

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



Ways of Reading: Interpretation of Scripture—Terms and Methods
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Historical vs Theological: A “historical” approach to scripture assumes that the bible was written to record actual historical events as they occurred. Of course, this view assumes that there is such a thing as “objective” history. A “theological” approach to scripture assumes that the bible was written to express and teach the beliefs and practices of the Ancient Israelites and the early church. This view assumes that the authors were not concerned with historicity but with theology.

Propaganda: This approach to scripture believes that the biblical texts were written to “convince” the audience of a particular worldview. The bible is intended to persuade the audience to believe and live a particular way, and the authors used whatever methods they could to bring about this intent.

Authority: In discussions of scripture, this term relates to how one views the bible and its power over them and their lives. What influence do these texts have on what they believe and how they live, especially the decisions they make and actions they take? It must be understood, however, that nothing has “inherent authority”. One must give the bible authority; it is not a given.

Inspiration: This is the belief that the bible was inspired by God. The extent to which one understands the divine/human roles in the process can differ. Some believe that the human simply held the writing instrument while God did the writing. Others believe that this process was more like the creative inspiration experienced by an artist or musician. There are various “middle-ground” understandings as well.

Inerrancy/Infallibility: This is the belief that the biblical text is inerrant/infallible. Because the bible is the “Word of God”, it does not contain any errors/contradictions. While some copying mistakes might be acknowledged, this view would say that the “original” text was perfect. On the whole, this belief holds that what the bible “says” is true. Any perceived confusion or contradiction within the bible is a human problem of understanding.

“Literalism”: This term refers today to people who claim they read/take the bible “literally”, doing exactly what the “bible says”. The most severe form of this requires believers to follow every commandment/teaching of the bible exactly as written and to believe that the events described in the bible happened precisely as described. Of course, it is impossible to take the whole bible literally. Thus, most followers of this approach pick and choose which passages should be read as literal and which should be “interpreted”.

Allegorical: This approach to scripture assumes that the text holds deeper meaning than what it says on the surface. In fact, an allegorical interpretation argues that the text intends to say something other than the “plain sense” of the writing.

Midrashic: This approach to scripture is centuries old and primarily has been practiced within the Jewish community. The assumption is that the text leaves holes or unanswered questions that need to be addressed. After having done solid study of a passage, it is possible to use one’s informed imagination to suggest possible answers to those questions/holes. There are different styles of doing midrash.

Textual Criticism: This method attempts to find/uncover the most original text of a biblical passage. It seeks to answer text-critical questions which emerge when two or more manuscripts disagree on the proper wording of a passage of scripture. Using methods, observations, and textual witnesses, this method would come to a conclusion on these problems.

Historical Criticism: This method attempts to discern the historical context out of which a passage of scripture emerged. Every text claims a historical setting/date, but most scholars believe that the biblical materials were written much later than the dates they claim. This method looks for historical “clues” within the text to see if they reveal answers to the following questions: When? Who? Where?

Form Criticism: This method begins with the assumption that many, if not most, of the biblical materials were handed down orally before being put into writing. In an oral culture, certain forms/structures were developed within different settings for particular types of communication. Storytellers and others could use these forms and the audience would understand what kind of information was being conveyed. This method searches for identifiable forms/structures within a biblical passage and then discerns what this “known” form would have added to the audience’s understanding of the message.

Source Criticism: This method is built on the scholarly argument that the bible was not written by one person or group of people. Rather, the bible is a compilation of written sources that existed from an earlier time. Source Critics have identified these sources and even attempted to do Historical Criticism on them. This method seeks to identify the sources within a passage and to gain insight into the text based on what is believed to be the setting/perspective of each source.

Redaction Criticism: This method examines the work of the editors of the biblical text. How were different sources combined? Is there evidence of editorial changes/transitions? Why were these stories put together in this particular order?

Canonical Criticism: This method believes that the final form of the canon is intentional and thus must play a role in one’s understanding of a particular biblical text. Canonical Critics look at how a passage’s placement within the canon impacts how it is read. Also, this method looks at how a particular text connects with the rest of the canon.

Literary/Rhetorical Criticism: This method treats the bible as any other piece of literature/written work. It brings to bear the issues of secular Literary Criticism on the biblical texts. Issues of genre, plot, setting, characters, imagery, poetic devices, wordplays, etc. are considered as are appropriate for the passage under study.

Sociological Criticism: Drawing upon the knowledge gleaned from the Social Sciences, this method examines the text to discern the societal structure described/assumed within it. This method looks at issues of customs, government, civic arrangements, etc. in order to see how these items influence one’s interpretation of the passage.

Ideological Criticism: This method starts with the assumption that the biblical texts are propaganda, and thus it seeks to uncover the explicit/implicit ideology within a text. What does the text assume is “normal/abnormal” or “good/bad”? What image of the Divine is portrayed here? What does the text want the reader to believe/do about a situation/issue? Under this method are found feminist, liberationist, womanist, etc. readings of scripture.