

THEOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

There are many faith-based arguments for activism for bisexual rights and justice. Some of the following specific theological connections may resonate with your faith community or tradition.

The Religious Institute's founding document, *The Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing*, calls for “**a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts.**” This overarching call for sexual justice is a helpful way to reframe discussions of sexual morality both in faith communities and in the public sphere.

Bisexuality reminds us of the **diversity, beauty, and wonder of creation.** Moving beyond the binary of gay/lesbian and straight invites people into the mystery and complexity of human sexuality. Attempting to categorize people, while a natural human instinct, limits our thinking about humanity and about the Divine. Faith communities and religious leaders can appeal to the diversity of creation when advocating for a broader understanding of sexuality.

Working for bisexual rights and justice need not be seen as taking away from other areas of sexual and social justice advocacy. Invoking the theological principle of **abundance**, religious leaders and faith communities can instead show how working for justice for any group of people enriches and informs all justice work. Oppressive systems affect the many interlocking identities and experiences of people (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, ability, and age, among others); justice work necessarily involves addressing multiple injustices.

Many religious traditions place a great value on **individual conscience.** The sacredness of human agency and choice can be lifted up as guiding principles in discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity. All human beings are moral agents who can discern for themselves how their faith and sexuality intersect.

Sexual justice calls on us to respect the **dignity and sacred worth of all persons**. Faith communities and religious leaders can uphold the sacred worth of bisexual people when challenging harmful myths and stereotypes and seeking to bring healing and wholeness to bisexual persons who have often been marginalized by lesbian/gay and straight communities. When advocating for bisexual visibility and rights in the public arena, upholding the dignity of all persons is essential.

Discussions about bisexuality expand the conversation about sexual orientation. Religious leaders and faith communities can use this as a starting point to remind people that **everyone has a sexual orientation**. This can help counter “us vs. them” thinking and promote unity as well as lift up shared community values.

Questions for Reflection

1. Which of these theological connections resonate most for you and your faith community? Which ones are more difficult to consider?
2. How can working for justice for bisexual persons enrich the faith community?
3. What theological principles would you add to this list?

HEBREW AND CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

There can be no doubt that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures play a large role in American discourse about sexuality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Most of the time, that role is to oppress or marginalize LGBT people. The challenge is to discern insights and guidance from the Scriptures that can be useful in contemporary discussions of sexuality and gender.

The Religious Institute guidebook *A Time to Seek: Study Guide on Sexual and Gender Diversity*, states that “Although the Bible has a good deal to say about sexuality, many theologians and people of faith believe that much of it does not speak to modern societies. For instance, parts of the Bible explicitly forbid certain behaviors — such as divorce, intercourse during menstruation, and re-marriage — that many faith communities now accept. Other biblical texts permit (or tacitly approve) such practices as polygamy, prostitution, and the treatment of women as property that are now prohibited. Meanwhile, the Bible is essentially silent on abortion, birth control, and masturbation.”¹

There are few biblical references to sexual diversity, and the Bible does not address current understandings about sexual orientation and gender identity, concepts that were unknown to the cultures of biblical times. There are no specific verses in the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures that explicitly address bisexuality.

Passages that reference same-sex sexual activity should be viewed in the context of what the ancient world that produced the Bible understood about sexual activity.² These six passages from the Bible are consistently used to marginalize lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, but current biblical scholarship effectively challenges such oppressive interpretations.

Genesis 19:1–29

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is frequently cited as an indictment of homosexuality. However, this interpretation does not reflect the social realities of the ancient Near East or the perspective of biblical writers. The story tells how the men of Sodom sought to force the two angels visiting Lot’s home outside “so that we may know them” (Genesis 19:5). The townsmen were threatening Lot’s visitors with gang rape, a means of showing domination that some surrounding cultures used with their enemies. Their act was a flagrant violation of the hospitality codes of the ancient Near East. The fact that

Lot offers his two virgin daughters to satisfy the mob testifies both to the sanctity of the hospitality codes and to the cultural distance between ancient and contemporary societies. The biblical writers do not identify homosexuality as the reason for Sodom's ultimate punishment. Certain Hebrew and apocryphal texts specify the sins of Sodom as pride, arrogance, neglect of the poor, and hostility to strangers (Ezekiel 16:49, Sirach 16:8, Wisdom of Solomon 19:13–15).

Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:24–27

Many theologians believe the Leviticus passages on male same-sex behavior refer to the rejection of foreign cults that practiced sacred prostitution during religious rites. The passages are part of what is known today as the “holiness code,” which also called for dietary laws, circumcision and other practices. The holiness code is generally thought to have originally been intended to maintain the distinctiveness of the Jewish culture during the time of the Babylonian exile (6th century BCE). Similarly, the passage in Romans refers to various examples of idolatrous behaviors in 1st-century society. The sexual activities that Paul prohibits are most likely male adult/child sexual behavior and male prostitution, and it is uncertain what specific female sexual behavior he denounces as “unnatural.” As Harvard theologian Peter J. Gomes writes, “All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it.”³

1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 1 Timothy 1:9–11

In the Corinthians and Timothy texts, scholars disagree about whether these texts refer to homosexual behaviors, to sexual promiscuity in general, or to temple prostitution. In the times when the Bible was written, sexual relationships were based on rigid gender roles and the concept of power and dominance. The authors of these texts had no concept of an equal, loving monogamous relationship between two people of the same sex. When the texts are read today, it is important to remember that the original authors are not referring to homosexual relationships as we understand them today nor to our modern understanding of homosexuality as a sexual orientation.⁴

I feel ambivalent about wrestling with bisexuality largely through text. While the textual tradition offers infinite inspiration, exegesis detached from diverse lived experience can objectify bisexual people. As a bisexual Jewishly-observant woman married to a man I am personally aware of how easy it is to be silent about my identity.

— *Chaplain Allison Kestenbaum, Jewish Theological Seminary*

Love and Justice

Many Jews and Christians ground their commitment to embracing the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities in the biblical call to love and justice that permeates the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Christian and Jewish congregations, people of faith, and religious leaders stand on solid scriptural ground when they celebrate and welcome people of all sexual orientations and gender identities as equally beloved.

The call for justice for the poor and oppressed is one of the most prominent biblical themes, particularly among the Hebrew prophets. Among the best-known passages are Amos's plea to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," (Amos 5:24) and Micah's question, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

The gospels record Jesus's overarching concern for justice as well. In the gospel of Matthew, he says that those who visit prisoners, provide clothing to those who need it, care for the sick, and welcome strangers will "inherit the kingdom" (Matthew 25:34–40). The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37 highlights the importance that Jesus placed on caring for others, even those who were considered different or outsiders.

The overarching message of the Bible is of God's love for humanity. That extravagant love, recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, is a message of hope to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures offer messages of hope and healing to bisexual persons, like the biblical affirmation that *all* humans are created in God's image.

"Humankind was created as God's reflection: in the divine image God created them..." (Genesis 1:27a).⁵

This passage conveys an expansive message: that all of humanity — in all of our glorious diversity — is created in God's image. If God is sacred and divine, then all people are likewise sacred and divine, each having inherent value and worth. (Similar passages occur in Genesis 5:1–3, Genesis 9:6, 1 Corinthians: 11:7, and James 3:9, among others.)

In a column she wrote for The Huffington Post, out bisexual Presbyterian minister Rev. Dr. Janet Edwards reflects on this verse from Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." She says, "God knew me and loved me before I was even formed. God chose to make me bisexual. And God wants me to live a life in harmony with the laws Jesus gave to us."⁶

The command that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” appears in the Hebrew Scriptures (Leviticus 19:18) and is quoted by Jesus in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27). This command sums up a central theme of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: that love is the guiding principle of ethical living and right relationship with others.

Biblical scholars have pointed to the relationships between Jonathan and David (recounted in 1 and 2 Samuel) and between Ruth and Naomi (recounted in the book of Ruth) as examples of same-sex loving relationships. Some theologians have identified these relationships as gay or lesbian.⁶ However, in both Biblical accounts, the people involved might today be identified as bisexual, at least in their emotional attractions, as these two stories portray men and women in significant relationships with people of different sexes.⁷

Jonathan, David, and David’s Wives and Concubines

The biblical story of Jonathan and David depicts men who, in today’s terms, might be described as having a bisexual orientation. David is described as being in a covenanted relationship with Jonathan, and he is also reported to have had at least seven wives (1 Chronicles 3:1–9) and numerous concubines (2 Samuel 5:13).

Jonathan first encounters David after David has killed a Philistine giant (Goliath) for Jonathan’s father, King Saul. A passage from 1 Samuel recounts that at their first meeting, “the souls of Jonathan and David became intertwined, and Jonathan loved David with all his heart” (1 Samuel 18:1). Later, the book of 1 Samuel recounts how King Saul sought to put David to death, as his prowess as a warrior was a threat to Saul’s kingship. However, more than once, Jonathan warned David of his father’s intentions, allowing David to escape from Saul. The text repeatedly mentions the covenant or pledge of love between the two men.

