

Will the Real Homosexual in the Bible Please Stand Up?

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Abstract

A public opinion survey and an examination of references to the Bible and homosexuality on the Web, show that the Bible has a considerable impact on peoples' attitudes regarding homosexuality. Interpretations of relevant biblical statements are used by conservatives and liberals to condemn or justify same-sex relationships. This article deals with biblical figures alleged to be homosexuals. Three pairs – David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi and Daniel and Ashpenaz – are mentioned most frequently as possibly being homosexuals. The arguments in favour of these claims are scrutinized and criticized. Basic flaws of disregarding the Hebrew original text, taking discrete verses out of context and lack of sensitivity to cultural differences between postmodern Western society and ancient Middle-Eastern ones were identified. It is suggested that these figures became so significant, by virtue of them being icons of homophilia – love and friendship between woman and woman, man and man, in pre-homophobia times. It is contended that those in the Bible usually identified as homosexuals are not necessarily so, and that someone who until now was never thought to be homosexual, more than anyone else in the Bible, can be more justifiably considered one. The case for seeing Ecclesiastes-Qohelet as a homosexual is presented, and thus 'the riddle of the Sphinx', a phrase used to describe his writings, is solved.

No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says; he is always convinced that it says what he means (George Bernard Shaw, from a *Saturday Review* article, 6 April 1895).

The Bible is the ideological platform of the Judeo-Christian ethic, which still has a significant presence in Western civilization. The biblical teachings regarding sexuality bear directly on the attitudes of religious Christians and Jews (Stemmler and Clark 1990). Beyond that, as it seeped into the culture and became in a way part of our 'collective unconsciousness', it has an impact on the society at large. Thus we are continuously carrying a dialogue with the Bible's sexuality messages: They shape our attitudes and we in turn, interpret them according to our own point of view.

A survey of 1003 American adults (Barna Research Group 2001) concluded that 'practical outcomes replace biblical principles as the moral standard'. And yet, about one out of four adults (24 per cent) lean primarily upon religious principles and teaching or Bible content when making moral decisions.

Many adults indicated attitudes that conflict with the moral positions advanced by their faith-of-choice. Regarding homosexuality, the main finding was:

Americans are more accepting of homosexuality. Nearly half of all adults (48%) believe that sexual relations between consenting adults of the same gender should be legal, although only half as many say that such relations are morally acceptable (25%).

Looking at the half empty cup, a large percentage still believe that homosexual relations should not be legalized, and of those who are more accepting, the majority still see such relations as immoral. Thus the Bible still has a considerable impact on peoples' attitudes towards homosexuality.

This is also reflected in the virtual world: An internet search for 'homosexuality and Bible' (Google.Com 2003) brought about 169,000 results. A year later (Google.Com 2004) it went up to 240,000 results. Continuing this click of the mouse empirical study, 863,000 (1,480,000)¹ results were found for 'homosexuality', and 305,000 (344,000) for 'sexuality and Bible'. Thus, about 20 per cent (16 per cent) of all web pages dealing with homosexuality included some reference to the Bible, and 55 per cent (70 per cent) of all pages dealing with sexuality and the Bible, were about homosexuality.²

Townsley (2003) has prepared a comprehensive bibliographical list of positive and negative positions regarding homosexuality and the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. He has rated each contribution according to: A = Anti-gay, P = Pro-gay, N = Neutral, and in addition rated on a 1-4 scale the degree of uniqueness and importance of the information provided. Thus, quite often homophobes and homophiles alike keep returning to the Bible to justify their respective positions. The As will point to sections in the Bible condemning homosexuality, while advocates or Ps will offer an alternative affirmative interpretation.

1. The numbers in parentheses are from the 2004 search.
2. The reader has to take into consideration that the outcomes of such a search are usually inflated as several hits to one and the same website are included. Furthermore, a search with names such as David and Jonathan also results in hits that have nothing to do with the biblical figures.

