

**Queering Scripture: LGBTQ+ Oppression & Liberation
Through Interpretation of the Bible**

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Introduction

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have attended many pride events throughout my life. I went to my first pride parade with my mother and her friends when I was a baby, and I've continued to go almost every year since. At every single one of those pride events, without fail, looking past the colors, decorations, and unapologetically proud and happy people, there is at least one zealous opposer. Whether they are shouting slurs and calling us abominations, or genuinely trying to convert us to save our souls from eternal damnation, these protesters tend to quote Bible passages and cite Christian doctrine to prove the desperate need our souls have for salvation. It would be easy, then, for me to write off Christianity as a religion full of nothing but hatred and threats of damnation. However, I also know quite a few Christians who were incredibly supportive of me in my transition and of my queerness, along with several who are queer themselves. So what gives? How can two people who recite the same prayers, worship the same God, and read the same texts, end up with two entirely different views on queerness?

This wondering evolved into the research question: *How have Biblical interpretations, and their encompassing faith, been utilized to push for and justify both the oppression and the embrace of LGBTQ+ people?* The goal of my research was to thoroughly explore some of the themes of biblical interpretation, with a focus on the ways in which the Bible has been used for the oppression of LGBTQ+ people. I also found in my research that many theologians, researchers, and queer people have begun to reinterpret such texts, recontextualizing passages often used to justify oppression to instead favor LGBTQ+ liberation. Although the literature covered many more topics, this review will focus on the following themes: individual interpretation of the Bible, the ability to sift through Bible passages, the relevance of cultural

context in interpreting scripture, politics, the church as an oppressive institution, what the text itself says on queerness, God's intent, and the church as an accepting and liberating institution.

After conducting my research, I came to the thesis: Theologians, researchers, and LGBTQ+ people agree that there are many ways to interpret the Bible, and recognize that it is often used as a tool to justify preexisting beliefs, rather than an objective text with fixed meaning. As a result, in the realms of politics, culture, and personal identity, some people utilize the Bible and their personal interpretations to justify the oppression of LGBTQ+ people, while others use it to call for their liberation and embrace.

THE BIBLE: MODES OF INTERPRETATION

Individual Interpretation

This section examines the Bible as a subjective text that can be individually and uniquely interpreted. It broadly describes how the text itself is not fixed in meaning, and can be interpreted in many different, often contrasting ways. The Bible is often interpreted as anti-LGBTQ+, but some queer people are starting to reinterpret the text, shifting to a more liberating perspective.

When studying scripture, scholars make note of the fact that the Bible is not and has never been an objective, all-encompassing text with indisputable meaning, and that it is then natural for there to exist many varying interpretations. Austen Hartke, researcher, trans activist, and author of *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, acknowledges this fact with the following statement about the first chapter of the Old Testament, on creation: “If Genesis 1 was meant to describe the world as it is, the biblical authors would have needed a scroll hundreds of feet long” (53). Understanding that scripture is not so clear-cut, Hartke writes that, when “studying the Bible through a historical-critical lens, which seeks to understand the biblical world and the intentions behind the text, in the original language,” it becomes “clear that there [is] more than one way to read and interpret the Bible” (49). He goes on to relay the thoughts of a nonbinary pastor named M. Barclay, who, upon having the realization that there are countless ways to interpret the Bible, found this concept of reinterpretation confusing and wonderful: “They realized that not everything they had been taught as a young person was undisputed fact. It also opened their eyes to the possibility that God’s acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ+ people might not be an open-and-shut case, as they had once thought” (49).

The idea that the Bible can be interpreted in many different ways is supported by professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans,

Robert Gnuse. In an interview I conducted with the professor, he explained, “In the Protestant tradition, a great emphasis was placed upon the believers' right to read the Bible and interpret it for himself or herself.” Gnuse added his take on the pros and cons of this freedom of interpretation: “That enabled a lot of great biblical scholarship to emerge, but it also enables idiots to quote the Bible however they want and say whatever they want” (Gnuse Interview). While acknowledging the right that everyone has to interpret the Bible the way they want, Gnuse claimed that it also allowed a lot of bigotry to emerge in religious circles. Brandeis University’s Professor of Christian Studies Bernadette J. Brooten claims, in her article, “Research on the New Testament and Early Christian Literature May Assist the Churches in Setting Ethical Priorities,” that while it is frustrating for people to interpret bigoted opinions from the Bible, it is ultimately beneficial to be able to look at a variety of interpretations. She writes, “Because scholarship is critical engagement, debate, and the weighing of the respective merits of each argument, we need a range of interpretations” (233).

In his article, “Divinely Generic: Bible Translation and the Semiotics of Circulation,” sociocultural anthropologist Scott MacLochlainn explains that, through the process of translating the Bible, a lot of the text must be interpreted. Given the very nature of language, MacLochlainn claims that there must be a certain amount of interpretation that goes into the translation; no translated phrase will be exactly like its counterpart in the original language, and personal interpretations of certain passages can leak into translations (244). MacLochlainn’s proposed solution is generics—a strategy of leaving translations intentionally vague, such that no one fixed interpretation will be forced on the reader (253). “[T]he generic was viewed not so much as a compromise between different exegetical renderings as it was a form that enabled the reader to interpret God’s words themselves” (255). It is by allowing a variety of interpretations,

MacLochlainn suggests, that readers are able to truly connect with scripture. He writes, “When one places one’s hand on a Bible in a US courtroom and swears upon it, one is swearing not on an intrinsically erring translation, but simply on the Word of God” (256).

