the Bible and homosexuality is politically fraught, the secularist looks to destabilize biblical meaning. Her engagement in the conversation is not intended to uncover any actual recognizable biblical stance toward homosexuality. She is, as we have noted, skeptical about the Bible having any discernible meaning at all. Rather, she enters the debate on the Bible and homosexuality “because it features many story lines that are of interest [to her]: convoluted sacred texts, cocksure interpreters, blurry Church-State borders, high-profile religious demagogues, pious biblical scholars, and, naturally, the conspicuous absence of secular participants.”\(^34\) Her reasons for scouring scripture are quite distinct from those of both the conservative and liberal religious readers.

Given the disparity in hermeneutical stances of the varied readerships, one might well argue that using scripture as a common ground would be yet another way further to polarize the sides rather than bring them into conversation. And yet, this paper is premised on the possibility that scripture can provide a common ground for discussion.\(^35\) Before the religious left and secularists began to attend to what the Bible has


\(^{34}\) Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible*, p. 102.

\(^{35}\) This optimism is fueled in part by the success encountered by Scriptural Reasoning groups, who bring together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars for scripturally-based dialogue.
to say about homosexuality, the lack of any common starting point for
discussion among divergent groups meant that there has been virtually
no dialogue between the religious right and the religious left. Even now,
there is little discourse: with regard to the question of homosexuality,
we have, in effect one Bible\textsuperscript{36} and three divergent hermeneutic stances
toward it (those of religious conservatives, religious liberals, and atheist
secularists). Berlinerblau is skeptical that any two—let alone three—of
these groups might move from a conversation about the common text
to coordinated social action.\textsuperscript{37} This paper seeks at least to initiate a
biblically-based conversation between these constituents. It seeks to lay
the groundwork for Robinson’s “reasonable, humane, and spiritually
sound conversation.” While not assuming that marriage is a desired
goal for all gays and lesbians (or heterosexuals, for that matter), this
paper responds to a theoretical question\textsuperscript{38}: “Do the canonical scriptures
of Judaism and Christianity offer any justification for blessing same-
sex unions?”\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Not Even One Bible: Two Levitical Laws, Three Readerships}

To begin to address this question in any profitable fashion we must first
assess how the Bible is being read right now; and, more specifically,
attend to the ways that the Bible is being read as providing reasons for
or against same-sex marriage. As noted briefly above and developed
more below, most accounts of the Bible’s position on same-sex marriage
search for the particular law(s) or specific biblical teaching(s) that will
illuminate the issue. Conservative, liberal, and secular readers all seek

\textsuperscript{36} This paper focuses primarily on the question of homosexuality/same-sex marriage
in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, the roughly common scripture of Christians and
Jews. Given this focus, this essay is complicit in perpetuating the idea that there is a
“Judeo-Christian tradition of marriage.” While using the terms, it recognizes the ways
that they are deeply problematic.

\textsuperscript{37} Berlinerblau, \textit{The Secular Bible}, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{38} Asked and dealt with in a variety of different ways in Jordan (ed.), \textit{Authorizing Mar-
riage}.

\textsuperscript{39} Jordan, “Introduction,” p. 1. In the editor’s formulation, the question goes on
“whether as marriages or as some other form of erotic union.” This paper attends spe-
cifically to the question of marriage.
recourse in the same canon of biblical texts about homosexuality, teasing out meaning in the same eight scriptural passages from both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament. The cluster of key verses is consistently Gen. 1:28 and 2:23 (the creation stories); Gen. 19:1-9 (Sodom and Gomorrah); Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 (sexual proscriptions); Rom. 1:26-27 (on unnatural intercourse); 1 Cor. 6:9 (wrong-doers who will not inherit the kingdom of God); and 1 Tim. 1:8-10 (the laying down of the law for the godless and sinful). Because we are trying to find a common scriptural ground for Jews and Christians, as well as for liberals, conservatives, and secularists, we will focus our attention here on the most problematic passages from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

While the Genesis narratives are relatively easy to dismiss (if one is inclined to do so), the laws that appear to prohibit homosexual behavior prove more difficult for liberal and secular readers to contend with. Leviticus specifically states, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22) and “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them” (Lev. 20:13). As the language—at least, as rendered in most English translations—is unequivocal, these two passages become the clobber texts in the debate. As Rebecca Alpert has noted, “Coming to terms with Leviticus may be the greatest single struggle facing gay men and lesbians seeking to find

40) Occasionally, other scriptural passages are brought into the conversation as well. Rabbi Steven Greenberg, who reads the Torah through rabbinic sources (in keeping with his Orthodox convictions), includes the story of the sons of God mating with the daughters of men (Gen. 6:1-3) and the impropriety of Ham toward his father Noah (Gen. 9:20-22) because they were "read obliquely by the rabbis [as speaking] to the issue of male homosexual relations" (Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004], p. 60). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Robert Gagnon, author of The Bible and Homosexual Practice, also turns to the story of Ham's act and Noah's curse as well as the story of the rape of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19-21); see Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).