Robinson (2001) in a comprehensive review, analyses key passages from both P ('liberal') and A ('conservative') perspectives. He delineates three domains where these conceptualizations clash: passages in the Old Testament, ones in the New Testament and instances of same-sex relationship in the Bible. In the first two domains the P commentators offer very strong and convincing arguments. Among them, Boswell (1980) covers the results of biblical scholarship in the 1970s concluding that these passages do not deal specifically with homosexuality or heterosexuality *per se*, but rather with errors in relationships (sins) that all persons are capable of committing.

The arguments regarding the third domain, with which we will deal in the present article, are less convincing. Let us spell out the importance of this issue: Whatever is said or not said about homosexuality, if same-sex (or homosexual) relationships are recognized and described in the Bible, and are described favourably, and on top of that, if the persons involved are respected and admired, the 'defence' can rest its case.

As no one in the Old Testament is explicitly identified as a homosexual, this is for all practical purposes, an attempt at 'outing' (Signorile 2000) biblical figures. In this article the use of the term 'homosexuality' is used for convenience's sake with these two reservations in mind: this word does not appear at all in the Hebrew text, and can only be found in some later translations into English. The terms 'homosexual' or 'gay' are quite recent and are inappropriate to describe persons in the biblical, or Hellenistic periods (Greenberg 1988; Dover 1989).

In the following pages I will first review three much described instances of 'biblical outings'. This will be followed by discussing the sexual identity of Ecclesiastes, which until now was not dealt with at all. It is my contention that those in the Bible that are usually identified as homosexuals are not necessarily so, and that someone who until now was never believed to be homosexual at all, might have been one.

Three Biblical Outings

Among attempts to identify homosexual couples in the Bible, three pairs are most frequently mentioned: David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, and Daniel and Ashpenaz. My discussion will follow Robinson's (2001) excellent summary of the respective positions of conservative and liberal commentators. Conservative theologians basically argue that given the prohibition and condemnation of male-male sexual relations, it is inconceivable that the Bible will describe a homosexual relationship, especially so when a key figure such as King David is involved. Believing in heavenly authorship, they read the Bible in a literal way, refusing to speculate

beyond what is explicitly stated. This is a legitimate choice, and one can only accept it or not, but not argue with it.

Speculating and offering interpretations, the liberal position opens itself to criticism, as alternative interpretations are always possible. Although sympathetic to this position, I will make such criticism indeed. To each thesis, an antithesis will be presented. At the conclusion of the analysis, a synthesis will be suggested. Most of the liberal discussants commit one or more of the following 'sins': (1) Using various biblical translations to the neglect of the Hebrew origin or its literal translation. One should not forget that translations are always interpretations; (2) Taking discrete verses out of their biblical context; (3) Assuming that postmodern Western culture is not different from an antique Middle-Eastern one.

The same Google.Com research (2003, and also in 2004) on the number of results per query was carried on each of these pairs, and the figures were: the first pair – 2,350,000 (6,600,000) results; the second – 163,000 (235,000); the third – 1760 (1870). David and Jonathan have an unparalleled presence on the web, which is a reflection of their cultural significance. They have become an icon of friendship, of male friendship as well as of homosexual love. Thus, Horner (1978) titled his book *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*. Similarly Ruth and Naomi became an icon of female friendship and lesbian love. Daniel and Ashpenaz, as can be seen from these statistics, are of much less cultural significance. These pairs are proportionally represented in the literature dealing with the issue of homosexuals in the Bible (Townsend 2003) and this proportion will be also maintained in the present discussion.

David and Jonathan

Background: The two books of Samuel describe the beginnings of the Israelite kingdom. It starts with the birth of Samuel who has anointed Saul to be the first King. Jonathan was his son, and next in line for the throne. David was a hero whose popularity became a threat to the King. The relations among these three are very intense: a very close bond between David and Jonathan; rivalry between Saul and David; a conflict between two loyalties in Jonathan's heart. Another emotional triangle was created when David married Michal, Saul's daughter and Jonathan's sister.