Looking for first-person accounts from transgender people on their thoughts on religion, scholars Kristen Benson, Eli Westerfield, and Brad van Eeden-Moorefield conducted a 2018 study, including seven in-depth interviews of self-identified transgender people (3 FTM & 4 MTF), ages 24 to 57. They describe their findings in their article, “Transgender People’s Reflections on Identity, Faith, and Christian Faith Communities in the U.S.” Amy, a 57-year-old trans woman who they interviewed, shared her thoughts on biblical interpretation:

“Unfortunately, many people are stuck with [a transphobic] view of scripture. And it’s sad because it limits them. It limits their view of the world. It limits their view of God. The box they keep their God in is too small” (409).

The researchers highlight that, as Amy suggests, the Bible is often used and interpreted in a way that puts other people—specifically LGBTQ+ people—down. While these interpretations can be damaging, Benson, Westerfield, and Eeden-Moorefield found that many participants have learned to interpret the text in their own way, citing sections of the Bible that encourage self-love. They explain that Sally, a Christian trans woman, “drew directly from the Bible to explain that self-hatred would be a violation of God’s will for her” (406). Although Amy had described the Bible being interpreted in ways to justify the persecution of LGBTQ+, Sally found a way to reframe the texts in favor of self-love and embrace.

It is on this basis that Joy Ladin wrote the article “In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology,” in which she suggests, like Sally, that we can reframe biblical texts to be more inclusive and accepting towards LGBTQ+ people. Ladin describes what the “image of God” (from Genesis 1:27, on creation) means to her as a trans woman:

From the time I first read Genesis as a child, I could see that the “image of God” had nothing to do with sex, gender, human differences, or human bodies—but what, exactly, did it mean? That question—what aspects of humanity reflect our kinship with our bodiless Creator?—is at the heart of what I now recognize as my personal version of trans theology, not because it is a question specific to transgender people, but because being trans forced me to search for aspects of my own humanity that weren’t dependent on my body or the meanings others gave it. Whether or not we are transgender, we engage in trans theology whenever we try to look past sex and gender, bodies and binaries, to understand what in humanity reflects the image of God (57).

She suggests that although the text may not have been written with transgender people in mind, the text can be analyzed and interpreted through a transgender lens, and that that interpretation is no less valid than any other (56). Put in the words of Mary Elise Lowe, from her article, “From the Same Spirit: Receiving the Theological Gifts of Transgender Christians,” “[t]heology can be queered and reformed by setting aside binary categories and embracing transgression and multivarious ways of thinking” (31).

Sifting

This section examines a mode of interpretation known as “sifting,” which suggests that one can pick and choose which Bible passages to follow. This section touches on “Sheilism,” and the idea of “eating the meat and spitting out the bones.” Here, the Bible is examined as a tool that people use to forward their own agendas, whether for oppression or LGBTQ+ liberation.

In a personal interview I conducted with Robert Gnuse, professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, he explained that biblical text should be looked at in its entirety, claiming that people should theologize from the whole text, rather than just sections that are in accordance with the beliefs of the reader. Gnuse states that “[p]eople have prejudices and they use the Bible to support their prejudices. The Bible doesn't create those prejudices. People have them on their own. They go looking for passages to reinforce it.” He suggests that people intentionally seek out passages that align with their

pre-existing beliefs; “people, especially in this country, know what they want to believe and they find a Bible concept and they make it say that” (Gnuse Interview).

Melissa M. Wilcox, author of “When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians,” argues a similar point, stating that one can sift through certain attitudes in the Bible based on their own personal values, feelings, and needs, and choose which apply to them and mesh with their identity (501). Wilcox relays this in a personal interview with a bisexual Christian: “Rather than being a rule book, religion has become a resource, to be utilized when it is expedient and ignored or rewritten when it is not. As one bisexual man explained to me: ‘I take from the Bible what I can use, and I disregard a lot of what I can't use.’ (interview 1154)” (500-501). Citing another interview, Wilcox writes, “‘I still have immense respect for the (Bible) because I feel all in all, you just eat the meat and spit out the bones. So I don't take every single thing - I just read it, and I let the Spirit guide me to the meaning’ (interview 1217)” (509). Wilcox explains that, based on these interpretations, anti-LGBTQ+ passages “are simply bones to be tossed in the trash” (509).

Comparing moderate interpreters of the Bible (those who try to take away the greater meaning of the Bible, rather than focusing on syntax) with literalists (those who follow scripture word for word, paying close attention to grammar), Wilcox goes on to say that moderate interpreters point out the hypocrisy of many literalist interpreters. They criticize literalist interpreters for opposing homosexuality solely because it goes against the Bible, pointing out that they don't as adamantly require all Christians abstain from pork or multi-fiber fabric. Wilcox notes that moderate interpreters also emphasize that Jesus, himself, never actually said anything about homosexuality, and that the Bible could have just as easily been talking about pedophilic (man-boy) relationships when condemning them (509).

In his book *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, Austen Hartke also addresses sifting when he makes this claim about the hypocrisy of some interpreters. When talking about a Bible passage that debates the morality of wearing the traditional clothing of another gender, he asks the question, “is it still relevant for us today?” Hartke points out a few verses that are obviously no longer relevant to 21st century life:

we no longer pay much attention to the laws in the verses before 22:5 (which command us to help our neighbor’s donkey or ox when we see it fallen in the road) or the verses after it (which command that we may never kill a mother bird when we take her eggs, but must always let her go free). Even if we look at other instances of the use of the word for “abomination” in Deuteronomy, we find rules that hardly seem relevant for us, such as Deuteronomy 25:13-16, which says that people who carry two kinds of weights in order to cheat others economically are an abomination. But if we took that rule seriously, perhaps we would be a little harder on people who manipulate the stock market! (61).

He makes it clear that Christians do not address all Bible passages with the same vigor or sincerity.

