

Hebrews

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Shortly after my coming out in 1989, after 40 years in the closet and 25 years as an evangelical missionary (Bible professor) in Latin America, I was invited to write the article on 'poor/poverty in the New Testament' for the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992). Having become divorced and unemployed in the coming-out process and brimming with sermon ideas for gay brothers in similar straits, I was free to dedicate some months to figure out, 'Is Hebrews really queer?' God did not just 'speak' but shouted encouragement to me as I studied and wrote about Hebrews! Every chapter seemed to have a powerful message – or several – and I soon had a lengthy and highly edifying manuscript that no publisher seemed to be interested in. André Gide noted, 'It is better to be hated for what one is than loved for what one is not.'

Introduction

Although traditionally known as 'The Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews', the book is neither a letter nor from Paul, but anonymous in the earliest Greek manuscripts. Hebrews probably was written around 65–6 CE, shortly after Paul's martyrdom and the great fire in Rome, but before the Roman war and destruction of Jerusalem (67–70 CE). Hebrews thus was penned perhaps less than a decade after Paul's letter to several house churches in Rome (55–8 CE). The author may well have been Apollos (Acts 18.24), apparently an unmarried, subversive, itinerant preacher like Paul and Jesus. The author represents a cultured, educated elite and addresses persons with a degree of education but recently impoverished by discrimination and persecution (10.32–4).

Most likely Hebrews was written to a house church in Rome, where Claudius' edict expelling Jews from Rome (49 CE) and the great fire (64 CE) had led to considerable persecution (10.32–4). Jewish believers in Jesus, when banished from Jewish synagogues, no longer would enjoy even the limited legal protection granted to other Jews (13.12–14). Priscilla (Rom. 16.3–5) or the apostle Junia (Rom. 16.7) may well have been one of the 'leaders' in the house church addressed, so although not written *by* a woman (in Heb. 11.32 the Greek grammar refers to the author as masculine), Hebrews may well have been written *to* a house church in Rome led by women.

The house church members addressed probably were mainly Jewish believers in Jesus who had immigrated back to Rome after Claudius' decree of expulsion (49 CE) was allowed to lapse with the accession of Nero (54–68

CE). The temptation to dishonour marriage (13.4) and fascination with queer Melchizedek (5.6–10; 7.1–28) may reflect that the majority of members were unmarried, sexual minorities. Another significant link between Paul's letter to the Romans and Hebrews may be the emphasis on Jesus' faithfulness unto death (Heb 12.2; see Christ's 'faithfulness as a son over God's house', 3.2, 6) and Paul's disputed references to the 'faithfulness of Jesus'.

Of all the Christian scriptures, Hebrews most frequently cites the Hebrew Bible, but continually suggests new interpretations, often Christological, and never simply reflects the original meaning (Attridge 1989). The two texts most featured are Psalm 110 and Jeremiah 31.31–4, both reflecting sexual minority perspectives. Hebrews represents an extreme among the Christian scriptures in the apparent degree of Neoplatonism in its language and theology, evidently reflecting its Hellenistic Jewish roots. However, its emphasis on the Hebrew traditions of creation, the Exodus liberation, Jesus' incarnation in a 'body prepared', then resurrected and ascended (Heb. 10.5; Ps. 40.6–8), and its apocalyptic hope of a renewed cosmos (Heb. 12) distinguish it from pure Neoplatonism.

'Anti-Semitism' (Anti-Judaism) in Hebrews and Homophobia in Paul?

John Boswell has demonstrated how anti-Semitism and homophobia developed as parallel prejudices, especially in the late Middle Ages (1150–1400 CE):

Most societies . . . which freely tolerate religious diversity also accept sexual variation, and the fate of Jews and gay people has been almost identical throughout European history, from early Christian hostility to extermination in concentration camps. The same laws which oppressed Jews oppressed gay people ['sodomites']; the same groups bent on eliminating Jews tried to wipe out homosexuality; the same periods of European history which could not make room for Jewish distinctiveness reacted violently against sexual nonconformity; the same countries which insisted on religious uniformity imposed majority standards of sexual conduct; and even the same methods of propaganda were used against Jews and gay people – picturing them as animals bent on the destruction of the children of the majority (Boswell 1980: 15–16).

Boswell's conclusion is now amply confirmed by Louis Crompton (2003), showing how inquisitorial violence promoting the killing of Jews and sodomites remained characteristic of Western 'civilization' well into the twentieth century. In the biblical field, for decades academics of various persuasions have fallen over backwards to defend the Second Testament against any charge or suspicion of anti-Semitism/Judaism, while at the same time blithely propagating the notion that St Paul in particular is responsible for centuries of homophobic violence against sexual minorities, 'sodomites'.

Hebrews provides neither clobber texts nor lesser ammunition for promoting homophobic violence; however, it is commonly assumed to be

'supersessionist', promoting the superiority of the 'Christian religion' to Judaism and advocating the replacement of Judaism by 'Christianity'. For dealing with homophobic recourse to favourite clobber texts in Leviticus and Paul, it is instructive to deal with the conclusion that Hebrews is supersessionist and promotes anti-Semitism/Judaism:

- Hebrews speaks of the superiority of Christ (1.1–4 etc.), not of 'Christianity', which remained a sect of Judaism even into the second century. Jesus' followers are referred to as 'Christians' only three times in the Christian scriptures (Acts 11.26; cf. 26.28; 1 Peter 4.16).
- As Robert Gordon points out, 'both Judaism and Christianity are supersessionist in relation to the Hebrew scriptures, both having turned their backs on forms of worship that involve the satisfaction of the deity by means of animal sacrifices' (2000: 28).
- Like Romans, Hebrews speaks of faith in God, not in Jesus. The strong warnings in Hebrews against apostasy are directed toward followers of Jesus, not the Jews.

1.1–4 Jesus: God's decisive, final revelation (not Leviticus or Paul)

'At many times and in various ways' reminds us of the diversity of biblical teaching in the sexual area. The 'many times' points to the diversity of historical contexts reflected in biblical texts. The decimated population of the Exile needed to hear exhortations to reproduce the species – Genesis 1 etc.; patriarchy presupposed male superiority. Jesus, by his sacrifice, cleanses us from our *sins* (oppression, lack of compassionate solidarity with those in need, intentions and acts that harm neighbour) – not from our sexuality. The loving, responsible expression of our sexuality is not sin and needs no confession or cleansing; sex is not 'dirty', only acts that are unjust, unloving, violent, harmful to neighbour are 'unclean'.

1.5–2.4 Biblical angels as a sexual minority and Jesus' superiority to them.

All of Jesus' followers can expect to have 'enemies' (1.13), but especially the poor, oppressed and sexual minorities. Victory is promised, but is most complete when foes are not humiliated, but transformed into friends. Only those who persist in harming others face humiliation at Jesus' final triumph. Psalm 2.7, cited in Hebrews 1.5, is a royal psalm in which the Judean king expresses his confidence in God's protection against his enemy oppressors (Attridge 1989: 53). The 'begetting' of the original psalm referred to the king's coronation, but in Hebrews refers to Jesus' ascension (implying his resurrection; Acts 13.33–4). Jesus' reign is fundamentally characterized by freedom, justice, love and joy, but not marriage and procreation (2.8–9; cf. Ps. 45). With the misleading translation 'righteousness' in 2.8–9, modern versions miss the reference to 'justice'. Homophobia and discrimination against sexual minorities are unjust; God 'hates' the wickedness of homophobia, racism, sexism, anti-Judaism, and so on but does not hate sexual minorities nor any loving, responsible expression of our sexuality.

