Book Reviews

Scripture and Interpretation

Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships by James V. Brownson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. Pp. xi + 300. $29.00 paper.

Understanding is harder than reading, and obeying is harder than understanding, especially when what I have read is telling me to do things that I would rather not do. If one happens to belong to a religious community that has the pesky habit of rooting its understandings of life in the interpretation of a sacred book, the only way to avoid obeying the text (aside from blatant disregard) is to find a new way of reading the inconveniently troublesome passage, a way that lets me off the hook of feeling compelled to do the things I never wanted to do in the first place.

This age-old hermeneutical temptation is at the heart of Brownson's book, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships,* leaves the reader with an important question: When is a newer reading a truer reading, and when is it simply more convenient?

Brownson explains that his goal is to help the church "to cultivate a wider capacity to read the biblical texts in fresh ways" (13). To his credit, he reveals that the impetus behind his research was learning that his teenage son was gay (11). Those difficult family conversations led the author down a path that eventually took him away from his traditional view of homsexuality into affirming same-sex marriage.

I confess that my problems with Brownson's book begin here as the reader senses a clear predisposition with strong hermeneutical implications. Traditional readings of Scripture suddenly "seemed shallow and unhelpful" to Brownson, and were merely "simple answers from the past" that failed to "look more deeply in a new context" for "new patterns" that were "fresh" and "reinvigorating" in the face of today's social challenges. The book's foreword by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson presses the point home. We read that Brownson "calls us into a deeper engagement with the Bible" pressing us to discover what it "truly means" (viii). The message is clear: The traditional understanding of Scripture that requires us to love all people unconditionally but prohibits homosexual behavior can only be affirmed by those who read the Bible superficially and do not know any gay or lesbian folks personally. Such dismissive assumptions do not bode well for the exegesis that follows.

Brownson's argument begins with a critique of traditionalist claims that are based on the idea of gender complementarity—the notion that men and women are created in such a way as "to go together." Brownson asks, "Is 'anatomical and procreative complementarity' really the basic form of moral logic that the biblical writers have in mind" when prohibiting same-sex relations? If this is the case, then "we ought to expect to find other passages of Scripture that make this connection between gender and biology clear" (23).

Brownson's question requires a negative answer for his case to be sound. The limiting qualification, i.e., his expectation of multiple, supporting passages drawing a connection between biology and gender, sets a bar all too conveniently high for his argument. Multiple, clear, supporting texts are always desirable for biblical interpretation, but is it a reasonable criterion for accepting an argument? Personally, I wish that the Old Testament explicitly linked Genesis 3 to the universal problem of human sin, but it does not. Does that inconvenient fact justify the rejection of the orthodox understanding that Genesis 3 describes the beginning of original sin? No, it does not.

Furthermore, Brownson's analysis of Genesis 1 and 2 is highly problematic. He reads each chapter as if it were a discrete unit with no literary or theological connection to the other, focusing his interests so narrowly as to guarantee that neither chapter can shed light on the other. The discussion of Genesis 1 begins by correctly arguing that the original "adam" was not a sexually undifferentiated being that was later divided into male and female. Consequently, man and woman do not "need" each other in order to be complete beings. But Brownson ignores the obvious gender complementarity embedded in the divine commission of Genesis 1:27c–28, "Male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth." Man and woman are commanded to reproduce, populate the earth, and govern it. Neither of them needs the other to be whole as a person, but biological, gender complementarity is integral to their ability to fulfill their role within creation.

Continuing his theme, Brownson states that the "focus of Genesis 2 is not the complementarity of male and female, but on the similarity of male and female" (29). He argues that becoming "one flesh" in verse 24 does not refer to sexual intercourse but to the "kinship bond" existing between family members. In other words, a man will leave his parents and form a new "kinship unit" with his wife. While it is true that becoming "one flesh" may designate kinship connections, including those between same-sex relatives, it is special pleading to insist that heterosexual bonding is irrelevant to Genesis 2:23–24. Heterosexual reproduction is foundational to all other kinship bonds. Only willful blindness can ignore this dimension of 2:24, following as it does the obvious procreative commission in Genesis 1:27–28. By seeing only the similarity between man and woman at the expense of their

differences in Genesis 2—and thereby continuing to discount any overtones of sexual complementarity—Brownson posits an either/or equation where none exists. Similarity always entails difference or different things would not be similar; they would he identical. Man and woman are not identical; they are similar (both human) while being different (male and female). Brownson's foundational analysis of Genesis 1–2 must be judged a failure.

Finally, Brownson's discussion of Romans 1:24–27, the New Testament *crux interpretum*, is a web of misinformation. He begins by insisting that the New Testament does not address notions of (1) sexual orientation or (2) life-long, committed same-sex relationships because neither concept was known in the ancient world. He then shifts the substance of his argument from this first claim about what was generally known (or unknown) in Paul's day to a second claim about the absence of extant literature written contemporaneously with Paul that offers a positive depiction of long-term, homosexual relationships. On the basis of these claims, Brownson concludes that Paul could never have conceived of such things as same-sex orientation and life-long gay unions (155–56). The supposedly unprecedented nature of modern, same-sex marriages then becomes an important ingredient in his suggestion that Paul's views on homosexuality cannot meaningfully engage the modern debate (165–67).

However, there are problems with both of Brownson's assertions. Concerning the first, it is long past time for this falsehood to be laid to rest once and for all. The Greco-Roman world certainly did know about both same-sex orientation and long-term, stable, same-sex relationships. Rather than depending as heavily as he does on the biased treatment of historical evidence in works like M. Nissinen's *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Fortress 1998), Brownson should also have consulted something like the even-handed presentation of the evidence in L. Crompton's *Homosexuality & Civilization* (Harvard, 2003), which demonstrates that both concepts were known to the ancient Greeks and anyone who was familiar with them.

