



Review of Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 257 pp.

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Dale Martin's newest book serves two functions that some scholars would have handled in separate volumes. For more than a decade, Martin has been writing essays on gender, sexuality, and biblical interpretation that have proven to be indispensable reference points for biblical scholars and theologians wrestling with such topics. *Sex and the Single Savior* gathers a number of those essays (about half of which previously appeared in other places) and makes them available in a single volume. Martin's reader will find here incisive discussions of New Testament, early Christian, early Jewish and Greco-Roman texts that deal, or (and this is important for Martin's approach) are sometimes read as dealing, with a wide range of topics including gender roles and ideologies; desire and asceticism; kinship, marriage and divorce; and homoeroticism. However, Martin's book also includes several chapters that focus on methodological and theological matters, such as the roles of rhetoric, culture, and experience in interpretation; the status of historical criticism as modernity's privileged strategy for reading the Bible; and the nature and function of "Scripture" in communities of faith, ancient and modern. At first glance, these hermeneutical emphases might seem out of place in a volume devoted to "gender and sexuality in biblical interpretation" (to quote the book's subtitle). Yet Martin does not only use debates over sex, gender and family as test cases for his methodological inquiries. He also demonstrates that contemporary arguments about sex, gender and family inevitably rest upon presuppositions about textual meaning and interpretation, which in many cases need to be interrogated critically. Thus, matters of gender and sexuality, and matters of hermeneutics and methodology, are inextricably intertwined already. Martin's volume helpfully explicates some of the relationships between them while offering a series of proposals for rethinking those relationships.

Many of Martin's arguments are aimed at 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. Foundationalists, however, whether they are fundamentalists, theological liberals, or critical scholars working in the university, usually subscribe to some version of what Martin calls "the myth of textual agency," that is, the "common assumption ... that the Bible 'speaks' and our job is just to 'listen'" (p. 1). Against this assumption about a "speaking" Bible, Martin argues forcefully that textual meaning is inseparable from interpretation, which itself takes place in specific contexts and under the influence of traditions and interpretive communities (religious and scholarly). Recognition of this fact does not at all entail a

rejection of the historical, contextual analysis of texts, an important modern type of analysis at which Martin himself—formerly a Professor of New Testament at Duke University and now for several years at Yale—excels. It does, however, require 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.

Some of these points have been made before, though seldom with the clarity that one finds throughout Martin's essays. However, Martin considers the consequences of such points for contemporary debates over Bible, gender, and sexuality, including the debates over homosexuality. Martin points out, for example, how assumptions about textual agency shape both the rhetoric of scholars who oppose homosexuality and the rhetoric of scholars who condone it. Specific interpretive controversies, such as disagreements over the meaning and translation of the Greek words *arsenokoitês* and *malakos* (sometimes alleged to refer to homosexuality and analyzed here in meticulous detail) in the New Testament Epistles, or arguments about the significance of Paul's statements in Romans 1, are discussed in such a way as to illustrate Martin's thesis that interpretive rather than textual agency shapes the debates over Bible and homosexuality. 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). But if scholarly reconstructions of biblical views about homosexuality are not simply the inevitable result of listening carefully to "what the Bible says," but rather are always produced by more or less complicated interpretive and rhetorical maneuvers, then scholars and other readers cannot simply hide behind texts when making statements about Bible and homosexuality. 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 develop his hermeneutical arguments only in relation to homosexuality. Readers of this journal may be especially interested in the numerous other ways in which questions about gender and kinship are brought into his discussions. Already in his discussion of the Greek word *malakos*, for example, Martin shows how attempts to make sense of biblical texts must grapple with complex assumptions, ancient and modern, about manhood and masculinity. A chapter on Paul's views about marriage and desire discusses those views in relation to notions of gender and body found among the Stoics and ancient medical writers; while also analyzing ways in which modern readers do or do not find themselves attracted to such "classical" ideologies, including ideologies of gender. A chapter on Paul's reference to "no male and female" in Galatians 3:28 does not simply attempt to discern the likely meaning of Paul's words in his own context, but also charts a number of ways in which Paul's statement has been or can be understood in changing historical and ideological contexts, including those characterized by debates over gender equality. And in one of the more exegetical chapters of the book, on the "hermeneutics of divorce," Martin deploys both historical and theological analysis in order to suggest (as he does in a prior chapter on "the Christian case against marriage") that modern attempts to ground "family values"

and a valorization of marriage in the New Testament often require significant interpretive acrobatics.

