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Bibles That Matter:
Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity

Ken Stone

Abstract

Discussions of Bible and homosexuality, and discussions of postmodern biblical interpretation, have often taken place in isolation from one another. However, Judith Butler's "queer" approach to sex, gender and performativity may allow biblical scholars to rethink their objects and procedures in a manner that brings such discussions together. Grounded in a reading of speech act theory, Butler's work explores the possibility that gender, rather than being conceived in a modernist fashion as the social interpretation of stable sexed bodies, is best understood in terms of collective practices that produce perceptions of fixed sexes and genders as performative effects. So too the Bible, often conceived as a fixed object, may be reconceptualized in terms of the collective practices, including conventional modes of scholarly and popular analysis, that produce perceptions of a single, stable Bible as performative effects. Postmodern queer theory's appreciation of complexity and pluralism as resources rather than threats can thus be extended from bodies to bibles. Just as Butler examines processes whereby bodies come to "matter" (in both senses of that term), biblical scholars can examine processes—including those associated with biblical theology and those associated with sexuality debates—whereby bibles, too, "matter."

Over the course of the last two decades, a number of scholars have suggested that biblical theologies ought to be reconceived for a "postmodern" world (e.g., Adam 1995a, 2006; Brueggemann 1997, 2005). As such scholars point out, biblical theologies have too often been constructed on the basis of a narrow set of assumptions associated with Western modernity. The assumptions in question, which thoroughly shape the ethos of modern biblical scholarship, involve in particular the notion that texts have relatively fixed meanings which are best discerned through the academic reconstruction of the Bible's grammatical sense, historical development, and ancient historical context. Now that these assumptions are being reexamined more critically, new ways of thinking about the Bible and its theological interpretation may be possible.

During roughly the same period of time, many communities of faith that actually use the Bible as a theological resource have been torn apart by controversies associated with homosexuality. Partly as a consequence, numerous books and articles have appeared in which biblical scholars attempt to discern and explicate biblical attitudes toward same-sex contact. Most of these studies deploy standard tools of historical-critical analysis, often with excellent results (e.g., Olyan, Brooten, Nissinen, Bird, and Ackerman). Yet relatively few efforts have been made to bring the concerns motivating such studies into dialogue with the parallel conversation about "postmodern" biblical theologies. Scholars who interrogate the premises behind modernist theological interpretations of scripture may on occasion use homosexuality debates among Christians to illustrate their points (e.g., Fowl: 119–27; cf. Adam 2006: 141–53). More often, though, studies on the Bible and sexuality, and attempts to rethink biblical inter-

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pretation apart from modernist assumptions about textual meaning, have developed independently of one another.

Recently, however, in a collection of essays on gender, sexuality, and biblical interpretation, Dale Martin bridges the gap between these developments when he launches a critique of what he refers to as "textual foundationalism." As used by Martin, the phrase "textual foundationalism" is not identical to "fundamentalism." Although fundamentalists may be foundationalists, many foundationalists reject beliefs about the inerrancy, theological authority, or historical accuracy of biblical texts. But foundationalists, whether they are fundamentalists, evangelicals, theological liberals, or critical scholars in the university with no religious affiliation, usually subscribe to some version of what Martin calls "the myth of textual agency." That is, foundationalists of all stripes accept "the common assumption … that the Bible 'speaks' and our job is just to 'listen'" (Martin 2006: 1). Against such assumptions about a "speaking" Bible, Martin argues forcefully that textual meaning is inseparable from hermeneutics and interpretive rhetoric, which take place in specific contexts and under the influence of traditions and interpretive communities (religious and scholarly). Recognition of this fact does not entail a rejection of the historical, contextual analysis of texts. Indeed, Martin deploys standard tools of historical analysis throughout the essays in his collection, as he has to good effect in earlier works on the New Testament and early Christianity (e.g., Martin 1990; 1995). By calling attention to flawed assumptions undergirding the "myth of textual agency," however, Martin hopes to encourage interpreters of all stripes to take responsibility for the ethical consequences of their own interpretive moves rather than projecting those moves onto the supposed agency of texts.

This insistence that scholars take responsibility for the ethical consequences of their interpretive rhetoric calls to mind similar arguments made, for example, by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999). Martin's argument that notions about textual agency actually conceal readerly moves also coheres well with some arguments found in the literature on "postmodern" biblical interpretation (e.g., Adam 1995b, 2006; Bible and Culture Collective 1995). Indeed, Martin himself cautiously characterizes his own approach as a "postmodern Christian historicism" (Martin 2006: 162), and he engages what he calls "postmodern queer readings" (88–90).

As the latter phrase indicates, however, Martin's volume, in distinction from many discussions of "postmodern" biblical interpretation, explores postmodern queries by considering at length their implications for contemporary debates over Bible, sexuality, and gender, including debates over homosexuality.