Throughout her article, “Research on the New Testament and Early Christian Literature May Assist the Churches in Setting Ethical Priorities,” Bernadette J. Brooten points out the oppressive nature of the Christian church deliberately selecting allegedly anti-LGBTQ+ passages over passages about human rights issues. Christian leaders tend to cherry-pick these passages, she claims, ignoring ones that do not align with their beliefs. Robert Gnuse points this out in his article, “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” highlighting that the Leviticus passage that prohibits homosexual behavior follows a statement that also prohibits having sex with a woman who is on her period, among other sexual acts that do not lead to procreation. Gnuse claims that the Levitical sexual laws emphasize maximizing reproductivity, so it would make sense that they would advise against any sexual act that explicitly cannot be used for procreation. It is interesting, then, he says, that people who use this

Leviticus passage do not condemn period sex as they do gay sex (76). As Gnuse and Brooten both suggest, people cherry-pick the passages that align with their pre-existing beliefs.

Furthermore, in his article, “What Do We Know of God’s Will For His LGBT Children?: An Examination of the LDS Church’s Position on Homosexuality,” Bryce Cook states that many Bible passages and commandments are regarded as unacceptable today. He writes,

However, we are, like other Christians, selective in which biblical commandments we take literally. Certainly, we do not accept other ancient biblical commandments the way we do those pertaining to homosexuality. Among scriptural passages that are no longer accepted are those that uphold slavery, mandate capital punishment for dishonoring parents, specify female purity rituals, and decree which foods are kosher. For example, Deuteronomy 22:23–29 stipulates that if a man rapes a married or betrothed woman, he is subject to the death penalty; but if he rapes an un-betrothed virgin he can make reparations simply by paying her father fifty shekels of silver and marrying her. Surely, we no longer accept this biblical law as just (12).

Like Hartke, Cook points out that much of scripture is irrelevant today, and can be cast aside.

A similar point is argued again by Robert Gnuse. In the personal interview, Gnuse says, “What we theologize off of is the general message of the text. So for example, in the old Testament they had capital punishment, but they didn't have prisons. You know, they either fined them, stoned them, or whatever. They did not have incarceration as an option. We do. Suddenly,” he concludes, “it means those passages that people quote to justify capital punishment today might be irrelevant” (Gnuse Interview).

Culture over Text

This section explains how, more so than the literal biblical text itself, matters of faith and morality were heavily, if not entirely, influenced by culture and politics. It analyzes the significance of cultural context in determining how the Bible has been interpreted.

Historians and scholars note that culture can have a greater effect on shifts in interpretation, especially regarding faith and morality, than scripture itself. American

sociologists, and co-authors of “Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality,” David Greenberg and Marcia Bystryn, claim that LGBTQ+ discrimination, historically, is rooted in major cultural shifts, and had little to do with analysis of the Bible. They point out that, as a result of large developments in the ancient Mediterranean world (such as Imperial expansion and devastating wars that disrupted people’s lives), monotheistic religion not only became more popular and accessible (with large cities becoming religious centers), but it became more necessary for people struggling to find new meaning or purpose with their lives (521). Thus, these cultural shifts caused societal instability that drove people to religion, craving guidelines and rules for ways to live. Among these guidelines were many cases of sexual asceticism, meaning harsh restrictions on self-indulgence, prohibiting people from expressing themselves sexually (521).

Greenberg and Bystryn continue their point about sexual prohibitions being a result of culture and politics of the time with reference to aristocracy and class conflicts in 12th century western Europe:

The bourgeoisie also reacted against sodomy (by which they meant all nonprocreative sexual activity) among the aristocrats, seeing it as an unproductive self-indulgence that expressed lust, not love or the desire for children. Indeed, sodomy became a metonym for excessive indulgence of material desires, evoking connotations that went far beyond sexuality. It represented a going beyond natural limits in the sexual sphere, in the same way that unrestricted greed did in the economic sphere (540).

They connect this to the condemnation of homosexuality, highlighting that Christian leaders, building upon the foundation of the sinful view of sodomy, used these ideas to prove the inherently sinful nature of homosexuality. They write, “By the end of the 13th century, the major elements in the Christian response toward homosexuality had been created. Scholastic theology had reconstructed sodomy as a sin against nature, far worse than other sexual sins” (542).

Karen Keen, author of *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, demonstrates the many stages of LGBTQ+ acceptance within the conservative church over time.

She emphasizes the importance of looking at these responses to homosexuality within their historical context, saying, “The body of Christ can better see the way forward when it examines its own attitudes and actions within historical trends” (1). Throughout the first chapter of her book, Keen summarizes the conservative church’s reaction to same-sex attraction from the 1960s to the present in five stages: 1. (1960s) “Gay people should stay in the closet,” 2. (1969-1990s) “Gay people are perverts and animals,” 3. (1990s) “Gay people are hapless victims who need healing,” 4. (2000s) “Gay people are admirable saints called to a celibate life,” and 5. (current times) “Gay people are _____.” As Keen understands it, the church is now at a crossroads, with many different ways to move forth in its response to same-sex attraction. She suggests that by analyzing the church’s response chronologically, we can get a better understanding of how the Bible is interpreted among various Christian communities, and why it is interpreted the way that it is (8-9).

Austen Hartke further establishes the claim that biblical interpretation, especially in regards to the persecution of LGBTQ+ people, has a lot to do with cultural context. In his book *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, Hartke examines the effect of Western Christianity on Taiwanese culture. He relays the account of Chen Chih-hung, spokesperson of an anti-LGBTQ+ Christian organization in Taiwan:

“Christian groups take the lead on this [homosexuality] issue since Asian religions haven’t traditionally seen homosexuality as a big deal. Churches in the U.S. and Europe have confronted the impact of gay marriage directly... Since only a small percentage of Taiwanese are Christians, we share what we know with other religions so that they understand the seriousness of the situation... Christian churches in Taiwan are informed by churches abroad about what gay activists have been doing here... We lack experience. They have told us how serious the issue is and what strategies [gay rights advocates] deploy” (71).