Most liberal theologians suggest that David and Jonathan had a consensual homosexual relationship – in some ways, a forerunner of some of today's gay partnerships. Robinson's (2001) summary of their arguments will be quoted. The following verses are this thesis's building blocks.

a) 1 Samuel 18.1

Jonathan became one in spirit with David and he loved him as himself (NIV)

or

the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul (KJV).

Thesis: Most translations use the term 'soul' rather than 'spirit' to describe the bond. They speak of an 'immediate bond of love', their souls being 'in unison', their souls being 'knit', and so on. Genesis 2.7, as written in the original Hebrew, describes how God blew the spirit into the body of Adam that God had formed from earth, so that Adam became a living soul. This means that 'soul', in the ancient Israelite times, represents a combination of body and spirit. Thus the two men appear to have loved each other both physically and emotionally.

Antithesis: The Hebrew *nefesh* is indeed not merely soul, but 'body and soul together'. Yet, this is a unity, and it is not justifiable to cut it down into two separate entities of body and mind, in order to argue that they loved each other both physically and emotionally. Words in Hebrew have many layers and shades of meaning. It is also true that two different words might have one shared meaning. *Nefesh* has at least two meanings: (1) A person's emotional/mental entity (mental sickness would be *machalat nefesh*); (2) The whole living person ('we are a ten *nefashot* (pl.) family' would mean that we are a family of ten persons). The first part of the verse uses the first meaning, and the translation into 'soul' is quite justified (although a problem is created as the Hebrew *nehashama* is also usually translated as 'soul'). In the second part of the verse, the second meaning of *nefesh* is indicated, namely – Jonathan loved him as he did his own self – as a whole person.

b) 1 Samuel 18.2

From that day, Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house (NIV).

Thesis: David left his parent's home and moved to Saul's where he would be with Jonathan. This is a strong indication that the relationship was extremely close.

Antithesis: Saul asked David to stay with him, probably for political reasons. He preferred to have this young popular hero close to him and under his supervision, rather than being a threat from a far. Upon this background the friendship between David and Jonathan could develop.

c) *1 Samuel 18.3-4*

And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt (NIV).

Thesis: Since people in those days did not wear underwear, Jonathan stripped himself naked in front of David. That would be considered extremely unusual behaviour (then and now) unless their relationship was physical.

Antithesis: The commentator thinks in terms of Western dress protocol. Bedouins would be a closer model. In hot desert climate conditions, it is customary to wear many layers including long loose underpants and a robe. In pre-homophobia societies, people did not have serious inhibitions about nudity or touch in same-sex situations, although in the Bible it was considered a great sin for children to see their parents' privates. The above thesis disregards another instance of nudity, described only one chapter later: King Saul himself gets totally undressed and starts prophesizing in front of Samuel as the spirit of God is upon him (1 Sam. 19.24). And now to a personal testimony: the author went to a gym in the United States and was surprised to discover that he was the only one to leave the shower stall without covering himself with a towel. In his Middle-Eastern country, males parade themselves in public showers naked.

The issue of possible nudity is marginal consideration to the above paragraph. Two points are more significant. First, in traditional societies friendship among males is a most important institution, carrying with it prescribed responsibilities and rituals (Brain 1976; Smith 1990). Thus, these verses describe a friendship covenant ritual between two males. Secondly, David's ascendance to the throne, instead of Jonathan who was the rightful heir to the King, creates a problem of legitimacy. This ritual constitutes a justification, as Jonathan himself is passing on to David the symbols of his status.

d) *1 Samuel 18.20-21*

Now Saul's daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased. "I will give her to him", he thought, "so that she may be a snare to him and so that the hand of the Philistines may be against him". Now you have a second opportunity to become my son-in-law' (NIV).

In the KJV, the end of v. 21 reads:

Thou shalt this day be my son-in-law, in the one of the twain (KJV).

