
THE PROMISE OF HAPPINESS IN THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

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Recently a potential research student came to my office to inform me that she was no longer interested in studying Christian textual traditions and queer identity with me. She explained that, having grown up Christian and recently come out as a lesbian, these topics were too personal, and she wanted to normalize her sexuality. Reading an essay of mine (or at least reading the first few pages, she admitted) was the thing that prompted her realization. It was an essay in which I offer a queer lesbian reading of Revelation's "Great Whore" (2011). The student explained that she wanted to continue studying religion, but not something as personally potent as queer biblical studies. Her words hit me hard. They felt like a rejection of my identity. Sitting in my office afterwards, with *this* essay on my to-do list, I realized that my encounter with this student captured much of what I experience as a queer lesbian in the field of biblical studies and a member of the Society of Biblical Literature. It is often an experience of raised hopes, followed by the disappointing realization that people really prefer the normal and comfortable.

In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010, 90), Sara Ahmed, a queer theorist and self-proclaimed "feminist killjoy," explains that "the promise of happiness is directed toward certain objects, as being necessary for a good life." Cultural representations of the good life teach us that the objects that lead to happiness are those most closely associated with heterosexuality, as well as with whiteness and wealth. We are taught to strive for these things, including marriage, career, home, family, and children. Even when our inclinations and desire lure us elsewhere, we should channel our desires towards these things that are markers of the good life. Those closest to us, including families and friends, are often the most overt enforcers of this

happiness script, which includes carefully choreographed gender roles, since their happiness is inextricably bound to ours. My mom taught me this, when she would regularly and disappointedly ask, “Why don’t you put on a little makeup?” or “Can’t you wear less masculine clothing?” My deviation, which included the tendency toward androgyny and a seemingly congenital disinterest in boys, made it difficult for my mom to realize her own good life, the picture perfect, heterosexual Christian family. This was difficult for both of us (something my mom noted on her death bed). As Ahmed observes, “deviation can involve unhappiness” (91).

This cultural script requires that queer stories have unhappy endings, lest they “promote homosexuality” (Ahmed 2010, 88). On the page and the screen, queer loves are unrequited or sacrificed to the straight friend, golden years are lived in solitude, or lives are cut short by illness and violence. Stories about the queer professional life have similarly required negative endings. How can we forget Sal Romano, one of the only gay characters on AMC’s *Mad Men*, who was fired for spurning the advances of a client? In light of these narratives, almost half of all LGBTQ workers remain closeted at work (Fidas and Cooper 2018),¹ and many who are out in the workplace worry about appearing “too gay,” “too femme,” “too butch,” “too queer.” We remain uncomfortable in our queer skin out of fear that we might make the social space of the office or workplace “uncomfortable” (e.g., nonheteronormative) (Ahmed 2013, 148). Some academic spaces may be somewhat more open to queer identities; however, LGBTQ biblical scholars know that many of the colleges and universities still committed to offering courses in Bible and biblical languages are places where we would never be employed. In fact, a telling test of ally-ship is whether or not straight colleagues pursue positions at these institutions.

When asked to contribute to this volume and to offer my experience of the Society of Biblical Literature as someone with the LGBTQ community, my first instinct was to think of the ways my story fits the expectation that queer stories are unhappy stories. I figured I was expected to perform a kind of oppression strip tease, where I make myself vulnerable to the pen-

1. This is in spite of the fact that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) interprets Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act as forbidding workplace discrimination based on gender identity and/ or sexuality. However, not all states in the United States have passed legislation against discrimination, contributing to the continuing climate of fear.

etrating eyes of my straight colleagues. However, while I understand the “shame and negative feelings” associated with a queer affect (Love 2007, 127), the truth is that my time within the profession has included hitting many of the marks of a good professional life. I have had paper proposals accepted more often than not and been invited onto the boards of program units related to my academic interests, including John’s Apocalypse and Cultural Contexts, Archaeology of Religion in the Roman World, and the ISBL’s Bible and Visual Culture group. I am occasionally asked to participate on panels for other program units, and I serve on editorial boards for the *Review of Biblical Literature* and Bible Odyssey. More importantly, I have developed a full network of professional colleagues and friends, including people along the LGBTQ spectrum and those who are straight. Being active within our professional organization in these ways has contributed to my earning tenure and promotion. I live the good life I was promised when I started the PhD program at Emory back in the 1990s. Even though I do not want to diminish my own hard work, I must admit that much of this stems from my privilege as a white, cisgendered, and visibly able-bodied individual. I know friends and colleagues who have not been given similar opportunities on account of their identities and perceived difference. Additionally, I realize that my personal experience of the Society of Biblical Literature as relatively benign comes as a result of the hard work of my predecessors, especially those feminists, womanists, and scholars of color, who have fought hard for inclusion and acceptance.

