

# THE BIBLE IN THE GAY-DEBATE IN SOUTH AFRICA: TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The Bible has been accorded an important role in the recent (and current) debate about homosexuality and gay people in South African churches, such as the Dutch Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. The context is often one of high-charged emotions, and an existential experience of the hermeneutical results and biblical texts which are interpreted in different ways – although in every instance with considerable socio-political impact. In general, with the high stakes and ambiguity which are involved, reflection on the ethics of biblical interpretation is important. The ethics of interpretation concerns various facets and areas of biblical hermeneutical theory and practices, including contemplation of the status and use of the Bible in faith communities and broader society in South Africa.*

## Keywords:

## Introduction

This is a brief reflection on the ethics of interpretation with regard to the Bible and homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> It means that this contribution is *not* about a discussion on New Testament ethics of sexuality or homosexuality – rather, hermeneutics is the focus; it is *not* a summary of all the different positions stated here and/or in the literature on the subject – rather, it is a reflection on hermeneutical points of departure and approach; and it is *not* a comprehensive, final, resolving ('ontknopende') conclusion to the broader discussion – rather, it is an attempt to formulate (some) important parameters for current and future discussions on this (and related) topic(s). In a word, it is about the *ethics of interpretation*, and in particular how to approach the Bible in the discussion on biblical homoeroticism and modern homosexuality. The discussion on the *ethics* of interpretation stands within the broader notion of the *ethos* of interpretation, which "refers not just to the canonical texts but to the larger realities envioning them and the modern reader and, in particular, to the experience of discovering truth, which calls our culturally constructed humanity into question" (Countryman 2003:224).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edited version of a paper presented at a workshop on "Skrifberoeep en etiek in die homoseksualiteit-debat", held at Stellenbosch University, 9 November 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Although the focus here is on gays and lesbians and the notion of homosexuality as such, it reaches wider to include all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people.

<sup>3</sup> It further implies a reconceptualisation of Biblical studies, breaking with the "ethos of 'pure', value-detached, positivistic scientism" in favour of a new ethos, of "critical reflexivity, democratic debate, intellectual, multilingual, and multidisciplinary competence. It takes as its goal publicly accountable scholarship and responsible production and communication of such scholarship" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:198). Biblical scholarship that perceives of popularised talks and writing as the only interaction and communication with the churches, fails to become a full participant in the interpretative conversation: "The difference lies in whether the life of the community of faith is a part of the conversation from the start or is rather the recipient of occasional memos excerpted from the academic conversation in simplified form" (Countryman 2003:226).

Two initial comments are appropriate: *Firstly*, the complexity of biblical interpretation<sup>4</sup> is also present when trying to make sense of the biblical texts on homoeroticism. The bigger questions on the authority, role and function of the Bible are as much part of the current gay-debate, and amidst an absolute overwhelming variety of hermeneutical and exegetical theories, still little consensus exists on the clear advantage of any particular model or method. However, no fatalist impasse needs to be assumed or adopted<sup>5</sup> since some broad perimeters for interpreting these texts academically responsibly and socially accountably can be established. And *secondly*, academic scholarship and personal convictions must not be allowed to push personal integrity aside, or to negate constructive conversation, dialogue and discussion without personal attack and acrimonious accusations and slander.<sup>6</sup> This does not imply or issue in a call for ignoring either the academic debate or the existentiality of personal involvement of people; it does not prefer a less focussed dialogue at academic, ecclesial or personal levels; and, certainly no cheap reconciliation of perspectives with the danger of short-circuiting this discussion, should be sought.

### An Ethical Approach to the Bible

Various scholars in different contexts have written about the importance of and proposed guidelines for the ethics of biblical interpretation.<sup>7</sup> However, while acknowledging the need for criteria for valid interpretation, the purpose of such criteria is “not to demonstrate certitude of one’s conclusions but to demonstrate the relative adequacy<sup>8</sup> of one’s interpretation” (Schneiders 1991:165-7). Two broad considerations, what Schneiders calls ‘global criteria’, are the notions of ‘that which cannot be done or undone’ and the ‘fruitfulness’ of interpretative results. The first notion is about responsible scholarship, i.e. not over-asking texts<sup>9</sup> or neglecting the importance of situating texts historically.<sup>10</sup> The second notion, fruitfulness, concerns the problem with energy spent on exegetical endeavours only to render the text banal, while on the other hand, recognising the value of new methods and insights which do not violate the canons of exegetical acceptability yet allow the text to speak anew, to ‘illuminate the faith of the community’ (Schneiders 1991:165).<sup>11</sup>

Another scholar (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:195-8) provides a set of 13 ‘theses’ or programmatic guidelines for the ethics of interpretation, some elements of which were already

<sup>4</sup> Cf e.g. Countryman (2003:224) on the complexity, both ancient and modern, involved in interpretation, and therefore the need to – while affirming its value – go beyond analytical methods to also include synthetic methods.

