

## “The GLBT Family in the Bible... Founding and Following the Work of Jesus” “Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with ‘New Eyes’” - Part 2

### Foundations - God Blesses the "Barren Ones"

One place to begin exploring GLBT history in the Bible is with the Biblical concepts of immortality. The Hebrew scriptures are not very clear about any consistent concept of life after death. The primary way that one would achieve immortality was through one's heirs. The worst fate that could befall someone was to be "cut off" from one's people. This could happen by being exiled for certain crimes, by public execution, or by dying without leaving any children. Prosperity and having many children were viewed as dual signs of God's favor. (Psalm 127:3-5; 128:3-6).

In this context, female barrenness was considered a curse. A woman's worth was connected to her ability to give her husband children. The Bible is full of stories of women who desperately prayed to God to "open their wombs" (Psalm 113:9; Genesis 30:1; I Samuel 1:10). Barrenness became a metaphor used by the prophets to describe Israel's pitiful condition when they felt abandoned or cursed by God. Isaiah 54 begins with a poignant recasting of this metaphor. Isaiah's prophetic message then revokes the curse of barrenness and Israel becomes a barren woman with many children. Two chapters later, Isaiah uses the term "dry tree" (a female image of barrenness) for eunuchs. It also associated the term "*cut off*" with eunuchs. The term "*eunuch*" in Isaiah 56 is possibly a generic term used to include men and women who do not have children.

The main reference in the law which may be the source of exclusion of eunuchs from the temple is Deuteronomy 23:1. Leviticus 21:17 says only those who are "unblemished can present themselves before God . . . ." This also excludes *eunuchs* who in ancient pagan religions were temple priests, and perhaps excludes children born of incestuous unions. Ultimately, Isaiah proclaims an inclusive covenant which promises the eunuchs and barren women *full participation* in the blessings of God and a "*name better than sons and daughters. . . an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.*"

### Some People Are Born "Eunuchs"

So who were the eunuchs of Biblical times? The word, "eunuch," seems to refer to a male who has been castrated (often to render him "*safe*" for female royalty). However, there are references to eunuchs as court officials who were not necessarily physical eunuchs. Eunuchs referred to in Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, as well as in the New Testament, were not all castrated males. "Eunuch" is a more generic word that may well have included barren females, gay foreign court officials and magicians and priests, as well as castrated males. Castrated males were often functionally, if not constitutionally, homosexual.

Jesus speaks about three kinds of eunuchs: "For there are eunuchs who have been so by birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (Matthew 19:12)

One might assume that eunuchs "made so by others" are those who have been castrated. Those who "*made themselves eunuchs*" are voluntary celibates. What of those, however, who were *born* eunuchs? Jesus makes it clear that heterosexual marriage is *not the norm* for everyone. This important comment by Jesus, which acknowledges lifestyles other than heterosexual marriage, applies to GLBT people.

Two stories of black eunuchs, both royal court officials, exemplify God's redemptive action. In Jeremiah 38, an Ethiopian eunuch saves the life of Jeremiah, an unmarried prophet. Jeremiah, in turn, brings a message of God to the king which describes how Jerusalem can be saved.

Another Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8, is baptized by the apostle Philip. The eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53 (awfully close to Isaiah 54 and 56!) a passage of messianic prophecy which describes the destiny of the Suffering Servant who would be "*cut off*" from the land of the living. The eunuch got the message that those who have been "*cut off*" are to be included. Hence his question, "*What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" Philip the apostle answers, "*Nothing!*"

## The Book of Acts - Defining A Lesbian and Gay "Nation"

The book of Acts is an account of the early Church as it attempts to preach and live an "unhindered gospel" (Acts 28:31). Today, there is a great, global awakening of GLBT communities, who still need access to an "unhindered gospel." Two crucial stories are central to such a gospel: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) and Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Both have their roots in the prophecies of Isaiah 56. Isaiah proclaims a future day when Gentiles and eunuchs will be included among the people of God, and their sacrifices will be "*acceptable*." The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "*acceptable*" in Isaiah 56:7 also appears in Acts 10:35.

