JASR 27.1 (2014): 116-117
doi: 10.1558/arsr.v27i1.116

JASR (print) ISSN 1031-2943
JASR (online) ISSN 1744-9014

Book Review

Nigel Wright (ed.), *Five Uneasy Pieces: Essays on Scripture and Sexuality*. ATF Theology, Hindmarsh SA, 2012, pp. xxx + 100, ISBN 978-1-921817-24-3 (Pbk).

This brief volume brings an Australian Anglican perspective to the debate around homosexuality and the Bible. The somewhat self-conscious title is revealing. In the world of scholarship, these five essays would be quite at home, but in the world of theology, to which all the authors belong, they are 'uneasy' in the sense that they seek to challenge literal and conservative readings of biblical texts. The title makes me uneasy on another front: why call the book *Essays on Scripture and Sexuality* when it is primarily about homosexuality? Perhaps a future volume can explore the rich tapestry of human sexuality rather than the somewhat tired binary of gay versus straight.

That said, the essays are very direct in dealing with homosexuality, and it is still a hot-button topic for the Church. Each of the five essays addresses one of the biblical verses generally understood to refer to homosexuality: Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:8-11. The authors, all from the Anglican communion and with theological backgrounds, take different approaches as they tackle their subject. This provides a wealth of choice for readers seeking different ways to tackle these controversial verses.

Megan Warner explores the story of Sodom and Gomorrah through considering the evolution of commentators' understanding of the Sodomites as sodomites, pointing out that early interpreters of Genesis did not consider it 'self evident' that the crime for which the Sodomites were punished was homosexuality (p. 9). She also considers the parallel story in Judges 19. Her brief essay is a clear explication of this particular discussion, although it adds little new material to it, beyond emphasizing the relative freedom readers have to seek alternate understandings of this scripture.

Richard Treloar tackles Leviticus' prohibition on a man lying with a man as with a woman. To do so, he summarises four key steps in an Anglican approach to scripture; '1. A high doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, and of the Church… 2. An awareness that the authority of Scripture is relative… 3. An incarnational view of Scripture… 4. A canonical approach to the reading of Scripture' (pp. 14-17). This allows Treloar to argue for a productive hermeneutic, one which looks at the verses with an understanding of both their original context and also views them with our contemporary understandings of issues such as human sexuality. Treloar is careful to acknowledge the dangerous ground of 'making the Bible dance to our early twenty-first-century tunes' (p. 26). His ultimate solution, referring back to similarly discriminatory verses about women and slavery, is to ask us to acknowledge that some portions of Scripture cannot be explained away, but must be read with 'an infusion of greater justice, greater compassion and greater equity in the treatment of human beings' (pp. 27-28). In other words, these verses are what they are, and we must somehow come to terms with their limited relevance to current society. This is not an argument to which biblical literalists will take kindly, but it is thoughtfully argued here by Treloar.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2014, Unit S3, Kelham House, 3, Lancaster Street, Sheffield S3 8AF.

equinoxonline

Peta Sherlock sets up her treatment of Scripture early, by pointing out that the Anglican Articles of Religion describe Scripture as containing 'all things necessary to salvation', with no mention of them being 'inerrant, infallible, or even inspired' (p. 31). She questions how we read Scripture, and, somewhat like Treloar, suggests ways in which we can read it with contemporary eyes. Setting up her argument takes Sherlock two thirds of her chapter, and when she eventually turns to Romans, she spends only a couple of pages reflecting on Paul's own context and bias. Again, this is not an argument that deals closely with the specific text, but asks us to reflect on our approach to the Bible as text more generally. Sherlock has only three references in her bibliography.

Alan Cadwallader flags his focus on contextualising 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in his opening paragraph. Cadwallader's approach is the most rigorously academic of the collection; he examines the etymological implications of the words *malakos* and *arsenokoites*, examines the context of the vice list and Paul's previous treatment of an incest case, and compares a brief vice list appearing in Luke 18:9-14. Cadwallader argues that vice lists are rhetorical devices which, in the case of Paul, stress sexual violence rather than particular kinds of forbidden sex.

Gregory Jenks leaps straight into 1 Timothy 1:8-11, offering a progressive reading. He references difficulties in translation, addresses cultural norms, and queries the author's voice and authority. Jenks then unpacks his own position and analyses how this affects his reading. Ultimately he asks us to separate what would have offended the author of 1 Timothy and his audience from what would offend a contemporary Christian; if the passage is about avoiding offense, should the same offenses still apply to today's cultural norms as those of two thousand years ago?

All these are very familiar arguments, and the academic reader will find little here that has not been said in an academic context before. However, as a basic introduction for congregations and individuals seeking to engage with five difficult verses in a well-grounded manner, this book fulfills an important function. A few lines from Michael Kirby's eloquent introduction sums it up: 'I do not really regard these chapters as "Uneasy Pieces". I regard them as full of ease and grace' (p. xxx). What the authors may regard as uneasy in their own congregations are arguments which sit easily in the field of religious studies.

Sarah Penicka-Smith
University of Sydney

© Equinox Publishing Ltd 2014.

equinoxonline