42) It is worth noting, and many do, that the Bible is largely unconcerned with women lying with women.
These verses alienate the gay and lesbian congregant and seem to shut down any discussion of same-sex union—let alone marriage. If homosexual acts are an abomination, so must homosexual marriage be. As Concerned Women For America proclaim on their website: “Homosexual marriage will always be an abomination to God regardless of whether a clergyman performs the ceremony. When God calls something unholy, man cannot make it holy or bless it.” Given the apparent lack of scriptural ambiguity, what argument against the conservative reader—nay, against, the biblical text—can the secular or liberal interpreter possibly mount?

Secular hermeneut Berlinerblau’s strategy is to destabilize the text, in this case reading beyond the widely quoted English to the original Hebrew, focusing on philology and translation. His analysis turns on the allegedly incomprehensible phrase מִּשְׁנֶה יָשָה within the verse generally translated “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence” (Lev. 18:22, NRSV). What is this mishkeve ishah, the lyings of a woman? In Berlinerblau’s view, the best philologist can arrive at no clearer translation than “And with a male you will not lie lying downs of a woman. It is an abomination.” Given the incomprehensibility of this phrase, the responsible interpreter had best “admit defeat.” Thus Berlinerblau endeavors to undermine the Bible’s authority by pointing to the ways it does not make sense. If it makes no sense, it can have no application.

Other (liberal) readers have sought to make sense of this same ambiguous phrasing not so as to dismiss the verse but in order to limit the verse’s application. In a strategy summarized on various websites, Jewish scholar Saul Olyan reads the laws of Leviticus as referring to one

45) Berlinerblau, The Secular Bible, p. 103.
47) For instance, at Answers.com (http://www.answers.com/topic/leviticus-18-1); Religious Tolerance.org (http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibh.htm); Jewish Family and Children’s Services of San Francisco (http://www.jfcs.org/Services/Individuals_
sexual act alone: anal intercourse. Jacob Milgrom, whose ideas have also been popularized, suggests that the laws are not universal in their reach: they limit both particular actors and a particular act. In Milgrom’s view, the passages in Leviticus prohibit homosexual behavior specifically for ancient male Israelites or inhabitants of Israel who engage in anal intercourse. Following up these arguments, gay Orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg makes much of the textual ambiguity Berlinerblau highlights. He wonders whether mishkeve ishah might refer to lying with a man “in a way that involves engulfment of the penis in penetrative intercourse.” He is not satisfied with such a broad category, however, and continues to parse the Hebrew language, turning to a variation of the phrase found in Gen. 49:4, such that he eventually arrives at the possibility that what God deems an abomination is sex that demonstrates power (and lacks love). He argues that the Levitical prohibition is against “sex for conquest, for shoring up the ego, for self-aggrandizement, or worse, for the perverse pleasure of demeaning another man. This is an abomination.” Not, as the plain sense might suggest, same-sex sex.

In recontextualizing the verses from Leviticus, liberal readers not only question precisely what act is being described as an abomination, but what exactly an “abomination” might be. The key for readers trying to diminish the apparent force of the word is to recast its meaning. John Boswell qualifies the term, arguing that the Hebrew הרע לא תעשה “does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft,...but

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49) Religious Tolerance.org (http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibh.htm); Other Sheep: Multicultural Ministries with Sexual Minorities (http://198.170.124.65/bkrvw-Milgrom.htm), etc.
51) Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men, p. 80.
52) Here it refers to the lyings of a father—Reuben lay with his father’s concubine, for which Jacob upbraided him.
53) Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men, p. 205. As Olyan has pointed out, the logic behind the restriction of the definition is not particularly compelling.
54) Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men, p. 206.
something that is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation.""55 Similarly, Greenberg notes that at the end of Leviticus 18, *all* the acts prohibited in the chapter are collectively described as נטועה. The Lord decrees “the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled” (Lev. 18:27). Greenberg wonders, “If [these acts] are all considered to'evot, why then is male-male sex specifically considered to'evah?”56 Boswell and Greenberg are both arguing that a man’s lying with a man as with a woman (or whatever it is that is being described in Lev. 18:22) is not any worse than any number of acts condemned in the Bible but seen today to be inoffensive by most. In their view, many things that were considered abominations in ancient Israel are not now considered to be so.

Alternately, some Christian readers try to do away with the apparent vehemence of the language of abomination or abhorrence by insisting that it is not as bad as it sounds: “The Hebrew word for abomination which is To’evah is quite different in meaning from the Hebrew word for sin... The Bible never refers in any of the passages as these acts being sins, merely abominations.”57 This argument, however, is anachronistic and fails to take into account that death is the punishment for such transgression. Lying with a man as with a woman may not be a “sin,” but it *is* a capital crime.58 Surely this extreme punishment signals that the act is far from sanctioned.59

Another way to deal with the problem of the term to’evah is to assume that the abomination rests not in a particular action, but in people acting counter to their own natures. Such a reading involves contorting

55) Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, p. 100.
58) Among conservative Christians, there remains a small minority whose reading of biblical law leads them to advocate the execution of homosexuals. These are primarily followers of the late Reconstructionist theologian R. J. Rushdoony, but there are also other outliers such as the Society for the Practical Establishment and Application of the Ten Commandments (http://www.tencommandments.org/homosexual.html).
59) This is the line of thinking followed by some conservative Christians, who contend that while many of the laws in Leviticus were abrogated by Jesus, those punishable by death are moral laws and are therefore still binding on Christians today.
what has been revealed to be an already distorted biblical passage. Thus, the biblical text is taken as having been directed to the majority of its listeners (who would, statistically, be heterosexuals) but is in effect about behaving in accordance with one’s nature (that is, with one’s individual sexuality). A heterosexual man who lies with a man commits an abomination—“terrible, unnatural acts of heterosexual pederasty”—just as a homosexual man who lies with a woman commits an abomination. The sin lies not in the specific act, but in the crossing of taxonomic boundaries.