Martin points out, for example, how problematic assumptions about textual agency shape both the rhetoric of scholars who oppose homosexuality and the rhetoric of scholars who condone it. Martin's demonstration of the inseparability of all such arguments from interpretation and rhetoric does not necessarily lead to any one view about homosexuality and the Bible, though Martin makes no attempt to disguise his own views (which are decidedly in favor of lesbian and gay rights). However, if scholarly reconstructions of biblical views about homosexuality are not simply the inevitable result of listening carefully to "what the Bible says," but rather always proceed by more or less complicated interpretive maneuvers, then scholars and other readers cannot hide behind messages attributed to texts when making statements about homosexuality or other matters of contemporary concern. Instead, they will need to specify more clearly, and take responsibility for, the full range of considerations that lead them to adopt this or that position in the contemporary debates.

Martin does not make such claims to undermine the use of the Bible as a theological resource. To the contrary, Martin, who acknowledges his Christian affiliation, states explicitly that he "firmly believe[s] that Christians should read Scripture and make it relevant to our lives." The process of finding Christian relevance is not restricted, however, to the deployment of modern exegetical frameworks, such as the distinction found in many discussions of biblical theology between historical meaning and contemporary significance. What Martin wishes to press instead is the necessity for "new ways of thinking about *how* we read Scripture" (161, emphasis in original). "Scripture," here, refers not to some reality lying behind the text (whether in a reconstructed history or a reconstructed authorial intention) but rather to meanings reached or created "in the *performance* of Scripture … in the *enacting* of Scripture in particular practices" (165, emphasis in original). Acknowledging the fact that reading takes "varied and unending" forms (165), Martin rejects the search for a uniform method of biblical interpretation that, applied to specific texts, would resolve once and for all the contemporary debates over sexuality and gender. For Martin, matters of gender and sexuality, including disagreements over homosexuality, appear instead to offer an occasion to rethink our assumptions about biblical interpretation. Eschewing calls for a single "workable prescription for arriving at ethically valid readings of the Bible," Martin challenges his readers to "educate our imaginations in new ways to think about Scripture differently" (170).

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to take up Martin's challenge to explore "new ways to think about

Scripture differently." Like Martin, I will do so in dialogue with "postmodern queer" thought. Indeed, my discussion can stand alongside attempts I have made elsewhere at "queer readings" of biblical texts (e.g., Stone 2005, 2006; cf. Stone 2001). Here, though, I wish primarily to reflect upon one among many ways in which, I believe, contemporary queer theory may provide insights with which to rethink biblical interpretation. As in Martin's discussion, so also in mine, matters associated with "performance" and "practices" will play a role.

One of the notions that emerged in queer studies outside of biblical scholarship during the 1990's is the notion of "queer performativity." The phrase itself comes from the title of an essay published by the literary scholar, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Sedgwick 1993). However, the larger conceptual framework for the phrase owes a great deal to a series of texts on performativity and gender written by philosopher Judith Butler. One of Butler's striking accomplishments has been to take the notion of "performativity," previously associated with philosophical investigations of language and the theory of speech acts, and use that notion to provide an alternative account of sex, gender and sexuality. Speech act theory itself, which gave birth to the notion of the "performative," influenced literary studies well before the appearance of Butler's work on gender (see, e.g., Ohmann; Pratt). Partly as a consequence, there have also been a few attempts to consider the relevance of speech act theory for biblical criticism (e.g., White); and speech act theory has been taken up as well in the study of religion more generally (cf. BeDuhn).

In Butler's hands, however, the notion of the performative has taken on new connotations that the progenitors of speech act theory would no doubt consider surprising (cf. Culler). Butler's analyses have already proven useful for the interpretation of particular biblical texts (see, e.g., Beal; Rowlett; Hornsby; Stone 2005, 2006). However, while I will turn later in this paper to the possible implications of Butler's work for the interpretation of a specific section of Scripture, my primary question here is whether engagement with Butler's reworking of performativity might allow us to rethink for a postmodern world *what it is that we do and what it is that we study* as biblical scholars.

By way of anticipation, I will suggest that it may be productive to reconceptualize the Bible itself in performative terms, in dialogue with Butler's reconceptualization of gender and sex. Butler's views on performativity emerged out of her attempt to rethink gender as a kind of doing rather than being, partly in order to think about "what it might

mean to undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life" (Butler 2004a: 1). So too I want to ask whether and how we might reimagine the Bible itself as a kind of doing rather than being, a doing that may also allow us to "undo restrictively normative conceptions" of biblical interpretation that are often at work in debates over Bible and sexual practice, as well as in other discussions of Bible, including those that concern biblical theology. To illustrate some of the possible implications of such a reimagining, I will also turn briefly to the Genesis creation texts, which have long played a role in religious reflections on Bible, gender, and sexuality.

The Performativity of Gender and Sex

In her influential book *Gender Trouble*, Butler raises a series of questions about a conceptual structure that has been nearly canonical for English-language studies of gender: the distinction between gender and sex. In those English terms, the sex/gender distinction was initially developed by psychiatrists (e.g., Stoller) who wished to differentiate biological sex, on the one hand, from socialized gender identities and social gender roles, on the other. According to this modern psychiatric distinction, "sex" refers to the biological difference between male and female, whereas "gender" refers to the psychological or social differences between "masculine" and "feminine." Using this distinction, psychiatrists hoped to understand how, for example, a transsexual might have a male biological sex while identifying psychologically with a feminine gender.

