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Thinking about Marriage with Scripture

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Introduction

Discussions of biblical texts loom large in Christian debates about same-sex marriage. The provocation for this chapter is the observation that far too often writers do not stand back from the detailed engagement with texts to ask deeper questions about how we should use the Bible to think theologically about forms of vocation in respect of human beings as sexual creatures. In this chapter I want to propose one way of addressing that issue, and, in so doing, to put it more firmly on the agenda.

For those who have grown used to reading books and blogs which take you straight to the disputed biblical passages in order to derive from them conclusions about human sexuality, this chapter is going to be frustrating. That frustration is a necessary one, however, if we are to unlearn those bad habits of short-circuiting a scripturally-resourced discernment on these questions and find ways of pursuing that task more adequately. We desperately need to, on both sides of the debate. I hope to model, in a brief and sketchy way, one approach. It takes its basic cue from the link between who Jesus is in the New Testament story about him, and the claims upon its addressees of the gospel story that concerns him.

My tentative proposal, then, is that Christians in their theological reflections on belief and practice should take themselves to be bound primarily to the story that culminates in the story of Jesus, and to be addressed by God and by Christ in and through it, in being called to the reorientation and common life it demands. Part of that reorientation is the call to understand every facet of being human, including human sexuality and institutions like marriage, in light of how we are to identify ourselves and others (including other creatures) as related to God in creation, salvation and in eschatological consummation. In this task, we should take the New Testament literature as not only the indispensable form in which the story is mediated, but – taking a lead from some early Christian ways of thinking about the Bible – also as offering a sort of training or education in learning to embody that story in the way we think, feel and relate to one another.

The Need to Think About How we Use the Bible on this Question

Turn to most books (or blogs) dealing with same-sex marriage and Scripture and after a while you know what to expect: a trawl through the much-debated passages like Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and 20, and Romans 1:18-32 and the historical backgrounds most likely to illumine their patterns of reasoning; and a minute dissection of passages relating to marriage, such as Jesus' sayings about divorce in Mark 10, the depiction of sexual differentiation and marriage in Genesis 1-2, and Pauline and deutero-Pauline teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5:22-33 (for example, see Brownson 2013; Countryman 2001; Gagnon 2002. See also more popular treatments such as John 2012; Schmidt 1995; Vines 2014). Writers emerge, after lengthy wrestling with a mountain of scholarship, grasping a conclusion about whether or not biblical teaching on homosexuality excludes faithful, permanent same-sex couples from marriage. While many of them seek to uncover underlying rationales and ask about their applicability for today, very few seem to reflect on deeper questions about how one should use Scripture to draw theological conclusions about these issues, and what sort of assumptions underlie their focus on this short list of contested texts as a way of reaching theological conclusions about human sexuality and marriage.[1]

Nor is it enough to urge the return to a traditional pre-critical approach to the plain, canonical meaning of the Bible, as though traditional ways of approaching the canon (which canon?) were beyond serious theological challenge or demonstrably capable of yielding theologies of sexuality rich enough to address the questions before us (see, for example, Seitz 2000 and Roberts 2009). The examples of anti-Semitism, slavery and women in the history of biblical interpretation suggest otherwise, and wishful appeals to the 'trajectories' of Scripture on these questions fail to reckon with the question of what qualifies as a meaningful and decisive trajectory in the canon or why it took so very long for these trajectories to be noticed by wise and thoughtful Christian readers. An appeal to some form of basic tradition of Christian reading practice is necessary, however, since in themselves the texts of the various Christian biblical canons may be read and used in all manner of ways and the form of the canon itself imposes relatively little guidance about how to use biblical texts in theology. In other words, we need to begin a long way back from where the debate is happening.

Scripture in Christian Communities and the Theology of Scripture

This last point suggests that the proper setting for thinking theologically about uses of Scripture in relation to questions of human sexuality and marriage is in Christian communities and the uses to which they and their members put biblical texts. All this is the proper setting for a theology of Scripture, that is, the attempt to understand the ways in which God is present and active in all these uses of Scripture. It is also the place to make proposals about what ways of using biblical texts might more fully accord with that understanding.

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[1] There are some exceptions, such as Song 2014, or Hays 1997, though Hays' treatment of homosexuality does not do justice to the promise of his methodology and he only briefly alludes to his underlying theology of Scripture. Analogies with the inclusion of the Gentiles are another exception. For one of the most significant treatments, see Rogers 1999.

