

Obama's Inaugural Ceremony: The Bible vs. Slaves, Women and Gays?

www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar

“We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall.... It is now our generation's task to carry on what those pioneers began.... Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law—for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.”

President Barack Obama's inaugural address, Jan 21, 2012

In the historic ceremony during which he declared these words, Barack Obama also took his inaugural oath with his hand placed on two Bibles, using treasured personal copies of Abraham Lincoln and of Martin Luther King—despite the fact that so many who honor the work of Lincoln to end slavery and King to end discrimination against African Americans continue to cite texts from the Bible to justify and rationalize their opposition to equality for sexual minorities. Was Obama being self-contradictory to thus exalt the authority of the Bible while at the same time advocating same-sex marriage? Or are his opponents misusing the Bible when they use it to promote heterosexism and homophobia? How about adding Troy Perry's Bible next time?

Did you ever notice that the seven negative “texts of terror” or “clobber texts” commonly used against sexual minorities (“homosexuals”) refer only to abusive sexual acts perpetrated by idolatrous males? Although through most of church history, the judgment of Sodomy (Genesis 19) was used against “sodomites,” biblical scholars for decades have recognized that this was a gross misuse of the text, which describes an attempted gang rape of two visiting angels—and no one would use the similar reference to the gang rape of a woman in Judges 19 as a basis for condemning “heterosexuality”! Similarly, the reference to the “strange flesh” (of angels) in Jude 7 refers to the attempted gang rape in Genesis 19. The reference to *arsenokoitai* (male-beds) in 1 Tim 1:10 occurs in a context of slave trade involving sexual abuse of slaves. And when the same Greek economic term is used in 1 Cor 6:9, the vice list is headed up with a reference to the “oppressors/unjust” (*adikoi*) who cannot inherit God's kingdom (see also 6:1, 7-8) and includes “idolaters” (6:9). The male anal same-sex acts prohibited in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are described as commonly committed by non-Jewish idolaters (Lev 18:1-3, 24-30) who also practiced child sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5). Similarly, the negative references to anal sex acts in Romans 1:27 (1:26 heterosexual) occur in a context that proclaims God's wrath against “all impiety/idolatry and oppression/ injustice” (1:18; for idolatry, see 1:19-23, 25; for oppression/injustice, 1:29).

Such negative texts condemning idolatrous sexual abuse, however, must be balanced against other texts on sexual minorities that are quite positive. The condemnation of idolaters who castrate themselves (Deut 23:1) provides no basis for condemning Israelites who suffered castration as prisoners of war (Isa 56:3-5; see also Jesus' reference to three types of eunuchs in Mat 19:12). The domestic codes that encouraged slaves to be obedient to their masters (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; Tit 2:1-10; 1 Tim 6:1-2; 1 Pet 2:13-3:7) must be interpreted in the light of other texts, beginning with the book of Exodus (1–15), that encourage liberation of slaves (1 Cor 7:21; Philemon). The many texts that reflect patriarchal customs of women submissive to their husbands must be balanced by other texts referring to women leaders (Deborah; Jael; the “apostle” Junia in Rom 16:7). The stories of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1-4), David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18–2 Sam 1), and Jesus and his beloved disciple (John 13–21) provide eloquent examples of loving same-sex relations that are neither idolatrous nor abusive. Sadly, in recent decades, many acknowledge the scientific limitations of the Bible manifest in the debates over Galileo and Darwin, the cultural limitations of the Bible in the controversies involving government by monarchies vs. democracies, and the great *diversity* in biblical teaching regarding slavery, women and divorce—yet they continue to espouse misinterpretations that promote harm, discrimination and violence against sexual minorities.

Such simple observations, demonstrating that no “clobber text” refers to or condemns consensual, committed, loving same-sex relations, often are neglected or even belittled by academic writers. They, however, have entire semesters to introduce students to the complexities of biblical hermeneutics, while pastoral efforts often involve a brief exchange with a visitor limited to a few minutes. For a full comprehension of biblical teaching on sexuality, obviously *both* exegesis and hermeneutics are essential, but we do well not to neglect the contribution to interpretation that comes from exegesis, since outside of controlled academic contexts, votes may be won or lost, suicides avoided and lives saved simply by taking advantage of all that exegesis offers.