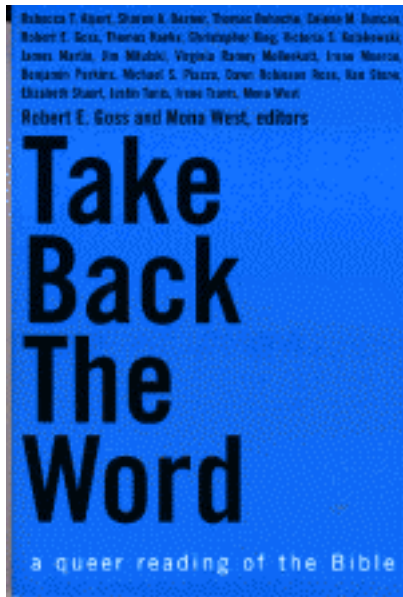


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Goss, Robert E., and Mona West, eds.

Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible

Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000. Pp. xvi + 239. Cloth.
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This book collects biblical interpretations from twenty lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual readers in order to reclaim the Bible for the well-being of the queer community. It comprises three parts. The first section, entitled “Queer Strategies for Reading,” includes “Reading the Bible from Low and Outside: Lesbitransgay People As God’s Tricksters,” by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott; “Camping around the Canon: Humor As a Hermeneutical Tool in Queer Readings of Biblical Texts,” by Elizabeth Stuart; “Love Your Mother: A Lesbian Womanist Reading of Scripture,” by Irene S. Travis; and “Eating the Crumbs That Fall from the Table: Trusting the Abundance of God,” by Justin Tanis.

The second section, “Taking Back the Hebrew Scriptures,” includes “The Garden of Eden and the Heterosexual Contract,” by Ken Stone; “Outsiders, Aliens, and Boundary Crossers: A Queer Reading of the Hebrew Exodus,” by Mona West; “When and Where I Enter, Then the Whole Race Enters with Me: Que(e)rying Exodus,” by Irene Monroe; “The Book of Ruth: On Boundaries, Love, and Truth,” by Celena M. Duncan; “Throwing a Party: Patriarchy, Gender, and the Death of Jezebel,” by Victoria S. Kolakowski; “Nehemiah As a Queer Model for Servant Leadership,” by Michael S. Piazza; “A Modern Psalm in the Midst of Breast Cancer,” by Irene S. Travis; “A Love as Fierce as Death: Reclaiming the Song of Songs for Queer Lovers,” by Christopher King; “Insider

Out: Unmasking the Abusing God,” by Dawn Robinson Rose; “Ezekiel Understands AIDS: AIDS Understands Ezekiel, or Reading the Bible with HIV,” by Jim Mitulski; “A Queer Reading of the Book of Jonah,” by Sharon Bezner; and “Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly: Reflections on Micah and Gay Ethics,” by Rebecca T. Alpert.

The third section is “Taking Back the Christian Scriptures” and includes “Matthew and Mary of Magdala: Good News for Sex Workers,” by Thomas Hanks; “Coming Out, Lazarus’s and Ours: Queer Reflections of a Psychospiritual, Political Journey,” by Benjamin Perkins; “The Beloved Disciple: A Queer Bereavement Narrative in a Time of AIDS,” by Robert E. Goss; “ ‘And Then He Kissed Me’: An Easter Love Story,” by James Martin; and “ ‘To Cut or Not to Cut’: Is Compulsory Heterosexuality a Prerequisite for Christianity?” by Thomas Bohache.

This assortment of writings covers a tremendous range of topics and styles, so as to amplify the predictable unevenness of Festschriften and collections of essays. Some essays address readers with a strong grasp of technical academic interpretation; others address readers with more everyday assumptions and interpretive practices. Some arrogate an interpretive authority that their essays do not quite back up, while others demonstrate a vivid and attractive biblical imagination that need make no excessive claims. Some are intensely personal, while others adopt a dispassionate tone that mirrors the presumed objectivity of the hermeneutically straight community of biblical interpretation. Readers should be warned that the collection concentrates on queer *identity* rather than queer *theory*; one would look in vain for essays by queer-identified straight authors. Nonetheless, these essays demonstrate a diverse and enriching array of interpretive agendas. Their testimonies considerably enrich the broad fields of biblical interpretation.

Lest readers suppose that the variations in texture reflect a second-rate product, they should recall that the very enterprise of queer interpretation of the Bible labors against grave impediments. The vast extent to which the Bible refracts the discourses concerning sexual dimensions of identity will almost necessarily introduce turbulence into the practice of queer interpretations of the Bible. The simple gesture of producing this volume has a social and cultural importance that outweighs many cavils about individual articles.

That being said, the book does pose challenges to any critical reader, whatever her or his criteria. An academic reader, even one predisposed to be congenial to queer readings, may well register discomfort at several essays that make bolder claims for historical probability than many sympathetic historians would grant. Readers less amenable to queer reading may find that most of the essays adopt a tone so resolutely gay-affirmative as to put hesitant readers off. No surprises here, since the institutional prevalence of

heterosexism makes it likely that these interpretations will sound outlandish to straight ears.

Readers who approach the book with generous patience, or with an enthusiasm grounded as much in the project itself as in the arguments that the essays make, will welcome the volume eagerly. A number of chapters deserve hearty approbation, though the basis of the essays' strength varies. Ken Stone's chapter on the Genesis creation story's institution of the heterosexual contract presents an insightful, technically and theoretically sophisticated interrogation of conventional interpretations that call on this passage to naturalize opposite-sex unions as ordained by God's will. Michael Piazza's essay successfully places less emphasis on technical exegesis and more on the relation between the biblical figure of Nehemiah and contemporary servant-leaders in the lesbitransgay community. Christopher King proposes a provocative gay-positive reading of the Song of Songs. The several essays in the opening methodological section contribute to a richer approach to textual "understanding" than those established by the dominant interpretive culture.

Thus Goss and West have made a noteworthy contribution in assembling this compendium of queer voices—a contribution both in content and in politics. This book will make an valuable addition to most academic and personal libraries, a unique resource for biblical, theological, and gender-studies curricula.