The alternative to this approach would be to find a theory that will tell us how any text has meaning and should be interpreted, and make sure our scriptural interpretation conforms to it. The price for such a general theory, however, may be that in its generality it fails to account for Christian ways of reading and the particularly Christian ways in which they make sense – and ends up excluding them.

There are properly Christian reasons, of course, for wanting to respect scriptural texts just as texts. They are the products of other creatures' communicative intentions and so out of respect for those intentions we should in our interpretations respect the ways in which they have been put together. Even so, such respect allows for a wide variety of ways of using texts, including plain disagreement with their authors! We need another way in which to think in more specifically Christian terms about the status of these texts, the authority we should accord them, and what might be appropriate ways of using them in Christian communities. One way forward, suggested by the theologian Hans Frei, would be to take a cue from a (so far) stable, practical consensus about reading Scripture in Christian tradition, which offers an approach to these questions.

The Priority of the Story of Jesus

Frei argued that, amidst all their disagreements about biblical interpretations, Christians have in practice prioritized the stories about Jesus in the New Testament over other texts in the Bible. They have read them as stories primarily about the character, Jesus Christ. They have taken them to represent him adequately to us. And they have understood his story to be the culmination of the story of God's concern for Israel and the world in Israel's Scriptures (Frei 1990: 8-18; Frei 1993).[2] Insofar as those stories have a similar basic way of identifying who Jesus was – in terms of his life, death and resurrection – we may talk of a single story rendered in various ways. It is to that story, then, in its connectedness to Israel's Scriptures, that Christian theology is most basically accountable.

In *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Frei 1975), Frei offered a reading of the synoptic Gospels (and especially Luke-Acts) that is in keeping with this consensus. He argued that the synoptics answer the question, *who is Jesus?,* above all in the way they tell the story about him, and that in that story his identity (who he is) emerges through the sequence of the story. As the story comes to its climax in the passion-resurrection sequence, Jesus' identity is most clearly set forth. There we see Jesus carrying out his most characteristic intentions in going to the cross out of love for human beings and obedience to God. There, in the continuity of what he does and undergoes as a human body, he is seen in his unrepeatable uniqueness. Just in that sequence, however, it becomes clear also that his identity is forever and inescapably entangled with who God is.[3] In the story, God is mysteriously active in and through contingent historical events and agencies. That divine presence and action culminates in the resurrection of Jesus, where God is present directly. The form that God's active presence takes is the risen Jesus. The resurrection has revelatory force for Frei: it discloses the profound unity of Jesus of Nazareth and Israel's God and the centrality of this human being to all God's activity in history, and to the way God relates to every human. This claim offers us a basis for thinking about Scripture, once we clarify the relation between Scripture and the identity of Christ.

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[2] This consensus therefore excludes certain groups claiming a Christian identity but rejecting Israel's Scriptures, a position traditionally labelled 'Marcionism' after the second century teacher, Marcion.

A Theology of the Gospel as Story

In Frei's account, the logic of the way the story identifies Jesus Christ is such that, for the believer who accepts it, Jesus Christ cannot be thought not to live. In this way, the story implicitly claims a very strong form of authority: if we accept its identification of Jesus Christ, we must understand him to be the living one.

We can fill out a theology of the story and the nature of its authority a little more if we trace the connection between it and the one it identifies. Following Frei's focus on Luke's Gospel, we might turn to its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles, where this connection between Jesus Christ and the spreading of his story is set forth. I take the narrative episodes of Acts to portray the activity of apostles as they disseminate the gospel about Jesus of Nazareth in such a way as to offer a Christian way of re-imagining the world.[4]

In Acts, the apostles and others retell Jesus' story repeatedly before different audiences, Jewish and Gentile, in Judea, Samaria, and various destinations on the way to the ends of the earth.[5] In the text, this story has the status of human testimony, the witness of those who had been with Jesus from his baptism to his ascension, to his resurrection from the dead, reporting 'God's deeds of power' in and through Jesus of Nazareth. In the episode of Pentecost and the sermon of Peter, Acts relates that testimony to its subject, Jesus Christ.

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[3] See also Kavin Rowe's exegetical development of this argument with respect to the term *kyrios* ('Lord') in Luke's Gospel, in Rowe 2009b.