A more sophisticated variation of this argument comes from Daniel Boyarin, who posits that the prohibition in Leviticus is not about contravening one’s sexuality—an idea that would have been foreign to biblical authors—but about engaging in behavior that is not “according to one’s kind.” Taxonomically, the male is the penetrator; the female, the penetrated. Therefore, a male who allows himself to be penetrated has not behaved “according to his kind.” In this light, Boyarin reads the prohibitions in Leviticus as closely connected to the prohibitions against cross-dressing: as a reflection of a biblical uneasiness with category confusion. Boyarin’s analysis is complex and nuanced, and

62) In “Are there Any Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality’?” Boyarin contends that neither the biblical nor the Talmudic culture knew “of a general category of the homosexual (as a typology of human beings) or even of homosexuality (as a bounded set of same-sex practices)” (p. 337); rather, he finds “strong evidence within the Talmud for the absence of a category of homosexuals or even of homosexual practices isomorphic with that of modern Euro-American culture” (p. 339).
63) Thus “male-male anal intercourse belongs to a category known as ‘male intercourse,’ while other same-sex genital acts—male and female—are subsumed under the category of masturbation, apparently without the presence of another male actor introducing any other diacritic factor into the equation” (Boyarin, “Are There Any Jews?”, p. 340).
64) Accordingly, he notes the parallelism in the language of Lev. 18:22 (on lying with a man as with a woman) and Deut. 22:5 (on cross-dressing).
65) Boyarin here draws on the work of Mary Douglas, who understands the word בֵּית, frequently translated as “perversion,” to mean a mixing or confusion. She argues that within the context of a concern for holiness, “hybrids and other confusions
has not entered the public debate about the Levitical prohibitions.\(^{66}\) Thus, with such arguments nowhere echoed in the popular rhetoric, liberal and conservative readers alike understand the verses in Leviticus as making statements—confusing though they may be—about human sexuality, rather than about separation of categories.

Occasionally, the emphasis is on sociology as opposed to sexuality. When situating Leviticus 18 and 20 within the surrounding law, some liberal readers contend that the sexual acts described in these passages were cultic in context, and therefore comprise a prohibition against idolatry rather than homosexuality. In lay terms, “historically the prohibitions were not directed towards homosexuals but towards the cult prostitution practiced by the neighboring Canaanites who worshipped Ba'\(\text{al}\) and Astarte, two pagan Gods. The reason for sexual practices in these religions was typical—they were fertility rites meant to assure good crops, or a healthy child, etc.”\(^{67}\) In a similar vein, others emphasize the preamble to Leviticus 18, in which God commands the Israelites: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes” (Lev. 18:3). By this logic, these readers claim that God’s concern is that his people not become like the surrounding nations—not that they not be homosexual.

All of these readings require that one understand the law to be historically determined and to have limited ongoing application. Mounting a Catholic defense of same-sex unions, theologian Daniel C. Maguire contends that “there are objections to same-sex unions in the Bible. However, many things in the Bible simply describe how people lived when the Bible was written. Not everything that the Bible tells us is something we could or should do today. . . [S]ometimes the Bible is

\(^{66}\) It has been discussed in some works intended for lay and scholarly readers alike; see, for example, Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men*, Jordan (ed.), *Authorizing Marriage*.

telling you *what people used to do*, not *what people should do today*." Unlike many others, Maguire is explicit in his bracketing off biblical text. His tactic here is to relegate the Levitical law to a deep past, read now as descriptive of what *was done* rather than prescriptive of what *one does*.

In a variant of this hermeneutic, more liberal Jewish readers acknowledge the extent to which a whole range of Levitical laws are regularly transgressed by contemporary Jews. In short, they suggest that a man lying with a man might be no more morally objectionable than sowing a field with two different seeds or wearing a garment of two different cloths (cf. Lev. 19:19). This logic recognizes that although Jews are forbidden to add to or subtract from scripture, for many Jews the canon has nonetheless been reconfigured. Not all the biblical corpus—nor even the whole Torah—has currency. While this selective use of scripture may admittedly be more pronounced in liberal strands of Judaism, traditional Jewish readings of biblical laws have at times rendered problematic laws obsolete while still granting them a place in the canon. Ethicist Elliot Dorff notes that some, "like the law stating that a 'stubborn or rebellious son' is to be executed and that the death penalty is to be applied for a whole gamut of crimes... have been effectively read out of existence through rabbinic restrictions on their meaning and applicability." While this paradigm of consigning problematic laws to practical obscurity could prove useful for contemporary liberal readers who choose not simply to write the Bible off, the ancient rabbis' very treatment of the laws of concern here—Lev. 18:22 and 20:13—hardly offers a model for bracketing our problematic texts. The rabbis extended, rather than restricted, the reach of these laws so that they applied not only "to all male homosexual sex, regardless of form or context," but to lesbian sex as well. Consequently, Dorff concludes "there is not much 'wiggle room' in the tradition itself to produce a liberal stance on homosexual sex." In fact, the history of