This association of the sex/gender distinction with modernist psychological sciences is often forgotten, however, due to the greater influence of the distinction in subsequent feminist analysis. In feminist and gender studies, the sex/gender distinction has provided a tool for analyzing the subordination of women to men that, in principle at least, avoids naturalizing such subordination. Most writers in feminist and gender studies who make use of the sex/gender distinction allow that biological differences between women and men exist and refer to those differences as matters of "sex." Since society and culture organize and give meaning to sex differences, however, the construction and organization of such differences are analyzed under the rubric of "gender." "Gender," then, is widely understood as "a social category imposed on a sexed body," to borrow the words of historian Joan Scott (Scott: 32). Conceptualized in this fashion, the sex/gender distinction has been enormously influential for feminist studies, especially social scientific studies, of the subordination of women to men (cf. Stone 2007).

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Butler, however, wrote *Gender Trouble* in dialogue with several essays by Monique Wittig (1992), which raise questions about the status of sexed bodies themselves. Wittig argues that the division of the human species into male and female sexes is a historical and social phenomenon accomplished through language rather than a natural fact. The categories "man" and "woman" are, in Wittig's view, political categories that lead us to grant social and ontological significance to—or "mark" bodies in terms of—exactly those parts of the body that are useful to sexual reproduction. For Wittig, binary categories of sex constitute the foundation upon which the imperative of sexual reproduction, the heterosexualization of society, and the subordination of women and sexual minorities all rest.

Butler partly follows Wittig when she voices the suspicion that binary categories of sex underwrite compulsory heterosexuality. As Butler notes, the presumptive stability and coherence of biological sex is sometimes used to police proper "expressions" of gender among individuals who are assumed to share the same sex. However, whereas Wittig calls for a kind of utopian elimination of categories associated with sex, Butler eschews utopianism and emphasizes instead the heterogeneity that exists or appears within sex/gender categories themselves. To take one of the more striking examples, the stability and essential coherence of binary notions of sexed bodies are troubled by the existence of intersexed bodies (Butler 2004a; cf. Kessler; Fausto-Sterling).

Thus Butler criticizes the idea that gender involves "expressions" or interpretations of a stable base or foundation in the sexed body. Though I shall return to Butler's ruminations on "bodies" below, it is important to note here that Butler does not deny the physical existence of bodies. She does, however, emphasize what she calls "the perceptually perceived body" and suggests that it may be "impossible to decide" how a "physical" body can be said to precede "the perceptually perceived body" (Butler 1990: 114). As perceiving beings, we simply do not have access to the body prior to, or outside of, perception, which is of course shaped by language and culture. Instead of accepting binary sexual difference as a substantive foundation upon which social gender systems are erected as interpretations, Butler asks pointedly whether perceptions of binary sex distinctions are not themselves effects of the heteronormative social and linguistic construction of gender.

It is partly as a way of explicating this possibility that Butler begins to articulate her theory of gender performativity. Significantly for my purposes, the word "performative" comes into Butler's discussion in opposition to a more substantive notion of gender as a kind of thing, or noun. "Gender is not a noun," Butler states. Rather,

> …the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender performance. Hence…gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing.…There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results [1990: 24–25].

For Butler, the illusory stability of both gender and sex results from repeated and ritualized practices. Such practices do not express truths of sex and gender. Rather, for Butler, effects of sex and gender are produced by what she refers to as the "stylized repetition of acts." Calling into question substantive accounts of sex and gender, she suggests that "if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is…a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (179, emphasis in original).

In the trajectory of Butler's work, this notion of "performative accomplishment" is developed (in, e.g., Butler 1993, 1997) in dialogue with the theory of linguistic speech acts associated with J. L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*. Austin famously distinguishes between what he calls constative and performative utterances. Constative utterances are true or false, and often describe or report things. Performative utterances, however, cannot usually be classified as "true" or "false." Instead of describing things, performative utterances accomplish the things of which they speak. For example, the proper words spoken by the proper persons in a wedding ceremony do not describe a marriage, but accomplish it. This example, found already in Austin, attracts much attention in the context of reflection on "queer" performatives (e.g., Sedgwick), given the role of marriage in heteronormative discourses. It should also attract the attention of biblical scholars, since, on the one hand, weddings often incorporate biblical texts and are frequently said to be based on biblical mandate; while, on the other hand, biblical assumptions about patriarchal household, patrilineal kinship, and sexual practice clearly differ in significant ways from modern notions of "marriage," even if the differences are rarely acknowledged (cf. Berquist; Stone 2005). For our purposes here, the example can be used to underscore a crucial component of performative utterances, which is their

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reliance upon social convention and context. In order for the words spoken at a modern wedding to accomplish a marriage, at least in the legally recognized sense, the persons speaking and the context in which words are spoken must conform to certain norms and conventions. Otherwise, the performative may, in Austin's terminology, "misfire." Context, convention, and power all play roles in both constraining and enabling the speakers who use performatives to "do" things with words.