2.5-18 *Humanity's glorious origin and destiny (how Jesus' death defeats evil and removes all obstacles)*

From the beginning, sexual minorities form part of God's good creation, created in God's image (Ps. 8.5), bearers of full human dignity (Heb. 2.6-8). Behind human agents of oppression and violence, Hebrews discerns other forces of evil (false ideologies that rationalize violence, the calumny of propaganda and lies), and proclaims that by his death Jesus has defeated and destroyed all such forces, including those inspired by ignorance and bigotry regarding sexual minorities (2.14). By his death, Jesus frees us even from the fear of death – and hence from all lesser fears as well (2.15). God 'helps' oppressed people, by taking hold of them to free them, not to stuff them back into 'closets of despair' (2.16, 18; 8.9). The cleansing of sins Jesus offers us through his death applies on the one hand to the sins of sexual minorities: clinging to respectable reputations, lack of courage to leave their closets, failure to love enemies who persecute them. It is applied as well to the sins of oppressors: injustice, bigotry and lack of compassion. Jesus, an unmarried representative of sexual minorities, is especially qualified by his personal testing and suffering to 'help' sexual minorities today in all their suffering and in their special temptations (2.17; 4.14-16).

3.1-6 *Moses and Jesus: paradigms of fidelity (vs. warped notions of sexual 'fidelity' today)*

In both legal and popular usage today, 'faithful' commonly means one thing only: *negative* avoidance of all sexual activity outside the marriage contract. If a spouse has avoided all sexual activity outside the marriage contract, that person is crowned as 'faithful' (however unfaithful in other areas). In the Bible, 'faithful' has a very different meaning. The Second Testament insists that being faithful to our calling, following Jesus and seeking first God's reign often involve breaking family ties, even with a wife (Luke 14.26; 18.29). Faithful/ness in the Bible is always a positive concept: it refers to what someone does and how it is done; never is it a negative concept such as avoiding or abstaining. In the biblical traditions, marriage commonly was a patriarchal family arrangement and did not involve the intervention of state or clergy, nor did it involve the exchange of vows. Obviously we may apply the concept of 'faithfulness' to the modern institution of marriage and to vows and promises in the sexual area, but to judge a whole person's character as 'faithful/unfaithful' on the basis of sexual abstinence is utterly contrary to the Bible. Even in the sexual area, a person may have failed totally to be a good sexual lover, but be legally and socially approved as 'faithful' simply for having abstained from sexual relationships outside the marriage contract.

3.7-19 *Hearing God's voice in the midst of the Aids crisis (God gets angry at oppressors, not the oppressed)*

'Synonyms for sin' include: hardening of heart, refusing to listen to God and to collaborate with God in the historical project of full liberation; always straying

in heart . . . not knowing God's ways; testing God; unbelief . . . departing from God; disobedience; being led astray by the deceitfulness of sin. Hebrews does not define sin legalistically, nor 'ethically' in universal Greek absolutes, but rather historically in terms of God's project of liberation from oppression (3.16) and guidance towards fuller liberation in the wilderness period (3.17; Num. 14). Israel refused to listen to God, refused further collaboration in the historical project of full liberation, and died (3.17). So today, God's commands are intrinsically related to the historical project of liberation and abundant life for all. When God works to free slaves from oppression, or women from the injustice of an inferior status, or sexual minorities from discrimination and violence – not to listen to God's voice today and work together with God is sin. Sin is so deceitful (3.13) that even divine commands commonly are utilized to justify it, such as Paul's commands to slaves used to justify racism, or his instructions regarding first-century women's head coverings, used to marginalize women from church leadership.

The Hebrew scriptures contain hundreds of references to the 'wrath' of Yahweh. Jesus himself occasionally displayed anger (Mark 3.6), but avoided speaking of God's anger (cf. Luke 21.23; John 3.36). Many Second Testament books follow Jesus in avoiding such terminology; references to divine anger are rare except for Romans and Revelation. In Hebrews, references to divine anger occur especially in the citations from the Hebrew scriptures (3.7–11, 17; Ps. 95.7–11). By ascribing anger to God, certain biblical writers seek to emphasize that God cannot remain passively indifferent in the face of human violence, cruelty, oppression and injustice. Especially, Second Testament writers seek to make clear that God's 'wrath' is always just and rational (Rom. 1.18), and thus to be distinguished from pagan concepts. Hebrews emphasizes that God's anger is provoked when we refuse to listen to God's voice and turn aside from God's liberating purposes, contenting ourselves instead with the poverty and oppression of an unjust status quo (3.10–11, 17).

If the root of sin is refusing to listen, how can we listen to God's voice today? Since Stonewall (1969) we have become aware of the violence suffered by sexual minorities – and have recognized the God of the Exodus at work to liberate. Not to work with God in seeking liberty and justice for sexual minorities is sin (Ps. 103.6–7; Luke 4.18–19). Aids is not 'the wrath of God against homosexuals'; God's wrath works against the injustice of the oppressors, not against the oppressed (Rom. 1.18); failure to show compassionate solidarity is what brings judgement (Matt. 25.31–46). The Church can listen to God's voice by listening to the sexual minorities in our midst (13.3); sexual minorities will grow strong as they avoid divisive bickering over minutiae, learn to listen to God through one another and work with other oppressed groups to create a 'rainbow coalition'.

4.1–13 Out of the closet and into God's rest

God's word is living and active, penetrating the uttermost recesses of human motivations (4.11–13); God's word unmasks the cruel rationalizations of oppressors, but also cowardly, unbelieving rationalizations of the oppressed, who are tempted to remain in bondage instead of trusting God's promise of

freedom and responding to God's invitation to construct a new community characterized by freedom, justice and love. Hebrews speaks continually not of 'reading God's book' but of 'hearing God's voice', which often involves careful scrutiny of inspired scripture, but also a sensitivity to the Spirit to discern what God wants to say to us today in a very different historical context, with scientific insights in many areas that far transcend the limited perspectives of biblical writers. Thus, Hebrews frequently cites the Hebrew scriptures, but the later applications the author makes commonly far transcend the meaning of the original texts (Attridge 1989).