<sup>5</sup> Although the Bible is of limited value for discussions on homosexuality today, “[t]he positive contribution of the Bible to modern discussions can be found by examining and interpreting the biblical passages within their historical framework” (Nissinen 1998:126).

<sup>6</sup> Much can be learned from the debate in the USA on ‘how not to talk about homosexuality’; cf the vitriolic outbursts of e.g. Gagnon (2000-2003).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. J Botha (1992:169-194); Patte (1995); Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:3-17).

<sup>8</sup> The focus is on a ‘logic of probability’ rather than on a ‘logic of verification’ (Ricoeur, Hirsch in Schneiders 1991:165).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. by dishonouring genre through insisting on references for lyric material to ascertain its accuracy; or, by ascribing specific concrete instances for elements contained in NT sin-lists. Cf Dreyer (2004:186); Nissinen (1998:125).

<sup>10</sup> E.g. to universalise specific texts to moral principles (and then even inconsistently so!) although they actually belong to a specific cultic context.

<sup>11</sup> More specifically, valid interpretation should meet other requirements (Schneiders 1991:165-6), as it should account for the text as it stands; be consistent with itself; be successful at explaining anomalies; be compatible with what is known from other sources; use responsibly all the methods that are appropriate.

addressed above.<sup>12</sup> She argues that the ethics of interpretation consists of four broad sub-categories, *viz* ethics of reading; ethics of interpretative practices; ethics of scholarship; and, the ethics of scientific valuation and judgment. Although this is an approach that paints with a broad brush, it nevertheless offers a useful and inclusive framework for dealing with various aspects of the use of the Bible in the gay-debate.

### **Aspects of an Ethics of Interpretation: The Gay-debate**

Within the debate about homosexuality and the role of the Bible in particular, a wide variety of stances, opinions and thoughts prevail. Again, the focus here is on how biblical texts are used by their interpreters/readers; not in the first instance to list the variety of positions regarding the legitimacy or credibility of homosexual orientation and/or lifestyle, or to evaluate such positions.<sup>13</sup>

#### **The Ethics of Reading: Texts and Methods**

The ethics of reading is concerned with the text and the methods used to interpret it. Avoiding recourse to a simplistic 'read-what-is-written', literalist approach, the 'values, norms, principles and visions of the text' as well as 'the value-laden assumptions and theoretical frameworks' accompanying reading processes are scrutinised. As one of four subcategories of the ethics of interpretation, the ethics of reading itself includes the following important aspects (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196).

#### *Language and texts*

From linguistic and literary theory a number of important issues have to be taken into account. Language and texts do not so much provide a window on reality as often construed in descriptive and reflective notions. Language, rather, is polysemic, constructive-performative, rhetorical-communicative and ideological misrepresentative; language can be dangerous, and can be used to marginalise and repress. Texts are rhetorical, 'inscribed communicative practices', multivoiced and tense-conflictive (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196). The underdeterminacy of texts (Westphal 1997:57-66) refers to the difficulty to proclaim the once-and-for-all meaning of a text, which is sometimes also expressed with reference to the notion of the surplus of meaning of texts.

A hermeneutical approach to these texts, which is used for decision making in the church, and that goes beyond a narrow, technicist style of identifying a 'principle' to be applied throughout, is alert to the socio-cultural contexts of (ancient) texts as well as (contemporary) interpreters, and allows for the surplus meaning of texts (cf Thiselton

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<sup>12</sup> Her first few and more theoretical theses are as follows: the ethics of interpretation is different from the ethics of a text, which is about the ethical and/or moral content of NT texts; the ethics of interpretation is a 'critical scientific metatheory' and is concerned with scholarly responsibility and accountability as integral to biblical studies; and, the ethics of interpretation aims to overcome the dichotomy between engaged and scientific scholarship (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:195-6).