Butler's coupling of a concept from the philosophy of speech acts, with a radical theory of gender, is admittedly unorthodox. There are precedents for stressing the bodily dimensions of speech acts, however, which have influenced some readers of the Bible (cf. Felman; Bal 1988). Unorthodox couplings are in any case constitutive of much queer life and thought (cf. Stone 2001); and one of the chief contributions of speech act theory for Butler is its ability to shift our thinking from the register of being to the register of doing. The performative speech act is not a tool for describing what something is. The performative is, rather, something that one does. In the doing, one brings something about. One does a wedding, speaking certain words in certain conventional contexts; and one brings about what is subsequently perceived as a married couple. So too, Butler argues, gender is not primarily a matter of being—recall that it is not, in her view, a noun—but rather a matter of doing.

It is not, however, a doing that is done all at once. It is crucial for Butler's use of performativity that she understands it against the background of Jacques Derrida's point that performatives succeed only by repeating or citing earlier models. Thus the distinction between individual, authentic events and repetitions or copies is undermined by performativity. What might look like a singular "event"—the "marriage," for example—is in fact in some sense always an imitation if it is to be meaningful at all. This exposure of what is supposedly original as itself an imitation or repetition becomes important for Butler's attempt to consider gender as in some sense always an imitation. At the same time, Derrida's discussion resituates the performative utterance in the context of what he calls (referencing again the example of marriage) a "citationality" or "general iterability" (Derrida: 18), which is a way of getting at the fact that signs, while necessarily relying upon earlier conventions and instances of use, can also be repeated or cited differently in all sorts of new contexts. This iterability leads inevitably not only to what Austin referred to as "successfully performed" acts but also to parodies, recontextualizations, and what Austin himself considered performative "infelicities" and "misfires" (Austin: 16, *passim*).

Such variation and unpredictability in citation is important for Butler, who understands gender performativity as a temporal process in which gender norms are cited both verbally and bodily. Through such citations, one "does" gender as what Butler calls "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler 2004a: 1). However, the slips, gaps, and differences that inevitably appear from iteration to iteration, with bodies as with speech, become for Butler resources that potentially expose the contingency of gender norms. One "does" gender, then; but one may "undo gender" as well, not by getting out of gender into a utopian space but rather by using the appearance of unexpected gender citations to destabilize hegemonic forms of gender. In a heteronormative society, where not only gender identity but also sexual desire are expected to follow in a particular fashion from biological sex, such unexpected gender citations appear for example in the lives of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered persons, and others who find themselves, for whatever reasons, living and loving outside of conventional norms for sex, gender, sexual desire and sexual practice; and who might, for that reason, be considered by others or consider themselves "queer."

Queer Performativity and Biblical Interpretation

Though I shall continue to elucidate suggestions made by Butler, at this point I would like to return to my earlier question: How might Butler's work in feminist and queer theory allow us to reimagine biblical interpretation? Although there is surely more than one way to answer that question, biblical scholars might begin by asking whether it could be useful to reconceptualize our object of study, as Butler does hers, in performative rather than substantive or constative terms. The object of study for biblical scholars is, of course, "the Bible." We make constative statements about this object whenever we describe the Bible, its texts, its origins, its meanings or its theologies. The substantive nature of this object is, for the most part, simply presupposed, even by some scholars who allow for multiple interpretations of that object. There is a solid thing, "the Bible"; and then there are the ways in which this supposed thing is given meaning and significance in diverse situations. There is "the Bible," and then there are various types of "hermeneutics," including the sorts of hermeneutics associated with the projects of biblical theology.

But as one way of taking up Martin's challenge to "educate our imaginations in new ways to think about Scripture

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differently" (Martin 2006: 170), I would like to consider the possibility that "Bible" stands to "hermeneutics," here, in something like the same way that "sex" stands to "gender" in conventional modern ways of thinking the sex/gender distinction. On the one hand, there is a material entity, "the Bible," the existence of which is presupposed in much the same way that sexed bodies are presupposed under the rubric of the sex/gender distinction. On the other hand, there are what we imagine to be "expressions" of that entity—translations, versions, scholarly and popular accounts—which differ from one another in many ways but are nevertheless usually considered manifestations or interpretations of what is ultimately a substantive foundation in the Bible. Even as some diversity of interpretation is allowed, the assumed stability of that foundation is often used to limit proper expression, in much the same way that the assumed stability of binary sex differences is used to limit proper gender expression.

Now one of the issues at stake in most debates over Bible and homosexuality is precisely disagreement over the proper interpretation of particular substantive biblical texts. In the light of Butler's project, however, we might ask whether readers of the Bible who wish to challenge its use as a support for heteronormativity—queer readers, for example—ought to contest, not only particular interpretations made of an assumed object (the Bible), but also the substantive, essential nature of that object itself. To be sure, we are familiar with a "perceptually perceived" Bible (to borrow the phrase Butler applies to the body); and so to question the Bible's substantive nature might seem counterintuitive. Yet it is hardly more counterintuitive, I think, than the questions asked by Wittig and Butler about "perceptually perceived" categories of biological sex. And if Butler's move toward performativity as a way of rethinking those categories is motivated in part by the fact that substantive accounts of sex and gender often underwrite heteronormativity, so also many readers today are only too aware of the fact that substantive accounts of "what the Bible says" often serve a heteronormative function. Thus we might borrow Butler's words, quoted earlier, and—substituting "Bible" for "gender"—reflect upon the possibility that "the substantive effect of Bible is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of Bible performance . . . Bible is always a doing. . . . There is no Bible identity behind the expressions of Bible; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."