Matters of gender and masculinity also come up in the essay on “Sex and the Single Savior,” which gives Martin’s volume its title and deals with the question of “Jesus’ sexuality.” As Martin notes, such phenomena as *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* testify to interest in this controversial topic within what Martin calls “the popular imagination.” Martin rejects the view that questions about Jesus’ sexuality must be illegitimate because they are anachronistic, pointing out that such an objection is only persuasive “if one is ‘playing by the rules’ of modern historical criticism” (p. 91). However, Martin goes on to discuss attempts by historical critical scholars to explore the sexuality of Jesus, not in order to tell his own readers the true nature of that sexuality but rather to show how Jesus’ sexuality can be “imagined” in numerous different ways even by scholars who attempt to use historical analysis to arrive at historical truth or original meaning. For some such scholars, Jesus must have been celibate. For other such scholars, Jesus may have been heterosexually active. For still other scholars, homoerotic activity on the part of Jesus is at least a possibility. All of these scholars deploy conventional tools of historical and textual analysis in more or less disciplined ways to make their cases. But rather than insisting that one scholar or another is likely to be right, Martin summarizes their diverse views in order to “illustrate what has been imaginable at different times with regard to the sexuality of Jesus—and what has been apparently unimaginable” (p. 96). Martin goes on to suggest that historical criticism, however rigorously practiced and in spite of the claims of many of its practitioners, cannot clear up the ambiguity of Jesus’ sexuality. While historical analysis is interesting and rightly weighs evidence about Jesus’ sexuality according to conventionally accepted historical criteria, its claims must finally be understood as products of a “historical imagination” that sits alongside the “popular imagination” as alternative sets of interpretive claims about Jesus. Moreover, still other imaginative ways of construing the sexuality of Jesus exist; and Martin discusses both “the patristic imagination” and “the gay imagination” as examples. Instead of attempting to adjudicate among such imaginative construals of Jesus and his sexuality from the perspective of historical criticism, Martin argues that it “is theoretically naïve and theologically suspect” (p. 101) to insist that all interpretations of biblical figures such as Jesus, or all interpretations of biblical texts such as the gospels, must be subordinated to the supposedly superior interpretations reached through modern historical reconstruction.

As the phrase “theologically suspect” indicates, Martin does not make his claims out of any desire to undermine the use of the Bible as a theological resource. To the contrary, Martin states explicitly that he “firmly believe[s] that Christians should read Scripture and make it relevant to our lives.” What Martin wishes to press, however, is the necessity for “new ways of thinking about *how* we read Scripture” (p. 161, his emphasis). Martin cautiously characterizes his own approach here as a “postmodern Christian historicism.” He asks historical questions of the texts but refuses to privilege such questions as leading to the most, or the only, plausible or legitimate readings. Moreover, as a historian (albeit in certain respects a “postmodern” one), he asks questions that could also be asked by non-Christian readers. As a Christian, however, Martin is interested in the ways in which biblical

texts are “*taken* to be Scripture—holy writings, the ‘word of God,’ ‘inspired’—by the church, the community of Christians, the communion of saints” (p. 163, his emphasis). “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 reading of Scripture itself,” a reading that takes “varied and unending” forms (p. 165). And if we find it necessary to distinguish between more and less adequate readings of Scripture, then in Martin’s view we should not do so by evaluating all interpretations against the criteria of either historical criticism (which criteria were, after all, unavailable to Christians before modernity) or, as is now often advocated, “community.” In fact, against the claims of some of his fellow “postmodern Christians,” Martin makes trenchant and timely observations about the ways in which “communal,” “Christian” norms for interpretation can be used to justify readings that are abusive to those who find themselves living outside of communal common sense, including today lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered persons. Martin himself therefore prefers “love” as a criterion for evaluating Christian readings of Scripture; and he points out in several chapters that this hermeneutical criterion, while sometimes disdained as unworkable today, places him in continuity with such influential Christian interpreters as Augustine, whose approach to Scripture is helpfully summarized.

Martin is not very interested, then, in restricting our ways of imagining Scripture. Indeed, he argues that “we must educate our imaginations in new ways to think about Scripture differently” (p. 170)—notice the plural, “ways.” Martin’s emphasis on the education of our imaginations is striking, and his final chapter includes a kind of thought experiment in which Scripture is reimagined as “space.” Given the crucial role played by architecture in 20th century attempts to define the “postmodern,” Martin’s appeal to “space” perhaps fits his project even better than he, himself, explicitly notes in the book. But in successive discussions of “Scripture as museum,” “Scripture as cathedral,” and “commentary as hypertext” (or “virtual cathedral”), Martin demonstrates how attempts to reconceptualize our interactions with biblical texts in new and imaginative ways can enrich our attempts to rethink biblical interpretation.

Martin’s volume touches on many other topics that cannot be covered in a brief review. In spite of the breadth of material found in the book and the fact that it incorporates several essays that were written and published independently of one another, Martin manages in *Sex and the Single Savior* to communicate a clear and compelling vision for contemporary biblical interpretation. Some readers will, of course, disagree with that vision. But Martin’s carefully argued book is unlikely to be easily dismissed. Its chapters move deftly between detailed textual analysis, sophisticated theoretical reflection, and matters of theology and ethics. In addition to its other strengths, the book is remarkably well written and ought to give pause to those who claim that projects associated with the term “postmodern” are inevitably obscure or riddled with insider jargon. The volume should be required reading for scholars and students interested in any facet of “gender and sexuality in biblical interpretation.” It will certainly be invaluable as well for those concerned about biblical hermeneutics and the role of “Scripture” in the contemporary world.

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