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68) Elliot Dorff, "Judaism and Homosexuality," in *New Jewish and Christian Approaches to Homosexuality*, p. 17.
69) Dorff, "Judaism and Homosexuality," p. 17.
70) Dorff, "Judaism and Homosexuality," p. 17.
Jewish interpretation of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 has fixed rather than destabilized the laws' meaning.

Likewise in the more conservative Christian traditions. These, like the rabbinic tradition, extend the law to include more potential transgressions rather than contextualizing the law to yield narrower definitions of the terms (as their liberal counterparts often do). While some liberal Christians bracket the text by noting that most Christians no longer follow the laws of Leviticus—stating, in effect, “If we regard these particular laws to be binding, so too must we follow the rest”—conservative Christians stress the ongoing relevance of God’s word. There are a number of ways that they make Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 a central part of the Christian canon.

The first method is to focus on what type of law these are. Liberal readers have tended to view Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 as ceremonial or ritual laws, no longer binding to the new Israel. By contrast, conservative readers have placed them among the moral law, “those precepts that are perpetually binding upon all peoples in all time (murder, adultery, the sole worship of the one true God).” As such, they remain enforceable: “God’s moral laws are part of His eternal principles and cannot be ignored.” Because “the moral law existed before God gave Moses the law,” it was therefore not abrogated by Christ. Moreover, “the death penalty was only exacted for moral law, never for ceremonial law. Lev. 20:13 demands the death penalty for certain kinds of homosexual acts, establishing that homosexuality falls under the moral law.” Hence Christians must uphold the dictates of Lev. 20:13 (and, by extension, 18:22).

Another tactic is to situate the two levitical verses within their canonical context. Robert Gagnon asserts that:

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It would be a mistake to regard the statutes in the Holiness Code as consisting of largely irrelevant purity regulations. Indeed, most of Leviticus 18-20 can be thought of as an expanded commentary on the Ten Commandments... Ritual and moral, eternal and contingent, are combined in the profile of holiness developed in Leviticus 17-26. Christians do not have the option of simply dismissing an injunction because it belongs in the Holiness Code.74

As some conservative readers note, Jesus himself took his distillation of the law—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19)—from the Holiness Code (Lev. 19:18). Thus, Jesus underscored the centrality of the levitical law for his followers. Leviticus is thereby as much God's word as the Gospels.

A third strategy is to read the two verses not as levitical but as subsets of universal law. In this view, the prohibitions against lying with a man as with a woman constitute adultery, which is forbidden by the Ten Commandments.75 Alternately, Jews and some Christians point to the prohibition against sexual immorality found in the Noahide laws. These laws, outlined in the Talmud,76 are understood to be binding to all humankind77 and prohibit any form of "illicit intercourse." This includes homosexuality. Hermeneutically, then, there are a number of ways to make both Jews and Christians accountable to the levitical law.

Although many readers have endeavored to read against the verses in Leviticus, in the debate about same-sex marriage they remain the most contentious parts of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. As secularists seek to render them meaningless, liberals work to bracket their relevance and conservatives strive to make them central to the canon. It seems, yet again, that there may be no common ground for discussion among our constituencies.

74) Gagnon, p. 121.
75) This argument is particularly prevalent among Catholics. See for instance: http://www.themiracleofstjoseph.org/commands.php or http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s2c2a6.htm.
76) B. Sanh. 56a.
77) On March 5, 1991, the U.S. Congress situated "the historical tradition of ethical values and principles which are the basis of civilized society and upon which our great Nation was founded" in these laws. It asserted that "these ethical values and principles have been the bedrock of society from the dawn of civilization, when they were known as the Seven Noahide Laws" (Public Law 102-14, H.J. Res 104).
Mis/Reading Ruth: A Tale of Redemption

The next step in the conversation—the 'spiritually sound' discussion—is not immediately obvious. We have examined the most troubling prooftexts for conservative, liberal, and secular readers of Hebrew scripture. We have seen that each of our constituencies reads scripture in its own way, that most of their readings are antithetical to one another. How do we proceed when the prooftext proves inadequate for dialogue, when the common texts yield no commonality? More precisely, what is the liberal reader to do?

I would argue that the most viable tack is to begin with these problematic texts from Leviticus.\(^{78}\) Counter to the general instinct of liberal and even secular hermeneuts, I propose we read these in the narrowest way possible—as explicit prohibitions of any type of same-sex sexual behavior. We then scour the rest of scripture—and here, again the focus will be on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, (arguably) the only common scripture of conservative, liberal, and secular readers and of Jews and Christians alike—for possible models for counter-reading.