Notice that I said "Bible," here; and not, in this case, "the Bible." One implication of a performative account of Bible may be that Bible, like gender, is best understood as

something other than a noun. Bible, too, has more to do with doing than being. How, then, does this doing get done?

Bible, like gender, may best be understood as something other than a noun.

It is, first of all, never completely done but rather always being done, temporally, like gender, and in many different ways. Butler writes at one point about "the effect of gender" by referring to "mundane ways in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender self" (1990: 24). So, too, the effect of Bible has been produced and continues to be produced in many "mundane ways," through ongoing activities that constitute the illusion of an abiding Bible. Such activities include, for example, practices of ancient copying and modern printing; multiple processes of canonization; attempts to standardize pluriform texts; translations carried out by individuals and committees; the production of commentary; processes of selection and exclusion that result in lectionaries; the preparation, delivery, and reception of sermons and lectures; choices and judgments made by publishers, journal referees, reporters, and the producers of televised documentary specials on the Bible; citations made by politicians and even U.S. presidents; the establishment of academic positions and departments that relate in some way to "Bible"; decisions about hiring and tenure made in such departments; the organization and ongoing activities of a "Society of Biblical Literature," with the approval or rejection of program units and papers for its annual meetings; and, finally, the "training" of biblical scholars (which is often discussed in terms of its location in the modern academy but might also be compared with those systems of reward and correction whereby humans "train" other animals). Through all of these practices, Bible is (to borrow Butler's language about gender again) "instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous"; and its "appearance of substance is . . . a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe, and to perform in the mode of belief."

These acts by which "Bible" is accomplished are, of course, collective practices carried out over time. They are not simply the practices of single individuals. This is true as well, however, for "gender" in Butler's perspective. As she notes, "One does not 'do' one's gender alone" (Butler 2004a: 1). The analysis of collective practice, whether in

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relation to gender or Bible, requires attention not only to plural actors but also to institutions, norms, and relations of power. Such attention runs counter to any hasty and misleading assumption that performative notions of gender involve multiple, freely chosen meanings circulating without any relation to constraint. Power, institutions, and shared norms all play constitutive and constraining roles in the processes whereby collective practices of knowledge produce their objects, whether those objects are bodies, as in the processes discussed by Butler; or Bibles, as in the scholarly practices examined for example by Burke Long (1997).

The political importance of this point can perhaps be explicated further in dialogue with a collection of essays that Butler published in 1993 under the title *Bodies That Matter*. The pun in this title is significant. On the one hand, Butler asks after the materiality or "matter" of bodies, the existence of which she does not deny. On the other hand, she asks after the discursive processes and collective practices whereby bodies come "to matter." Bodies are not simply made of matter. Bodies matter. Bodies have meaning. This much seems clear. However, Butler also raises and indeed emphasizes questions about *which* bodies matter, and why and how some bodies matter more than others. As Butler sees it, "intelligible" bodies "only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemes" (1993: xi). Descriptions of bodies always involve processes of "exclusion." The demarcation of what Butler calls a "domain of intelligible bodies" depends upon the existence of a "constitutive outside," which consists of all those bodies, body parts, or bodily practices that fail to conform to prevalent frames for intelligibility. Such frames do not concern only sex and gender, of course. Other matters—race and disability, for example—are also involved. But as Butler notes, the force of these intelligibility frames is sometimes a matter of life and death; and she has increasingly asked (in, e.g., Butler 2004a, 2004b, 2005) about the ways in which power both limits and enables our ability to achieve livable human lives by allowing some bodies to matter and insuring that others do not.

Now the question of livable human lives is an important question indeed for those of us who study the Bible, a book once referred to by Mieke Bal as "the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill" (Bal 1991: 14). The roles played by Bibles in taking or giving life depend to a significant degree, however, on how Bibles matter, which Bibles matter, and which ones do not. The answers to these questions, too, are determined by frames for intelligibility, which create their own "constitutive outside."

The Bibles quoted—and thereby constituted—by anti-gay Christians, for example, necessarily result from a focus on particular texts, translations, and interpretations; and the sense of coherence that one associates with those Bibles is partly an effect of the fact that one either ignores or dismisses other texts, translations and interpretations. Exactly the same thing is true, of course, for Bibles quoted by gay-affirmative Christians. It is important to recall, however, that the effect of a performative speech act—the marriage, for example—will depend at least in part on the authority and social power wielded by speakers involved in the occasion. So too, authority and social power play a role in determining which Bibles matter, and which ones do not. In a heteronormative society, heteronormative Bibles are more likely to assume coherence and intelligibility. On the other hand, the publication of academic queer commentary on biblical books by scholars teaching and writing in the field (Guest, *et al.*) may well modify the conditions of intelligibility under which Bibles are enabled and constrained to matter at all. What we imagine the Bible "to be" may well change as a result, though in assessing that possibility one must take into account the likely conservative tendencies that prevail in the training, hiring and promotion of biblical scholars.

