

## HERMENEUTICS OF PASSIONATE REFUSAL

[This hermeneutic is the product of a long struggle to claim my continuing love for the Bible (even Paul) even as I envision a world free of tradition – a product of too many traditions to name.]

Let me begin with the Word of the Lord proclaimed by the Prophet Hosea about the Land of Israel:

She is not my wife, and I am not her husband — that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts, or I will strip her naked and expose her...and make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst. Upon her children also will I have no pity, because they are children of whoredom.... for their mother has played the whore. (Hosea 2:2-4)

And God's reason is this:

"I will punish her for the festival days of the gods of Baal when she offered incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and **went away after her lover, and forgot me**, says the Lord" (Hosea 2:13).

In this passage and too many others in the Bible, God expresses his jealousy that he has been jilted for another god (another lover as He sees it) by making violent sexual slurs from on high — Israel becomes, in his jealousy, a woman, a whore, who deserves to be stripped and killed by thirst.

According to God, it is **those foreigners** who are responsible for her seduction. For instance, in the Book of Ezekiel, it is the "Babylonians [who] came to her into bed of love, and they defiled her with their lust" (Ezekiel 23:17). It is the Egyptians who "fondled her bosom and caressed her young breasts" (Ezekiel 23:21). In the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Nahum, God goes even further in his jealous rage and feels completely justified in raping Israel because she has gotten too close to her **'evil neighbours'** who have taught her to swear by another god. The Lord God tells his lover: "it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, and you are violated" (Jer. 13:22). And just in case, we are not sure who did the raping — the Lord of Hosts tells Israel, through his prophet Nahum, I "will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let the nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame. I will throw filth at

you and treat you with contempt" (Nahum 3:5-6). Israel is a filthy whore who deserves to be raped because she is sleeping with more than one god.

A Hermeneutics of Passionate Refusal refuses to tiptoe around these passages, refuses to 'water them down' with historical research, or find a way to excuse God's actions. A hermeneutics of passionate refusal, in solidarity with people of other faiths refuses to give **any** credence to God's jealousy. In solidarity with all victims of violence, this reading refuses to claim or accept as authoritative this God who uses sexist, sexual slurs, sexual violence and threats of expulsion and rejection to act out his jealous rage both against his 'lover' and the 'foreigner' he blames for the seduction. This is NOT the Word of God — this is God written with the ink of patriarchal, human distortion!

A Hermeneutics of Passionate Refusal imagines that this kind of logic - this distorted, patriarchal logic that is still unfortunately very prevalent in our world — may have permeated **many** texts of the Bible, and thus seeks to uncover and refuse this logic before proceeding to pronounce and claim **any** text as Word of God or to use **any** text as '**authorization**' for our justice-seeking projects.

For instance, most of us have heard the Word of the Lord through Moses to the People of Israel when God said, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22). And we may have heard that this belonged to another time, or that it refers to penetrating and being penetrated (not the same as our understanding of same-sex love) or we may retort that, if we're allowed to eat lobster now, why can't a man have sex with a man? But, in my mind, this misses the deeper point — this passage is saturated with God's unacceptable jealousy — in Lev. 20:2, if the 'lover' sleeps with the gods of Molech, God will put them to death. The 'other' god is unclean and defiles God's name and God's sanctuary — because God has decided that **he is pure** and all other 'foreign' gods are impure. It's the same kind of Divine logic that we see in Numbers 25 when the Midianite wife of an Israelite man **must be killed** by the spear of Phineas because she **pollutes** the holy place. The Holiness Code is about separating from 'the foreigner', about not being 'defiled' by the competition. And, in the end, it is about justifying a colonizing God who takes away the land of Canaan from its native inhabitants and gives it to his lover — excusing Himself by naming those others as unclean, sexually perverse foreigners. This same God excuses his actions by claiming that "the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:22). No, God told Israel that they could take that land for themselves from the natives who lived there. The same kind of justification for many a Christian mission — the 'heathens' engage in sexually perverse or unclean behaviour — let's move in and 'civilize' them. And It is the same kind of logic

used by the men who murdered Matthew Shepherd — he's defiled, let's kill him.

In case we might be tempted to have a supersessionist moment and think this kind of logic is only in the Old Testament, we simply have to move to Paul. The apostle Paul also uses this same **"God as Jealous lover"** language. For instance, when speaking to the church in Corinth, he tells them that he feels a divine jealousy for them, for **he** promised them in marriage to one husband, to present them as a **chaste virgin** to Christ —but he thinks they are straying from their devotion and following **some other message** about Jesus rather than the one he proclaims. They are, in Paul's mind, sexually impure simply because they aren't in a monogamous relationship to Paul's message. Furthermore, when speaking to the Romans in chapter 1 (that passage that is used so often to clobber us), Paul engages in the same kind of sexual slurring that God did in the Prophets when he stereotypically characterizes the Gentiles as sexually perverse simply because they did not honor his God but rather worshipped other gods. We are so schooled in derogatory talk about 'pagans' — that when Paul says 'women who exchange natural intercourse for unnatural' and "men who commit shameless acts" (Romans 1) we don't hear the 1<sup>st</sup> century racism that Paul is spouting. Paul's bigger point is that all people are 'sinners' and need the love of Christ — but how Paul gets there —that is, using the foreign-bashing logic of sexual violence - this, a hermeneutics of passionate refusal will not embrace!

This kind of logic is also woven into our favourite texts. Yes, David remembers David's love as one that surpasses the love of women. And yes, Ruth tells Naomi, "Wherever you go, I will go...your people will be my people" but these queer texts are also dripping with the language of the superiority of the nation of Israel over the the 'idolatrous' nations (God's term) of Moab and Philistia. Queer love is there, but these texts are also stained with the same logic as that of Leviticus, Hosea and Romans.