What we seek are other unequivocal prohibitions and unwavering restrictions, other instances in which a biblical passage states clearly and absolutely that something ought not be done. The Torah, in particular, is rife with possibilities. Ultimately, however, the goal is not merely to find a useful analogue (Exodus’s prohibition of such and such act is as ardent as Leviticus’s prohibition against a man lying with a man), but to find an example that might provide a precedent for disobedience of an apparently absolute “thou shall not.” In addition, the point is not to find a text that has been recontextualized or disregarded by post-biblical interpreters. There is no shortage of these. Rather, the goal is to find a prohibition that was abandoned within the Bible itself.

Some readers have attempted a version of this enterprise by considering the very texts we have been dealing with. They consider what the law (and the epistles) have to say about homosexuality and, finding these

\(^{78}\) Likewise, if one does the same with the passages from Romans, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy—that is, read them as unequivocal denunciations of homosexual acts/homosexuality—Ruth may yet provide a “solution” to the problem of reconciling the Bible and same-sex marriage.
to be particularly discouraging, they turn to the narratives for stories that undermine the law. In particular, they have looked to the relationship of David and Jonathan in the books of Samuel and the relationship between Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth. I Samuel describes King David as loving Saul's son Jonathan "as he loved his own life" (I Sam. 20:17). When Jonathan died, David lamented: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (II Sam. 1:26-7). Likewise, Ruth's love for her mother-in-law Naomi reflected a singular loyalty. In a declaration now often read during (heterosexual) marriage ceremonies, Ruth swore to Naomi: "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). Both David and Ruth make profound declarations of love that are unparalleled in the Bible. That these declarations are directed toward someone of the same sex has been encouraging to some interpreters looking for models of same-sex love in the biblical text.

If one is unpersuaded that David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi were gay, but compelled by and sympathetic to the desire of gay and lesbian readers to find their likeness in biblical narratives, where in the Bible might one turn for a more positive view, a counter-example, or even a possible model for acceptance? Consider anew the book of Ruth, a book of quiet conversations and seemingly small actions that turn out to have tremendous national and religious implications. If one is unpersuaded that David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi were gay, but compelled by and sympathetic to the desire of gay and lesbian readers to find their likeness in biblical narratives, where in the Bible might one turn for a more positive view, a counter-example, or even a possible model for acceptance? Consider anew the book of Ruth, a book of quiet conversations and seemingly small actions that turn out to have tremendous national and religious implications. It is an instructive book for the religious liberal not because Ruth and Naomi were lesbians, but because it offers a sympathetic portrait of the Other;
it "points out the necessity to acknowledge and respect difference in order to ensure moral and political dynamism in the life of a nation."\(^{81}\)

Perhaps most importantly, it gives readers—and, potentially, activists—a model for communal reinterpretation of seemingly inviolable biblical law. Happily, as literary critic J. Hillis Miller illustrates, the book lends itself to recasting: as we will see, it has a long history of having been at best "mistranslated," at worst "violently appropriated"\(^{82}\)—and of surviving.

It is a simple story. Set in the time of the Judges, the book of Ruth opens with an Ephrathite family being forced by a famine to leave its home in Bethlehem and to settle in the neighboring country of Moab. There, the two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, take Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah. Some time later, the sons and the husband die, leaving the mother, Naomi, alone in a foreign land with her two daughters-in-law. Bitter and beaten down, Naomi decides to return home. Ruth refuses to part from her mother-in-law, and the two women return to Judah together. Back in Bethlehem, she finds favor in the eyes of Boaz, a relation of the family. After "all that [she had] done for her mother-in-law since the death of [her] husband," (Ruth 2:11), Boaz enjoins Ruth to glean near his maidens (2:8), ensures her safety by charging his men not to bother her (2:9), and enables her to provide for herself and Naomi by having his young men pull grain from their bundles to leave for her (2:16). Ultimately, he agrees to act as the levir, marrying Ruth to continue Mahlon's family line. Those who witness the marriage\(^{83}\) bless


\(^{82}\) Both terms are J. Hillis Miller's. One might also use the language of queering here, and not merely because of the use to which the text will be put. Alexander Doty's definition of "queer" as "mark[ing] a flexible space for the expression of all non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception" is useful here. Doty's "cultural 'queer space' recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever anyone produces or responds to culture" (Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], p. 3). In this respect, queering is a form of misprision or counterexegesis: a reaction to mass culture reception.

\(^{83}\) Which is clearly depicted as a legal and financial transaction (cf. Ruth 4:7-11), making it less than consonant with contemporary understandings of marriage.
it, saying, “May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah” (Ruth 4:11-12). When Ruth bears a son, the women of Bethlehem bless Naomi and name the child Obed. A genealogy at the end of the book records that Obed becomes the father of Jesse, who is the father of David, from whom the messianic lineage is to spring. The book of Ruth is a short, elegant book that hinges on themes of emptiness and fullness, foreign and familiar, hesed (loving-kindness) and providence. It is a book in which we recognize what it is to be human: to love, to lose, to persist and to flourish.

