

○ REVIEW OF DALE B. MARTIN, *SEX AND THE SINGLE SAVIOR: GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION*

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Sex and the Single Savior is a collection of essays by Dale Martin (Yale Divinity) that interweave issues of gender construction, sexuality and marriage all while addressing the inadequacies of contemporary Christian readings of these texts, suggesting new avenues for critical reading and appropriation and offering critique of the current political and theological landscape. The texts Martin examines are all New Testament texts; most of them are Pauline. The work is largely aimed at the general reader or elementary student.

Despite what may seem like a forced or ambitious agenda, Martin pulls this off with extraordinary brilliance. At times, he makes exegetical moves that are, in a word, stunning. The net effect is scalpel-elegant and sledge hammer-devastating, at once. In part, this arises from the unique history of this work. Far from being a text aimed at 'hot issues' of the day, commissioned by an acquisitions editor for the demi-popular marketplace, this work – though singularly relevant to the most engaged and polemic of current issues – has evolved in the old fashioned way: a brilliant scholar, at the top of his form, working with texts and traditions he knows intimately while closely considering the issues he encounters in the modern church and academy, drawing out ideas which have been carefully nurtured over more than a decade of careful guardianship. The result is a matured and intricate book that still speaks to a vital, immediate concern. The simplicity and clarity of the work does not arise from 'writing down' to the lay audience, but has emerged organically from careful and precise thought betraying an intimate familiarity. In short, this is what so many of us hope to produce. *Sex and the Single Savior* is clearly a work of love; the partnerships it reveals is of the familiar, obsessive and most endearingly conventional type between scholar, text, and ethics (even as the 'three way' nature of the affair reflects modern possibilities and sensitivities).

The book is a collection of eleven essays, most on a general theme of human sexuality and gender construction in biblical literature. The essays span 1995 to the present. They vary in

technical level; one chapter was originally a public, general audience lecture while other chapters were originally highly technical scholarly articles. Key contributions are chapter 3, ‘*Arsenokoitês* and *Malakos*,’ which was originally published in Brawley’s *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality* (1996) and chapter 4, ‘Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,’ which originally appeared in *Biblical Interpretation* (vol 3, 1995). These essays have proven to be central in later literature on gender and sexuality in Paul. In addition, chapters 2, 6, 9, and 10 are appearing in print for the first time in this volume; they each originated as conference or colloquium presentations in recent years. The essays, save the title essay ‘Sex and the Single Savior,’ treat Pauline texts either centrally (the general case) or at least tangentially (as in his chapter 9 on divorce and remarriage). Though the volume’s subtitle indicates an interest in ‘biblical interpretation,’ the book remains largely interested in Paul (and completely interested in New Testament texts and Christian interpretation of them).

Each of the essays is an all-out assault on what Martin calls ‘textual foundationalism’ and the ‘myth of textual agency.’ Indeed, it seems, in some places this becomes Martin’s central interest; gender and sexuality make the issue acute and critical for modern ethics. ‘Textual foundationalism’ is the belief that the Bible begins and under-girds ethics. At root of one’s ideology is biblical text. Normally, this foundation is established by interest in the historical origins and meanings of the text in question; the range of potential meanings in a biblical text are, foundationalists would argue, to be confined to ‘legitimate’ readings – what an original author most likely intended.

The foundational meaning of the text is made effective via the ‘myth of textual agency.’ Foundationalists, Martin argues, then move to articulate what the text ‘says’ or ‘means’ as *prima fascia* obvious and equally compelling for the construction of modern norms. In other words, moderns must comply to the demands of the text, and these demands are found in what the text ‘says’ to us. As Martin points out, however, (often and at times very humorously) texts can not ‘speak.’ Left open on the table, they don’t make a single peep or whisper (I confess to nicking this rhetorical object lesson in my own lectures to undergraduates; it worked wonderfully). Further, Martin insists that ‘texts don’t mean. People mean with texts.’ Texts do not speak. People speak after reading texts.