God's word is a sword, not a club. Sexual minorities often suffer much from those who use God's word as a 'club' to clobber and to foment 'gay-bashing'. They even speak of the 'clobber texts' – favourite proof-texts commonly mis-translated and misinterpreted to foment hatred and violence against sexual minorities. Hebrews teaches, rather, that God's word is 'sharper than any double-edged sword' – not a 'club' to bash the weak, but a 'sword' to pierce the conscience of the oppressors and call them to repentance. As a sword, God's word does not load us with false guilt, but unmasks real guilt of the oppressors as well as the failures of the oppressed. Real guilt has to do with acts of oppression and lack of solidarity with the oppressed – things that reveal lack of love and result in actual harm to our neighbour (Rom. 13.8–10). Experienced as a 'sword', and not brandished as a 'club', God's word enables sexual minorities to see that God created them and loves them just as they are; their sin does not consist in any sexual orientation, nor in loving, responsible expressions of their sexuality, but in their lack of solidarity with others who suffer oppression, failure of courage to come out of the closet, etc. Proper use of God's word as a 'sword' requires disciplined study, careful interpretation and sensitive application (2 Tim. 2.15); ignorant laying hold of the Bible as a club only advertises the prejudice and bigotry of the assailant (Attridge 1989: 133).

Can we 'rest' inside the 'closet'? Sexual minorities who believe in Jesus experience a kind of 'rest' in the closet (Heb. 3.3), but not the full rest Jesus intends for his followers. Life in the closet is an 'Egyptian bondage', a life of continual subterfuge where one is 'loved for what one is not', a life of continual fear of being 'outed' and 'hated for what one is' (André Gide). In the hostile world outside the closet, sexual minorities experience tribulation – hardly conducive to rest! Nor is unemployment what Jesus meant when he promised 'rest'. Other factors that make rest difficult outside the closet include alienation from family, divorce suits, loss of jobs, inheritances, friends, prestige and health insurance. Such expressions of oppression characterize what the Second Testament calls 'the world'. Outside the closet, sexual minorities can learn to rest in the unique peace Jesus promises (John 14.27); they join hands with others who work to fulfil God's purpose: a world freed from oppression and discrimination.

4.14–5.10 Prayer: bold approach to the throne of a gracious God

In the face of injustice, oppression and persecution, Jesus' followers' first 'line of attack' is always prayer; other action may also prove necessary, as the Spirit leads, but nothing is more important or effective. We may need to demonstrate before the White House or the Pink House in Argentina, but not before we

besiege the throne of God; we may need to petition and organize marches – but direct access to the throne of God is our greatest privilege and our greatest source of power for achieving that liberation from all oppression, which is central to God's purpose for humanity. An interview with some president pales into insignificance in comparison with our privilege of Jesus' 'interview' with God the Creator on our behalf as our great high priest.

Jesus' sinlessness and our sinfulness (4.15; 5.1–3). Jesus was 'without sin' (sinless), but not 'sexless'. The Word became 'flesh' (John 1.14), which implies sexuality and the urge to propagate the species (John 1.13), but is characterized by weakness and mortality (5.7, 'flesh . . . death'). Our sinfulness does not reside in our sexuality (unless expressed unlovingly, harming the neighbour), but is especially characterized by 'straying' due to 'ignorance' (5.2). For example, one can mortally harm a neighbour through ignorance by not following carefully medically prescribed guidelines for safer sex, or by loading friends susceptible to heart attacks with too much cholesterol, pushing alcohol or cigarettes on those who need to abstain, contaminating air with our own smoke, driving after drinking, etc. (for 'ignorances,' or sins of ignorance, see also Heb. 9.7; the sacrifices in Lev. 4.2; 22.14). Probably most of the hatred, violence and oppression of sexual minorities also is based on ignorance, false ideologies and 'majority propaganda', coupled with fear. Also, the great harm done to sexual minorities through 'Ex-Gay'-type ministries results from ignorance about both science and the Bible. If so much sin is due to ignorance, then to combat sin effectively we need sound education, not just emotional denunciations and exhortations to repentance.

Jesus' prayer life and ours (5.7; 4.16). In the days of his flesh, Jesus prayed first for himself; in the face of death, Jesus' prayers were characterized by tears, loud cries, urgency and fear (5.7). Hebrews here gives us its only concrete reference to Jesus' earthly ministry – his prayer life, culminating in Gethsemane, but not limited to that intense experience. Because of Jesus' saving work, our prayer life (4.16) can be characterized by 'confidence' or 'bold frankness', freedom of speech in the presence of God. The timely 'help' God promises involves not just sympathy but effective, liberating action.

5.11–6.12 For times of persecution, when solidarity with the oppressed falters

Symptoms of spiritual and psychological immaturity include: being easily distracted from the search for solid truth (5.11), forgetful of basics (5.12); oversensitive to injustices suffered, while insensitive to injustices committed, fleeting pleasures rather than authentic, enduring good (5.14). Commitment to Jesus and solidarity with his followers was publicly expressed in baptism (6.1–8). To abandon pagan temples and banquets (or even modest synagogues) and start assembling with the house churches meant loss of status and public shame and involved a kind of 'option' for the oppressed, persecuted (largely poor) followers of Jesus. 'Coming out' as a disciple of Jesus in first-century Rome was a lot like 'coming out of the closet' for sexual minorities today. Individualism, isolation and a life of subterfuge are rejected as one opts to share the oppression and persecution now commonly suffered by sexual minorities. While gay

men and lesbians coming out of the closet may often meet their parents scrambling to get in, it is virtually impossible to return to the closet, once out. Like Christian baptism, it involves a step that normally cannot be repeated. Often we may wish it were otherwise, but as Hebrews reminds us, some decisions in life are irrevocable. God respects our freedom and those irrevocable decisions. Rather than trying to sneak back into the closet, what is called for is a decisive turning from egotistic individualism and a decisive, positive commitment – to building enduring communities characterized by freedom, justice, mutual respect and love.

From stern warning, Hebrews turns to address readers as 'beloved' by the writer (6.9), and expressing 'love' in humble acts of service to poor and needy saints (6.10) – the first references to interpersonal love in the book. Today Aids ministries provide countless opportunities and illustrations of this kind of humble, loving service; also for communicating Jesus' Good News that God's loving embrace encompasses each one, and that the 'salvation' (6.9) Jesus accomplished includes sexual minorities. Jesus' Good News, communicated through appropriate deeds and words, can inspire a 'full assurance of hope until the end' (6.11). Faith (6.12) that is persevering and patient (literally, 'suffering long') inherits all God's covenant promises.

6.13–20 God's promise and oath: hope's anchor when the storms of persecution rage

Faith–hope's basis is: God is faithful and does not lie. Sexual minorities suffer cruelly because of lies and majority propaganda. As children they are brainwashed with a presentation of a world in which sexual minorities do not exist – everyone is expected to marry and become the father/mother of two children. Very early, a process of sexual 'education' may begin, which actually consists of heterosexual 'majority propaganda' (either failing to even mention sexual minorities or portraying them negatively as sinful, criminal or mentally ill). Such majority propaganda, even when not explicitly taught from books, appears omnipresent in the TV, films and public displays of affection legally permitted/approved.