Thesis: Saul's belief was that David would be so distracted by a wife that he would not be an effective fighter and would be killed by the Philistines. He offered first his daughter Merab, but that was rejected, presumably by her. Then he offered Michal. There is an interesting phrase used at the end of v. 21. The KJV preserves the original text in its clearest form; it implies that David would become Saul's son-in-law through 'one of the twain'. 'Twain' means 'two', so the verse seems to refer to one of Saul's two daughters. Unfortunately, this is a mistranslation. In modern English, this might be written: 'Today, you are son-in-law with two of my children.' That would refer to both his son Jonathan and his daughter Michal. The Hebrew original would appear to recognize David and Jonathan's homosexual relationship as equivalent to David and Michal's heterosexual marriage. Saul may have approved or disapproved of the same-sex relationship; but at least he appears to have recognized it.

Antithesis: Saul wanted David dead without his own direct involvement in the deed. Thus, he offered David a deal he 'could not refuse': Getting his daughter for a wife and in return leading the war against the Philistines, hoping that he will get killed in such a war. David refused once before and agreed later to marry Michal who loved him. The verse referred to above is a fragmented and possibly misplaced one. Its literal translation would be: 'In (or for) two you will get married into me today.' Possible interpretations could be: (1) You get a second chance to marry into me; (2) I am making such an offer for the second time; (3) You will be married into me for two reasons (Michal's love of him, and the king's own wish) or under two conditions (one of them would be fighting the Philistines). Saul might as well have talked about his own bond with the prospective chief of staff as marriage. David's friendship with Jonathan was something that did not make him particularly happy, and to which he would not have given his blessing. Finally, same-sex marriages were unknown in the antique world.

e) 1 Samuel 20.41

After the boy had gone, David got up from the south side of the stone and bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together – but David wept the most (NIV).

Other translations of the Bible have it as:

and they kissed one another and wept with one another, until David exceeded (KJV)

and they sadly shook hands, tears running down their cheeks until David could weep no more (Living Bible).

Thesis: The translators of the Living Bible apparently could not handle the thought of two adult men kissing, so they mistranslated the passage by saying that the two men shook hands! This is somewhat less than honest. The original Hebrew text says that they kissed each other and wept together until David became great. The word which means 'great' in this passage is *gadal* in the original Hebrew. The same word is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to King Solomon being greater than all other kings. Some theologians interpret *gadal* in this verse as indicating that David had an erection. However, the thoughts of David becoming sexually aroused after kissing Jonathan is too threatening for Bible translators, so they either deleted the ending entirely or created one of their own.

Antithesis: Indeed, David and Jonathan kissed each other three times. Kissing each other three times is still the norm in meetings between males (and not between males and females) in Muslim countries. Incidentally the combination of bowing down and kissing is also found in the meeting between Moses and his father-in-law Jethro (Exod. 18.7). The root *gdl* (big) has many meanings and shades of meaning. A biblical dictionary counts 37 of them, none having to do with sexuality. Moreover, a penis is actually referred to in the Talmud as a 'small organ'. The same word exactly with the same inflection (*higdil*) is used often to describe God's great acts (1 Sam. 12.24; Ps. 129.3). Thus the NIV and KJV translations are both correct.

f) 2 Samuel 1.26

I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women (NIV).

Thesis: In the society of ancient Israel, it was not considered proper for a man and woman to have a platonic relationship. Men and women rarely spoke to each other in public. Since David's only relationships with women would have been sexual in nature, then he must be referring to sexual love here. It would not make sense in this verse to compare platonic love for a man with sexual love for a woman; they are two completely different phenomenon. It would appear that David is referring to his sexual love for Jonathan.

Antithesis: The verse is about love in its totality. There is no point in breaking down this whole. The fact that in some societies public contacts between males and females are restricted does not mean that they limit themselves to sexual love only. In the Bible there are many moving descriptions of love between the two sexes such as between Rachel and

Jacob, and Isaac and Rebecca. The very expression 'my brother' indicates non-sexual intimacy. This beautiful passage is comparing two sublime experiences. It is actually saying that although the love of woman (which is also sexual), is so wonderful for David, Jonathan's love and friendship was even dearer than that.