## Ethnos Uncovered

In the story of Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (a Gentile), Peter is given a divine revelation from God: ". . . God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God." (Acts 10:34-35). The word "nation" is actually the Greek word *ethnos* from which we derive our word "*ethnic*." The term refers to a race, culture or people. Thus Peter learns that among every race, culture or people those who fear God and do what is right are eligible for baptism.

Is the GLBT community just a political lobby for homosexual behavior, or is it an *ethnos*? Certainly, there are heterosexual people who engage in homosexual sex, and GLBT people who may never have sex at all. Are GLBT people a kind of behavior, or a kind of people for whom homoerotic attraction is but one characteristic? An *ethnos* could be defined by a common history, vocabulary, culture, institutions (schools, libraries, clubs, churches, synagogues, social organizations, businesses) heroes, political leaders, scholars, values, and the ability to recognize each other even when submerged in the dominant culture. If these constitute an *ethnos*, GLBT people are included in the word "*nation*" used in Acts 10. What evidence of GLBT *ethnos* exists in the Bible? This is a complex detective story made more difficult by thousands of years of heterosexist bias in secular history and Biblical scholarship.

## Jesus Lived an Alternate Lifestyle

Relationships of Jesus in the gospels differ greatly from the contemporary so-called nuclear family. Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha. What drew Jesus to this very non-traditional family group of a bachelor brother living with two spinster sisters? Two barren women and a eunuch are Jesus' adult family of choice. Are we to assume they were all celibate heterosexuals? What if Mary and Martha were not sisters but called each other "sister" as did most lesbian couples throughout recorded history?

John's gospel refers no less than eight times to the "one whom Jesus loved", also called the "*beloved disciple*". Scholars rarely explore that fact that Jesus obviously had a particularly close friendship with one man. Whether or not Jesus was gay, homophobia has silenced exploration of this relationship.

The Bible, in fact, knows almost nothing of the Post-Reformation ideal of monogamous, lifetime romantic heterosexual marriage. The Bible portrays marriage in terms of property and business transactions, polygamy, extended family, tribal groupings, Levirate marriage and other lifestyles. The anti-marriage bias in the New Testament and sex-negative emphasis of early theologians is well known by historians and students of human sexuality.

The new Christian community in Acts includes childless widows, former prostitutes, social outcasts, celibates, married people, eunuchs, blacks, Jews, and Gentiles. Those previously excluded were now fulfilling the promise of Isaiah 56: *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all the people."*

## Jesus Chooses a New "Family"

Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of Isaiah 53, was "cut off" from his people in two ways: he was executed as a criminal and died without heirs. He was a functional, if not physical, eunuch. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ redefined eternal life, dissociating it from the necessity to produce children.

Once, when confronted by his biological mother and brothers, Jesus pointed to his disciples as a new family, saying: "For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31)

### Also See:

**"Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with 'New Eyes'"**  
(Part 1)

And

"Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with 'New Eyes'" - Part 3:  
**"Same-Sex Relationships in the Bible"**

## Footnotes to "Our Story Too..."

1) Consultation of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, on "Biblical Issues and Homosexuality," Unpublished papers, 1987. Six infamous passages in the Bible are used against gays and lesbians-all of which must be taken out of context when directed against them. A thorough, yet concise, commentary on these passages is provided in the pamphlet, *Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness*, by Rev. Donald Eastman, referenced below.

2) This section, "Same-Sex Relationships," is indebted to Tom Horner's *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1978.

3) This section, "Important Questions," is indebted to Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984.

### Further Reading:

The following sources are recommended for those wishing to more carefully study related issues:

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 2000.

Goss, Robert E and Mona West, ed *Take Back the Word*. Pilgrim Press, 2000

Boswell, John. *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Countryman, Louis William. *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*. Morehouse Publishing, 2001.

Heyward, Carter. *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic As Power and the Love of God*. Harpercollins 1989..