It's a common concern that homophobic interpreters will say to a queer reader that they simply take what they want from the text and avoid the verses they don't like. And, of course, that's what the queer reader might say to Fred Phelps or Focus on the Family in Canada. A HERMENEUTICS OF PASSIONATE REFUSAL refuses to accept the logic of any text which spouts the logic of the foreign-bashing, sexualized violence of God's jealousy - not only the ones which 'target' queer sexual practices. I want to refuse the link between 'foreign' god and sexual perversity wherever I see it. I want to refuse God's patriarchal sense of entitlement — that He alone deserves to be God — and all other gods are an abomination because it is this logic that makes the Afghani woman or a foreign object who can be raped by Canadian or British or American soldiers. It is this

logic which makes it possible for gay men to be executed in pairs in Iran or young lesbian women to be expelled from school in Cameroon. It is this logic that fuels the Israeli government's violence in Palestine and Lebanon and Bush's against Iraq.

God's sexual slurs are not only applied to people of 'other' nations, but are also used by people within nations to divide themselves against each other. In the clobber text of 1 Timothy 1:10 the writer of the epistle is talking about non-conformists within the congregation who, in his opinion, are not following the teachings of Paul. So he calls them 'godless' and because they are godless, he knows them to be fornicators and sodomites. He is not assessing their sexual practices here, he is simply using the divinely ordained sexual stereotyping for whoever is the 'other'. When Paul is arguing with the Galatians against the need to get circumcised as a sign of belonging to the community - he characterizes those who argue for circumcision as being "of the flesh" — and people of the flesh, **he knows**, are into fornication, idolatry, drunkenness and sorcery — and Paul makes the 'threat' that these people will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He does it here and he does it again in 1 Corinthians 6:9. And yet we take up Galatians 3:28 with its promise that there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male and female...which **is** part of Paul's project...but there is still an underside, which, when left unnamed, we may inadvertently reproduce.

And what about Jesus? Is the Jesus of the Gospels innocent in this regard? No, he proclaims the same kind of wrath when he divides the world into 'the sheep' and 'the goats'. Yes, he extends his grace to one of Israel's 'others' — the Samaritan woman, but only after she is 'marked' by the text as one of the dogs who deserve his crumbs. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus suggests that Jews know how to pray properly, while Gentiles just babble on. And Jesus tells his disciples not to bother with the Gentiles, but go only to the lost house of Israel. This is a Jesus who has bought into the logic of 'foreigner' as 'other' —the one who can just be left behind when God's wrath comes upon the earth.

So, where does this leave me? Do I throw the Bible out because it is saturated with this humanly distorted God — the God who is jealously annihilating the 'foreigner' so they cannot sexually defile his lover? Should I just ignore Paul? Should I pick through the Gospels to find the real Christ? No, I simply avoid those mental gymnastics and refuse to attribute to God or to Christ the human distortions of the ancient biblical writers. The God of wrath who sexualizes the foreigner in the Old and New Testaments is not a God I can believe in. Can I replace God with the biblical Christ? No, because the Christ of the New Testament also does not escape the human brush of this logic.

A Hermeneutics of Passionate Refusal reads the Bible as inspired by holy Spirits and penned by human hands. It reads the Bible as one cloudy window through which to search for God. The very book that contains the logic that I refuse also contains the God and Christ of Love, of forgiveness, of justice, of mercy...both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Christian Testament — but human distortion and holy spirit are always inescapably tangled up, and **we** must — across our differences - tease out the distortion from the holiness of God with the gospel we have cobbled together from awful (that is, sometimes full of awe, and sometimes simply awful) texts.

Perhaps Origen, the ancient biblical scholar, was right when he suggested way back in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century that

"the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling blocks, as it were and hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not be completely drawn away by the sheer attractiveness of the language...and fail to learn anything of the more divine element"

A Hermeneutics of Passionate Refusal, with the help of Reading Strategies, refuses to leave any hindrance intact which promotes a jealous God who 'sexualizes' and kills the foreigner simply to keep himself at the top. We have all too often followed suit, and our world needs us to say NO!

**QUEERING SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY:**  
**A HERMENEUTICS OF PASSIONATE REFUSAL**

**READING STRATEGIES**

1. Before I claim any biblical text as a queer badge of Christian identity (eg. David and Jonathon or Ruth and Naomi), I want to examine the text within the larger narrative or letter to determine if it is connected in any way with the logic God's jealous justification of sexual violence against the 'foreigner'.. If so, in my interpretation, I want to name this where I see it.
2. I refuse to find affirmation for my queer identity in the biblical text in any way that reproduces the logic of Divine Jealousy.
3. I refuse to focus on the issue only of 'homosexuality' in the Bible or declare the 'clobber' texts as innocent if they participate, in any way, in the logic of othering (eg. Leviticus 18; Romans 1:26-28).
4. I refuse to name any text which is saturated with the logic of Divine Jealousy as Word of God, but seek to hear the Word of God through engagement with all of the biblical texts.
5. I refuse to examine any text only on the basis of sexuality or gender or class or race, but to examine all texts for all forms of domination of one group of people over another, one God over another, or one gospel over another.
6. I refuse to read only 'within community' but to work to read across communities because the ways 'my' community may participate in the logic of Divine Jealousy becomes clearer with conversation across difference.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Is there anything about the Hermeneutics of Passionate Refusal that might be helpful to you? If there anything that would be unhelpful to you?
2. Can you think of a biblical text that you have loved that you might have to re-examine if you were to adopt this hermeneutical stance?
3. Can you think of a 'clobber text' that you can say a stronger **"NO"** with the lens of a Hermeneutics of Passionate Refusal?