[4] Here I am following the way of conceiving Acts taken by Rowe 2009a, though without attempting to match the sophistication or erudition of his treatment.

[5] The story varies in the telling, but the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus is always the decisive moment, usually preceded by his attestation by God through the deeds of power he performed followed by his

According to Peter's sermon in Acts 2, the apostles' testimony is to be understood as the fulfilment of prophecy in light of the identity of Jesus. The apostles are witnesses of God's resurrection of the one whom God had attested to Israel through deeds of power, who had been handed over to the Gentiles to be put to death according to God's plan. The apostles' witness at Pentecost is the manifestation of the promised Spirit, which Jesus has poured out, having received it from the Father. By this Israelites are to know 'with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you have crucified' (Acts 2:36).

In this crucial moment of his sermon, Peter not only identifies the risen Lord and the earthly Jesus as the subject of the apostles' witness; he also picks up on two key terms by which Luke depicts Jesus' identity in Luke-Acts. As Kavin Rowe has shown, Luke in his Gospel uses the term *kyrios* ('Lord') of God but also of Jesus, and uses the ambiguity about which of the two the term denotes to express both the unity and the distinction between Jesus and God (Rowe 2009b). As Rowe also argues, Luke's use of the term *christos* ('anointed one') helps clarify that pattern of unity and identity between God and Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth is the Anointed One in virtue of the way the Spirit shapes his life from his conception, through his baptism, temptation, and in his ministry. The Spirit of the Lord is the Power of God. The construction of these terms, we may infer with Rowe, serves to express the freedom and intimate engagement of the God who is present and active in this world (Rowe 2009b, 47). It is the effect of the activity of the Spirit of the Lord in the human life of Jesus, uniting him inseparably to God which justifies Luke's extending the divine title *kyrios* to Jesus. (Rowe 2009b, 47-49). But Jesus is Lord in a distinct way: as Christ, as the one who receives the Spirit, who is entirely dependent on God in this unique way.

The force of Peter's sermon is that the extraordinary apostolic testimony of Pentecost as the outpouring of that same Spirit marks the further gift of God's Power to other human creatures, in and through Jesus. We can thus identify two factors which make possible the apostles' witness – their story about Jesus Christ as Lord. Both inhere in Jesus' identity as given in the story itself and his relationship to God in the Spirit of God. First, the identity of Jesus as something which can be told is made possible by the extraordinary role of the Spirit in shaping

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(unwitting) rejection by the people of Israelites and their leaders. Sometimes that story is made the conclusion to a rehearsal of the story of Israel; sometimes it is the conclusion to a story about God the gift-giving creator.

who Jesus is from the very beginning of his life: a human being living from a unique relation to God whose life therefore has a pattern that a human story can relate. Second, in his unity with God, marked by the shared title 'Lord', and as disposing of the same Power that shaped his existence as 'Christ', Jesus impels and empowers the telling of the story by bestowing that Power of God as a gift on his witnesses.[6] As a result, this story which humans tell is a means whereby God speaks. It conveys a divine call to repentance and promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit (2:40). Hence at times in Acts the apostolic testimony about Jesus Christ is called 'the word of God' (e.g. Acts 6:2, 6:7). At the same time, the apostles speak in the name of Jesus Christ (4: 18), and their message is described as 'the word of the Lord' elsewhere (13: 44, 48). If we bear in mind the way that Luke uses 'Lord' to express the unity of God and Jesus, we can see that Jesus is included in this divine speaking through the apostles' story (see Rowe 2009a, 111-112 for the same argument with respect to the use of 'Lord' in Acts 2). For the same reason we may take Jesus to be, with God, the Lord who makes this message efficacious (Acts 2: 47, 11: 21) (Rowe 2009a, 128-129).

Jesus' identity is crucial to the efficacy of this divine communication: it is to those who repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ that the Spirit and forgiveness are to be given. As a vehicle of divine communication, the story that the divinely empowered apostles tell demands and evokes a response which orients the responder wholly to the subject of the story: the risen Lord himself.[7] In the fullness and continuity of his identity, he himself is the truth of the story and the source and end of its authority, of the demand it makes of its hearers. The story of Acts illustrates further the nature of that authority and the scope of that demand.

