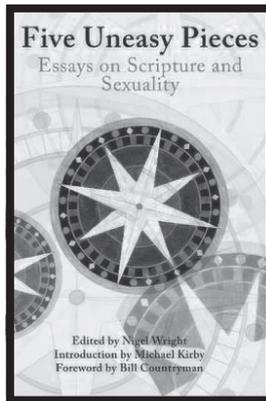


BOOK REVIEWS

FIVE UNEASY PIECES: ESSAYS ON SCRIPTURE AND SEXUALITY.

NIGEL WRIGHT (EDITOR).
ADELAIDE: ATF, 2012. \$30.15. XXX
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I approach this edited collection as neither an Anglican nor as someone particularly concerned with whether or not the Bible “forbids” homosexuality, as such. Rather, I approach it assuming the Bible has little to tell us about human sexuality that is not already encoded

within the patriarchal and androcentric norms of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultural contexts. *Five Uneasy Pieces* positions itself as a reasoned counterpoint to some of the more strident declarations on Christian expressions of human sexuality, and is made up of essays by five Australian Anglican scholars on particular “texts of terror” that refer to the (imported) category of the “anti-homosexual”.

The volume begins with a foreword by North American biblical scholar, L. William Countryman. He points out that while the present collection deals with oft-studied texts that have long figured for a discussion of homosexuality, it expands the geography of the conversation, previously largely the preserve of the North Atlantic world, to include Australians. Countryman points out that the rift in the Anglican Communion around the issue of sexuality has its roots in long-established different approaches to interpreting Scripture. This seems obvious, but is worth re-stating. As he diagnoses: “Each separate Anglican strand takes too much for granted. As long as we cannot articulate our fundamental presuppositions in ways that are intelligible to one another, we cannot persuade one another of our conclusions” (xvii).

Following this, Michael Kirby provides an introductory essay that frames the proceeding chapters in terms of a conflict between traditional theologies of human sexuality and modern advances in psychological and sociological research into the

nature of sexual attraction. He also suggests that compromise on these matters, in order to keep the Anglican Communion from falling apart, is unstable at best. In response, he proposes that Anglicans adjust their thinking and understanding of Scripture to the new sexual-scientific realities.

The first of the uneasy pieces, written by Megan Warner, focuses on the Sodomites in Genesis 19. Was the sin of Sodom really homosexuality? She argues, on the contrary, that the wickedness of Sodom was a lack of hospitality shown towards God’s envoys. Such a view is consistent with both the literary context of the passage and also early interpretations of Sodom found in early Christian and Rabbinical texts. The chapter does not break new ground and rehashes what I thought were well-known arguments. Similarly, Richard Treloar’s re-reading of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 re-treads old ground. However, his chapter also advances some “Anglican ways of taking the Bible fully seriously” based on various Articles of Religion and the Anglican-hermeneutical tradition. Treloar observes that these isolated verses are part of ancient Israel’s holiness codes, in company with a whole lot of other seemingly bizarre prescriptions, such as forbidding the trimming of one’s beard (19:27–28). He arrives at a point of respecting the text enough to resist its “plain sense.” While the privileging of certain sexual configurations seems apparent within these texts, the universal and transcultural application of such models is less obvious.

In the next chapter Peta Sherlock tackles Rom 1:26–27, a text which seemingly condemns not only gays but also lesbians. Again, Sherlock begins with a brief exploration of Anglican hermeneutics before settling on some basic interpretive principles including, for instance, drawing the marginalised into the centre. Sherlock’s engagement with the text is limited and incredibly problematic. It relies heavily on the previous scholarship of Brendan Byrne and Walter Wink and perpetuates an anachronistic view of ancient sexuality by universalising contemporary constructions of the hetero-homo binary. For example, she writes: “Paul here condemns heterosexual people who are acting, out of greed and lust, as if they had a homosexual orientation. She seems to have no understanding of people who are genuinely, whether by genetic make up or culture, ‘naturally’ homosexual” (41). This is nonsensical in that sexual orientation is itself a modern category. While ancient people had

no conception of homosexual orientation, this does not necessarily mean that they thought everyone was heterosexual or straight. More accurately, sexuality was experienced, not in the first instance, as attraction, but according to honour and shame codes that were closely aligned with the patriarchal gender dynamics of ancient society.

Alan Cadwallader's chapter on 1 Cor 6:9–10 is a breath of fresh air in that it presents an original proposition, namely, that the definition of *arsenokoites* – one of two obscure words conventionally taken to mean homosexual (lit. “man-bedder”) – refers to the man who “is living with his father’s wife” in 1 Cor 5:1 and thus has entered another man’s bed. Cadwallader establishes this interpretation through the analysis of a radiating succession of contexts, including the literary unit, form, and historical function and setting. He argues that the vice list is included as a rhetorical device within the larger unit of 1 Cor 5–6, which relates to the specific offence of incest, and not male-to-male sexual expression.

Finally, Gregory C. Jenks engages in a “progressive reading” of 1 Tim 1:8–11, another vice list that is often proof-texted to condemn homosexual activity. Unique to Jenk’s chapter is an autobiographical elaboration of his reading site, consisting of his educational background, religious affiliation, ethnicity, cultural identification, marital status, and political and theological leanings. Awkwardly, it reads as a slightly self-indulgent acknowledgment of liberal guilt, and I do not think Jenks successfully brings himself into a multi-directional “reader response” dialogue with the text. In fact, his exegetical analysis is almost non-existent, and the chapter’s structure is wooden and formulaic (e.g. “As a progressive Christian reader of this NT passage...”). Jenks does provide some discussion of the relevant Greek words, but his translation of, for example, *arsenokoitais* as “improper sexual activity with other men” (80) appears to contradict the more exhaustive work of Cadwallader in the preceding chapter.

My main concern with this volume stems from its underlying premise: the very act of constructing a canon of biblical references to homosexuality (or heterosexuality) is itself problematic and should have been actively deconstructed. If the imported category of homosexuality is positioned as the object of research in the first place, this in turn disguises the assumption that there is an uncomplicated continuum in heterosexual relations that is both natural and timeless. In other words, while the book attempts to provide an inclusive counterpoint to strident Christian declarations against homosexuality, the normativity and

perhaps even privileging of heterosexual identity is still presumed. While no doubt fuelled by good intentions, oppressive ideologies are still uncritically re-inscribed, as in the case of Sherlock’s chapter.

Alternatively, a queer approach to Scripture, in which the instability of compulsory gendered and sexual norms are problematised, would be far more effective at undermining supposedly biblical arguments for the ontology of monogamous heterosexual relationships. For example, a conservative-evangelical response to this volume, *Sexegesis*, co-edited by Michael Bird and Gordon Preece, constructs a theology in which Creation/New-Creation is seen as the dominant sexual meta-narrative of the Bible. Accordingly, each passage of Scripture should be read as part of this story. Underlying their theology is the assumption that since Adam and Eve were straight, the New Creation will be similarly full of heterosexuals. Such a reading of the Eden story is easy to deconstruct: Adam is not initially a man as such, but rather an androgynous/intersex formation of living clay who occupies the intermediate realm of the ancient gender hierarchy. A queer reading attempts to undermine the male-female and hetero-homo binaries that undergird conventional reading strategies. But it also enables scholars to move beyond the artificial canon of texts thought relevant to discussions of so-called biblical homosexuality. The issue is that the few texts this volume deals with already bear inordinate weight, when their relevance is arbitrary at best.

ROBERT J. MYLES, is a recent PhD graduate of the University of Auckland. He is currently co-editing a volume on the topic of the Bible and sexuality.