As evidenced in the paragraph above, Hartke argues that there is clearly a different religious response to homosexuality in different regions. He adds later, like other scholars, that time

period is hugely influential to the church's response to LGBTQ+ issues. Hartke says that the apostle Paul "would probably have been surprised to see openly LGBTQ+ folks leading prayers and people who had been divorced distributing the elements of the Eucharist. Yet here we were" (96).

In his article, "Divinely Generic: Bible Translation and the Semiotics of Circulation," sociocultural anthropologist Scott MacLochlainn introduces another element to the interpretation equation: translation. The Bible, of course, was not originally written in English, and so translators are tasked with co-authoring an interpretation that is both true to the text and meshes well with the people and culture of those they are translating for—a translation that is coherent with their readers, as well as a pure, objective, universal translation of the text (237).

MacLochlainn proposes that, given the complexity of the task, Bible translation can sometimes turn into a game of telephone, and translators are not immune to herd mentality, thus creating imperfect, culturally-biased versions of scripture (244). He additionally notes that there are cultural consequences to Bible translation, in some cases completely changing the meaning of a word. Thus, he relates that the impact of cultural influence on scripture may make some interpretations irrelevant to our current times: "Although Holy Scripture is nowhere culture-bound in the sense that its teaching lacks universal validity, it is sometimes culturally conditioned by the customs and conventional views of a particular period, so that the application of its principles today calls for a different sort of action" (247).

Robert Gnuse, in "Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality," takes a somewhat alternative approach to analyzing cultural context. Gnuse argues that interpreters must separate the Bible from its cultural context entirely. He states that although the biblical authors almost certainly held opinions about the things they were writing

about, the text does not necessarily reflect such attitudes. For example, the First Testament advocates for the rights of women and slaves, although it does not reflect the culture or common attitudes of the time. Biblical text often leads us to values ahead of their time. We must, then, theologize based on the text, rather than the cultural values of those who wrote them (78). As such, he suggests that it is culture itself that shapes various interpretations and views of morality, when it should be a study of the text alone. In our interview, Gnuse claimed that the morality of abortion is entirely shaped by cultural context.

They had to assign a value to a fetus. It doesn't tell us whether they considered the fetus a person or not. They had to say, "a fetus only has a 50% chance of surviving childbirth. We'd have to prorate it." So again, you don't take the text literally, because if their age is different, you [have to ask] ask what's the overall message of the whole text, and the overall message is to respect life (Gnuse Interview).

Gnuse argues that, because of the cultural circumstances at the time the Bible was created, scripture was written, in part, out of necessity.

Austen Hartke provides even more evidence to this claim in his book, *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*. In acknowledging the binary nature of the Bible passage Genesis 1:27 on the creation of gender, Hartke points out that such an isolating contrast between identities may have been something of a necessity at the time it was written.

The Torah laws that defined them and identified them as God's people were based on these acts of separation between the sacred and the profane, and between the commendable and the abominable... What's obvious is that rules like these not only made it easier for God's people to identify good food from possibly dangerous food, but also created ideological boxes that helped people understand the world around them... (50).

By separating concepts and behaviors into clear, opposite categories, people could easily distinguish between safe and dangerous, and between right and wrong. In this sense, interpretations of the text—and the text itself—are very clearly influenced by its cultural surroundings.

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE BIBLE AS A MEANS FOR OPPRESSION

Politics

This section explores the intertwinement of politics in the interpretation of scripture. It discusses the “smokescreen” that the political opposition to gay marriage has put up, as a method for ignoring other cultural and political problems within the church, as well as describing the general involvement of the church in legislature.

In my interview with Robert Gnuse, he establishes a connection between biblical interpretation and the political realm. Gnuse explained that, since its inception, the Bible has been used to put others down.

[P]eople are homophobic and they hate people who are different from themselves, or they may hate people who have a sexual identity that they're afraid they might have and [that] they're fighting against. And so they will just go out and find whatever they want in the Bible and use it however they want to beat down their opponents. It gets used by people to beat other people down. It's been used to beat down women, gay people, slaves and poor people (Gnuse Interview).

In his article, “Seven Gay Test: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” Gnuse suggests that scripture was, at times, intentionally changed to influence public opinion on homosexuality. He says,

The New Revised Standard Versions translates these two words [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*] in both passages as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites,” giving them a specialized meaning. The New King James Version and the New American Bible translate these words likewise. However, the old King James Version and the New International Version translate the words as “homosexuals,” so that readers of those translations will quote their bibles emphatically to condemn homosexuality (81).

As he points out in his article, these words—take *malakoi*, for example—change in meaning and connotation depending on how we translate them. *Malakoi*, in its most literal translation, simply means “soft” (79), and yet it is translated to “homosexuals” so that readers will “quote their

[B]ibles emphatically to condemn homosexuality” (81). The Bible, as Gnuse and other scholars note, was often used to push certain political agendas, usually in the direction of oppression.

As American sociologists, and co-authors of “Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality,” David Greenberg and Marcia Bystryn note that in Medieval times, it was not uncommon anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric to make its way into legislature.

Ecclesiastical denunciations of homosexuality began to reappear in the 11th century, with homosexuality among the clergy becoming a target of persistent criticism. Peter Damian, the energetic church reformer, led the attack with his mid-century castigation of ecclesiastical sinfulness, the *Liber Gommothianus*, which urged Pope Leo IX to impose the maximum penances allowed in the penitentials for all homosexual violations regardless of age and circumstances—a proposal that Leo rejected. In Alain of Lille's 12th-century *De Planctu Naturae* (The Complaint of Nature), the goddess Natura condemns homosexuality along with other sexual vices, and in the following century, Scholastic theologians characterized homosexuality as a sin “contrary to nature” (Bullough 1976, pp. 378-82; Boswell 1980, pp. 303-32)...Beginning in the mid-13th century these sentiments were embodied in secular legislation, which betrays knowledge of the recently revived Justinian Code by its prescription of the death penalty for sodomy. Thus a customal (collection of customary law; its provisions were not always traditional) prepared in Orleans around 1260 required that third offender sodomists be burned... (533).