At the same time, Butler notes that one must do more than recognize the role of power in constituting what she calls "the field of intelligible objects." One must simultaneously look for instabilities, surprises, and tensions or even contradictions that reveal "contingency and . . . transformability" in "the conditions by which the object field is constituted . . ." (Butler 2004a: 216). Butler's emphasis on this point helps to account for her influence in queer theory; for queer studies is partly grounded in recognition that attempts to order the "object fields" associated with sex, gender, sexual desire and sexual practice have created categories ("male" versus "female," "masculine" versus "feminine," "heterosexual" versus "homosexual") that are inevitably confounded by the multiple complexities of actual bodies, desires and practices (cf. Stone 2001). Far from deeming such complexities inevitably threatening, Butler's work tends to recast them as sites for exploration and transformation.

Now it is not at all difficult to highlight instabilities and contingencies in the biblical scholar's field of intelligible objects, the field made up of biblical texts. One can even use old-fashioned tools to do so. The peculiar illusion that there is a single, stable Bible can be exposed quite quickly as an illusion by any serious engagement with textual criticism, for example. Textual criticism's potential for destabilizing rigid notions about the Bible as a substantive object is increas-

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ingly apparent (cf. Ehrman); and I do not find it difficult to imagine that textual criticism, though admittedly not closely associated with queer theory, may turn out to be indispensable in the long term for queering the Bible. Similarly, the instabilities and disagreements that structure any attempt at translation or lexicography are crucial for contestation of the heteronormative accounts of Bible produced by readers every day (see, e.g., Martin 2006: 37–64), just as attention to details about intersexed bodies has become crucial (in, e.g., Butler 2004a) for Butler's ongoing contestation of binary accounts of gender and sex.

So too, in terms of content, the contingency of heteronormative Bibles can be contested not simply by arguing over what the Bible says or doesn't say about homosexuality, but perhaps more significantly by re-reading supposed biblical foundations for modern heterosexuality. Close readings of such passages may be more important for challenging heteronormativity than endless debates over so-called "clobber passages"; for gaps emerge between the Bibles that queer readings of such passages produce and the Bibles so often cited against lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered persons. Attempts to give stable accounts of Bible inevitably fail to account for all details, as do attempts to give stable accounts of sex and gender. Looking at a wide range of biblical passages that refer to sex and gender, queer readings may "undo" the impression that modern forms of heterosexuality are unambiguously grounded in these ancient texts, partly by emphasizing the elements that have to be excluded in order to produce heteronormative Bibles.

If we adopt Butler's notion of performativity as a way of thinking about such projects, we will no longer understand them as arguments over supposed "true meanings" of, or constative statements about, a single substantive Bible. We may find ourselves asking instead about the extent to which "Bible" as an entity actually precedes such arguments; and whether such arguments do not in certain respects produce the impression of a single Bible as their performative effect.

To ask such questions is not at all to doubt the physical existence of numerous actual biblical texts, any more than Butler's queries about sex and gender involve a denial of the physical existence of numerous actual bodies. Heteronormative Bibles do, in some sense, "exist." They are produced every day, as are heteronormative genders. Like those genders, heteronormative Bibles result from what Butler would call citations of norms—norms for selection, norms for translation, norms for reading, norms for what Bible-readers and the texts they quote are supposed to be saying about sex.

But those of us involved in lesbian, gay, or queer read-

ings also produce Bibles as performative effects. As a result of our own citations and iterations, we "do" Bible in other ways; and in this doing of Bible, a queer doing of Bible, we also "undo" the Bibles that are so often used against us. We engage in such doing and undoing all the time, knowingly or not, through out teaching, our writing, our translation, our speaking; and we may even come to value the fact that queer readers "do" Bible in many different ways, just as queer life and thought values the fact that sex, gender, and sexual practice are "done" in multiple ways. We are never in a position to make Bibles mean just anything whatsoever, for Bible performatives—like gender performatives and speech acts—always exist in some analyzable relationship to context and convention. The production of Bibles is, like the production of gender for Butler, "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler 2004a: 1). And the ethical consequences and political effects of specific performatives will, of course, need to be assessed, in the case of Bible as with gender and sexual practice. But by focusing on this text rather than that one, by reading in this way rather than another, queer readings do not simply undo heteronormative Bibles. They also make it possible for other Bibles to come into existence, Bibles quite different from the ones used to normalize modern forms of monogamous heterosexuality, Bibles that startle and surprise—queer Bibles, perhaps. Such Bibles emerge as we do things with words; and as our practices of Bible do and undo, what Bibles are made to say and do, with gender and sex.