Despite the happiness I experience as a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, I still feel a sense of difference or out-of-place-ness as someone who identifies as queer and who does queer scholarship. The distinction between being queer and doing queer work is important and one that some overlook by collapsing personal and academic identities. Again, when I was approached to participate in this volume, I wondered if I was asked to contribute because I’m an out gay woman or because of the work I’m trying to do with queer biblical interpretation. While I don’t always foreground queer interpretive questions and themes in my work on Revelation, I still think of everything I write as chipping away at categories used to control and suppress difference, such as binary understandings of gender and sexuality, and assumptions about what counts as worthy of inclusion. Toward this latter end, I’m committed to engaging the works of female-identified and LGBTQ interpreters, especially those outside of academia. Just because I am gay woman does not mean my scholarship is inherently queer. Doing queer scholarship does not attach to a particular

sexual or gender identity; rather, it can involve participating in conversations about queer affects, ways of knowing, and interpretive practices, as well as engaging the diverse texts that form the ever growing and morphing queer canon. I would argue that queer scholarship requires at least a commitment to political stance that challenges gender binaries and heteronormativity in any of its many manifestations.² At its best, I believe, queer biblical scholarship includes engaging the tools of queer discourse, including the camp and drag stylings of gay male culture, the earnest longing associated with lesbian rhetoric, or the swagger of female masculinity.

I don't think anyone is surprised to hear that the Annual Meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature are experienced by some as very male spaces. Ritual retellings of jokes about the preponderance of tweed, khaki, and facial hair only underscore the fact that straight, white men dominate the meeting. We get it. You all are quite good at properly performing the gendered role of the professor as imagined in the cultural products of mid-century America. Although some of my best Society buddies wear jackets with elbow patches, I still believe that the Annual Meeting's gender bias is harmful. Panels continue to be dominated by male-identified white scholars, and patriarchal language and practices abound. Similarly, academic gatherings like the Annual Meeting assume a kind of "compulsory heterosexuality" that works hand in hand with gendered assumptions (Rich 1980; Ahmed 2013, 145). The possibility that a professional adult can leave their everyday life behind for a few days during the school year to engage in "the life of the mind" (which for some seems more along the lines of drunken shenanigans) is built upon the belief that we're all married or partnered. The model takes for granted the existence of a selfless spouse, typically a wife, who stays home to take care of kids, aging parents, and other dependents. This wife will also, presumably, drive you to and from the airport and have dinner ready for you when you get home. I know the privilege that comes with being partnered, as I have a spouse who is usually happy to care for our dogs instead of joining me for a weekend of stimulating conversation about ancient texts and traditions. This bias toward coupledness, especially understood in terms of traditional gender

2. Scholars, of course, disagree over what constitutes queer scholarship and perform this scholarly work in a variety of ways. One of the first and best examples of the range of approaches possible in queer biblical scholarship is Ken Stone's edited volume *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (2001). See also the *Bible Trouble* volume, edited by Hornsby and Stone (2011).

roles, makes our professional meeting possible. If an individual chooses to opt out of this heteronormative reality, their professional opportunities are limited. For the most part, we are forced to play by the rules of this game, unless we are collectively willing to entertain different models for academia. Furthermore, the straightness of the Annual Meeting becomes especially profound when the papers are put away and the receptions begin. In these moments many convention-goers are unwilling to restrict their heterosexuality to the privacy of their own hotel rooms, performing explicit flirtations in lobbies and ballrooms, something simply not possible for those who are queer.

There are a few oases where queers and their friends gather, including both formal and informal spaces. One formal space is the LGBTI/Queer Biblical Hermeneutics program unit. A couple years before the unfortunately labeled “Great Divorce” of 2008, when the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature announced they would be meeting on different weekends, a handful of scholars (Ken Stone, Diane Swancutt, and Holly Toensing) proposed a new program unit focused upon LGBTQ biblical interpretation. This unit, which I eventually cochaired with David Tabb Stewart and which is now chaired by Joseph Marchal, provides a rare venue dedicated to both developing LGBTI readings of biblical texts and articulating queer interpretive approaches. The unit has offered thematic sessions on topics ranging from camp and drag to conceptions of queer time, as well as collaborating with a wide-range of other groups, including Healthcare and Disability in the Ancient World and African-American Biblical Hermeneutics. The program unit intentionally welcomes scholars from different stages in their careers, encouraging graduate students to propose, preside, and even sit on the board. By having a graduate student on the board, the unit recognizes that individuals doing course work and writing their dissertations are often on the cutting edge of the field. This is just one way the unit tries to push against academic norms.