Like Greenberg and Bystryn suggest, anti-gay sentiments have historically resulted in dire, tangible consequences for LGBTQ+ people.

Karen Keen, author of *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, explains that the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights has continued from the Medieval times, and is still present in our court rooms today. During the ex-gay movement (a religiously-driven movement comprised of people who used to identify as homosexual, but who have since “overcome their same-sex attraction,” as well as organizations encouraging people to resist their “homosexual desires”), Keen states that “[t]he Religious Right wanted to use ex-gay testimonies to fight political battles.” She goes on to explain that “[g]ay rights hinged on the assertion that

sexual orientation is immutable and akin to race and gender. Thus, the ex-gay movement, which had focused primarily on pastoral care, now became politicized” (5).

Austen Hartke, in *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, illustrates the modern-day persecution of transgender rights in the political and religious realm.

[I]n 2016, what had previously been a predominantly theological debate, between conservative Christians and those who supported transgender justice, became an all-out battle that exploded onto the national legislative scene... Suddenly the movement toward protection for transgender people in the United States became, in the opinion of some Christians, a threat to religious liberty (12).

Evidencing this same issue, Bryce Cook, author of “What Do We Know of God’s Will For His LGBT Children?: An Examination of the LDS Church’s Position on Homosexuality,” details the role that the Church of Latter-day Saints played in the politicization of LGBTQ+ rights. He notes that, addition to its prevalent use of anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine, “[t]he Church also began entering the political arena, fighting same-sex marriage legislation and lobbying for ballot initiatives and legislation that defined marriage as only between one man and one woman” (8).

As Hartke later notes, the LDS Church was not alone in its conquest against LGBTQ+ rights. Organizations and their political action committees, such as the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, have pushed against nondiscrimination laws for queer—and especially transgender—people, claiming that “including gender identity as a protected category in civil rights laws would ‘threaten the public safety of women and children by creating the legitimized access that sexual predators tend to seek,’” despite there being no evidence whatsoever to support these claims (13).

Brandeis University’s Professor of Christian Studies Bernadette J. Brooten presents the idea that an assault on LGBTQ+ rights may serve as a kind of smokescreen for bigger issues that

the church does not want to tackle. In her article, “Research on the New Testament and Early Christian Literature May Assist the Churches in Setting Ethical Priorities,” Brooten claims,

If groups of Christians define abortion and LGBTQ rights as the most foundational ethical questions, then issues such as racism and the long-term effects of slavery and its aftermath, sexual and other gender-based violence, massive incarceration, police killings, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments, war and militarization, fair working conditions, climate change, and healthcare for all will be peripheral (232).

Austen Hartke also feels that the time, energy, and resources spent by the church in its fight against LGBTQ+ civil rights is misguided and misdirected. He proposes a hypothetical in which churches are able to set aside their prejudices and welcome transgender Christians with open arms. In the second to last paragraph of his book, Hartke writes the following:

The time and resources that once went into fighting this particular battle in the “culture wars” now go to summer lunches for school kids, building low-income housing, and welcome packages for refugee families. Transgender leaders, many of whom have experience in community organizing, begin to create outreach programs that take worship into local parks and retirement homes, rather than waiting for people to stumble into the sanctuary. The church grows, the gospel spreads, kids get to grow up in love and safety, and justice begins to roll down like water (176).

Unfortunately, as Hartke acknowledges, the church has a long way to go before that becomes a reality.

The Church’s Role in LGBTQ+ Oppression

This section discusses the pragmatic role of the church in anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and oppression, specifically examining the LDS Church’s pursuit against gay marriage. It also describes how this “smokescreen” of cultural and political issues was reinforced by the church, and how Christian leaders actively ignored other issues in favor of pursuing their anti-LGBTQ+ battle. This section discusses the immense power that the church has as an institution, and how a lot of religious organizations have gotten involved in politics, contributing to the oppression that LGBTQ+ people face in a religious context.

Scholars agree that, while it is not possible to analyze the exact thoughts and opinions of the average person, or even the average Christian, the church, with heavy influence over the

general populace since at least the 4th century, has been a powerful oppressive institution for the LGBTQ+ community. American sociologists, and co-authors of “Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality,” David Greenberg and Marcia Bystryn, observe that, “[s]ince all Roman antihomosexual legislation from the 4th century on was introduced by Christian emperors, it has generally been assumed to have reflected Christian attitudes toward homosexuality.” Still, they also point out that although the church was undoubtedly hostile towards homosexuality, it is unlikely that most Christians were particularly antagonistic to it. According to these two sociologists, there is simply not enough evidence on common attitudes of people in different parts of the Empire to draw a solid conclusion on their stance on homosexuality (527).

Greenberg and Bystryn point out that, regardless of whether or not the general public agreed with them, the church held very strong stances on homosexuality, stating that “[s]cripture was interpreted as condemning all homosexuality, and Patristic authority was unequivocal in its denunciation of homosexuality” (537). They go on to establish the dire consequences of this opinion: “Beginning in the mid-13th century these sentiments were embodied in secular legislation, which betrays knowledge of the recently revived Justinian Code by its prescription of the death penalty for sodomy. Thus a customal (collection of customary law; its provisions were not always traditional) prepared in Orleans around 1260 required that third offender sodomists be burned” (533).

Karen Keen, author of *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, further proves this point, calling to anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments from the 1600s: “[t]he seventeenth-century minister and Bible commentator Matthew Henry said same-sex relations are ‘not to be mentioned without horror.’ He believed God gave people over to ‘vile affections’ as

punishment for idolatry. He also commented with apparent approval that these individuals were being sentenced to death by his own government” (1).

