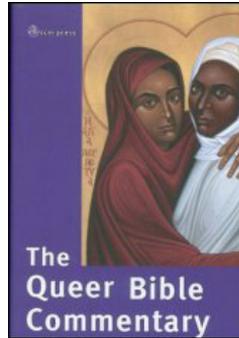


○ **REVIEW OF DERYN GUEST, ROBERT E. GOSS,
MONA WEST AND THOMAS BOHACHE (EDS),
*THE QUEER BIBLE COMMENTARY***

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The term 'landmark' is bandied about a little too freely in biblical studies, as in most academic disciplines, but the term may aptly be applied to *The Queer Bible Commentary* (henceforth, *QBC*). It is a monumental achievement by any standard, and the editors are to be commended for bringing what must have been an exhausting labor to completion. With *QBC*'s appearance, LGBT/queer criticism of the Bible attains an exponential increase in visibility both inside and outside the academy. Its precursor volumes are too numerous to name; prominent among them, however, are at least four for which one or more of the editors of *QBC* were responsible – Robert E. Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (1993); Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (2000); and Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (2005) – along with Ken Stone, ed., *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (2001), Stone himself also contributing three essays to *QBC*.

QBC's jacket blurb styles the volume 'A valuable resource for leaders and members within confessional communities engaged in contemporary discussion with LGBT issues'. This is probably the volume's primary intended audience. But it will also be enormously useful for university and seminary courses – as I can already testify from first-hand experience—particularly courses with an exegetical, liberationist, or methodological focus (not that these three emphases are mutually exclusive).

The volume is the work of thirty-one scholars overall, both Jewish and Christian (predominantly the latter, however), hailing from the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, and contributing forty-five essays between them. Thirty-four individual texts of the First and Second Testaments combined receive their own commentarial essay, while pairs or triads of texts (1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Peter, the Johannine Letters) share a single essay. The coverage is more

uneven, however, than this description suggests. For instance, both Philemon and Jude each receive their own essay, while the Twelve Minor Prophets must make do with one between them.

The volume begins with a preface and an introduction. The latter, by Ronald E. Long and subtitled 'Disarming Biblically Based Gay-Bashing', is not an introduction to the contents of *QBC* per se. '[T]he traditionalist who would hold that homosexuality is invariably sinful normally', notes Long, 'has recourse to three passages: a twice-repeated Levitical proscription (Lev. 18.22; 20.13); the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19); and the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans' (p. 2). Long then proceeds to treat each of these texts in turn. Equipping leaders and members of confessional communities of the kind to which *QBC* is addressed with arguments to counter those ordinarily brandished by Bible-thumping gay-bashers and other less militant traditionalists is a crucial task, but the extent of the challenge involved becomes apparent from a reading of Long's essay. The traditionalist can reduce Paul's tortuous argument in Rom. 1:18-32 to a handy sound bite: Homosexuality is an unnatural act that incurs the wrath of God. Long's counter-reading of the same material is, on the whole, profound and compelling, but it necessitates ten pages of dense argumentation – no small reason why the debate between traditionalists and liberals around the Bible and homosexuality is, more often than not, an incommensurable exchange conducted on two sides of a seemingly insurmountable wall.

At one page, *QBC*'s preface is excessively brief, given that it functions as the sole introduction to the volume's purpose, scope, and methodological range. That range is described as spanning 'feminist, queer, deconstructionist, postcolonial and utopian theories, the social sciences, and historical critical discourses' (p. xiii). Although not stated explicitly, the ultimate model for this commentary, as for other identitarian biblical commentaries of the past fifteen years, is *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 1992). *Mutatis mutandis*, *QBC*'s procedure follows the precedent set by *The Women's Bible Commentary*, as this further statement from *QBC*'s preface suggests:

Rather than a verse-by-verse analysis, typical of more traditional commentaries, contributors to this volume focus specifically upon those portions of the scriptural text that have particular relevance for readers interested in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues such as the construction of gender and sexuality, the reification of heterosexuality, the complicated question of lesbian and gay ancestry within the Bible, the transgendered voices of the prophets, the use of the Bible in contemporary political, socio-economic and religious spheres and the impact of its contemporary interpretation upon lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities (p. xiii).

This claim, however, needs to be read alongside an earlier one in the preface in order for the sheer ambitiousness of this commentary, as conceived by its editors, to come fully into view. Against those who would see the scriptures as providing an unshakeable and secure mooring for their positions on human sexuality, *QBC* demonstrates, 'perhaps above all', argue its editors, 'that these texts...have the capacity to be disruptive, unsettling and unexpectedly but delightfully *queer*', and that this queerness can be found, moreover, 'not just in a handful of selected texts, but across the board in every text of the First and Second Testaments' (ibid., their emphasis).