If an adolescent manages to crack through the propaganda barrage to discover that he/she is not alone in feeling 'different', parents commonly rush in to assure that it is only a 'passing phase'. They may find a psychologist still eager to take their money for several years in an effort to 'cure' the wayward, deviant adolescent. If help is sought from religion, the lies multiply: God is said to promise to 'cure' homosexuality, since it is a disease; or God is said to have given all homosexuals the spiritual gift of sexual abstinence, so they can be happy missionaries like the apostle Paul; or God is portrayed as furious with homosexuals for engaging in acts 'contrary to nature', always an unforgivable sin. God is said to have created 'Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve' – and Steve is not supposed to ask who created him. Classmates and even distant relatives strive to find the 'right girl/boy' who will manage to convince the deviant to go straight. Hebrews reminds us that the lies of majority propaganda do not proceed from God, for God does not lie; Jesus is the truth, and the truth frees us from the lies of majority propaganda (John 14.6; 8.32).

Faith-hope's content is God's promises. God never promised to 'cure homosexuality', since it is not a disease and is never even referred to in scripture, much less as a disease to be cured. God never promised to give some spiritual gift of sexual abstinence to all persons of homosexual orientation. The notion of orientation is a nineteenth-century scientific discovery about which biblical writers knew and wrote nothing; neither the word nor concept existed before the nineteenth century. When in the Bible's creation story God says, 'It is not good for man to be alone,' the text does not add 'unless he is homosexual'. To make such an addition is to put a lie in God's mouth. In the biblical covenants God promises to free us from all oppression, forgive us our sins, not our sexuality, enable us to know God and practise justice, be guided by the Spirit into all truth, and experience the abundant life Jesus spoke of (John 10.10).

In baptism we promise to seek first God's reign and be faithful to God. Gay men and lesbians may freely commit themselves to a sexually exclusive relationship as a same-sex couple, in which case each will seek to keep that agreement. More complex is the common situation where gay men or lesbians, brainwashed by majority propaganda, fall into the trap of heterosexual 'marriage'. The Bible never presents marriage as a covenant with vows. Such vows are mechanisms of oppression for sexual minorities and can even result in blackmail. Sometimes they need to be unmasked and set aside.

7.1-28 *Melchizedek, patron saint for queers*

To make Jesus priest, God changed the law (7.11-21). The law needed to be 'removed', because the priesthood was unable to perfect anyone (7.11-12; cf. 11.5; 12.27). Jesus did not descend from Levi and Aaron, but from the tribe of Judah, and Moses' law never permitted descendants of Judah to be priests (7.13-14). Jesus' priesthood stems not from anything in Moses' law, but from the power of his indestructible life, and is attested by God's promise of an eternal priesthood (7.15-17, citing Ps. 110.4). God thus annulled Moses' 'fleshly' law and introduced a better hope that enables us to draw near to God (7.18-19). Descendants of Levi and Aaron became priests without being authenticated by any such divine oath; but Jesus' priesthood, being established by God's oath (stronger than the law), is not weak and perishable, but eternal (7.20-1).

Hebrews presents *Melchizedek* as the most appropriate patron saint for sexual minorities (7.1-10). Adam was uniquely qualified as sexual minority representative in that he had no human parents, had an incestuous mate taken from his own side/rib, and begat children with his mate according to divine command, but without ever being married. Jesus, too, was uniquely qualified as sexual minority representative, since he had no biological father, legally was 'illegitimate', never married and had no biological descendants. *Melchizedek*, however, is presented in Hebrews (following Genesis 14) as surpassing both Adam and Jesus as sexual minority representative: he had neither human parentage nor biological descendants. Nevertheless, he ruled as priest-king in Jerusalem with a reign characterized by both justice and peace (justice, *sedek*; *salem*, *shalom*, peace). In many respects he appears to resemble the two-spirited, gay spiritual leaders in Native-American tribes.

8.1–13 Ordination deconstructed: Jesus, a lay minister with a better covenant and better promises

Hebrews describes Jesus' better ministry, affirming that he became perfectly qualified (7.28) to serve as high priest in God's very presence in the authentic (heavenly) sanctuary (8.1–2). Israel's priests, descended from Levi and Aaron, were ordained to offer to God the gifts and sacrifices prescribed by Torah, but while on earth Jesus was but a 'layman' and not qualified by proper descent to minister in the earthly temple (8.3–4; Bruce 1990: 183). The sanctuary where Israel's priests served was but a shadowy copy of the true (authentic) heavenly sanctuary (8.5; Ex. 25.40). The language of Hebrews here is similar to that of Platonic idealism, but the thought is not the same, since the writer avoids any dichotomy between material and non-material (Jesus' resurrected, ascended body is in heaven), and the whole Levitical order historically foreshadows 'the good things to come' (Heb. 10.1).

Sexual minorities, who form part of God's people in every age and under every covenant, can rejoice especially that the fundamental provision of the Exodus covenant (liberation from oppression) is also fundamental in Jesus' mission (Luke 4.18–19) and covenant promises (Mark 14.24), because the same liberating God is at work throughout human history (Ps. 103.6–7). Sexual minorities need no special 'sexual majority' priesthood as mediators, for they too can 'know God' (Heb. 8.11) as they practise justice (Jer. 22.15–16) and solidarity with the needy (Heb. 10.32–4; Matt. 25.31–46).

God's 'better promises' (8.6) expressed in the new covenant never suggest miraculous changes in sexual orientation. Such fraudulent promises and claims are a modern invention in so-called 'Ex-Gay' ministries, which have no basis in scripture and no scientific support. Even Paul's claim to a spiritual gift of sexual abstinence is only for a few (1 Cor. 7.7), and he never claimed nor suggested that anyone of homosexual orientation automatically had such a gift.

9.1–28 Jesus' death: earthly defeat, 'heavenly' accomplishment

Christ, the high priest of God's new order, made the perfect sacrifice (9.23–8). However inadequate all human analogies, and however great the mystery of Jesus' cross, Hebrews emphasizes that the decisive effect was the solution to our sin problem: by his death, Jesus 'did away' with sin ('annulment', v. 26) and 'took away' sin ('bear', v. 28). The basic problem was not that the wrath of God needed appeasing, but that sin needed to be eliminated (all that harms individuals and makes human community impossible – oppression and lack of compassionate solidarity). Jesus' redemptive death is the clue to our life: it was not a defeat, but his major accomplishment (on redemption, see Attridge 1989: 249, notes 61–2).

In Hebrews 9, the last word (in Greek) is 'salvation' (v. 28), referring there not to forgiveness of sins (9.22), but to the final decisive liberation from death and all destructive forces at Jesus' second 'coming' (literally, 'appearance', since he is always present and comes continuously by his Spirit; Matt. 28.20; Rev. 1–3). Instead of 'salvation', Hebrews 9 prefers to speak of Jesus' accomplishment as 'redemption' (9.12, 15), using the Exodus analogy of poor slaves who are liberated from their oppressors. However, Hebrews views the more

basic human problem as universal (not limited to some wealthy, powerful oppressing class): sin, which defiles every human soul and conscience. Jesus' blood (death) redeems and frees us by accomplishing a decisive purgation, or cleansing from sin (9.22). This cleansing annuls sin and all its effects (v. 26) and ushers in God's long-awaited new order (v. 10). For oppressed groups (sexual minorities, etc.) it is particularly meaningful to remember that salvation brings redemption from slavery, with freedom and dignity; but also to realize that powerful oppressors only manifest in practice the destructive egotistical tendencies that are present in all of us and that need the decisive cleansing resulting from Jesus' sacrifice.