J. Hillis Miller reads the book of Ruth as a parable for theory. We will consider this point in depth, offering a thorough recapitulation of Miller’s argument so as to contextualize and anchor the moves this paper will ultimately make. In Miller’s view, Ruth “is a narrative of alienation and assimilation that can exemplify theoretical propositions about the travel of theory.” In his telling, the text itself has undergone the very changes its characters underwent. He contends that “this book of the Hebrew Bible has been alienated from itself, translated from itself. It has been put entirely to new uses, uses by no means intended by the original authors or scribes.” The first and most significant of these was the assimilation of the Hebrew book into the Christian canon, which of course gave rise to multiple vernacular translations of the book, and to a widespread understanding of the book as legitimating the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah. This is a significant shift: as Harold Bloom puts it, “the New Testament in its relation to the Hebrew Bible is the

86) Where it changed both locale and genre, becoming one of the historical books rather than one of the scrolls in the Ketuvim (writings).
87) In his genealogy of Jesus, Matthew chronicles “Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David” (Mt. 1:5-6). In Matthew’s reckoning, there were fourteen generations from David to the deportation to
most outrageous example of 'mispri​sion' in the history of the West, that is, of 'mistakings' or takings amiss, translations as mistranslation.'

The New Testament use of Ruth is, however, only the beginning of a series of misprisions.

One might argue that the rabbinic use of Ruth, which transforms her from loyal daughter-in-law to paragon of the convert, is also a mistranslation. *Ruth Rabbah* 2:22-24 reads Naomi's articulation of her devotion to Naomi as an assertion of her willingness to take on the yoke of the commandments:

22. AND RUTH SAID: ENTREAT ME NOT TO LEAVE THEE, AND TO RETURN FROM FOLLOWING AFTER THEE (I, 16). What is the meaning of ENTREAT ME NOT? She said to her, "Do not sin against me; do not turn your misfortunes away from me." TO LEAVE THEE AND TO RETURN FROM FOLLOWING AFTER THEE. I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands than at those of another. When Naomi heard this, she began to unfold to her the laws of conversion, saying: 'My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theatres and circuses,' to which she replied, 'WHITHER THOU GOEST, I WILL GO' (ib.) She continued: 'My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house which has no mezuzah,' to which she responded, 'AND WHERE THOU LODGEST, I WILL LODGE' (ib.). THY PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE (ib.) refers to the penalties and admonitions [of the Torah], and THY GOD MY GOD (ib.) to the other commandments of the Bible.

In this imagined conversation, the language of the book of Ruth is understood to say something quite distinct from its plain sense. The rabbis intentionally misread the scripture, translating it for a new context.

Miller highlights two considerably more contemporary examples of the misprision of Ruth. The first is the English folk tradition of *Sortes Sanctorum,* divination by Bible and key. Described in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd,* the "reading of the oracles of holy writing" Babylon, and "from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations" (Mt. 1:17).

entails a young woman balancing a Bible on a long house key.\textsuperscript{90} The Bible is opened to the first chapter of Ruth, and the woman repeats the verses following “Whither thou goest I will go” while thinking about the man to whom she is attracted; if the Bible moves, she will marry the man. Miller describes the ritual as “a mistranslation if ever there was one. The verses...have nothing to do with her marriage to Boaz, except by unintentional prolepsis, since she has not met or perhaps even heard of him yet. But the words can be displaced with uncannily appropriateness to a new context in which they fit perfectly. There they can have a new performative function.”\textsuperscript{91} Likewise the use of Ruth’s speech in a marriage ceremony. These spoken words, when performed, take on a new meaning. They point forward to marriage while reaching back to filial loyalty.

Miller’s second illustration of a mistranslation (or “violent appropriation,” which seem to him to be synonymous) of Ruth is in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” The poem speaks of the nightingale’s song, which Keats has heard in a garden in Hampstead, as “something that has sounded the same in many different places and at many different times over the centuries.”\textsuperscript{92} In the poem, Boaz’s field is among the places the nightingale might have been heard. Keats reflects that it is “Perhaps the self-same song that found a path/Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home/She stood in tears amid the alien corn.”\textsuperscript{93} The juxtaposition of Boaz’s fields with the other settings where Keats’s nightingale has sung “associates Ruth with Keats’s general presentation of the human situation as forlorn, derelict, haunted by death, even ‘half-in love with easeful death’ (1. 52).”\textsuperscript{94} The atmosphere is all Keats, no Bible. Miller calls the decontextualized use of Ruth Keats’s “invention”; “it is his translation, or mistranslation, of the story of Ruth for his own quite different purposes. Ruth in the Bible is not shown to have suffered one pang of homesickness for the country of Moab, nor to have dropped