<sup>13</sup> Important, broad lines of persuasion which go beyond a facile categorisation of pro- and anti-homosexuality positions can be noted. Some discount the value of biblical texts to inform sexuality in (post)modern world, in fact, that it burdens contemporary discussions to extent of becoming a stumbling-block rather than being a helpful resource. Others claim that biblical texts indeed provide a resource for ethical decision-making, and are thus normative for issues of sexuality as well (e.g., the Bible is a "road map both to eternal life and to manner in which life is lived here and now", Wold 1998:7). These stances depend largely upon one's position on especially two matters, the theory and practice of biblical interpretation, and the understanding of the nature and role of the Bible today.

2004:145ff,<sup>14</sup> following Gadamer, Betti, Ricoeur and Habermas). This means that an appeal to a supposed plain sense of Scripture (e.g. Wold 1998:208-9) in the gay-debate would not suffice (cf Balch 2000), and is challenged by the now discounted plain meanings about slavery and the status and position of women in church and society, which turned out to have been little more than interpretation forged by the power of convention.<sup>15</sup> The claim that no biblical author approved of homoeroticism ‘in any form they knew’ is not difficult to show, but has to be read in the light of the biblical texts’ focus on ‘physical sexual contacts’. Moreover, the Bible has no sustained or primary discussion on homoeroticism itself since it always appears as a secondary theme in other contexts (Nissinen 1998:123-4), and that it is contemporary interpreters who have thematised or grouped together different texts with regard to the topic of homosexuality. These texts do not have *direct* relevance for what is called homosexuality today (cf Dreyer 2004:190).<sup>16</sup>

### Contexts

The importance of contexts – of the original authors, textual transmission, and reader/receiver-audiences – for understanding the meaning of texts, is crucial and often studied at historical level and sometimes, unfortunately, slighted in textual interpretation. The amnesiac attitude towards the historical contexts of texts negatively impinges on the ability to make sense of them. Feminist biblical scholars have long pointed out that “classic texts and traditions are also a systematically distorted expression of communication under unacknowledged conditions of repression and violence” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196)<sup>17</sup> – an observation particularly applicable also in the case of texts related to homoeroticism. Amidst varying opinions about homoeroticism in the Greco-Roman world, the Jewish context which provided one primary context for the biblical texts was consistently negative about such practices. Here, of course, the reasons for such negativity need to be investigated and identified – such contexts and reasons cannot be assumed to summarily being analogous to our times and contexts. And then we also need to deal with the fact of the ‘dominant male perspective’ of the texts, and that “the available sources do not tell the whole truth of the life and reality of ancient people” (Nissinen 1998:133).

It is dangerous and in any case not even very helpful to merely assume that values and institutions mentioned in the Bible necessarily and immediately have the same meaning and resonances in our culture and society. To mention a few examples: marriage was first and foremost a social structure of loving relationships between parents and children amidst extended families with different generations and horizontal extensions, regulated by honour and shame, and patronage and clientage as core values rather than modern notions of security, nurturing and so forth.<sup>18</sup> Sexuality in the first-century culture was strongly

<sup>14</sup> In the end, Thiselton does not deal with his social location adequately, allowing the sheer quantitative weight of the traditional opinion to influence him more than he seems to be aware.

<sup>15</sup> Bitter acrimony is characteristic of both sides in the ‘debate’; cf Wold’s (1998:213-5) invective against Mel White for claiming hermeneutical privilege, “anyone who takes the Bible seriously will support his view of homosexuality” (214), only to claim himself (Wold) that “careful study of the biblical text demonstrates the fallacy of it [*sc* homosexuality]” (215). Numerous other examples can be listed.

<sup>16</sup> Two related questions have to be postponed for later discussion: How do we deal with the ideological nature of texts and of their interpretations or interpretative interests (Fowl)? And, how can the importance of undercutting the supposed ‘meant-means’ division best be appropriated (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:31; cf Stratton 1996:261).

<sup>17</sup> Even when one assumes a more neutral understanding of the socio-historical context of a text, it is still “produced rhetorically through selection, classification, and valuation” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196).