One of the queerest spaces I’ve experienced at the Society of Biblical Literature was a collaborative effort initially organized by the Bible and Cultural Studies steering committee (including Erin Runions, Tat-siong Benny Liew, Jione Havea, Jennifer Glancy, and Jacqueline Hidalgo) inviting a number of program units to work together to create space for intellectual conversation and support across difference. The program units, which represented nontraditional hermeneutics (e.g., LGBTIQ, Feminist, Latinx, Postcolonial, Asian and Asian American, Islander),

cosponsored two sessions, which were then divided in two halves, creating four mini-sessions. These mini-sessions were devoted to teaching and learning about shared theoretical and pedagogical topics, such as memory and orality, and to providing time and space for mentoring graduate students and junior scholars. This creative use of human resources and time, which required productively manipulating the schedule given by the Society of Biblical Literature, created opportunities for a variety of people to form connections across interpretive boundaries. An aim of organizing these sessions was to support scholars employing interpretive approaches and tools not typically used in the context of biblical studies, including those that challenge the historical-critical hegemony. This collaborative effort, which occurred over three or four years, functioned as a type of queer resistance to scholarship that privileges straight, white, Euro-American ways of knowing.

The spaces created by the LGBTI/Queer Biblical Hermeneutics unit and the nontraditional hermeneutics collaboration have been spaces consisting primarily of people with shared commitments to inclusion and difference.³ These spaces communicate a clear commitment to challenging the strictures of straight academia and, therefore, provide a safe place for scholars to embrace and exhibit queerness. Performing queerness outside of these spaces can be a bit more complicated. This is not entirely on account of straight colleagues' responses to queer perspectives, although sparse audiences and misunderstandings about queer vernacular are par for the course. A bigger issue for me is my internal sense that I should toe the line and tailor my actions and words to the expectations of straight scholarship. I feel pressured to avoid making others uncomfortable with my queerness. This happens even in very accepting spaces. A few years ago I was asked to respond to a series of papers offering queer readings of Pauline texts, an ostensibly queer-friendly environment. Still, most of the papers, written primarily by white, cis-male scholars, struck me as being somewhat vanilla in approach. They engaged queer theory on a theoretical level, but not with the passion and playfulness or the poetry that explicitly signal queerness. Given this, I wanted my response to the precirculated papers to embody queerness as a way of highlighting the straight affect of the papers. To this end, I referenced lesbian sexuality in an explicit, yet

3. One exception was a panel organized by the LGBTI/ Queer Biblical Hermeneutics group that included a paper offered by Robert Gagnon, an outspoken opponent of the LGBTQ community.

relevant, way and ended my response with a call to embrace the material reality of queer life: “The question is then, what is queer? I’d fill that category with dirtiness, deviance, glitter, leather, AIDS/ HIV, house music, stuffed animals, studs, fairies, dildos and plastic wrap” (Huber 2015). I intended, to return to the insights of Ahmed, to be “happily queer.” I wanted to embrace the deviation of queerness and trouble the “conventional ideas of what it means to have a good life” (Ahmed 2010, 115). I like to think that I embrace this attitude in all parts of my life, but after this particular performance I felt nausea. I feared that my fellow⁴ scholars would no longer take me seriously and that I had offended them by challenging their queer quotient. No one verbalized any of that; however, I was feeling the pressure of compulsory straightness that comes with being a good biblical scholar.

My experience of being a queer scholar in the Society of Biblical Literature is complicated, as I can imagine the experiences of many others are similarly complex or ambivalent. I am thankful, however, for colleagues, both at the university where I work and within the academy, who are willing to support me in my efforts at being happily queer. In many ways these people (and hopefully they know who they are) are my community of accountability and the ones who often give me hope that, despite the culturally determined unhappy endings of queer lives, my life in the profession is one of meaning and even queer joy.

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4. While the papers were all by male-identified authors, another queer woman was invited to read a paper for an author unable to attend. I was not entirely alone, although the panel was definitely not as diverse as I would have liked.

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