Martin’s point is not to be clever or pedantically precise (though he is both). His purpose is to foreground how, particularly with respect to sexuality and gender, modern scholarship has created a ‘normative’ voice that is simply passing on what it has also received. Martin insists on unveiling this subterfuge. He allows no one to hide behind text or innocent messenger status. He insists that readers, themselves, mean what they produce. Further, there is no, single, stable, controllable basis for meaning in text. The limits are our imaginations, creativity, community, needs and hopes. In most essays, Martin presents a brilliant survey of historical readings/ exegesis of the text in question, only to show, ultimately, how the readings fail to coalesce or retain a consistent structure or content.

Martin opens (‘The Myth of Textual Agency’) by dismantling confidence that we can determine a text’s ‘intended meaning’ via history (and showing that such concerns are very modern). A familiar conversation to many of us, Martin offers a single critique with solid examples accessible to the non-specialist. He continues his methodological discussion in chapter 2, ‘The Rhetoric of Biblical Scholarship: A Primer for Critical Reading of Historical Criticism.’

Chapter 3 ‘*Arsenokoitês* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences’ explores this notorious pair of words found in 1 Cor. Contrary to many suggestions which take both terms as descriptive

of male-male sexual engagement (where the former term designates the active partner, the latter the passive), Martin offers a thorough lexical study to conclude that: a. we really have no idea what *arsenokoitês* actually entailed (though it seems to be some form of – economic – sexual exploitation?). *Malakos*, would be better rendered ‘effeminate’ or even ‘sissy.’ Martin then demonstrates how ‘historical’ reading and translation of these words is enmeshed in cultural assumptions about ‘normativity.’ The theme of heteronormativity is again taken up in chapter 4, ‘Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32.’ Martin, again, opens with a demonstration of how previous modes of reading are inadequate. His particular concern surrounds readings that suggest Paul is arguing humans, universally, have fallen from some pristine state into sin, the ultimate expression of which, is same-sex encounter. Such, Martin argues, is implicitly reinforcing heteronormativity. Martin, instead, takes a rigorous turn back into the text to argue that Paul suggests same-sex desire arises from idolatry (one should realize, as well, that, for Martin, ‘textual foundationalism’ is always couched as an idolatrous move).

In chapter 5, ‘Paul without Passion: On Paul’s Rejection of Desire in Sex and Marriage,’ Martin addresses Paul’s comments in 1 Cor. 7. In sum, Martin argues that Paul (blending some Stoic ideas) is fundamentally arguing for the cessation of desire. Sex, in and of itself (and if properly expressed – i.e. controlled), is relatively innocuous. Desire, however, is the stone in Paul’s shoe. Paul recommends marriage as a means to avoid ‘burning’ with desires. Marriage is intended to quiet sexual desire.

In chapter 6, ‘The Queer History of Galatians 3:28: ‘No Male and Female’‘ Martin surveys the readings of this famous text. Beginning with Stendhal and expressed mostly fully (perhaps) by Schussler-Fiorenza, one strand of NT scholarship has argued for a Pauline egalitarianism (despite the clearly non-egalitarian thrust of some other key passages in Paul). Conservatives, however, have argued that no egalitarianism exists at all; male and female are equal only ‘in Christ’ (i.e. in terms of their potential to be saved). Radical contemporary feminists have argued this text is not egalitarian, either. Paul is arguing for ‘equality’ only to the extent that women are moved along a gender continuum towards masculinity; they become ‘equal’ only by becoming ‘male.’ Martin presents these readings, then makes a stunning and gorgeous turn of his own. Recognizing the grammar is ‘no...and...,’ Martin, using historical and grammatical analysis that is pristine, argues that Paul’s demands could also be taken as a call to femme up males and destroy masculinity.