- “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (1 Samuel 18:3).
- “Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life” (1 Samuel 20:17).
- “Then Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, “The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever”’ (1 Samuel 20:42a).

David’s lament at Jonathan’s death is recorded in 2 Samuel 1:26:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

While the story of Jonathan depicts David in a covenanted and loving relationship with a man, the story of Bathsheba, who became David's seventh wife, leaves no room for doubt that David was attracted to women as well:

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her (2 Samuel 11:2-4).

Ruth and Naomi

The story recounted in the biblical book of Ruth tells of two women who had meaningful intimate relationships with other and same-sex partners. Naomi and Ruth are each married to men at the beginning of the story, Naomi to Elimilech and Ruth to Naomi's son Mahon. When both men die, Naomi resolves to go back to her homeland of Judah and encourages Ruth to return to hers. Since Ruth has no sons (which would bind her to Naomi in the culture of the time), this is the expected course of action.

However, Ruth refuses to go back to her homeland, and the feelings that she expresses toward her mother-in-law Naomi parallel the feelings expressed in biblical relationships that are primary attachments. Ruth 1:14b says, "Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." "Clung to" is the same Hebrew word (*dabaq*) used to describe a marriage relationship in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." Although there is no indication in the text that the women were erotically involved, it is very clear that they are involved in a primary emotional relationship. While some theologians have written that Ruth and Naomi are in a same-sex relationship, it is more accurate to describe them as women with primary relationships with both men and women.

In a lyrical passage used in many marriage ceremonies today (and also used in Jewish conversion rites), Ruth vows to return with Naomi to Bethlehem in Judah:

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:16b-17)

Ruth and Naomi settle in Bethlehem, and eventually Ruth remarries a man named Boaz, because he is a relative of Naomi's and her "redeemer-trustee" (a male relative charged with making sure that his widowed kinswoman, Naomi, is protected). Ruth has a son, Obed, with Boaz and the text says that Naomi became the child's nurse (Ruth 4:16). The women of the neighborhood are said to have rejoiced that "A son has been born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17). The implication is that Ruth had the child for Naomi, and that Ruth and Naomi raised Obed together.

It takes both couples (Ruth and Naomi, and Ruth and Boaz) to produce and raise this child, who represents the hope and future of the Davidic lineage. Obed and Ruth are also named in the Gospel of Matthew's extended genealogy of Jesus, where Ruth is one of only five women mentioned.⁸

Modern understandings of sexual orientation cannot be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. These texts date from thousands of years ago and are products of a culture that is radically different from our own culture. However, the behaviors and feelings that are depicted in these stories, and the fact that they are presented without commentary, points to a society that may have been more accepting of diverse intimate relationships than many people assume.



A REFLECTION ON SONG OF SONGS (*SHIR HASHIRIM*):

Shir HaShirim, one of the most lyrical books of the Jewish canon and a beautiful love song has an unusual voicing. The gender of the beloved changes through the book, sometimes male, sometimes female. One doesn't always know the gender of the speaker, leaving open a reading that the love that is being spoken could be same gender love.

Given that this book is framed as both a love song between humans and a love song between G-d and Israel, and given that the traditional view of G-d in Judaism is that G-d is both male and female and everything in between and outside of those categories, *Shir HaShirim* stands as a testament to love beyond gender.

Having readers of various genders read out the text on Shabbat during the intermediate days of Passover, when it is traditional to read the text, offers welcome, affirmation and consciousness raising, not to mention amplifying the message of boundless eternal love.

— *Rabbi Debra Kolodny, Executive Director, Nehirim*

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus

Biblical scholars have pointed out that, “the Jesus of the Gospels nowhere makes any explicit statement about homosexuality in general, nor even the homosexual practices that might have been commonly recognized in his day.”⁹ In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus’s time, same-sex sexual behaviors did not preclude other-sex sexual behaviors. Indeed, according to one scholar, “What we today call bisexuality was far more the expected pattern of behavior.”¹⁰

For example, some biblical scholars believe that in the context of Greco-Roman society, the biblical story of the centurion and his “servant” that appears in three of the four gospels¹¹ is about two people in a same-sex sexual relationship.¹² They point out that Jesus makes no mention of this when he heals the servant. Instead, he holds up the centurion as a model of faith, saying, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matthew 8:10b). And while these biblical scholars note that the “servant” is most likely the centurion’s lover, few if any mention that the centurion is also probably married to a woman, as would have been the norm in the Greco-Roman culture.