<sup>18</sup> The Bible is witness to at least three different kinds of marriage, none of which corresponds to the modern

determined by fertility and procreation – being the days before global over-population! – with male domination of women in a hierarchical, patriarchal world taken as an unquestioned given, to the extent where masculine power was symbolised by the penis as attested by such public statutes (Crossan and Reed 2004:258-266).<sup>19</sup> This differed vastly from modern notions of sexuality as a non-vital, at least equally recreational aspect of human identity, with accompanying notions of the equality of the sexes and genders. First-century arranged marriages comprising mutual responsibilities and obligations, although decidedly male-focused and -dominated in all respects, is foreign to a world where sexual relationships flow from sustained relationships based on love, romantic and sentimental feelings and associations. And, whereas modern views of what is ‘unnatural’ are established with reference to biology and behavioural sciences and individualist intent, ancient views focused on societal standards and convention (Nissinen 1998:133).

Sexual relationships in the ancient world and during the time of the New Testament must be viewed within the broader social spectrum of life. First-century life, in short, was governed by the ‘pivotal’ values of honour and shame, and “[a]s sexual and social relations were isomorphically conceived, the role of the active penetrator was always essentially honorable”.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, it was sexual *acts* which were categorised, not *people* on the basis of sexual orientation! Sex was not an act of fulfilment but an act that one person *did* to another, which meant that sexual identity was inextricably linked to social and political identity<sup>21</sup> – “the social body precedes the sexual body”. In short:

no distinction is made in the ancient sources between gender roles (man/woman), sexual orientation (homosexual/ heterosexual/ bisexual), and sexual practice. In those sources, erotic-sexual interaction on the part of people of the same sex is not considered a question of individual identity but a question of social roles and behaviour (Nissinen 1998:128).<sup>22</sup>

This meant that sex for the Greeks was no more or less morally problematic as eating and drinking. Regulation of sexual activities existed, in particular to curb harmful effects to society, but no (moral) codes of licit or illicit sexual behaviour was not to be found (Lambert & Szesnat 1994:52-56; cf Nissinen 1998:129-30).<sup>23</sup>

### *Interpretation*

People do not read the Bible unbiased or neutrally since all human beings are susceptible to a variety of socio-cultural influences which constitute human life. Such influences include that of organised religion in its many facets and forms, and in SA often the lingering impact

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(Western) notion of marriage based on mutual love (Van Aarde in Dreyer 2004:182-3).

<sup>19</sup> Androcentrism and patriarchy would have found the passive participants in homoerotic acts even more of a threat to the ‘fibre of society’ than women who are considered to be out of place. Cf Nissinen (1998:132) on the perceived threat of homoeroticism and homophobia as having “more to do with issues of masculinity and femininity than anatomy and psychology”.

<sup>20</sup> “Male honor is symbolized in the male sexual organs” (Malina 1993:135).

<sup>21</sup> “[D]escriptions of sexual relations were dominated by a hierarchical polarization based on the congruence of social status and sexual hierarchy” (Nissinen 1998:128).

<sup>22</sup> Of the four different forms of same-sex relationships of which all are attested in ancient sources, transgenerational homosexuality, transgendered homosexuality, egalitarian same-sex relationships, and class-distinguished homosexuality, only the third category plays a significant role in modern society (Nissinen 1998:131).

<sup>23</sup> While “active and passive partners match the distinction between male and female roles”, “[s]ame-sex sexual contacts were regarded as a voluntary perversion” (Nissinen 1998:128,130). The notion that “sperm contained the origin of human life” and therefore should not be wasted or used inappropriately (Nissinen 1998:130-1), should be noted.

of the attendance of church services and other activities from an early age. The effects of popular media such as movies and television are noticeable in the lives of most people. It is useful therefore to accept that everybody has certain predilections when it comes to reading the Bible and making sense of it, since sense-making takes place within someone's framework of reference saturated with diverse influences. Recognising and being willing to share those influences, and to have them challenged and critiqued are important aspects of an ethical approach to biblical interpretation<sup>24</sup> – it implies an openness and willingness to dialogue and debate; it implies an appropriate humility towards the texts, the dialogue-partners, the theme and towards those most affected by the discussion, as well as humility towards God. In short, interpretation is “determined by the effective history of a text as well as the communities of reading and their norms” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196) and meaning is the result of the complex process of interaction between text and reader *in contextu*.

Admitting to the log of our own presuppositions (as well as the splinter of those of others!) implies and requires an openness and readiness to listen to various positions,<sup>25</sup> as well as the willingness to engage responsibly and accountably with the Bible as an (maybe *the*; but not, *only!*) important reference point in the discussion.