\textsuperscript{91} Miller, “Border Crossing,” p. 221.
\textsuperscript{92} Miller, “Border Crossing,” p. 222.
\textsuperscript{94} Miller, “Border Crossing,” p. 222.
a single tear." And yet, the book comes to reflect the plight of all those who have been displaced. Ruth, which is devoid of both longing for foreign lands and nightingales, "yields without apparent resistance to what Keats does with it." These are but a few elements in the transformation of Ruth. In her essay "Finding Our Past," Rebecca Alpert points to the many ways that the story of Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi has served as "a positive example of a primary relationship between women in the Bible." She cites anecdotally a lesbian convert to Judaism's identification with Ruth, a "convert whom she understands to be, like herself, a lover of women"; a lesbian couple who uses Ruth's declaration of loyalty to Naomi as the vows in their commitment ceremony; a popular novel adapted for film in which one woman uses the text of Ruth 1:16 to make known to her friend "that she wishes to leave an abusive marriage and come live with her." Most often, Alpert notes, the story of Ruth and Naomi has proven to be "a model for the powerful love that is possible between women," and precisely because it "point[s] toward something greater than a relationship of loyalty and obligation between...women...[it] resonates with lesbian women in search of role models."

Herein lies the beauty of the book of Ruth. It yields without resistance to what one does with it. When it travels, it is translated or deformed. In a new setting, Ruth may be "put to new uses that cannot be foreseen"; these uses are "an alienation of [the book], its translation into a new idiom, and its appropriation for new, indigenous purposes."

95) Miller, "Border Crossing," p. 222.
temporary lesbian women turn to the relationship between Ruth and Naomi as a model that affirms their own relationships. Likewise, Miller argues, people in ancient Judah encountered the story of Ruth—at once the widow, the orphan, the poor and the stranger, for whom the Bible enjoins us to care—and made it their own so as to ensure their own cultural vitality. They took the Moabite girl and transformed her into an Israelite, into a national heroine. They “assimilate[d] the alien, making the different into the same, but at the same time changing that same, in order to ensure that vitality, just as works of traveling theory are transformed in the new country or in a new discipline. In the new place a theory is made use of in ways the theory never intended or allowed for, though it also transforms the culture or discipline it enters.”

So too can the religious liberal turn to this ancient text to illuminate the contemporary situation. Like Matthew, like Hardy, like Keats, they can lift Ruth from its traditional setting and make it speak to a new situation. Like theirs, their misprision of Ruth will be a transformation of code: words, which meant one thing in their original setting, will take on new value in another. Figures recast may serve as analogues or foils in ways they had not before. This mistranslation will imbue the text with new value, as “any cultural event that is incorporated into a specific poetic context is reordered within that particular text (whether it is long or short) in accordance with the needs of that text.” Reordered in accordance with new needs, the book of Ruth will become a compelling prooftext.

How to reorder the book of Ruth? The reading I propose demands that we not only take individual verses and passages of scripture to be coherent, but that we understand there is meaning to be found in the interrelationship of the many (varied) texts in the biblical canon.

108) And a fine illustration of Doty’s “proposition that basically heterosexist texts can contain queer elements” (Doty, Making Things Perfectly Queer, p. 3).
Asserting these principles is not the same as claiming that the Bible is divine and divinely authored, as conservative readers would have it. Neither is it a repudiation of Berlinerblau's characterization of the Bible as a pastiche of fragmentary documents. Rather, it is a recognition that, no matter its provenance, the library of books eventually bound together to comprise the Bible has exerted tremendous influence over Western culture as a unified (generally intelligible) library.

All three of our readerships are in agreement that the Bible is, on some level, a narrative text or group of texts. Yet the ways the Bible is used in debates about homosexuality almost completely obscure this commonality. Instead, the text is taken apart, with dissembled passages circulated as sound bites. This method runs counter to the sensibility of most readers of the Bible, who are likely to concur with the assertion "that no single verse stands entirely on its own, but rather is fortified by its surrounding text and by other Scripture within the Bible. Taking any verse out of its context, without considering its surrounding text and supporting Scripture, only twists the meaning of the verse."\(^{109}\) Thus this paper argues that there is no good reason to conceive of the Bible's teachings on homosexuality as a series of dictates that exist in isolation from other statutes or stories, especially given that—beyond the confines of the debate itself, that is—few on either side of the debate actually seem to conceive of the biblical text generally as merely a litany of prohibitions. Which is to say, this paper reads the Bible as it has been read for centuries: as a largely coherent collection of books that can be understood in light of one another. It gives equal consideration to the legal (halakhic) and the narrative (aggadic) material, holding the genres to be mutually illuminating. Where it deviates from many 'traditional' readings—although, as the conservative readers' use of the Genesis stories of creation and Sodom and Gomorrah in the case against homosexuality attests, not all—is in its foregrounding of the narrative over law, seeing the former (rather than the latter) as prescriptive.\(^{110}\)


\(^{110}\) Calum Carmichael has written extensively about the interplay between biblical law and narrative.
Felicitously, the biblical text itself allows us to see this disregard of legal proscription as a legitimate hermeneutic move. Over and over again, the book of Ruth reminds us that its heroine is not only a stranger among the people Israel, but a Moabite. Ruth is named twelve times in “her” book. In six of these instances, the name is accompanied by an ethnic or national designation: she is Ruth the Moabite.