Ruth and Naomi

Background: The book of Ruth is a story of human friendship, loyalty and kindness. It describes Ruth's kindness to Naomi her mother-in-law, and Boaz's kindness to Ruth. The book is also a report on King David's genealogy, as Ruth became the grandmother of Jesse, David's father. A public relations consultant working with some political candidate will probably describe the book as a campaign to soften David's liability of being a descendant of a foreign Moabite woman. She is portrayed as a very special woman, dedicated to her family, who chooses of her own free will to join the Israelite nation.

A well-known passage in the book of Ruth is 1.16-17, which is often read out during marriage ceremonies and lesbian union services:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me (NIV).

Thesis: Ruth 1.14, referring to the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, has it that 'Ruth clave onto her' (KJV). The Hebrew word translated here as 'clave' is identical to that used in the description of a heterosexual marriage in Gen. 2.24: 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh' (KJV). It is mentioned (KJV 4.15), that Ruth loved Naomi, while no such feelings are expressed towards Boaz, her husband. These verses suggest that Ruth and Naomi were in a close committed possibly romantic relationship.

Antithesis: The Hebrew root for 'clave' – *dvk* – is used also to describe a believer's relationship to God, or a person's sticking up to his or her values. The book of Ruth is indeed about a very close and committed relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law. Naomi calls Ruth 'my daughter' (2.22), which is not to be expected between lovers in a relationship of equality. A similar loving relationship existed with Orpah the second daughter-in-law, who did not stay with her: Ruth is kissing the two daughters-in-law (1.9) and Orpah is later kissing her (1.14). An emotional relationship which includes hugging and kissing, in moments of separation or joy, is not something unheard of between woman friends. Ruth's relationship with Boaz was surely based on kindness and grati-

tude. It is not described in the text to what degree they verbally expressed their love in their own privacy.

Daniel and Ashpenaz

Background: Daniel is the latest book in the Old Testament. It has Hebrew, Aramaic, Persian and Greek influences. Daniel and his four friends were taken as children from their home in Judea to be raised and trained in the Babylonian court during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. They were under the supervision of Ashpenaz, the chief of the court officials. Daniel wished to observe his religion's dietary codes and asked Ashpenaz to grant him permission to do so. The English translations of v. 1.9, describing Ashpenaz's response are very different from each other.

Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel (NIV).

Now God had brought Daniel into favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs (KJV).

Now God made Daniel to find favor, compassion and loving-kindness with the chief of the eunuchs (Amplified Bible).

Thesis: Some would detect the possibility of a homosexual relationship here. The Hebrew words which describe the relationship between Daniel and Ashpenaz are *chesed v' rachamim*. The most common translation of *chesed* is 'mercy'. *V' rachamim* is in a plural form which is used to emphasize its relative importance. It has multiple meanings: 'mercy' and 'physical love'. It is unreasonable that the original Hebrew would read that Ashpenaz 'showed mercy and mercy'. A more reasonable translation would thus be that Ashpenaz 'showed mercy and engaged in physical love' with Daniel. Of course, this would be unacceptable to later translators, so they substituted more innocuous terms. The KJV reference to 'tender love' would appear to be the closest to the truth. One might question whether Daniel and Ashpenaz could sexually consummate their relationship. They were both eunuchs. Apparently, when males are castrated after puberty, they still retain sexual drive. It is interesting to note that no other romantic interest or sexual partner of Daniel was mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

Antithesis: The above semantic analysis is groundless. There is no point in breaking down figures of speech, such as 'nice and easy' or 'cut and dried', and draw conclusions from each word separately. *Chesed v' rachamim* is an idiom that describes the range of positive feelings such as grace, empathy, pity, mercy and kindness. The word *rachamim* derives from *rechem*, meaning womb, and is used to mean mercy only in the plural

form. The same very idiom is found in many places in the Bible and at least three of them in Psalms, describing God's attitude to human beings: 'who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies' (KJV 103.4).