According to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the apostolic witness calls its hearers to a fundamental reorientation away from sin and toward this same Jesus, by means of the rite of baptism involving the invocation of Jesus' name (cf. Acts 22:26). By being oriented to Jesus in this way through baptism, hearers of the story become those who also receive the end-time gifts Jesus gives: forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit.

It also entails their joining a community of those who share this fundamental shift in self-identification, gathering in the temple and in homes. Their common life is marked by practices in which they learn to live out that shift in the way they think, in their emotions, and in the manner in which they act toward one another. They 'devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers'; they sell their property and goods to meet one another's needs; they eat food together 'with glad and generous hearts' (2:42-47). Here we have a picture of the mode of authority of the story of Jesus Christ reflected in the ideal response set forth in the narrative of Acts. It demands the reorientation of lives in identification with Jesus Christ, the story's subject, embodied through appropriate practices, emotions and dispositions in a common life.

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[6] See also Paul's description of the origins of his apostolic ministry and his gospel in Gal. 1:1, 1:11ff.

[7] Similar claims could be made of the story as told in the other Gospels in the New Testament, and also in Paul, where it is God's immanent activity – God's Power or Spirit – which makes the gospel effective (1 Cor. 2:4-5; Rom. 1:17). Here too, the story and its apostolic tellers are vehicles of an address that is at once from God and from Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21), and can be called in this sense God's word (2 Cor. 2:17).

The extension of the apostolic mission to the Gentiles discloses further elements to our understanding of the authority of the story of Jesus. It is a message of reconciliation extended to all people on earth, to whom also the eschatological blessing is also extended. But the story demands a more basic reorientation within the turn to Jesus as Lord. It demands a turning to Israel's God as Creator, radically different from everything else as the source of all life and blessing (Acts 14:14-17; 17:22-28). Of Gentiles, then, the story requires a learning to see the world as creation, oneself as creature. It is to relate the goods we enjoy and our enjoyment of them to God as their source. It demands this recognition and along with it a redirection of worship, trust and hope from creatures to their Creator whose goodwill is disclosed in the particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

The Authority of Scripture in a Historical World

If we follow the logic that relates Jesus Christ to the story about him, we find that, just as he is seen to be central to God's relation to the world, so he and his story form the centre of gravity for Christian Scripture. It does so in two ways.

First, it does so with respect to Israel's Scriptures. The story of Jesus calls us to recognize that the God of Israel has come to Israel and to the world in and through Jesus Christ (Acts 2:20). In this way, it presents itself as the culmination of a story about God and Israel told in those Scriptures (Acts 2:16-36, 3:12-26, 7:1-53, 8:30-35; 13:16-41 etc.). Just so, the story of Jesus asks believers to receive and understand those Scriptures in those terms. On the one hand, Israel's Scriptures provide the context in which Jesus' story is to be understood. On the other, Jesus' story claims to be the lens through which those Scriptures are to be read in Christian community. It asks us to see anticipations of the end of the story in earlier episodes and especially in the promises made to Israel and the visions of its prophets. What authority Israel's Scriptures have for Christian communities is mediated through this relationship to the story of Jesus. Second, Jesus' story forms a centre of gravity in relation also to the texts of the New

Testament. In effect, the book of Acts contextualizes itself (and the gospel of Luke) by narrating the story of the apostles and their message into the world. It thus implies a distinction between the story of Jesus, and the text of Luke-Acts in which that story is related. We may be used to thinking that the reliability and authority of a text is our guarantee as to the truth of its message. Thus, if we can show that the story is divinely authored, or historically reliable, or true to a more general sense of what it is to be human, then we can have confidence in what it tells us. The story Acts tells about the apostles, however, upsets our expectations about this relationship between the reliability of the text and our confidence in the story it tells. By contextualizing itself in the story of the apostles' mission, Luke-Acts signals that as a text its reliability depends on the apostolic testimony it relates. And as we have seen, according to that testimony, Jesus of Nazareth as Lord is One who makes his story true and authoritative, and shapes the nature of that authority. Jesus Christ as the Living One is the ultimate ground of assurance of the truth of the teachings for the text's addressee, Theophilus, and for all the readers he stands for (cf. Lk 1:1-4).