Creation Texts and Queer Performativity

In order to reflect further, and more concretely, on the Bibles that could emerge as a consequence of queer readings, I would like to turn briefly to the creation texts found in Genesis 1–3. In recent years these texts have played a central and growing role in attempts to use biblical literature to buttress heteronormative accounts of sex and gender. As controversies over homosexuality have intensified, more and more questions have been raised about the ways in which Christians have used the story of threatened rape in Sodom in Genesis 19, or the laws against male-male intercourse in Leviticus, to condemn homosexual activities of all kinds. Perhaps as a consequence, increased attention has been given to the creation texts by Christian scholars who seek in the Hebrew Scriptures a biblical foundation for the valorization of heterosexuality (e.g., Gagnon, Davidson, Seitz). Such readers find in these texts an emphasis on binary, so-called "complementary," sex differences. The presence of this em-

phasis at the beginning of biblical literature is taken as one indication that heterosexual coupling is part of "God's original design for human sexuality" (Davidson: 15), which rules out the legitimacy of same-sex sexual contact or other activities that could blur divinely instituted boundaries between male and female.

This valorization of heterosexual relations, which is entirely in keeping with modern approaches to "family values," no doubt sounds to many readers like nothing more than the self-evident, "plain sense" of the creation accounts. However, an approach to these same texts shaped by queer performativity might take its starting point from recognition that, in other times and places, readers have found in these texts quite different meanings. During the early centuries of Christianity, for example, stories of creation served (as did other biblical texts) as battlegrounds for those holding competing views on asceticism, celibacy, and marriage (Brown; Clark 1986, 1989, 1999; Pagels). Proponents of chastity such as Chrysostom and Jerome found it easy to conclude that Adam and Eve were virgins in the Garden of Eden, where there was no need for sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse, like death, was assumed by such readers to be characteristic of our current, cursed experience of fallen humanity, but intrinsic neither to the original divine intentions for humanity nor to the mode of life preferred for those living a new creation in Christ. Although this approach to sexuality is quite distinct from modern celebrations of heterosexual coupling, it seems not to have been difficult for ascetic readers to find support for their views in Genesis.

Moreover, such readers sometimes understood the stories in Genesis 1–3 to be dealing with additional issues that are seldom raised when the stories are interpreted today. For example, as I point out in more detail elsewhere, matters of food, appetite, and proper Christian eating and fasting were often handled by appeal to the book of Genesis, and especially to the story of the Garden of Eden (Stone 2005: 23–45). The idea that creation accounts were as much "about" food as sex was easily confirmed by the important role played by food in those accounts, particularly in the acts of temptation and disobedience that were understood to have led to a "fall," as Christian terminology would have it. Many modern readers, by contrast, find in the creation accounts a foundation for heteronormativity, and argue as a consequence that creation rules out homosexual practice; yet they fail to see in the text any significance for our contemporary attitudes toward food, which so concerned many ancient Christian readers.

Furthermore, binary sex differences are themselves de-

stabilized by some ancient interpretations of Genesis 1–3. Although modern historical critical readers often speak of two creation traditions in this section of Genesis, ancient readers did not. Thus, many of them tried to account for the curious fact that Genesis refers first to the creation of a humanity that was both "male and female" (1:26–27), then at a later point to the creation of Adam (2:7), and then at a still later point to the creation of Eve (2:21–23). As Daniel Boyarin has noted in a study of the Jewish sources, attempts to interpret the relations among these sequential acts of creation sometimes led readers to conclude that the first creature must have been in some sense androgynous (Boyarin: 31–46). Certain writers such as Philo apparently assumed that the first creature, in Genesis 1, was spiritual and androgynous; whereas the second creature, in Genesis 2, was embodied and male. This embodied male creature was then later divided into two creatures, male and female. Other, midrashic, traditions suggest instead that the first creature was already embodied. However, since this creature was, according to Genesis 1:26, already both "male and female," it apparently had both male and female genitalia. Only later, in chapter 2 of Genesis, was this transgendered creature separated and refashioned into two creatures. In such readings, however, the binary sexual difference emphasized by contemporary readers was arguably not assumed to be foundational in an originary sense but rather interpreted as a secondary development.

Of course, my point in recalling these readings of Genesis and contrasting them with more recent interpretations is not to determine which readings are "right" and which are "wrong." I wish, rather, to underscore the contingency of all interpretations of these creation accounts. Far from resulting inevitably from careful attention to the text, such interpretations are produced in diverse ways whenever particular readers, working with particular assumptions and asking specific questions motivated by their own contexts for reading, see very different sorts of meaning and significance "in the text." The "Genesis creation accounts" that result are in some sense generated, performatively, by the very reading processes that claim simply to interpret them.

Rather than simply demonstrating this fact by appealing to the history of interpretation, however, queer readers may also find in the Genesis creation accounts a site for the production of alternative citations, and hence new meanings. The second creation story, usually referred to by scholars as the Yahwist account, offers particularly intriguing resources for such meaning production. The fact that human sexual distinctions are established at a later moment in the story,

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rather than being present from the first creation of human-kind, has already led some feminist scholars to understand the first human to be sexually undifferentiated (e.g., Trible; Bal 1987). Other readers discern tension in the text between reasons for understanding the first creature to be male and reasons for rejecting such a sexual identification (e.g., Jobling; Fewell & Gunn). However, this tension is itself a potential challenge to any reading that finds in the story a straightforward account of foundational sexual difference. The complexities of the story can thus be taken in directions quite contrary to the neat tale of binary gender distinction that many readers find there today.