Keen notes how these beliefs are not were not left in the past, but rather remained a consistent belief among conerservative Christians throughout the first half of the 20th century, as the church continued to antagonize LGBTQ+ people. She states that the general belief among conservative Christians has been, as expressed by fourth-century theologian John Chrysostom, that same-sex attraction was the result of excess, uncontrollable lust, stemming from some sort of spiritual corruption. This belief was widely upheld by the church, up until around the 1950s (1-2). Keen clarifies that the church was so anti-gay even after that time, continuing into the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, that they wanted nothing to do with even homosexuals who proclaimed themselves ex-gay, who were seeking repentance and some sort of cure for their same-gender attraction (5).

Keen further conveys the conservative church’s response to homosexuality during this period, explaining that, following the Stonewall riots of 1969, gay people became entirely villified by the church. She says that

most Christians viewed sexual minorities as godless and rebellious individuals who willfully engaged in perverted and criminal behavior. Few conservatives could conceive of gay people as potential Christians deeply devoted to their faith. Many writers portrayed sexual minorities as pedophiles, addicts, mentally disturbed people, promiscuous deviants, or even Nazis. Gay people were to be feared as dangerous (3).

Researchers agree that this type of vilification of LGBTQ+ people didn’t stop with homosexuals. To explore this notion, scholars Kristen Benson, Eli Westerfield, and Brad van Eeden-Moorefield conducted a 2018 study on this, including seven in-depth interviews of self-identified transgender people (3 FTM & 4 MTF), ages 24 to 57. They describe their findings in their article, “Transgender People’s Reflections on Identity, Faith, and Christian Faith

Communities in the U.S.”: “Several participants experienced clear discriminatory reactions after revealing their gender identity, reinforcing the notion that faith is tied to sexual morality.

Suzanne talked about feeling demonized by, saying: ‘I’m the devil incarnate because I wear women’s clothes. So, I got to be doing something that is not right. They’re not sure exactly what that might be but I must somehow be subversive for family values’” (409).

Benson, Westerfield, and Eeden-Moorefield point out that this level of discrimination and overall ignorance of LGBTQ+ issues have led to extreme tension in the church between LGBTQ+ people and anti-gay/trans conservative Christians. These authors state that, of the participants who had ever been part of a spiritual or religious community, 19% left due to rejection, and 39% left out of fear of being rejected due to their transgender identity, concluding that “[d]iscrimination and negative responses toward diverse gender identities from members of religious communities contribute to weakened ties to formal religious institutions” (397).

Benson, Westerfield, and Eeden-Moorefield observe that the type of exclusion and shame from the church that many transgender people face can be detrimental to their mental health and well-being, especially for those who place such value on religion and community (410).

Other researchers note that one thing that makes the church particularly threatening to LGBTQ+ people is its power as an institution. In his article, “What Do We Know of God’s Will For His LGBT Children?: An Examination of the LDS Church’s Position on Homosexuality,” founding member of the non-profit organization ALL: Arizona LDS LGBT Bryce Cook presents the Church of Latter-day Saints as something of a religious, anti-LGBTQ+ juggernaut, demonstrating its influence over the people who belong to its denomination, and its history of “entering the political arena, fighting same-sex marriage legislation and lobbying for ballot initiatives and legislation that defined marriage as only between one man and one woman” (8).

As Cook says, the LDS Church not only holds power in terms of its influence over its followers, but it also uses its institutional power to make waves in the political arena.

According to Cook, what makes the LDS Church so powerful, compared to many other religious bodies, is its focus on anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine. Unlike much of the other oppressive ideologies explored in this literature review so far, Cook explains that the Church of Latter-day Saints's prohibition of same-sex marriage is not based in scripture (or at least is not taught that way), but rather based in "teachings about eternal marriage, the plan of salvation, and gender complementarity" (19). Cook summarizes the Church's stance with the following statement:

As a doctrinal principle, based on the scriptures, the Church affirms that marriage between a man and a woman is essential to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children. Sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife. Any other sexual relations, including those between persons of the same gender, are sinful and undermine the divinely created institution of the family. The Church accordingly affirms defining marriage as the legal and lawful union between a man and a woman (4).

Demonstrating the continuity of the sentiments that Karen Keen brought up in *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, Bryce Cook talks about the LDS's view of same-sex relationships as immoral and disgusting. Again, like Keen's description of the conservative church, the LDS Church suggests that the only solution to same-sex attraction is a lifelong devotion to celibacy (3). Cook writes, "Seeing homosexuality as a psychological or spiritual malady, [LDS Church leaders] taught that the cure was intense repentance, self-mastery, and even marriage to the opposite sex. This belief informed the Church's ecclesiastical approach and leadership training, as well as the thinking of Mormon mental-health therapists, for years to come—and it was probably the most psychologically and spiritually damaging of all the Church's teachings on homosexuality" (6-7). Cook further clarifies the real-world consequences of the Church of Latter-day Saints's anti-LGBTQ+ doctrinal teachings, saying,

[i]n example after example, I hear of sadness and despair. However, it is not being gay that causes the emotional trauma and mental anguish; it is being gay and raised in a religion and culture that tells you from the time you are an innocent child that your feelings of love and attraction are degrading and sinful, something you must extinguish and bury deep inside. Unlike your straight friends and siblings who revel in their crushes, falling in love, showing physical affection, dating, and marrying, you are taught that the love and attraction you feel is from Satan and if expressed—even in a loving, monogamous marriage—it will cause society’s downfall and the destruction of the family, and you will be declared an apostate, an enemy of the Church (45).