In this respect, Luke-Acts offers a pattern for thinking about all New Testament literature. Luke mentions other orderly accounts besides his own, and the New Testament includes three of these. This mention also relativizes these accounts to the common basic story that all tell in their different ways. Those different ways of telling serve the purpose of assisting readers and hearers to the truth of what they have been taught. They offer different ways into Christ's identity and presence and into following him. We might extend the point to other New Testament literature. For example, Paul offers *ad hoc* theological argument and instruction in response to the issues raised by his correspondents in their particular circumstances, drawing on the implications of the story of Jesus Christ in the context of Israel's Scriptures and the story they tell. In other words, Acts helps us contextualize New Testament literature *theologically*, rather than primarily as a historical source – though it may be useful in this way also.

Our circumstances too are, like those of the writers, contextualized by the ending of the story of Israel in Jesus' story. They are nevertheless quite particular and distinct from the historical worlds reflected in scriptural texts. Those texts, moreover, confront us with a Lord who is not constrained by the limits of historical location. Therefore, we cannot always simply repeat the ways in which these writers and their contemporaries set forth faithful living in conformity with Christ. Difference of historical context can mean, on the one hand, that we are faced with circumstances not addressed by biblical teachings, or that biblical teachings involve appeal to common sense or scientific knowledge which is not valid for other readers in other contexts (think of Paul's natural law argument about hair coverings, or hair length, in 1

Corinthians 11:2-16: see the account of Paul's reasoning in Schoedel 2000, 59-64). Yet in responding to this Lord, we are afforded in these texts, under the Spirit's guidance, a sort of education. It is a training in the 'transformation of the mind' (Rom. 12:2) and life in accordance with the way God and Christ are identified in the story and with the way all people are identified in relation to them. Acknowledging the authority of this literature, then, means learning to think with it in dependence upon the Spirit of God. Such a model of scriptural authority also allows us, where appropriate, to bring our own knowledge to bear, where the texts make room for an appeal to it, and to relate it to what Scripture discloses about the identities of God, Jesus Christ, and creatures.

I would suggest we might extend this way of thinking about Scripture to Israel's Scriptures also, read in the light of the story of Jesus (see above). Here, too, we have a highly varied set of texts which serves to offer provocations, principles or paradigms to think with theologically. Wisdom literature is obviously suited to this sort of appropriation, but so too is narrative, and many legal texts can be taken in this way also.[8] To indicate more fully what this proposal might look like would take more space than I have here, but it does seem to be one way of following the pattern of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1ff ('These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the end of the ages has come') and the guidance offered by the author of 2 Timothy 3:16 ('All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness').

This discernment must also be critical in at least two ways. First, we must be attentive to ways of following the teaching of Scripture that have led to promoting the suffering and denigration of other creatures. Such suffering and denigration are contrary to their dignity as God's creatures and as addressees of the Gospel. We must be prepared to scrutinize and revise our performances of the text accordingly.[9] Second, for the same reason, we must be alert to the potential in scriptural literature for being appropriated in such ways. We can also guard against harmful readings by reading Scripture in conversation with other members of Christian communities past and present, far and near. And for all these reasons, this sort of thinking with Scripture demands that we are being formed already.

Thinking about Human Sexuality and Marriage in the Context of Creation

In the gospel, the Lord asks of believers to recognize who they are in relation to God. The most basic recognition here is to learn that we are creatures. I want to take this learning as my focus in offering a worked example of thinking with Scripture about human sexuality and marriage. I do so largely in conversation with David Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence* (2009).

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[8] On narrative and law see also Barton 2014, 137-148, 170-174.

[9] I'm borrowing this shorthand from Stephen Barton (among others) (Barton 1999).

A key decision that needs to be made at this point is where to begin to focus our thinking within the biblical canon. Theologians at this point traditionally turn first to Genesis, as the first book in the canon and which begins with stories about creation. In doing so they follow the direction of at least two strands of New Testament teaching, one of which is directly concerned with marriage: Paul's depiction of Christ as a Second Adam in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, and Jesus' teaching about divorce in Mark 10 and parallel passages.[10] And, in doing so, they find two passages concerned with human sexuality and with the origins of marriage. It is hard to dispute the need to follow this direction in thinking theologically about these subjects, but these are not the only texts to which the New Testament directs us. Paul's identification of God as Creator in Acts 14:16-17 and 17:26 describes divine creative activity in terms that echo not only Genesis ('From one ancestor he made all nations…') but also the portrayal of God in biblical Wisdom literature who allots times of human lives (Eccles. 3:1-15), who gives life and breath to creatures (Ps 104:29-30) and provides them with good things (Ps 104:10-28), and whose providential ordering of human lives is the background belief asserted and tested in that literature. Furthermore, in the Johannine Prologue and in Colossians 1.15ff, the writers connect creation and salvation in Jesus Christ using the figure of divine Wisdom that we find in Proverbs and other texts (cf. Prov 8:22-31).