Brownson's second claim about the lack of extant literature written in Paul's day is true, but its relevance to his argument is unclear. Exactly how does the absence of contemporaneous literature prove anything about what Paul could or could not have known about homosexuality, especially because the earlier Greek literature remained widely in circulation? Paul was a well-educated man whose native city, Tarsus, was home to a major university. This is merely another tendentious conclusion based entirely on an argument from silence.

Brownson goes on to argue that the Greek word translated as "desire" (*epithumia*) in Romans 1:24 does not denote mere desire but focuses especially on the intensity of desire. He says, "one cannot ignore the level of passion when a pattern of behavior is characterized by the word *epithumia*" (167). Over the course of a few pages, his rhetoric escalates from discussing desire to describing "out of control desire" and "excessive, self-centered,

and destructive behavior" (169). Accordingly, Paul does not condemn homoerotic desire *per se* in Romans 1:24, but the self-centered, uncontrolled excesses revealed when heterosexuals lust after members of their own gender. Here Brownson is simply wrong in both his lexicography and interpretation. The single word *epithumia* is never rightly translated as "out of control desire." It is significant that he offers no evidence or documentation for this bizarre rendering. Paul knows very well how to describe an "excess" of *epithumia*, as he does in 1 Thessalonians 2:17 (*en pollē epithumia*, "in intense desire"). By such shenanigans Brownson avoids the real issue for Paul. It is not the volume of one's desire but its object, i.e., members of the same gender that makes it shameful. After all, the desire in Romans 1:24 is a consequence of the idolatry of Romans 1:18–23, and it seems unlikely that Paul means only to condemn excessive idolatry!

Brownson's treatment of the way Paul uses the Stoic notions of what is according to nature (*phusis*) and contrary to nature (*para phusis*) in Romans 1:26–27 is also problematic in the way he treats both the origin and the interpretation of the idea of "nature." This time he admits that there was a great deal of extant Jewish literature available to Paul that used the Stoic categories of "natural" vs. "unnatural" behaviors. Now, however, the availability of extant literature only demonstrates that the idea of nature was "not an inherently Jewish concept" (225). Never mind that Paul's belief in angels, resurrection, final judgment, and the apocalypse were not inherently Jewish concepts either. Why an idea's place of origin should be problematic is unclear, except that it provides Brownson with another opportunity to cast aspersions over Paul's argument. Most egregiously, Brownson ignores the important Stoic distinction between nature (*phusis*), which is inherent to the unchanging order of creation, and law (*nomos*), which is variable according to human, social conventions. This confusion allows him to misconstrue Romans 2:14, "When Gentiles . . . do by nature things required by the law," and its relevance to Romans 1:26–28. By eliding the Stoic distinctions among creational, societal, and personal nature, he can import the anachronistic, subjectivist claim that Paul uses *phusis* to designate "'what comes naturally' or 'what is in accord with one's own nature or identity'" (226). What "comes naturally" for Paul is the creational norm of heterosexual relations, not the "whatever comes naturally to me" of our modern, individualistic society.

Brownson concludes by believing he has shown how "both sides [of the debate] accept the authority of the [biblical] text in what it is teaching," a claim that can only be embraced by readers who also share his endorsement of same-sex marriage. He insists that the true disagreement between traditionalists and progressives concerns "how Paul's discussion (and the rest of the biblical witness) speaks to our contemporary experience, particularly the experience of gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships" (262). Once again Brownson misstates the issue. The disagreement actually turns

on the (in)appropriate role given to the claims of modern, gay experience in shaping the church's interpretation of uncomfortable texts. Rather than submitting the gay experience to Scripture's evaluation, Brownson makes personal experience authoritative and then molds Scripture accordingly. Any book filled with as many errors, misrepresentations. and falsehoods as is this one should not please anyone, but I am afraid that *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* will become very popular among those who prefer teachers that make them feel comfortable "in their own *epithumias*" (2 Timothy 4:3).

—David M. Crump

One Bible, Many Versions: Are All Translations Created Equal? by Dave Brunn. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013. Pp. 205. $16.00 paper.

Popular theological positions tend to swing like pendulums. Dave Brunn has seen the Bible translation pendulum swing far to the side of the "literal," "formal equivalence," or "word-for-word" translations. With his work, Brunn hopes to start the pendulum swing in the opposite direction, in favor of "meaning-based," "dynamic equivalence," or "thought-for-thought" translations. He argues for a paradigm shift in the way mainstream Christianity sees Bible translation. All translations use, and should use for that matter, a thought-for-thought translation method. Different translations merely use a meaning-based translation in different quantities and in different verses. For that reason, Brunn proposes the terms modified-literal and idiomatic as replacements for literal and meaning-based, respectively. In order to translate successfully, Brunn argues that the meaning conveyed must take precedence over form (87). Brunn's purpose is twofold: to educate those who read the Bible about successful translation work, and to remove some of the stigma that has been placed on idiomatic translations.

Brunn's years of translation and missionary service with the Lamogai people of Papua New Guinea increase the clarity with which he delivers his argument. Brunn has firsthand experience of the challenges of translating the Bible into a new language and a new culture. The examples he presents from his years of translation work highlight the impossibility of an exact word-for-word translation. Unique languages and cultures make a word-for-word equivalence impossible. The so-called literal translations, such as the KJV, ESV, and NASB, often resort to a meaning-based translation as the translation demands it. As Brunn puts it, "This deeper examination led me to conclude that the seemingly literal versions of the Bible in English are not nearly as literal as I had previously thought (22)." Throughout the book, Brunn argues that every translation uses a word-for-word translation in some cases and a meaning-based translation in other cases. Brunn does not proselytize for one particular translation, asserting the value of a wide variety of translations.