The central chapter, carrying the name of the volume (ch. 7: ‘Sex and the Single Savior’) is the only chapter not to treat Paul in any way. Martin explores the possibility of whether or not the historical Jesus could have been married or had sex (of any kind). He notes that we can not conclude any position definitively; indeed, one can, as readily, demonstrate the possibility that Jesus was gay (and seeing the infamous ‘beloved disciple’ of John’s gospel). The point is most surely *not* that Martin argues that Jesus was gay; his arguments, however, reveal the extreme exegetical gossip that has amassed around Mary and Jesus and to illustrate how little we know (and how little, really, it matters). More, it reveals the dynamics of an implicit heteronormativity in scholarship and Christology. Martin argues scholarly views on the subject say far more about contemporary views of sex, sexuality and culturally described norms of sexual distinction.

In Chapter 8, ‘Familiar Idolatry and the Christian Case Against Marriage,’ Martin flatly denounces modern evangelical fascination with ‘family values’ as idolatry. He demonstrates that Jesus’ and Paul’s ethics of ‘family’ are radically different than what emerges from the modern

focus on family. Jesus, Martin clarifies, called for a seamless boundary of believers which was broadly inclusive, not a narcissistic celebration of the nuclear family. In chapter 9, 'the Hermeneutics of Divorce' Martin continues this thesis. Surveying the remarks of Jesus and Paul on divorce, Martin concludes that the historical Jesus was radically opposed to divorce and remarriage, absolutely forbidding both. Matthew, however, adds a proviso ('except in cases of *pornea*'), which Luke extends further. Paul, addressing the case of a woman divorced by a non-believing husband, allows remarriage (but only 'in the Lord,' i.e. to a believer). Martin argues that these various communities were trying to soften Jesus' harsh standard, a standard which, by not allowing any form of divorce, would discourage or destroy marriage in the first place. Indeed, Martin argues that such a goal was Jesus' particular intention; he wanted a marriageless community of believers, mutually sharing with one another. Martin, as well, calls for the same, suggesting the church should abandon the 'marriage business' because of the way marriage perpetuates divisions.

Chapters 10 and 11, 'The space of Scripture, the Risk of Faith' are clearly the capstone for the book and the argument for which Martin has been carefully preparing us. After a survey of Richard Hays' monograph on Pauline use of scripture (and, in turn, surveying Pauline uses directly as they appear in Galatians and 2 Corinthians), Martin concludes that Paul read scripture not to be 'formed by' its contents, but to find confirmation, understanding, and argument for ideas he had already formed. Scripture was not taken as the means of making faith, faith recognizes scripture. Martin appeals for a similar reading approach among modern Christians. He offers a new metaphor for scripture: a sacred space for exploration which prompts, as a museum would, reflection, narrative, and new ideas. Noting, of course, the inherent risk of such an approach – that monstrous inequity and unethical reading could be implicitly 'verified' via readings of scripture – Martin never the less accepts the risks as those inherent in 'faith' and a hermeneutics of Love.

My question, however, feels even more acute. Martin insists that the bible remain a central text for modern ethics. Why? In some ways, I suppose, I could see that we, as moderns, must deal with biblical text because it has been accepted as authoritative by others, because it has become 'canon' and 'scripture.' But Martin seems to be arguing for more. He seems to be arguing that we must engage scripture not simply because we have inherited it as scripture, but because of some intrinsic quality within it.

At times, I found myself wanting to push Martin into Hebrew Bible or to hear him engage non-Christian (at minimum, Jewish) treatments of these issues. He does not. He does not, however, because of the nature of this book; it is a work that has emerged and evolved. As in many cases, the strength of the book – that it is so deeply a reflection of Martin's general concerns and skills over the last decade – is its limitation – it is not, and does not mean to be, exhaustive. More could be said. Hopefully, scholars will take up the manifesto-like challenge to re-imagine scripture and read with multiple strategies in creative and playful ways (always with an eye toward relevance and ethics) and turn to the texts Martin has left behind.

This work would be ideal for introduction to any of a host of gender/sexuality/family studies courses, Pauline literature, New Testament theologies, or methods of biblical interpretation.