It is not clear whether Ashpenaz and/or Daniel were eunuchs at all. The Hebrew *saris* is a loan word from Acadian *sha reshi* – 'he who is of the head'. The two meanings of this word are: (1) officer, courtier, chamberlain; (2) eunuch (Kline 1987). The book of Daniel is less about the person, but rather his religious visions and the theological issue of God's justice in the world. Ashpenaz is a person in an authority position who shows consideration to the feelings of another person who is dependent on him. This regrettably doesn't happen often enough in life, yet it does and it can happen and not necessarily for romantic or sexual reasons.

Synthesis

Reading the debate between liberal and conservative theologians regarding these three pairs, one can forget that we are not dealing with living persons, but rather with characters in a book only. The question of their historicity is still an open one, as no supporting archeological findings are in existence. If some readers understand them as homosexual, so be it for them. No one can take away this feeling-conviction, and this interpretation could well be very constructive for their own life. In addition to this subjective consideration, logically speaking, we cannot determine categorically that any of the six people mentioned was not a homosexual, nor can we make this claim about any biblical figure. One can only present alternative reconstructions and each reader can decide which ones are found more convincing.

The three pairs are not living persons, but they are alive in our consciousness, and thus they have a spiritual existence. A great love affair or friendship story serves as a source of inspiration for generations to come, be it historical or fictional, biblical or mythological, written or on the movie screen. Human love is human love, regardless of the sexual orientation of the protagonists, or of their readers or viewers. A platonic relationship can be a model for a sexual one and vice versa. A homosexual pair can be a model for a heterosexual one, and the other way around makes sense too. If this is the case, supposing that these three biblical pairs were not homosexual, it is still a viable question: why are they so attractive to homosexual readers, or what do they symbolize?

Whereas the stance of homosexuality in the Bible is still debated, it is no doubt that homophobia was not yet in existence. I am suggesting that homosexuals and unfortunately (due to homophobia) not enough heterosexuals find the stories of the three pairs fascinating for this reason. The

biblical discussion is about deeds and not about the essence of persons' sexual identity. People were not afraid to show affection towards their own kind, and experience the erotic in all kinds of affiliation. In a similar vein Plato talked about 'pedagogic Eros'. The Bible is full of examples of erotic feelings between believers and the Deity. In these far away times, homophilia, love between woman and woman, and man and man, was appreciated, and friends could easily hug, kiss and talk about love. As a matter of fact, people were much more inhibited in demonstrating love and affection towards the other sex. Nowadays too, it is quite common to see in Middle-Eastern countries, male friends walking hand in hand in the street, kissing each other when they meet or depart.

It can be only speculated that these figures are found to be so attractive to the homosexual community because of the very ambiguity of their sexual identity. David and Jonathan could as well be lovers or simply friends who loved each other. Ruth and Naomi could be a lesbian couple, best girl-friends, or having a close daughter-mother relationship. Ashpenaz could have been sexually attracted to the handsome young Daniel, or he might have just felt compassion towards him and wanting to help. These biblical figures do not carry any sexual orientation on their sleeve, they are not stereotypic, and hence their universality. In Western culture one is homosexual or heterosexual, bi-sexual or transgendered. We are labelled and put in boxes. And if one is what one is, everybody can guess what his or her friends are. In the Bible, people are just sexual, and in the case of our six heroes and heroines, they just had friends, good friends.

Insisting that David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Daniel and Ashpenaz were gay is falling into the trap of categorization. Imposing on the text less than plausible interpretations in search of legitimacy and pride might backfire. After all, one must be pretty desperate to deny more obvious interpretations.

Solving the Riddle of the Sphinx

Readers and commentators of Ecclesiastes have always felt that this book stands apart from all other books in the Bible. Wright (1968) aptly titled his article on the book's structure 'The Riddle of the Sphinx'. This characterization was often repeated in articles afterwards. The traditional-conservative understanding is that the author is King Solomon, and the book's main topic is maintaining faith in God in the face of life's hardships and paradoxes. A critical-liberal approach to the book would see the author as one living in the Hellenistic period, a person who was involved in politics, a poet, a philosopher and psychologist.