Bryce Cook is not the only person to note the detrimental effects of the Church of Latter-day Saints’s anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine. Author of “In Our Lovely Oubliette: The Un/Intended Consequences of Boundary Making & Keeping from a Gay Mormon Perspective,” D Christian Harrison writes specifically about the LDS Church’s Policy of Exclusion, commonly referred to as the POX. Enacted on November 5th, 2015, Harrison explains that the Policy of Exclusion was the name given to a change in the LDS Church’s definition of apostasy (the abandonment or renunciation of a person or persons from a religious group or organization) to now extend to same-gender couples (53). He establishes that there were very real consequences of the POX, including being responsible for many suicides. As he states, this new policy is still being stood by and justified, “perpetuated by a church unwilling to apologize.” Until they do so and rescind their policy, Harrison says that countless Latter-day Saints have and will resign, crippling the numbers of queer attendees (55).

Harrison places the reader in the shoes of his former self—a closeted young gay man who grew up a devout member of the Church of Latter-day Saints;

You’re a seventeen-year-old young man who is attracted to other men your age. You’ve never acted on it. You’ve read President Spencer W. Kimball’s *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, you’ve read Elder Packer’s talk “To the One,” and you’ve heard the snide remarks by the adults in your life, and it’s perfectly clear: homosexuality is a sin next to murder. You’ve heard comments about tying a millstone around a sinner’s neck as an act of blood atonement, and you’ve thought many times about ending it all. But against your better judgment, you decide to talk to your bishop... He then promises you that if you

complete an honorable mission, return and marry a good girl, all will be forgiven. He reminds you that with God all things are possible—if you have faith... (57).

Harrison captures the gravity of this POX by drawing attention to LDS stakes, which according to the LDS Church website are “a group of local Church congregations [consisting] of about 3,000 to 5,000 members in five to ten congregations.” He states, “Since November 5, 110 stake members had resigned. And for every one person I know who has resigned, I know ten who are on life support” (56).

Austen Hartke emphasises this point in the first chapter of *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, in regards to the church’s support of and perpetuation of anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine. He says,

the mental and emotional bias that American culture holds against transgender individuals leaks out into real-world actions against trans people, whether that action is turning down a nonbinaru applicant for a job or gunning down a trans woman in a bathroom. When our churches support or even organically formulate the idea that transgender people are morally, intellectually, or theologically inferior, we feed right into the hatred that leads to death for an already marginalized group (18).

And, as Hartke points out throughout the rest of his book, the church has consistently both supported and formulated those ideas. Pope Francis, he notes, compared transgender people to nuclear weapons that threatened life on Earth. He writes, “During a part of the interview in which he talks about things that destroy the order of creation, Francis uses the following examples: ‘Let’s think of the nuclear arms, of the possibility to annihilate in a few instants a very high number of human beings. Let’s think also of genetic manipulation, of the manipulation of life, or of the gender theory, that does not recognize the order of creation’” (17). Hartke then poses the question, “What effect must it have on transgender Catholics to know that their church community considers them unnatural and dangerous?” (17).

He answers this question later in the book through the account of a transgender man who grew up Christian in Taipei, Taiwan. This man, Aidan Wang, described his experience as an out trans man in a Christian church. Aidan explains how his pastor, every Sunday, would whisper things about him to his girlfriend, bringing her to become more and more uneasy about dating him, given their shared Christian faith. Hartke writes, “This pressure and prospect of losing either his church community, or his girlfriend, or both, caused a lot of mental anguish for Aidan. On top of that, there was always the tiny voice of doubt in the back of his head whispering, ‘What if they’re right about you?’” (72). He goes on to say that this took an incredible toll on Aidan: “When it came down to it, though, the trauma that he had been living through, while being told over and over again that he was inherently wrong and bound to an eternal punishment, became too much to bear” (73).

What makes matters worse, according to Brandeis University’s Professor of Christian Studies Bernadette J. Brooten, author of “Research on the New Testament and Early Christian Literature May Assist the Churches in Setting Ethical Priorities,” is how the church privileges issues of sexual morality over more pressing human rights issues. She suggests that the church does indeed have power as a huge institution that, as has been shown throughout this section, has a lot of sway over public opinion, and in many cases in a court of law. This, Brooten claims, is why it is so important to shift the focus of the Christian church from things like restricting abortion laws and banning gay marriage, to pressing issues concerning the oppressive systems that govern us and put down marginalized peoples (232).

However, Brooten claims that, in ignoring the obvious oppressive problems of society, the church is at least partially responsible for those plights. She examines the role of the church in sexual slavery since the conception of the Bible, noting that, although Christian leaders and

communities saw the sexual exploits of masters, they chose to do nothing more than lightly discourage such actions (230). In this example, interracial rape was both legal and normalized, but interracial marriage was sinful, immoral, and illegal. Brooten goes on to say,

Much more seriously, Christian toleration of masters' sexual use of their enslaved laborers was always a potential part of these forced labor relations. In the Roman world, however, a master could normally manumit [release from slavery] his slave-woman and marry her. That drastically changed with the invention of slavery as a race-based institution in the early modern era, which eventually opened the way to antimiscegenation statutes that prohibited interracial marriage but not sexual contact. These statutes prevented a white man from entering into a serious relationship with a black woman that included mutual rights and responsibilities. Sexual exploitation reminiscent of slavery, however, remained a viable option. The Ku Klux Klan, a Christian terrorist organization, employed sexual terror against the African American population with impunity. Today, black women who experience rape are less likely to report it to law enforcement and, if they do report it, face greater hurdles than white women in the criminal justice system. A long view of history enables one to see in the current situation echoes of slavery and of Jim and Jane Crow. (230-231)

Brooten goes on to say that, through its willful ignorance of pressing human rights issues, and an active choice to push forward in its conquest against gay marriage and abortion laws, the Christian church must accept and atone for its role in perpetuating oppressive institutions and bigoted ideation (232).