Kelsey has argued that there is a particular value in turning to Wisdom literature first in order to shape our thinking about God's creative relation to creatures. For here we find this topic treated on its own terms. In Genesis, Isaiah and the New Testament it is used to illuminate stories of how God reconciles creatures to Godself, and its distinctive logic is subordinated to the logic of those stories of salvation (Kelsey 2009: 161-2). A further advantage of this way of proceeding within the biblical canon, Kelsey argues, is that it helps block the tendencies of traditional readers of the tales of origins in Genesis 1-11(the 'primeval history') to understand Genesis 1-2 as descriptive of an ideal world before the 'Fall' of Genesis 3 (Kelsey 2009, 297ff). For the consequence of this way of reading Genesis 1-3 (which also interrupts the structure of Gen. 1-11) has been to equate the created existence of Adam and Eve with human perfection.[11] In this way these readings seem to imply that human beings are, in their created existence, imperfect because of the Fall and hence imperfectly human, so casting suspicion on their full humanity.

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[10] One might add Romans 1:18ff.

[11] On this point about the abstraction of Gen. 1-3 from Gen. 1-11 see Westermann 1994, 2-4.

Kelsey uses Job's protesting description of being created by God in Job 10:8-19 to guide his reflections on human beings as created by God. He finds two mini-stories here. Job 10:8-10 describes Job as being created by God in and through his birth from his human mother. God is freely and directly engaged in this process, so that Job's creation is both utterly gratuitous and natural, and on a par with the way other animals are created. Kelsey proposes, in effect, that we follow the model the text offers for thinking about humans as creatures. The text speaks of God's creative action by way of Job's birth in terms of the knowledge of its time (the coagulation of semen in the womb – Job 10:10). We think with the text by speaking of God's creative action through human birth, using the scientific knowledge of *our* time. And so we say that God creates human beings through their complex development before and after birth, as they interact with their biological and social environments. Thinking with the text in this way allows Kelsey to acknowledge the frailty and finitude of humans as living bodies and affirm their goodness as such.

The second mini-story, Job 10:11-12, depicts Job as the recipient of his human body, the recipient of a gift from God. Job takes this gift to be a mark of God's commitment to him in something like a social institution between two parties. This commitment from God forms the basis for Job's complaint. Job 10:11-12 also depicts Job as capable of being held to account by God for his actions (cf. Job 10:13-17) and just so worthy of respect. Finally, Kelsey also notes that in Job, and in Genesis 2:4b-3:24, God actually makes human beings accountable and responsible (and capable of response) by addressing them through the medium of ordinary human language, so establishing between God and humans something like a public space with commitments and obligations for the parties involved (Kelsey 2009, 291ff). What lines of thought about human sexuality and marriage might we develop from the orientation these scriptural texts afford us?

First, they indicate that we should see human reproduction, and hence the form of sexual differentiation it involves, as a good through which God creates human beings, just as Job was created. In this light we can understand the significance of the creation of humans as male and female and God's blessing of them (Gen 1:27-28) and subsequent generations in the Genesis primeval history and beyond. Yet once we learn from Wisdom texts not to see Genesis 1-2 as a depiction of perfect humanity, and not to absolutize the ancient social forms in which scriptural teaching is given, we need not see reproduction as normative for every human being or every act of sexual intimacy or as determinative for human gender roles. Nor need we conclude that sexual differentiation is significant only in reproductive encounter (as Robert Song seems to imply – Song 2014, 25). The malign effects of assuming the normativity of reproductive sex for full humanity in respect of many who are single, or who do not desire someone with whom they could reproduce in this way, or who find themselves unable, or no longer able, to do so, urge the importance of such considerations.[12] We would also have space to see the nurture offered by non-biological parents, guardians and other carers as modes of divine creation.