Since sexual minorities commonly are made scapegoats for the evil others suffer, the biblical references to the scapegoat on the day of Atonement may prove more helpful in communicating the mysterious significance and accomplishment of Jesus' death (9.22; Lev. 16.20-2; also Schwager 1987). On the cross Jesus shed little blood and carried none of it to heaven, but he gave his life for us (Mark 10.45; cf. Lev. 17.11) and instituted a bloodless sacrament (Mark 14.24-5). The cross heralds the end of violence.

10.1-18 Jesus' death: how 'filthy' sexual minorities can get a clean conscience (and why Leviticus never really worked)

The Exodus and creation accounts (Gen. 1-Ex. 19) can help create self-esteem and a sense of dignity for oppressed peoples. Torah's legal provisions also are best understood as promoting justice for the oppressed. When misused as a club, however (to protect the powerful and terrorize the weak), Torah's legal provisions became instruments to destroy human dignity and self-esteem. Instead of leaving people with a sense of forgiveness, a clean conscience, a healthy sense of direction, the law became simply an accuser that loaded the weak and poor with false guilt, heightened inferiority complexes and suicidal depression. Jesus blasted the lawyer-theologians (legalistic 'scribes') and pious fundamentalists for using Torah in this cruel and destructive way (Matt. 23; Luke 11.39-48).

Hebrews emphasizes that although Jesus is 'the same' (13.8; unchangeable, like God, 1.12), even during Israel's history God repeatedly introduced radical changes in the law (and modern scientific studies of the Pentateuch underline even more emphatically the dynamic, changing character of Torah, reflecting centuries of diversity in historical conditions). When Jesus inaugurated Jeremiah's promised new covenant, assuming an eternal priesthood quite 'off the map' for Leviticus, the changes became even more radical. The ark of the covenant in Moses' wilderness tabernacle contained the Ten Words/Commandments written on stone as a summary of Torah's fundamental concerns (Heb. 9.4) - but as Jesus and his followers challenged and set aside the Sabbath law, even the Ten Commandments lost any aura of 'ethical absolutes'. Paul used some of them to illustrate concretely how love avoids harming the neighbour (Rom. 13.8-10), but the 'laws' God promises to write on hearts (Heb. 10.16) are only examples of human love (Lev. 19.18, 33-4). Hospitality to strangers and visiting prisoners may be even better pointers than the Decalogue (Heb. 13.1-6; Matt. 25.31-46)!

10.19–39 *Freedom of speech for sexual minorities*

In 6.4–8 Hebrews warned sternly of God's judgement on members who turned away from God and forsook their commitment to solidarity with Jesus' followers (6.6; cf. 10.25). The sin involved was thus a lack of solidarity with the weak and oppressed in their various needs (Matt. 25.31–46). Even more grave, however, would be active collaboration with the oppressors in their crimes of injustice. Jesus had given his life for them. To abandon his followers in a time of persecution and collaborate with their oppressors was to despise Jesus, and 'trample' his blood under foot. Sexual minorities who step out of the closet are 'enlightened', begin to find one another, and become empowered as they meet together. Like the house churches in Rome, such groups need to multiply, learn to network with one another and other oppressed groups. Returning to the closet to collaborate with oppressors in order to avoid persecution Hebrews portrays as the gravest of sins.

11.1–7 *Faith before the flood: worshipping, walking, building*

Words, like the humans that use them, are dynamic and changing. Hence they cannot be 'defined' in any static sense, but only described in their most characteristic aspects. As a preliminary orientation to its classic exposition of faith, Hebrews 11 gives us a 'snapshot' that focuses on faith's relationship to invisible spheres: (1) the as yet unseen future; and (2) invisible present realities, such as God (freedom, justice, truth, love, etc.). While many moderns profess not to believe in the personal, infinite, triune God revealed decisively and finally in Jesus Christ, probably no one is really a thoroughly consistent materialist. Even purported dialectical 'materialists' make strident demands for 'justice', expound at length about the 'meaning' of 'history' and exhort us to maintain firm our 'hope' as we work to bring in the promised 'utopia'! Hebrews is more up-front in making explicit the conviction that only faith can 'give objective reality to objects of hope', that is make present the desired future. To that end, faith also links us to invisible present realities.

Before speaking of the faith of others, Hebrews first reminds us of our faith that the invisible God spoke an invisible word and thus created everything we see (11.3). Hebrews thus explicitly rejects the notion of Greek philosophers that the existing universe was made out of visible elements – earth, fire and water – along with invisible air. Hebrews approximates the theological concept of creation *ex nihilo*, thus negating any atheistic concept of evolution. Also absent is the modern fundamentalist concern to insist on a recent creation in six literal days.

Abel worshipped God with a superior sacrifice (11.4; Gen. 4.3–5). The superiority of Abel's sacrifice did not consist objectively in its content, but in the inner attitude of Abel's faith, which resulted in his becoming the victim of Cain's murderous violence, the Bible's first 'martyr' (Jesus even describes him as the first 'prophet', Luke 11.50–1; cf. Matt. 23.34–6; 1 John 3.12; Prov. 15.8; Gen. 4.7).

Enoch walked with (translated in the Septuagint as 'pleased') God (1.5–6; Gen. 5.18, 21–4). Hebrews expounds Enoch's faith in terms of the Greek translation ('pleased') instead of the original Hebrew 'walked with'. Enoch's walking

with God resulted in his escaping the experience of death. Faith presupposes believing in God's existence and fundamental goodness/justice. The image of life as a path to be trod in God's presence by an individual like Enoch, or in company with God's people is fundamental to biblical teaching. The Bible never speaks of 'morals' or 'ethics'. The Bible prefers to speak of our trustful, obedient relationship to God as 'walking' (Gen. 6.9; 17.1; 24.40; 48.15; Pss. 56.13; 116.9). As we walk, the scenery changes with diverse historical contexts, so the concrete content of obedience may also change, but there is fundamental continuity: 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6.8).

Noah's example lays starkly before us the radical character of faith in God as transcending ordinary human reason. On superficial materialistic presuppositions, nothing could be more unreasonable than constructing a large boat far from all navigable waters. Noah received a divine word of warning and acted on it with a faith that transcended superficial materialism. What he thus 'saved' was his 'house (hold)'. Households included everyone living together, whatever their gender, blood relationships or sexual arrangements; slaves commonly were included. Noah's faith resulted in 'rescue' from the flood for his entire household (and the accompanying animals, as Genesis indicates). Noah's faith was thus quite 'reasonable'; and proved thoroughly practical – but it appeared the height of folly to his contemporary 'materialists', who perished in the flood.

11.8–22 Patriarchal faith: salvation by child-abuse?

Abraham: faith of a landless immigrant (11.8–10). As in the case of Noah, Abraham's behaviour is reasonable and sane, given the presupposition that God exists and communicates with human beings, but apart from such an experience it would seem the height of folly. God called Abraham and gave him promises, and by faith–hope in God's faithfulness, Abraham faithfully 'obeyed'. God promised him an unknown earthly 'land' (11.9), but Hebrews transforms the object of Abraham's hope into the heavenly Jerusalem, 'the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (11.10; cf. v. 16; 12.22–4).