In repeatedly giving her provenance, the author of the book of Ruth is not merely underscoring Ruth’s status as foreigner and outsider. He is reminding us again and again of her improper pedigree, of her belonging to a nation into whom the Israelites were forbidden to marry. According to biblical narrative, the Moabites are descended from a scandalous (and illegal) union. As Lot and his family fled Sodom, his wife looked back at the destruction God rained down upon the city, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Fearing that their family line (and perhaps all humanity) would not continue, Lot’s two daughters contrived to get their father drunk and had sex with him. The one bore Ben-Ammi, forefather of the Ammonites, and the other Moab, eponymous ancestor of the Moabites (Gen. 19:24-38).

It is not, however, this inauspicious beginning that set the Israelites against the Moabites. Rather, the laws of Deuteronomy give cause for the abhorrence of the Moabites:

3 No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, 4 because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you...6 You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live (Deut. 23:3-6).

Not only were Israelites forbidden to marry Moabites, they were forbidden to abet them in any way.

How then do we account for the Bethlehem community’s embrace of the Moabite? After all, when Ruth arrives, she receives Boaz’s protection even before she earns his affection. Furthermore, the elders of Bethlehem bless Ruth and the women of the town bless Naomi on account of her daughter-in-law. One might argue that the community was acting in accordance with a different set of Israelites laws: the prescriptions for just treatment of the widow, the orphan, the alien, or
the poor laid out in the Torah and taken up by the prophets (cf. Exod. 22:22, Deut. 24:19, Zech. 7:9-10). The book of Ruth is the quintessential biblical expression of kindness and mercy. Ruth, besides being a Moabite, is at once the widow, the orphan, the alien and the poor. She stands at the edges of society, dependent on the kindness and mercy of others. Small wonder, then, that Keats imagined her not merely as homesick but as “forlorn, derelict, haunted by death.” Small wonder, too, that the people of Bethlehem took her in.

Read in canonical order, the biblical record seems to suggest, however, that the community’s blessing of a Moabite might have had less to do with her plight than with their own limited knowledge. According to later books of the Bible, the Deuteronomic law had fallen into obscurity but was reaffirmed by Ezra. The prophet Nehemiah recalls:

1 On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent (Neh. 13:1-3).

Religious readers of the Jewish and Christian canons will assume the community described in Ruth knew the laws given to Moses, however. In both canons, Deuteronomy precedes Ruth. So, unlike in the scene Nehemiah describes, in the book of Ruth the return to Bethlehem, to the land of the law, does not bring about the dissolution of forbidden marriages. Rather, through the Levirate law, the union of Ruth and Naomi’s son continues symbolically. Moreover, the community as a whole holds Ruth in high esteem because of the loyalty she showed Naomi and her family (Ruth 2:11-12). While the narrator will not allow the reader to forget Ruth’s Moabite origins, the community seems to content to overlook them. When she marries Elimelech’s kinsman Boaz, the community convenes as witnesses and offers its blessing on the couple. The blessing goes beyond mere well-wishing. With its entreaty that “the Lord make the woman who is coming into [Boaz’s]

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111 Miller, “Border Crossing,” p. 222.
house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11-12), the townspeople set Ruth among the matriarchs of Israel. We can read their actions as direct defiance of the law and a willingness to extend the boundaries of the community of Israel.

More importantly, however, God himself seems to disregard Ruth’s provenance. He too offers his blessing on the couple, and this blessing takes the form of a child. When Ruth and Boaz “came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). It is surprising enough that through divine will the line of Elimelech was continued by a Moabite. It is nothing short of shocking that the son born of the forbidden marriage was the grandfather of King David, one of the most important figures in the Bible. The book of Ruth thus offers a biblical model for defiance of biblical law and for sanctioning forbidden marriages. It is precisely the prooftext the religious left needs.

There are, as we have seen, ways to deal with those biblical texts that seem to disallow the possibility of grounding an argument in favor of same-sex marriage in biblical sources. The success of these hermeneutic moves is mixed. By turning from laws—which in the case of the homosexual, as in the case of the Moabite, seem to be unequivocal—to a narrative that describes communal transgression of a law in the name of love, the religious liberal may find the biblical precedent she has been seeking. There is no tension in taking normative cues from narrative portions of the Bible: “law is not always separated from narrative. Civil and moral instructions often follow one another.”

Thus it is possible to offer another misprision of Ruth, another putting of the book to uses that “could not have been foreseen.” Read it as intentionally abrogating the laws of Deuteronomy.

The biblical law is clear: Moabites are not permitted to enter into the community of Israel. And yet the biblical narrative is equally plain: the forerunner of the Messiah was the great-grandson of a Moabite. If the book of Ruth has anything at all to teach us, it might well be that from time to time, it is worth seeing what happens when a community breaks a law. This is not a call to anarchy. Rather, it is a gentle nudge to conservative, liberal, and secular readers alike to look beyond the world

of the text to the world of its readers. In the book of Ruth, a community rallied around two people whose marriage defied God's law. The community not only witnessed this union, it blessed it. And, as a consequence of that blessing, the society was positively transformed. Admittedly, it took generations for the full fruit of acceptance to be known. No doubt it will take at least as long for the impact of same-sex marriage to be fully grasped in the United States.