Conservatives would do well to remind themselves that the ultimate purpose of our creation is neither the perpetuation of the species nor the preservation of the heterosexual family unit. Liberals, on the other hand, should remember that sexual and psychological fulfilment on our own terms are not the be all and end all of human existence either (Holben 1999:228).

### History of Interpretation

The history of interpretation and reception of the Bible regarding homosexuality by the Church(es) through the ages, are overwhelmingly negative. Christian tradition ‘has always condemned homosexuality’ (Carroll in Nissinen 1998:125), but it should be remembered that this was true of heterosexuality for a large part as well: sexuality was seen as expression of lust and was considered sinful!

The temptation to simply align current positions with such ecclesial positions over many centuries, need to bear in mind also the accompanying notions regarding celibacy,<sup>26</sup> gender roles, and the like – some of which are still in force in some traditions, while in other traditions they have only been discarded over the last few decades.

### The Ethics of Interpretative Practices: Process

As a second aspect of an ethics of interpretation, an ethics of interpretative practices (or scientific production) concerns the critical investigation of “the process of how interpretation is produced, authorised, communicated, and used” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196-

<sup>24</sup> Cf Malina's (1991:3-23) comments on the considerate reader; not only are considerate readers required in different interpretative schools, but consideration should also characterise engagement between different schools.

<sup>25</sup> Especially in Reformed theology where the value of tradition is slowly being appreciated again, even if not ascribed an equal status with the Bible.

<sup>26</sup> The biblical texts offer no evidence of celibacy as a moral option in and of itself. “For those without this gift [sc of celibacy], Paul considered the satisfaction of desires, so long as it was within the boundaries of the property ethic, entirely appropriate. Any insistence on celibacy for homosexuals as such is, accordingly, contrary to New Testament witness” (Countryman 1999:522).

7).<sup>27</sup> Since it has become increasingly clear that biblical texts on homoeroticism neither address homosexual orientation *per se*, nor modern, monogamous, sustained homosexual relationships, does that mean that the texts are irrelevant for our discussions on homosexuality today? Hardly, but it does mean that dealing with the individual ‘six-shooter’<sup>28</sup> texts cannot be the sum-total of our interpretative efforts to arrive at greater clarity about biblical perspectives on homosexuality. Reading texts in isolation has always been questioned in the Reformed tradition, believing that the whole Bible forms the proper context for interpreting texts, reading them as part of the entire story of God with God’s people (Duff 1996:154). Regarding homoeroticism in the Bible, an ethics of reading therefore requires more than close reading of specific texts, although that is an important starting point.

The ‘gay texts’ of the Bible are often dealt with in two, fairly different, ways. On the one hand, the biblical texts are seen to condemn homosexuality as such and with little need to qualify the nature of the texts, the form of the object of condemnation, or other related matters. However, a primary and first important difficulty is that neither the word<sup>29</sup> nor the concept in the form and way used today (‘homosexuality’) and found in certain Bible translations, existed or was used similarly when the texts under discussion were composed.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the biblical texts are used in a more nuanced way,<sup>31</sup> arguing that it is specific instances and forms of homoerotic behaviour which were condemned: abusive sexual relationships where powerful males subdue powerless males; more often than not pederastic in nature; offending primarily because such acts were perceived to be contrary to social norms and values about honour and shame which were gender-biased and prescriptive in sexual roles; and in the Old Testament probably even religiously focussed transgressions were in mind.

Evaluating such interpretative practices, it seems as if anachronism and ethnocentrism are still particular and prevalent dangers in the use of the Bible in the gay-debate, as much as in other similar debates (as with women in the leadership roles in the church, for example). If we take anachronism to mean the assumption that ancient perceptions and

<sup>27</sup> The following aspects are up for scrutiny: Area of questions and problem formulation; ‘common-sense’ assumptions; lenses of reading and reflection; ‘reconstructive models, analogies, and images’; theoretical frameworks, worldviews, and points of reference’; construction of discourse, authorities claimed and references left out; rhetoric of scientific discourse (ethos, logos, pathos); boundaries constructed and maintained by scholarly discourse; “critical reflexivity and comprehensiveness of a discourse” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:196-7).