Second, Job's story also encourages us to take seriously the possibility that attention to the development of human sexuality might trouble readings of Genesis 1-2 which derive from those texts a two-sex model of human sexual differentiation.[13] I am thinking here especially of certain intersex conditions and the way they problematize thinking of biological sex as male and female (Cornwall 2010; Cornwall 2012; Fausto-Sterling 2012: 43ff; see also Susannah Cornwall's essay in this volume). If we take seriously the priority of thinking with creation with Wisdom texts, it may be difficult to block this challenge by asserting the fallen imperfection of intersex bodies. At the same time, we should take seriously Kelsey's insight from Job and from the second Genesis creation narrative that God personalizes us by addressing us through ordinary human language. For this insight directs us to attend to the ways in which our linguistic contexts form us as persons responsible to God and one another. Such reflection must consider the ways in which categories of human sexual differentiation and its lived expression (sometimes called 'gender') vary historically and across cultures (Laqueur 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2012, 70ff; see also Raphael Cadenhead's essay in this volume). It must consider the possibility that the categories of sexual differentiation and gender roles found in scriptural texts may not be natural or normative, even as they are part of the fabric of texts through which we are addressed by God.

Third, Wisdom literature indicates to us that part of our proper response to God creating us and our everyday world is a delight in God's creatures. This delight is patterned for us in the delight Wisdom takes in her fellow-creatures. For humans, this delighting includes taking delight in one's sexual partner through sexual intimacy. In the texts, reproduction is logically separable from such sexual delighting. The two are found together in Proverbs 5:15-20, but while a concern to restrict the addressee's production of offspring to the relations with his wife is urged as a major reason for sexual fidelity, the aim of sexual activity here is not strictly subordinated to reproduction.[14]

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[12] Here one might have sympathy with Elkanah's argument in 1 Samuel 1:8. A passing comment by Rachel Muers alerted me to the significance of this passage for this topic, and her reflections on Elkanah are developed in more depth in her Afterword to this volume.

[13] Note the complexity of this development and the scope for discontinuity between various levels of sex/gender identity in Fausto-Sterling 2012.

The Song of Songs offers an extended account of sexual intimacy in which passionate mutual delight between the lovers, framed in terms of the delightfulness of other creatures, is to the fore. Here there is scant reference to the possible reproductive results of their love-making.[15] In this light we need not subordinate the delight expressed by the earth-man in Genesis 2, or the one-fleshed union for which the first pair are the etiological explanation, to the focus on blessing and reproduction in Genesis 1:27-8 (and might also note the apparent equality between the man and woman). Such lines of reflection give further cause for not seeing reproduction as a normative expectation of every human couple in their sexual intimacy, even if it is enjoined upon humanity as a species. By understanding God to create us as fragile, dependent beings set in our everyday contexts, we may also see that the desire for another to take delight in one in this way is a proper creaturely need.[16]

Nevertheless, this kind of affirmation of taking sexual delight in another is qualified in Wisdom literature. For the desire it involves is relativized by being compared to a desire for something far more desirable: wisdom.

Wisdom is here a way of navigating the world in its orderliness so as to flourish. Such wisdom, says Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8:11, 'is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her'. We are thus directed to respect the priority accorded here to the desire for wisdom over other forms of desire that we experience as creatures. Hence the life conducted in search of wisdom will seek a wise way of conducting oneself with regard to sex that should guide Christians in seeking to shape and to inhabit (and perhaps in part subvert) the marital institutions of their contexts.

One line of reflection here might, like Rowan Williams in 'The Body's Grace', consider the form of partnership that best makes for mutual delight in another to be respectful and dignifying (Williams 2001; see also Brett Gray's chapter in this volume). Such a line of reflection might attend to the way in which language is a vehicle for the mutual delight of the lovers in the

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[14] Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 seems to suggest partners take mutual delight in sexual encounter, but makes no reference to reproduction.

[15] The closest the text comes is when the woman connects their intimacy of their love-making to the birth and rearing of their mothers in Song of Songs 3:3, 8:1-2 and 8:5, which is of a piece with the way the man addresses her as his sister in places (e.g. 4:9-12, 5:1-2).

[16] See also Kelsey on need and desire in general as features of human finitude, not marks of imperfection, in 2009, 268.