More significantly, attempts to read the Yahwist story as a demonstration of the positive importance of heterosexuality often have to exclude, or explain away, certain features of the story that stand in some tension with this valorization. It is a striking fact, for example, and one too often ignored, that the first explicit reference to female heterosexual desire in the Bible appears in God's description of the negative consequences of Eve's transgression. The initial positive valuation of heterosexual intercourse in Genesis 2:23–24 is narrated in such a way as to incorporate only the man's point of view. In 3:16, however, female heterosexual desire is referred to by God in the context of the woman's punishment, and can be understood as itself a negative consequence of the woman's disobedience. Given the association made in 3:16 between such desire and the difficulties of childbirth, one can even find here a biblical acknowledgment that the consequences of heterosexual intercourse for women were, in the ancient world, potentially quite negative (see Meyers: 110–13); and so the desire that led to such intercourse was perhaps more easily interpreted as punishment than gift. The point, again, is not that the text must be read this way but rather that details in the text certainly allow it to be read this way. Thus attention to textual detail, far from ruling out a queer reading of this story, in fact opens up possibilities for various sorts of queer interpretations of it, some of which I have attempted to sketch in more detail elsewhere (Stone 2006; 2005: 23–45).

To be sure, the Priestly account of creation in Genesis 1 may be less amenable to queer reinterpretation than the more complicated Yahwist narrative, though attempts to re-read the Priestly text as something other than a heterosexual story of origins remain to be undertaken. Nevertheless, the fact that Genesis does include not one but two accounts of creation, as historical-critical scholars have long noted; and the fact that an orderly account of creation which appears to emphasize neat, binary distinctions of gender has to contend

with the presence of an alternative account in which matters of gender and sexuality are arguably much less clear, can stand as a sort of symbolic representation of the situation in which queer counterreadings of biblical literature find themselves. The tidy Bibles of heteronormative interpretation do exist, but they inevitably stand alongside more complex accounts of "Bible" that will always threaten to allow Bibles to matter in new, exciting, strange, and even queer ways.

Conclusion

Now I have obviously not tried here to broach the problems that have long plagued attempts to define "the concept of 'biblical theology'" (Barr). My primary goal has been rather to explore one possible way of responding to Martin's call for new ways of imagining Scripture. It seems safe to suggest, however, that discussions of biblical theology, whatever else they might be concerned with, are also concerned with "Bibles that matter." They revolve around, and are fueled by, the possibility that biblical texts can be interpreted in terms of meaningful theological concepts ("God," "covenant," etc.) or processes ("canonization," "traditioning," etc.). In that respect they often involve forms of attention to, and interpretations of, biblical texts that differ in certain respects from those which structure projects defined along other lines, such as the history of religion, comparative literature, or deconstruction, even if the boundaries between these categories are fluid rather than fixed.

Although practitioners of biblical theology might imagine that there is little to learn from queer studies, I believe the suggestions I have made above in fact also imply a reconceptualization of biblical theology as one subfield of biblical interpretation. For biblical theologies, too, can be reimagined as performative enterprises. Though I will not attempt it here, a performative account of biblical theologies and the Bibles they produce could with profit, and may well yet, be written. Since the questions that biblical theologies put to biblical texts are not precisely identical to (even if they sometimes overlap with) those originating from the history of religion or literary studies, the Bibles that are generated as effects are also never precisely the same. Even among themselves, biblical theologians, in the doings of Bible that we call biblical theology, generate what might well be considered different Bibles. It is, of course, now routine to acknowledge that the Bibles of Jewish religious interpretation and Christian theology are not identical (cf. Levenson); but I would put the point more finely than this. To use specific examples: the Bibles produced in the Christian Old Testament Theologies of

Eichrodt, Von Rad, and Brueggemann are clearly different from one another, and different yet again from that found in the work of someone such as Childs. Each of these projects produces an "intelligible" "Bible that matters," which also relies on its particular "constitutive outside."

For some practitioners of biblical theology, these differences are sources of anxiety. Such practitioners assume that, underlying diverse biblical theologies and their accounts of Bible, there must exist a stable foundation—"the Bible"—that can be used reliably to adjudicate among proper and improper expression. The assumption replicates structurally the belief—which Butler's performative account of gender and sex attempts to challenge—that an account of stable sexed bodies can be used to adjudicate proper and improper expressions of gender, sexual desire, and sexual practice.

Yet on this point, biblical theology may have much to learn from queer studies. For queer studies is based in part on the conviction that multiplicity and pluralism in sex, gender, sexual desire and sexual practice, far from being threats that must be suppressed, will inevitably appear and should be allowed to flourish. They serve for many of us as sources of joy and delight, and as resources in the struggle for a more humane world in which larger numbers of lives are deemed livable and indeed permitted to live well. If this appreciation of complexity and pluralism as resources rather than threats can be extended from bodies to Bibles, we may find ourselves creating not only a "biblical theology appropriately postmodern" (Brueggemann 2005: 131–40), but a biblical theology decidedly queer; and Bibles that matter indeed.

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