<sup>28</sup> The Bible is seen as a revolver with reference to six texts (Gen 19:1-29; Lev 18:22, 20:13; Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tm 1:8-11) which act as ‘bullets’ directed at lesbians to kill of their access to the claim to full membership in the community of faith (Germond 1997:193).

<sup>29</sup> In the Greek NT the neologism noun ἀρσενικοίτης (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tm 1:10) and the adjective malakoi (1 Cor 6:9) are used to refer to men involved in same-sex sexual activities; for women similarly engaged (Rm 1:26 αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετέλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν) there is no specific, single term of description used (neither for men in Rm 1:27. ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἄλλ ἴλους, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσενισ τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι).

<sup>30</sup> Even if Thiselton’s position that the concept homosexuality could have been present although that word was not used in ancient times (Thiselton 2004:158-161,188) is granted, it unfortunately still disregard the broader problematic of establishing the accuracy of the concept as description of the relevant ancient practices, the equation of certain practices divided by 2000 years by a single concept, and so on.

<sup>31</sup> As much as other ‘contemporary’ issues require a nuanced approach! While we may be beyond the days when the institution of slavery was regarded as normal or women as naturally and in all other ways inferior to men, the position of women in the church and clergy in particular still goes on. Other ‘hard-fought’ positions have since crumbled: prescribed hair-length for men and women; dress code (and headgear in particular) for women; the position of Sundays in our socio-economic times, etc.

values are simply equal to those of modern times, and to infuse the ancient ones with modern ideas; and ethnocentrism to mean the assumption that the perceptions and values of a particular group of people are or should be equally valid for another, disregarding the uniqueness of their own perceptions and values, the danger of the claim to a 'plain' or 'obvious' meaning of the biblical texts is evident. A selective co-textual reading which enlists surrounding texts on the basis of vague notions of universality while discounting the socio-cultural and thus contextual limits of others allows both anachronism and ethnocentrism in by the backdoor.

### The Ethics of scholarship: Social Location

A third aspect of the ethics of biblical interpretation is the ethics of scholarship,<sup>32</sup> which attends to the 'ethos, social location and positionality of biblical interpretations'. Questions are asked about who the persons are who interpret, what their standpoints and perspectives are, and what the social and political values are of specific interpretations? Since the conscious and unarticulated goals of an interpretation determine its 'sociopolitical and religious functions and effects' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:197), the ethics of scholarship reckon with the social location of interpreters and the social (incl religious) impact of their interpretations.<sup>33</sup> Notions of inerrancy and infallibility are dispensed with since they distract from interpretation, leaving only an 'enforcement of norms'. "Any preconception about the text, then, that makes the interpreter want to save it from embarrassment is suspect" (Countryman 2003:230).

Easy, quick-fix and uncomplicated answers and solutions on how to engage the gay-debate or how to deal with lesbians are not useful, as much as obscurantism which is at times evident in academic debates, will not suffice. The fact of Christians living in civil society implies that traditional binaries cannot be re-invoked, perceiving of society as the necessary opposite of the community of faith, contrasting biblical injunctions with medical and psychological research, and so on. Positing other, all too easy contrasts as argument-clinchers are often expressions of heterosexism and even homophobia (at times amounting to hate-speech) and more often than not rest upon popularist but unfounded urban legends<sup>34</sup> with research results pointing in other directions.

It is Christians' shared responsibility 'in this world' (1 Pt) to discern the will of God through deliberation with other faithful as well as informed people about moral issues. The way and purpose to which scientific knowledge is brought to bear on the use of the Bible in the gay-debate needs to be accounted for.<sup>35</sup> "[T]he perspectives of genetics, psychiatry, and sociology, even if partially contradictory, as well as the recent formation of gay and lesbian identities and lifestyles have shed totally new light on same-sex relationships and have thoroughly shaken the whole discussion" (Nissinen 1998:125; cf 132). Biological, psychiatric and socio-cultural studies and knowledge have to be considered, and carefully evaluated for their impact on the discussion. "There is general consensus today that no one theory of homosexuality can explain such a diverse phenomenon, as no one theory of

<sup>32</sup> As emerges in an ethics of communication, biblical scholarship "is an assembly of divergent communicative scientific practices" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:198).

<sup>33</sup> An important starting point for interpreters is that they have 'true reverence' for both text and community (Countryman 2003:229).