Song of Songs. Sex here is so much more than 'genital acts'. It is just as much a conversation in which the language of words (expressing desire, praising, inviting and beseeching, narrating episodes of intimacy) and the language of physical intimacy (seeking, looking, touching, welcoming, entering) are interwoven in what is a thoroughly mutual taking of intimate erotic delight. These are highly vulnerable communicative acts, because they are highly self-involving. They involve a singling out of the other for particular regard that involves the whole of oneself; that entails a mutual possession: 'I am my beloved's and he is mine' (Song 6:3). The woman seeks a permanency to their love: she would be a seal upon his heart and arm because love is as strong as death (8:6). The text does not tell us whether this desire was met, and it is clear this Solomon had many queens and concubines (Song 6:8-10), suggesting the mutuality of their love might be questionable on the part of the man.

To this ambiguity we can bring the concern of Proverbs for truthful language and faithfulness to one's conversation partners. As Kelsey relates, Proverbs represents this concern by contrasting the behaviours of Woman Wisdom and the foolish or adulterous woman (Kelsey 2009, 229ff). Woman Wisdom makes a truthful, public offer. The foolish woman subverts such ordinary public speech by her deceitful offer and by her breach of the marital covenant with her husband. It is a problematic image, taken from a male perspective, but its depiction of the way our ordinary speech commits us to those we speak with can be applied to the conversation of the lovers in the Song of Songs without such gender-bias. The lovers' conversation is a deeply self-committing one. In light of Proverbs' concern for truthful, faithful speech, the lovers' verbal and physical conversation can be seen to tend toward a life-long and exclusive commitment on the part of both. Such commitment would also demand an appropriate public formalization and recognition by wider society. In putting these things together we may find here a condition for wise loving which envisages forms of marriage which would echo *on both sides* the other-respecting, hospitable self-commitment of God to creatures symbolized in God's relation to Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31.

Conclusion

So much depends on *how* we think with Scripture. The worked example I have just offered illustrates the difference it makes to approach the task in light of the model of scriptural authority I have sketched above, and to consider carefully the way in which we deploy the resources of the scriptural canon. By thinking with the texts in terms primarily of how they identify God and creatures, and by thinking first with texts from the Wisdom tradition, and then reading texts from Genesis and elsewhere alongside them, we may find new ways of thinking theologically about human sexuality and about marriage. Thinking with Scripture in these ways might allow us to recognize ourselves as created by God through human reproduction, biological development and socialization, without taking reproductive sex as a norm for all human sexual relationships. It would let us consider the phenomena of human sexual difference within a scripturally-shaped framework and allow them to disturb our assumptions about sex and gender. It would move us to seek wise forms of relationship in which the deep self-commitment to the other enacted in truly mutual sexual delight is expressed in a wider pattern of life, and publicly recognized.

But when, you might be wondering, do we get to the difficult passages that everybody argues about most? The short answer is: not yet. To get there, I would need to develop this worked example into a much fuller theological account of human sexuality and of ways of thinking about human relationships involving sexual intimacy. Such an account would need to expand on the work done here in respect of humans as creatures. It would have to add to it similar exercises in thinking with Scripture in respect of humans as creatures reconciled to God and on the way to final fulfilment with God. It is only in the context of a theological use of Scripture of that order that we can adequately assess the most appropriate *use* of the teaching of passages like Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 or Romans 1:18-32 and their appeals to what is appropriate to male status or to the natural order.[17]

For, as I have shown throughout this chapter, to help Christians address the character of marriage in any given context, we need a God-centred way of thinking about it that allows us to draw upon, sift, order and deploy the varied testimony of the Scriptures, taking seriously both their normative function and their human, historical character. It will be one that allows us to pay attention to the complex lived reality and variety of marriage practices in our own context, and teaches us to see how they might better reflect the good purposes of God. I have sought to show how we can take the Scriptures primarily as testimonies to the identities of God and creatures, and as patterns proposed to the people of God for discerning their lived response to God. I have argued that recognizing these patterns does not bring our thinking to an end, but sets us on a pathway of theological thinking, taking into account our experience and other data and discoveries about human sexuality. We think 'biblically' about marriage when our reasoning about particular forms of marital institutions and practices takes its shape from those patterns, as critically governed by the way Scripture identifies God and human beings in relation to Jesus Christ.

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[17] Robert Song offers a good example of this sort of assessment in 2014, 62ff. For one of the best treatments of the rationale behind these texts, see Nissinen1998.

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