Weighty textual evidence supports the idea that Sarah's faith is here celebrated (vv. 11–12). However, literally, the Greek speaks of receiving power for 'deposition of seed'. Nowhere else in ancient Greek literature is such a role assigned to a woman, since the existence of the female egg and its crucial role in human conception was not understood until modern times (Lane 1991: 47b:344–5; van der Horst 1996). Although obviously active in giving birth, women in antiquity were usually considered purely passive in conception, functioning as 'incubators' where the male deposited the seed.

If superficial materialist faith be rejected as impossible, grave dangers also must be faced in the faith that God exists and speaks to us (vv. 17–19)! Abraham became thoroughly convinced that God had commanded him to slaughter Isaac like some animal sacrifice. Although the voice from heaven stopped the killing at the crucial moment, for Isaac it must have been a terrifying experience – a kind of child-abuse far surpassing many episodes of sexual abuse of children. Both Jewish and Christian traditions forget Isaac's perspective and focus exclusively on Abraham as a paragon of obedience in an incomparable situation of testing. For Hebrews, Abraham leaps from primitive belief in a

cruel deity who demands child-sacrifice, to mature Christian faith in the God who raises the dead (11.19, perhaps elaborating the 'we shall return...' of Gen. 22.5). Like Abraham, sexual minorities tend to be immigrants. As adolescents on farms or in towns, they commonly are rejected and thrown out by homophobic parents and churches, suffer discrimination in employment and rejection by peers. At first they may simply seek the familiar – a more welcoming rural setting, 'another country', only to find that although preparing for them a city, God has not always prepared them for the city. Contrary to popular myth, however, not homosexuals, but heterosexual male relatives like Abraham are the primary abusers of children.

11.23–31 *Moses' faith: stepping out of the closet to liberate the oppressed*

Moses was stuffed into a 'closet' (basket), thus hiding his Hebrew identity for 40 years. His Hebrew people continued to suffer, serving Pharaoh as slaves, while Moses enjoyed princely privileges of wealth and education in the world's most powerful empire. Had he remained in the closet, possibly he could have had some ameliorating influence on his people's suffering and saved himself immense deprivation. At the age of 40 Moses finally decided to be true to himself and the God who created him: he refused to be called 'the son of Pharaoh's daughter' – his safe, comfortable closet was shattered! He opted to share the lot of oppressed slaves, God's chosen people, and lead them to freedom (11.24–6). Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is the 'preferential option for the poor', advocated by Latin American liberation theologies, so clearly expressed. Hebrews shares with Exodus the perspective that the slaves were not poor due to racial inferiority or laziness (Ex. 5.17), but because of injustice and oppression. The solution was thus not Egyptian band aids of charity, but the 'liberty and justice for all' which God called Moses to establish. Moses' faith-decision to come out of the closet and identify himself as a descendant of Hebrew slaves may appear too delayed to us and to the slaves who could have 'outed him'. Similar decisions by sexual minorities constitute the most powerful political action possible today. Liberation for countless others can result, but is usually accompanied by persecution.

The pagan prostitute Rahab, a sexual minority, made a decisive contribution to the liberation of the poor (11.30–1; Josh. 2). Although shocking to many readers, biblical writers exalt Rahab the harlot: James places her exemplary faith alongside Abraham's (2.25); Matthew in Jesus' genealogy (1.5) shatters Jewish tradition by naming her an ancestress of the Messiah; and Hebrews makes her its first explicit female paradigm of faith. Even more shocking, biblical interpreters now commonly assume that in showing hospitality ('peace' in Heb. 11.31) to the Hebrew spies, Rahab would have included sexual services commonly offered in such situations in the Ancient Near East. She thus expressed her new 'faith' in the God at work to liberate the oppressed (she was Jericho's 'absolute outsider'; Attridge 1989: 344) and avoided the sin of the Sodomites against their angel visitors (inhospitality, attempted gang rape; cf. Gen. 18–19; Heb. 13.2). The harlot's hospitality to spies thus proved decisive in the collapse of the key fortress city of Jericho.

11.32–40 *Faith's apparent defeats and the problem of evil*

Hebrews' male author continues with a rhetorical summary of seven masculine examples of faith-heroes and ten characteristic acts of faith described in the Hebrew scriptures (11.32–35a). The seventh example referring to 'the prophets' could include women like Huldah. The inclusion of Barak – to the exclusion of Deborah – and Jephthah, whose vow led him to kill his daughter, remind us of the author's patriarchal cultural context, which only occasionally is transcended. The ten exemplary expressions of faith also are dominated by patriarchal male values. Human history provides abundant examples of women and sexual minorities manifesting militant faith. Women military heroes – for example, the gender-benders Deborah and Joan of Arc – and sexual minority rulers and military heroes – Alexander the Great, Frederick the Great, Lawrence of Arabia – stand as eloquent refutations of modern arguments against women and homosexuals in the military or political office. Human history also is replete with examples of oppressed and marginalized groups and leaders suffering apparent defeat and martyrdom (Heb. 11.35b–38).

12.1–13 *How to run by faith (even when no one is chasing you): if God is our parent, is evil only 'discipline'?*

Run the race with perseverance: looking to Jesus (12.1–3). Jesus is not so much the 'Lord above us' in a static hierarchy, but rather the leader-pioneer who marches before us. Without him neither we nor the ancient exemplars could reach maturity/perfection (12.2; 11.40). This may well imply a kind of 'theological critique' of the ancient heroes, many of whom the scriptures portray as far from perfect (Jacob, Jephthah, Samson!); a corollary might be that military exploits be admired as examples of faith and courage, but not slavishly imitated by disciples of one who commanded Peter to put up his sword. Exemplary subjects of faith are innumerable; but for Christians the sole object of saving faith is the one God supremely revealed in Jesus Christ (1.1–4). Above all in times of violent persecution, Jesus' disciples will be sorely tempted to 'take the sword' (11.32–35a) – and 'perish by the sword'. Hence, Hebrews reminds us that in such circumstances Jesus triumphed by enduring the cross and despising its shame (12.3).

Is all human suffering simply parental 'discipline' (12.4–11)? For anyone familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, the explanation of human suffering (evil) as a kind of divine parental discipline would be almost axiomatic (Heb. 1.5–6, citing Prov. 3.11–12). C. S. Lewis once wrote: 'God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.' Later, however, a harrowing personal tragedy forced Lewis to recognize the inadequacy of this argument (citations in Bruce 1990: 346). Does a God of love not also 'shout' in our joys, including sexual pleasure? The context in Hebrews suggests a limited view of 'discipline' as involving stern decisions freely made (12.2), resulting from compassionate solidarity, which can lead to a martyrdom that defies tyrants (12.4). God's parental 'discipline' in this context permits us to face and make such painful decisions – the Creator's supreme tribute to the our freedom (Heb. 6.4–6; 10.26–31). To explain Aids

as mere parental discipline is to portray God as a cruel sadist who tortures humans. Undoubtedly we can all learn something from terrible suffering, but lessons that are the result of suffering do not adequately explain the multiple and complex causes of evil.