<sup>34</sup> E.g. about genital mechanics and fitment-theories of sexual intercourse; procreation as the begin and end all of human sexuality; gays as perverts, rapists, abusers and paedophiles, spreaders of HIV/AIDS; etc.

<sup>35</sup> It is not useful to insist on choosing between either the biblical witness or the contribution of science in ethical discernment about homosexuality (SO Jones and Yarhouse 2000).



heterosexuality can explain that diverse phenomenon” (Coleman 1995:54). There is no positive indication that homosexuality should be treated as a disease and has in fact been removed from the DSM-III as a psychological disorder in the 1970’s already. While the nature-nurture argument continues in full swing, no homosexual gene has yet been found. Gay reparative therapy has not been shown to render any significant and certainly not lasting results.

Reverence for the community as a necessary part of the character of the interpreter, does not imply agreement with all beliefs of the community whether expressed by “the dictatorship of the powerful or the tyranny of the many”. It does, however, treasure the sense of belonging to the community for whom the interpretations are made in the first instance<sup>36</sup> (Countryman 2003:230). From a socially-engaged<sup>37</sup> position, biblical scholars, church leaders and everyone who consider themselves concerned with biblically interpretation, need to ask themselves: How is the church (communities of faith) assisting society to deal with LGBT-people who desire to live their lives also in submission to God, as part of a sustaining and sustained relationship, aware of and expressing their sexuality within such a loving relationship? How could they be supported to establish social arrangements or contracts which could emulate and support the *values* which heterosexual marriages and family lives ideally stand for?

#### The ethics of scientific valuation and judgement: Knowledge and values

The ethics of scientific valuation and judgement investigates two broad aspects, the first being the kind of knowledge<sup>38</sup> produced. Since interpretation is always a human activity, done by people with certain experiences, biases, interests, values and goals, careful consideration is required for the ‘implicit interests and unarticulated goals’ of the interpretative stances and results produced. And secondly, an ethics of scientific valuation and judgement “examines the norms, values, interests, visions, or ideals implicit or explicit in biblical interpretations as well as the criteria of discernment and evaluation”. It follows that interpretation, since it is always interested and value-laden, requires both cognitive and evaluative criteria for deciding between different interpretations<sup>39</sup> (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:197).

It was Foucault who emphasised the relationship between power, discourse and knowledge, allowing the recognition of the extent to which historical discourse is coloured by ideology and manipulated by power interests – and all of these particularly on the level of human sexuality (Lambert & Szesnat 1994:58).<sup>40</sup> Discussions about homosexuality and biblical interpretation involve (concerns about) power and ideology: “To deny an entire class

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<sup>36</sup> “This is often a problem for modern biblical interpretation, since many academi interpreters have allowed themselves the apparent luxury of abandoning the community that cares about the Bible rather than enduring the stress and strain of remaining in it and entering into conflict with it where that seems necessary” (Countryman 2003:230).

<sup>37</sup> Countryman (2003:231-2) talks of ‘engaged detachment’, referring to engagement with ‘the process of interpretation’, ‘the richness of the text’ and ‘the need of the community’. Detachment comes from the awareness that an interpreter is only one, even if critical, part of the interpretative conversation.

<sup>38</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:197) suggests the following categories: technological, hermeneutic or emancipatory.

<sup>39</sup> This of particular importance for the use of the Bible in the gay debate, because “[i]f texts are polysemous and have an oppressive history of effects, their interpretation always requires judgement and evaluation” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:197).

<sup>40</sup> So, e.g. Nissinen even argues that different biblical texts are applicable when dealing with homosexual persons as such, as compared when dealing with their historical status as oppressed and despised minority (Nissinen 1998:126).

of human beings the right peaceably and without harming others to pursue the kind of sexuality that corresponds to their nature is a perversion of the gospel” (Countryman 1999:522), and is the result of self-defined purity codes of contemporary communities of faith.

Sexual discourse is a powerful tool to construct society, to manipulate and control, to exert influence. The ever-present danger in discussions about people, who are marginalised, regardless of the social categories of discrimination used, is that it can develop into a situation where the powerful exert their authority over a minority deprived of power and agency, reinforcing their marginalisation. This certainly true for those who reinforce the marginality of the minority but in certain ways also for those who side with and are advocates for the minority. In the end, it is not only about intentions and motives – although it is certainly about these as well – but it is also about how the interaction is structured, how the discourse is pitched and controlled, and the anticipated results or outcomes of the interaction.<sup>41</sup>

In this regard, both heterosexism and homophobia have to be addressed for their (potential) influence on the way texts are read and appropriated today.