The book's title and the author's name are one. The Hebrew Qohelet, comes from the root *qhl*, which means gathering or a community. Understanding his name to mean one who speaks in gatherings, it was translated into 'Ecclesiastes' in Latin and into 'the preacher' in English. Yet, the name could also refer to a gathering of his literary writings (an Anthology), or it could well be 'one of the community' (Anonymous). As we cannot know the origin of this pseudonym, we will use the original Hebrew 'Qohelet'.

Many articles and books interpret and discuss Qohelet's teachings. It is quite surprising to discover the scope of the interest in him. A book search (Amazon.com, 2003) found 209 books on Ecclesiastes. Whyte (1998) offers an interesting introduction from an existential point of view and Michelle (1999) lists relevant studies on Qohelet. His students called him 'the one' (12.11) for a good reason, and indeed the one he is, a unique and a grand teacher of wisdom and living.

The theology in the book is different from the rest of the Bible: God is not the nationalistic Jehovah, but the universal and open to personal understanding 'the deity'. The ethics in this book are not those of fulfilling God's commands, but rather about finding happiness in life. This book is not an account told by some biblical writer, as was the case with the books of Samuel and Ruth discussed above. Qohelet is a personal book, an edited anthology, which includes poems, aphorisms, and meditations all written by Qohelet himself. The book, according to liberal interpretation, was edited, and it includes remarks by a student of his and some modifications and additions by a more conservative editor.

Nietzsche (1966) supplies us with an important hint:

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown.

It is my claim that Qohelet included autobiographical material in his book, which until now was not recognized as such. I will deal here only with his love life and not with his intellectual development and his political career's ups and downs, which are also to be found in the book.

Qohelet lived in two cultures, the Israelite and the Hellenistic. In the first one, homosexuality was considered an abomination and great sin; in the second, love between an adult male and a younger one was quite common, and even considered to be a sublime form of love (Dover 1989). Male love in the Hellenistic world took place along marriage and family life. In the Israelite society marriage was the norm and a sacred duty as

well. Qohelet's loneliness and pain stemmed from the fact that he could not live openly with a male lover, nor could he get married as he felt a strong aversion and reservation towards women. Hence Qohelet had to keep his feelings a secret — he had to stay in the closet, only to be 'outed' now. In the following sections I will detail the issues and verses that lead me to these conclusions. I will quote the relevant passages from the Mechon Mamre (2003) *A Hebrew-English Bible*.

a) Many commentators were almost at a loss trying to understand Qohelet's negative attitude towards women. He says: 'and I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands; whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her' (7.26). Qohelet adds: 'one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found' (7.28). Some common interpretations of these verses conceive the writer as a misogynist; others understand these expressions as referring only to a sinner woman as is described in the book of Proverbs; or seeing these lines as a description of his own shrewish Xantippe (Socrates' mythological wife).

None of these suggestions is satisfactory. Qohelet is not a misogynist as he advises his young protégé (lover?): 'Enjoy life with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which He hath given thee under the sun' (9.9); The statistics of not finding one woman out of thousand, invalidate the 'sinner woman' hypothesis (there must be more than one decent woman around). Qohelet did not have a life partner. Interestingly enough, in what I claim is an autobiographical section he says: 'There is one that is alone, and he hath not a second; yea, he hath neither son nor brother' (4.8). 'Wife' was not used here and the expression 'second' to denote an intimate life-partner is unique in the Bible, and can also stand for a man as well. Thus, Qohelet is not talking about women, but rather about his own feelings towards them. He confesses that he himself finds it impossible to live with and love a woman. This for him would be 'more bitter than death'.