As those who commonly suffer persecution, we are exhorted to 'run the race' – even when no one is chasing us. Like the early disciples, we discover that we too can be inspired by a 'great cloud of witnesses' (including many 'bastards', 12.8!) as we explore the riches of our gay and lesbian historical heritage (see the successive contributions resulting from recent advances in African-American, feminist, third-world liberationist, and gay/lesbian historical studies).

'*Running the race*' also involves looking to love ourselves (12.12–13). The 'justice' of 12.11 is here elaborated with the metaphors of feeble arms and weak knees that are 'straightened' (v. 12) and paths made 'straight/level'. The discipline expounded (12.4–11) produces the twin fruits of justice for the oppressed (12.11) and peace with neighbours (12.11, 14) and God (13.20). Queers demand 'justice' not mere compassion, but neither they nor their 'lifestyles' need to be 'straightened' in the sense of 'conformed to those of the heterosexual majority' (vv. 12–13). Science recognizes that 'homosexuality' is not a sickness, and thus cannot be 'healed'. Homophobia can be healed, and gays can experience inner healing of wounds inflicted by a homophobic society. Thus can we run the race 'marked out for us', looking only to Jesus (12.1).

12.14–29 *The heavenly Jerusalem: do we go up, or will it come down?*

Esau's forfeiture, for a single meal, of his double inheritance rights as first-born exemplified the kind of short-sighted materialism of a 'secular or profane' person that is not to be imitated (12.16). Readers are said to have arrived at Mount Zion, which, unlike Sinai, can be touched. A five-tiered assembly is gathered thereon: angels, spirits of the departed, the Church consisting of 'firstborn', God and Jesus. The assembly is characterized more by joy than fear. The two references to God remind readers that the living God is immanent (near, present) as well as transcendent (12.22–3). The references to Jesus' blood as 'speaking' prepare readers for the following exhortation to listen.

Having recently survived the great fire in Rome (64 CE), readers would have vivid impressions of the kind of disaster threatened by a God whose holy love resembled fire. Citing Haggai 2.6, Hebrews refers to an earth and material heaven(s) that are both created, and can be 'shaken' and 'removed' by God's mere voice (12.25–7). Only God's 'kingdom' proves unshakeable, apparently descending to earth to be gratefully 'received' (12.28; cf. Attridge 1989: 381). 'Mount Zion' and 'the heavenly Jerusalem' do not refer to an immaterial realm separated eternally from the earthly scene (12.22–4; cf. 11.10, 16). Rather they are 'near' in space as well as time (13.14) and will finally descend to earth to consummate God's realm (Heb. 12.26–8; Rev. 21–2; Matt. 6.10). Although joyful (v. 23), Christian worship of God is also to be ever characterized by reverence and awe (v. 28; cf. vv. 18–21), since God is progressively revealed as holy love.

God speaks today to us also (12.25–9). Many white heterosexual males claim to have a private 'pipeline' to heaven that enables them uniquely to hear God speaking and telling everyone else exactly how they need to behave sexually.

Increasingly, sexual minority representatives are coming to realize that God speaks to us as well. God speaks to us by the word and the Spirit as we worship and as we follow Jesus. Because commonly we are a hidden minority, especially the more affluent sexual minority representatives often are tempted to shrink back from solidarity with other oppressed groups such as women, the poor, people of colour, immigrants and ethnic minorities, Aids sufferers, the physically challenged. God often speaks to us, calling us to repentance and confession for our comfortable indifference and collaboration with those who oppress. 'See that you do not refuse the One speaking' (12.25).

God speaks to us as we work for peace (12.14–21). Authentic peace on earth can only be established as the fruit of justice (12.11, 14), not by seeking to prop up an unjust status quo that rationalizes persecution and discrimination against minorities. In a classic example of 'blaming the victims', one book attacked 'homosexuality' as 'the bond that breaks' the unity of the Church – instead of facing up to the cruel bigotry expressed in homophobia. The peace and unity of the Church are undermined by hatred and fear of sexual minorities, not by the responsible expression of their love.

Homophobia is a noxious root (12.15) that produces bitter fruit: injustice, gay-bashing, parents disowning their adolescent children, throwing them out on the street and even attempting to kill them, teen-suicides, depression, alcoholism, drug addiction. Proper fear of God casts out all lesser fears, including homophobia. The axe must be laid to this noxious root if the Church's peace and unity are to be restored and maintained. Authentic holiness involves us in strenuous opposition: to all injustice, and hypocrisy; to all cowardly shrinking from compassionate solidarity with the weak; to all traitorous collaboration with oppressors. Many religious leaders, following Esau's example, sell out the rights of sexual minorities in order to guarantee promotions and improve their retirement benefits.

God shouts to us in our joys (12.22–4). Sexual minorities stand among the joyful throng that have come to Mount Zion (v. 22) and to Jesus (v. 24), who promised life and peace to all who trust him and obey his love-commands. Worshipping with other impoverished saints in a house church could prove depressing. Hebrews tells us to lift our eyes and contemplate seven spiritual realities that surround us, and which make us part of an innumerable, exuberant throng. God speaks to us in such worship experiences, God whispers in love at times of discouragement and pain – but God also shouts to us in ecstatic moments of sexual love (Song 8.6–7): (1) that God created us the way we are; (2) that God loves and accepts us even when society and church do not; (3) that we can learn to 'see God' (Heb. 12.14) at work in human history to make the heavenly Jerusalem descend to earth (a society characterized by freedom, justice, wisdom, peace and love); (4) that God calls us to worship and solidarity with all who follow Jesus.

God's holy love is a consuming fire. Hate merchants commonly claim to have heard on their private heavenly pipeline that God commands them to terrorize people of colour by burning crosses before their homes and churches. Since Troy Perry founded the Metropolitan Community Church as a place where sexual minorities are welcomed, some 38 MCC places of worship have been burned by religious fanatics, following the late medieval tradition that

'faggots' are to be burned. This scandal has received scant media attention, where bigoted attacks on the dignity of sexual minorities still get free publicity – something never permitted when anti-Semitism or racism is involved.

The Catholic author Ann Patrick Ware writes: 'No longer, I believe, can responsible people get away with deploring violence and acts of violence, while at the same time fueling the fires that cause such acts' (Ware 1988: 31). The scriptures emphasize that not all fire is from God, who warned Israel against playing with 'strange fire' (Lev. 10.1–3). Fire kindled by fear and hate for minority groups is 'strange fire' that has nothing to do with the fire of God's holy love. What the flame of God's holy love consumes are the sins of oppression and idolatry. Flames ignited by bigots in their hatred of minorities are 'strange fire' from evil sources – not from the God supremely revealed in Jesus! When oppressed peoples experience the raging fires of persecution and the deep waters of grief, God promises: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you' (Isa. 43.1–3).