‘Heterosexism’ may be defined as “a systematic form of oppression in which the beliefs and actions of society reinforce the assumed inherent superiority of the heterosexual pattern of loving, and thereby its right to dominance, resulting in the rigid imposition of gender and sexual roles on women and men”.<sup>42</sup> This pervasive belief system and the homophobia which may accompany it, continues to prevent the Church’s affirmations of justice, mutuality, trust, and a caring community from being extended to lesbian and gay people (Canadian study document quoted in Cilliers 1997:180; cf Jung and Smith in Morrison 1997:116).

The notion of the male-female sexual relationship as paradigmatic in the Bible at various levels is important for understanding a central aspect of what it means to be human within the contextuality of the biblical context. However, to claim this paradigm as *naturally* unalterable and therefore prescriptive for today as well, is to impose a natural law argument on the debate, and also to impinge on the freedom of God to call people into various – also gay and lesbian – relationships. Importantly, “one can uphold the essential value of the male-female relationship and yet maintain that God calls some persons into homosexual relationships” (Duff 1996:155).

The ethics of communication is concerned with whether interpretative practices do justice to the text and its interpretation(s) as well as to contemporary readers, especially to those biblical readers who are affected by biblical texts today. It analyzes scholarly interpretations as to their interests, values, and visions in order to show that not only so-called engaged but also scientifically supposedly value-free or value-neutral scholarship is an ideologically, theologically, or ethically motivated communication (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:197).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> E.g. West and Dube’s insistence on ‘speaking with’ rather than ‘speaking for/on behalf of’ others with reference to ‘ordinary’ Bible readers (1996:7-17). Cf criticism from Maluleke (2000: 87-112) and Segovia (2000: 59-83).

<sup>42</sup> Cf however Stackhouse (1996:133-143) on the ‘heterosexual norm’.

<sup>43</sup> “The great aim [of the committed interpreter] is not to impress other not to triumph politically, but to encourage genuine knowledge, thought, and reflection (Countryman 2003:232).

## Conclusion

Ethics of interpretation resists interpretative positions which amount to the recital of a few selected texts outside of (and often in harsh contradiction to) their literary, socio-historical and reception-critical contexts. The argument that the Bible is timeless and therefore to be used as encyclopaedic reference for human behaviour and morality before God, soon finds itself in trouble.<sup>44</sup> Notions such as “Die konsepte seks, sonde en huwelik is onvoorwaardelik teologiese aangeleenthede vir die Kerk en daarom moet antwoorde daarvoor in die Bybel afgelees word” (Botha 2005:296), only serves to illustrate an impoverished hermeneutic and anachronistic understanding of the Bible as ‘theological compendium’ which does an injustice to the richness of the biblical witness – for all its seeming simplicity, it obscures rather than clarifies; for all its concern for the text, its interlocutors and the hermeneutic process are sadly neglected. Theological concepts are always human constructs, for better or for worse – they do not fall from heaven, as also the Bible did not: the social location and historical process of a theological concept need as much attention as the historical embeddedness of Scripture. And ‘answers’ are not ‘read from’ the Bible since the Bible is not an encyclopaedia neither a contemporary document of which we immediately and unproblematically know how to handle its literary conventions, style and genre intricacies or how to include and incorporate its socio-historical setting and embeddedness.

The very reason for discussing the ethics of interpretation, and that the time was not spent in more discussion on the biblical texts themselves, is probably due to the fact that we all realise that using the Bible requires more than simply an exercise in grammatical analysis, historical study or even self-awareness. There cannot be a textbook with the title, “Hermeneutics for dummies: Ten easy steps”. The hermeneutical process is not like repeatedly using a recipe for baking a cake but infinitely more complex and requires more from us than quoting a text or two in support of our own position(s), requiring also discernment, ongoing reading and studying, and maybe above all, a willingness to rethink the conventional of which we so easily and imperceptibly become a part!

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<sup>44</sup> Cf OT texts in Lev on treatment of women pregnant outside of wedlock, agricultural rules pertaining to planting of crops and material used for making clothes etc. and NT texts on clothes to be worn; hairstyles; slavery etc.

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