Every text? A bold claim, indeed, and a setting of the bar dauntingly high, given that not a few of these texts seem about as unpromising a terrain for queer reading as, say, the U.S. Tax Code or the Queen's annual address to the British parliament. (On second thoughts, scratch the latter example). Commentators assigned certain texts surely had an unfair advantage over the rest; only consider Genesis (sodden with incest, rape, even onanism), 1 and 2 Samuel (David and Jonathan!), Ruth (and Naomi!), the Song of Songs (sex and, well, more sex), the Gospel of John (the Beloved Disciple!), or the Book of Revelation (prostitution and plushophilia). Queering the less juicy texts required considerable ingenuity. *Analogy* is the strategy most frequently employed. 'Chronicles reminds me a little of East Sydney', Roland Boer's commentary on 1 and 2 Chronicles begins; 'men as far as the eye can see. Men in couples, men in night-clubs and bars, men firmly muscled and flabby, moustached and clean-shaven...' and so on for several more lines (p. 251). These analogies work best when, like Boer's, they are ventured tongue-in-cheek. When they take themselves too seriously they seem forced; as, for example, when Thomas Bohache in his commentary on Matthew suggests that 'to be queer in the heterosexually dominated United States (or indeed the entire industrialized Western world) in the twenty-first century is not so vastly different from being a Jewish peasant in Roman-occupied Palestine in the first century of the Common Era' (p. 488). Tamar Kamionkowski wrestles aloud with the problem of applying queer theory to the psalms, texts that not only do not seem to have any sex in them but do not seem to have any characters either; 'and without characters, how can we talk about gender and sexual identities?' (p. 308). Her primary solution to the conundrum is to descend into the womanless narrative worlds of the psalms in which male petitioners emote to their male God and seek to be rescued from still other males. 'Nonetheless from a translesbigay perspective, particularly from a gay male perspective, the psalms offer a complex and rich picture of a variety of male-to-male relationships', she contends. 'Some of these relationships may be affirming to contemporary translesbigay readers while other models presented in these texts may be problematic or even offensive' (p. 312).

Some commentators carry off their task beautifully. Jennifer L. Koosed's commentary on Ecclesiastes/Qohelet, for instance ('Qohelet is queer. Consequently, commentators have always looked at it askance' [p. 338]), is elegantly executed from start to finish. Ken Stone's commentary on Job is a powerfully understated, essentially sermonic, connecting of its themes with HIV/Aids; while Deryn Guest adopts a similar strategy with Lamentations, assessing its relevance for those who have had to endure homophobic violence. Tom Hanks weaves a commendably inventive commentary on what I would have regarded as one of the more unpromising texts for queer reading in the Second Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews (sample section titles: 'Biblical angels as a sexual minority and Jesus' superiority to them'; 'Out of the closet and into God's rest'; 'Melchizadek, patron saint for queers'). But other commentators seem to fall short of the (admittedly formidable) challenge posed by their assigned texts. Stephen J. Moore, for example (no relation), doesn't touch explicitly on GLBT/queer issues until the last five lines of his commentary on Philemon. Theodore Jennings only touches on them sporadically in his commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians; surprising given the consistent inventiveness that characterizes his recent *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (2005). L. William Countryman's commentaries on James and the Johannine Letters invite the same criticism, although not his commentary on Jude (but there he had some sex to work with). One unintended lesson this volume teaches its reader is that when even a whiff of sex is absent from the biblical material,

queer commentary can tend, for many pages at a time, to sound drearily indistinguishable from straight commentary (although it need not, as Boer and others show).

How else might *QBC* have been better? It might have taken a further leaf from *The Women's Bible Commentary* and given us some general orienting essays beyond the preface and introduction. Obvious topics readily come to mind: 'Homoeroticism in the Ancient Near East', 'Homoeroticism in the Ancient Mediterranean World', 'Queer Theory and Biblical Criticism'.... It is not that such material is absent from *QBC*, merely that it is scattered and hard to gather. Elizabeth Stuart in her commentary on Proverbs, for instance, uses Judith Butler to excellent effect to queer Hochma and the Strange Woman. But Stuart provides nothing like an adequate introduction to Butler or that enormously influential brand of queer theory of which Butler's name is emblematic; nor should she have to. Having an essay near the front of the volume that would have dealt with Foucault, Butler, Sedgwick & Co, histories of sexuality, the inception and dissemination of queer theory, queer theory's sometimes strained relations to feminism, queer theory's sometime strained relations to lesbian and gay studies, and so on, would have been a sound move pedagogically that would have enabled university and seminary students especially to become cannier users of the volume.

But all of these are relatively minor quibbles in the end. Ever since obtaining my copy of this book, it has rarely left my desk and has yet to stop surprising me. It will certainly be supplemented but I doubt it will be surpassed.