b) The name or nickname 'Qohelet' is unusual and unique in the Bible. It has a feminine ending appropriate for a woman's name (the masculine form would be Qohele). Moreover, in Hebrew, verbs change according to gender. Thus 'said' would be *amar* for male, and *amra* for female. In two separate occasions, Qohelet is referred to in the feminine mode, one of which comes immediately after the passages quoted above (7.29) and the second at the end of the book (12.8), where the feminine ending somehow slipped to create a senseless 'said the Qohelet' (*amar haQohelet*). This

peculiarity does not appear in all English translations of the Bible, assuming that these were simply 'a scribe's mistakes'. It is my contention that (1) mistakes in such a simple matter are not very plausible; (2) two mistakes of the same nature are improbable; (3) among homosexuals such playful switching of mode of speech is now, and possibly was then, quite common. Some male homosexual will use the feminine mode to describe their feelings or actions, or to inquire about those of their listeners.

c) Qohelet mentions seven times the word *holeloot* which is wrongly translated as madness. A better translation would be 'profligacy'. A *holel* is a sybarite, libertine or bon vivant. Qohelet talks about partying, luxuries, food and wine, but does not mention sex at all. On several occasions he calls himself a sinner, he also talks about promiscuity, again without any details. In the Talmud there are voices that refused to include Qohelet in the Bible, charging him with heresy (*minoot*). Heretics were considered to be people whose beliefs were deviant, and whose life style was negative and promiscuous (*b. Sanh.* 38.72). Conclusion: the very something that is not explicitly stated, and only hinted at, was Qohelet's non-normative love and sex life.

d) Friendship is a central theme in the book of Qohelet, and the word itself is mentioned by him five times.

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one be warm alone? (4.9-11).

The first image, of helping each other in moments of distress, is understandable. How many non-homosexual males would use the image of lying close to get warmer, to describe friendship? In Hebrew 'hot' and 'heat' are of the same root. Thus when the old King David complained about coldness, a young woman (Abishag) was brought to him 'and let her cherish him, and let her lie in thy bosom, that my lord and the king may get heat' (Kgs 1.2, KJV). Thus, Qohelet's image of heat must be based on his own experience of friendship with men.

e) In homosexual love, there is a special admiration of beauty and youth. The looks of youngsters, their smooth skin, bright eyes and black hair were often described by Hellenistic poets. Qohelet demonstrates to us that youth had special significance for him. He is connected to a young man, addresses him and dedicates his poetry to him. Moreover, Qohelet

differentiates between the different shades and stages of youth (in Hebrew: *bacharut, neurim, shacharoot*), which is another indication of the dominance of this theme. Qohelet wants his young friend to always appear at his best: 'Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no oil' (9.8).

f) Qohelet writes about his own aging in very gloomy and pessimistic terms. In the Israelite culture old people were much respected, and the word 'old' was used as a synonym for 'wise'. However, for homosexuals, it used to be much more difficult to come to terms with old age, when one is less attractive and must buy love for money. Loss of youth and diminished pleasure are compared in his poetry to the destruction of a house and darkness (12.2-7).

Summary and Conclusions

The Bible still has a dominant place in the cultural discourse on homosexuality. This was documented both in the real and the virtual worlds. The present article has dealt not with biblical proclamations but rather with biblical biographies, trying to find out who in the Bible can be considered to be a homosexual.

Three pairs – David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Ashpenaz and Daniel – are often mentioned in this context. Notwithstanding these pairs' sexual identity, their significance lies in them being icons of friendship, compassion and love in pre-homophobia times.

It was realized that it is impossible to categorically determine if any biblical figures are or are not homosexual, just as it is impossible to deny any reading or interpretation of a novel. All that can be done is raise some doubts and counter arguments regarding their 'outing'. In addition, an alternative 'candidate' was presented, with a different set of supporting arguments. Thus we are moved to the realm of aesthetics, where readers will have to determine for themselves which 'tune' sounds more harmonious and true to the original text.

This writer at least is convinced that he has solved what was presented by biblical scholars as the 'riddle of the Sphinx'. The very secret of Ecclesiastes-Qohelet, an original voice in the Bible, unique in his philosophy and outlook, was his homosexuality.

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