Jesus promotes alternative family structures in many gospel stories. For example, in Mark 3:31–35 (see also Matthew 12:46–50), Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and answers, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” And in Luke 14:26, he says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” These passages make it clear that Jesus does not privilege “traditional” family structures among his followers. Indeed, his disciples in the gospel accounts are men who have chosen to ignore societal roles as married men and fathers and instead follow Jesus and participate in his ministry.

Jesus embraces sexual minorities as well. For example, he makes what seems to be a perplexing statement about eunuchs in Matthew 19:10–12: “His disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’ But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from 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.’” Jesus appears to acknowledge that there are sexual minorities (the word “eunuch” may not have been literal in this passage) who were so from birth. The Rev. Dr. Theodore Jennings, Jr., professor of biblical and constructive theology at Chicago Theological Seminary, argues that the saying about eunuchs is consistent with Matthew’s concern for the sexually marginalized throughout his gospel account.¹³

The gospel accounts of Jesus's life indicate that sex, gender, and norms about sexuality mattered little to him. Jesus healed women deemed "sexually impure" (Matthew 9:20–22, Mark 5:25–34, Luke 8:43–48), allowed a prostitute to anoint his feet (Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, Luke 7:37–50, John 12:1–8), and defended a woman who committed adultery (John 8:2–11). He had important emotional connections with men and women: Mary of Bethany (Martha's sister), Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, and the "beloved disciple," for example.

Paul

The letters from Paul (as well as those attributed to Paul) that are included in the Christian canon record much about the struggles of the early communities of Jesus's followers. Paul's main concern was creating and maintaining stable communities that avoided harassment by civil and religious authorities. Because of this, many parts of his letters conform to the norms of the day and contradict the more radical and egalitarian actions and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. (See 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, and Romans 1:24–27.) However, texts of liberation and hope can also be found in Paul's writings.

In the book of Galatians, Paul records what scholars believe to be a fragment of an early baptismal liturgy. In it, there is a vision of the world to come in which the many binary categories assigned to humanity no longer exist: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

This is an especially powerful passage for bisexual people who are marginalized by binary thinking that seeks to restrict their attractions, behaviors, and emotions to one of two sexes. Paul's proclamation that becoming one in Christ Jesus erases the distinctions between males and females also celebrates sexual and gender identities that erase or transcend these distinctions. As author, theologian, and Metropolitan Community Church minister the Rev. Chris Glaser has written, "If there is no longer male and female in Christ Jesus, it does not matter to God which gender we love, which gender we are, or which gender we believe ourselves to be."¹⁴

In an often-quoted passage in the book of Romans, Paul affirms that nothing, most especially not a person's identity, can come between humanity and God's love: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

Questions for Reflection

1. What is your reaction to considering the biblical accounts of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, the healing of the centurion's "servant," and the accounts of eunuchs through the lens of bisexuality?
2. How can we understand passages that many people believe condemn non-heterosexual behaviors in light of the overall scriptural messages of "love your neighbor as yourself" and the message that "all are created in God's image"?
3. Which of the scriptural interpretations above resonate most for you and your faith community? Which ones might be more difficult to consider?
4. Are particular sexual acts moral or sinful in and of themselves, or do they need to be judged in the context of relationship? What does it mean that the *Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing* (see inside front cover) calls for a "sexual ethic based on personal relationship and social justice rather than particular sexual acts"?

Notes

- 1 Palmer and Haffner, *Time to Seek*.
- 2 Rev. Mona West, PhD., *The Bible and Homosexuality*, Metropolitan Community Churches, <http://mccchurch.org/resources/mcc-theologies/>.
- 3 Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1996), 158.
- 4 The section on the six "lobber passages" is quoted from Palmer and Haffner, *A Time to Seek*, 27–28.
- 5 Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
- 6 Rev. Dr. Janet Edwards, "Top Five Questions Asked About Being A Bisexual Minister," *The Huffington Post*, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-janet-edwards/top-five-questions-asked-about-being-a-bisexual-minister_b_1280433.html.
- 7 Also see Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Jacob's Wound* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 227–233.
- 8 Rev. Dr. Janet Edwards, "Top Five Questions Asked About Being A Bisexual Minister," *The Huffington Post*, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-janet-edwards/top-five-questions-asked-about-being-a-bisexual-minister_b_1280433.html.
- 9 Matthew 1:1, 2a, 5b
- 10 Deryn Guest et al. eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 16. See also: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 91–117 and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 89–91.
- 11 Matthew 8:5–13, Luke 7:1–10, and John 4:46–54.
- 12 Deryn Guest et al. eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 152.
- 13 Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *The Man Jesus Loved* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 150.
- 14 Chris Glaser, *The Word is Out* (Harper, San Francisco: 1994) 10/3.