13.1–6 *Loving the brothers – and also the sisters*

Hebrews 13.1–6 summarizes the Christian 'lifestyle' or 'way of life' (*tropos*, 13.5; cf. 'conduct', v. 7; 'walking', v. 9); the fundamental focus is on love as manifest in concrete relations. Commentators universally refer here to Christian 'ethics' or 'morality', but these Greek philosophical concepts are totally absent from the Bible (their virtual omnipresence in the discourse of those who pretend to 'take the Bible seriously' clearly indicates that what many 'defenders of the Bible' really take seriously is their addiction to the thought patterns of Greek philosophy). The historical and dialectical connotations of the word 'praxis' make it a more adequate description of the kind of obedience Hebrews here envisions.

Modern readers have great difficulty interpreting biblical teaching in what we call 'sexual' matters, since the modern terms and concepts 'sex'/'sexual' are totally absent from the Bible. Hebrews first critiques the Greek tendency to despise the material, seeking to counter an ideology that is 'marriage/marriage bed'–negative with a more positive attitude ('honour'). Neither sexual abstinence (1 Cor. 7.7) nor marriage and maximum reproduction (Gen 1–2) are advocated as 'absolutes'. Rather Christian freedom is maintained in the focus on a positive attitude. 'Honour' towards marriage replaces the 'honour' for parents in the Ten Commandments. The following prohibition of 'love for money' indicates that the preceding prohibition of adultery and prostitution relates abuses to irresponsible expressions of excessive desire (*pornous*, recourse to prostitutes etc. – all forms of 'coveting').

An author like Apollos, a bachelor missionary like Paul (13.23), understandably would place hospitality to strangers as the most important expression of Christian love (13.2) – even more basic than any of the Ten Commandments! The Sodom story commonly was misinterpreted in contemporary Jewish literature as condemning the same-gender expressions of love common in Greek and Roman society. Apollos' fascination with the Sodom story may well reflect his own consciousness of being 'different' along with the 'order of

Melchizedek'. Like Jesus (Matt. 10.14–15; Luke 10.10–12), the author of Hebrews corrects contemporary Jewish 'homophobia' by reminding readers that the Sodom story had to do with inhospitality to angels.

Rahab, already singled out for her hospitality, was the only woman explicitly named and honoured in chapter 11. By her hospitality, she expressed not only the love commanded in 13.1–2, but daring 'faith', receiving Israelite spies with 'peace' (11.31). If Rahab performed her expected professional services, sexual love may be viewed as a significant dimension of the biblical concept of 'peace'. By exhorting readers to 'honour' marriage (13.4), Hebrews counteracts 'sex-negative' bias in contemporary platonic philosophy (1 Tim. 4.3). However, by commanding only honour, Hebrews refuses to make marriage an ethical absolute – thus breaking with the Genesis command to reproduce the species. The freedom of queers was thus maintained, as long as harm was avoided. God's promise (Heb. 13.5b, citing Deut. 31.6) to be present with the oppressed is especially meaningful to queers who have been abandoned by family, church or friends and persecuted by society. The expression of faith in God's 'help' in the face of persecution and oppression is likewise relevant to uncloseted sexual minorities who have suffered discrimination in employment, loss of jobs, health insurance, inheritance rights, and more. As elsewhere in Hebrews (8.9; 2.16), God's 'help' refers especially to liberation from oppression.

13.7–25 Following the 'real' leaders: Roman house churches, model for Christian anarchy?

Hebrews 13.7–25 contains three imperatives regarding the house-church leadership in Rome: 'remember' previous leaders, 'obey' present (local house-church) leaders, and 'greet' all the leaders and saints in (perhaps four) other Roman house churches. The implied leadership structure stands in stark contrast with later developments, when authority descended from above: a complex hierarchy.

Hebrews is directed to all the members of a Roman house church in a context where 'leaders' were equals (without even official titles of elder or deacon). By addressing the members, not their leaders, and by writing a letter of 'exhortation' (13.22) rather than orders, Hebrews implies that the real power remains with the entire people of God ('saints', 13.24), who are exhorted willingly to submit to authentic leadership in their house church). Hebrews has swept ecclesial bureaucracy aside with its rejection of the Mosaic order of Levites and Aaronic priesthood (vv. 10–14).

Remember previous leaders who died (13.7–16). By characterizing previous leaders as those of exemplary faith who 'spoke the word of God' (v. 7), Hebrews implies that all church members have a basic knowledge of scripture (5.11–6.3) and a capacity and responsibility for discernment to interpret God's word (not blindly submitting to vast stretches of priestly law in Leviticus, for example). Authentic leadership was constituted now simply by exemplary faith and capacity to discern and speak God's word – not by ordination processes bestowing hierarchical status. The new model for leadership involves educated lay women and men who recognize only 'lay' leaders – who in turn follow the layman Jesus – not a congregation of passive, illiterate 'sheep' who

blindly submit to an authoritarian 'pastor'. The upstart layman Jesus has now been constituted the only 'shepherd' (13.8, 20-1), and his 'sheep' include the house-church lay leaders along with the other members (Matt. 23.8-12). Jesus is exalted as 'the same' – not as some static tyrant rigidly imposing an unjust status quo – but as a Moses-like shepherd who faithfully leads his people out of bondage into authentic freedom (13.8, 20).

Obey current church leaders (3.17-21). Lay leaders who had followed Jesus 'outside the camp' exemplified rejection of the old priestly hierarchy and were thus representative of 'subversive' liberating leadership. Their aim was to enhance freedom, not to control; their power line was prevailing intercession ('watch ... pray', 13.17-18; cf. Jesus, 4.14-16; 7.25). In a house church of some 15-20 members, the leaders to be obeyed would be well known personally and would know each member by name (John 10.1-5) – there were no distant hierarchical heads, and no follower of Jesus was a dog at the end of some lengthy 'chain of command'. Animal sacrifices (though extensively commanded in Leviticus 1-5) are no longer valid, but two kinds of sacrifice are still to be continually offered: *praise* to the God who liberates from all oppression, and *good works* to the poor and oppressed. Prayer is a privilege and responsibility of each lay member, as well as of each lay leader.

Greet the lay leaders and members of other house churches in Rome. Readers are exhorted to listen patiently to leaders in other lands (3.22-3). Hebrews' author and Timothy are leaders with roots in other cultures. They can exhort in writing, or visit personally, but do not claim a superior authority over the local leaders of any house church. Hebrews does not set one congregation over another, but fosters ecumenicity through visits and letters; neither isolation nor domination is the preferred pattern, but a unity in diversity that faithfully reflects the being of the triune God revealed in Jesus. Some call this pattern Christian 'an-archy' – enhancing freedom by opposing the development of higher-archies. Women, people of colour and sexual minorities have a common interest in opposing traditional oppressive hierarchies and promoting the kind of anarchy/democracy in church and society that Hebrews advocates. Often, however, one secular organization or church comes to claim monopoly rights over sexual minorities as well. Hebrews provides the pattern for multiplying local house churches, but also for maintaining unity among equals.

The Queer Bible Commentary

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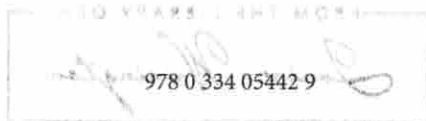
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