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE BIBLE AS A MEANS FOR LIBERATION AND EMBRACE

Sticking to the Text: What the Bible Says On Queerness

This section reviews the most commonly used Bible passages to condemn queer people, as well as the doctrine of many anti-LGBTQ+ Christians, and discusses how they have been used, and how they can be differently interpreted. This section explains scholars' views that the Bible does not have any indisputable message about queer people; what creates and enforces those views are the people and institutions with pre-existing prejudices against LGBTQ+ people, who seek out passages to affirm their beliefs.

In all the discourse around interpretations of the Bible, many researchers believe it is most important to not stray too far from the text, and to instead look at what the Bible really does—and does not—say on the matter of queerness. As a professor of religious studies, Robert Gnuse says he often hears debates among Christians who try to force their own interpretations onto the text, making assumptions about the biblical authors. In an interview, he warned against that way of thinking: “So don't go starting to say, ‘Well, now this is the way they thought.’ We don't theologize off of their thoughts on other issues. We theologize off what we have in the text.” He went on, claiming that sticking to the text was especially important because it was the only solid common ground that Christians and theologians alike had. “[Christians and scholars] all agreed to [theologize from the texts] in the late fourth century. And that's the only thing that Christians have in common, is these documents” (Gnuse Interview).

It was because of this notion that Gnuse says he originally wrote his article, “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality.” This article dissects the seven most commonly-used passages to condemn homosexuality, deconstructing each of them with direct reference to their language. What he noticed in his research, according to our interview, was that each and every one of these passages did not, in fact, refer to homosexuality in terms of a loving

relationship between two free, consenting adults. Rather, every example often used by conservative Christians to denounce homosexuality is really referring to rape, bestiality, master-slave relationships, general domination and demoralization, or cultic activity (Gnuse Interview).

For example, in Gnuse's article, he addresses the Leviticus passage (Leviticus 18:21-24) that is often used to reduce people attracted to the same gender to "abominations," referencing verse 22, which says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," and verse 24, which says, "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves." Gnuse writes, in response,

The explicit condemnation of foreign practices in verse 24 would seem to imply cultic activity. Thus, it might appear that those particular cultic activities are the last three activities mentioned in the prohibition list: infant sacrifice, homosexuality, and sex with animals. Furthermore, the word "abomination," which is used in the text at this point, very often describes foreign behavior, especially cultic activity. If so, then what is condemned by the homosexual prohibition is not general homosexual behavior, but cultic homosexual relations in particular, and a strong indication of this may be that it follows the prohibition of infant sacrifice and precedes reference to sex with animals by women (76).

Gnuse goes on to deconstruct several more of these "clobber passages" (passages frequently used by the religious right to condemn homosexuality).

In a similar deconstruction of a clobber passage, Austen Hartke, in *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, discusses the use of Genesis 1:27 to prove the binary nature of gender. The passage reads,

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

At first glance, it may appear to be a passage defining two and only two complementary genders—male and female—but Hartke suggests that, with added context, the passage actually

invites us to challenge these binaries. He highlights that this chapter (Genesis) is full of dualities: heavens and the earth; night and day; light and darkness. With this in mind, Hartke writes the following:

This verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk. As M Barclay puts it, “This chapter talks about night and day and land and water, but we have dusk and we have marshes. These verses don’t mean ‘there’s only land and water, and there’s nowhere where these two meet.’ These binaries aren’t meant to speak to all of reality—they invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond” (51).

With added context and a new perspective, the passage used to shun nonbinary people instead becomes one that validates their existence.

Offering another approach, in their article “Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality,” David Greenberg and Marcia Bystryn explain that the Bible was no more condemning of homosexuality than it was of heterosexuality. They say that although it is often construed as only being against homosexuality, the Bible was typically condemning *all* sexuality.

Christian hostility to homosexuality was not directed against that alone, but toward all forms of sexual activity. Although the New Testament did not look favorably on sexual expression, the leaders of the early church gave sex much greater attention and rejected it far more passionately and completely...Tertullian regarded unchastity as worse than death... (524).

Greenberg and Bystryn argue, then, that it is dishonest to only portray same-gender sex as wrong, when in actuality, all sexual acts that were not strictly procreative, or out of wedlock, were regarded as wrong (537).

Like Gnuse, Arizona LDS LGBT founder Bryce Cook establishes that, “[w]ith respect to canonized scripture, there is very little content on homosexuality and nothing that addresses the modern development of love-based same-sex relationships and marriage” (15). He goes on to say that “Jesus spoke of marriage, divorce, and the sin of adultery, but he never directly addressed homosexuality” (15).

With this insight, Cook explains the rationale of the Church of Latter-day Saints, in their persecution of LGBTQ+ people, as one of the few conservative churches to openly acknowledge the lack of biblical evidence for the condemnation of homosexuality. Because LDS Church leaders understand that clobber passages tend not to hold up to scrutiny, they instead turn to doctrine (16). Cook describes this doctrine as dealing in “teachings about eternal marriage, the plan of salvation, and gender complementarity” (19). He makes it clear that the Church views homosexuality as immoral, unnatural, and a threat to the institutions of marriage and family (5). However, much like the clobber passages that the LDS Church avoids, the logic of their doctrine does not hold up to scrutiny. Throughout his article, Cook deconstructs these arguments, proving that homosexual relationships are no less moral than heterosexual ones, and that they should be held to the same standard, advocating for the fact that same-sex relationships can be loving, beneficial, and very important.

In her article “In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology,” professor Joy Ladin goes a step beyond deconstructing conservative Christian anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine and clobber passages. Ladin suggests that, while not literally about queerness, many stories in the Bible actually portray the queer experience, and the struggles that transgender people face. She talks about her experience as a transgender woman, and how, when reading the Bible as a child, she saw herself and her own experience reflected in the texts (57). The story of Jonah particularly caught her eye, as it is about self discovery, rejection, and finally acceptance. Ladin writes,

I am not reading the Book of Jonah through the lens of transgender experience in order to “trans” the text or to suggest that the story is “really” about the problems of being transgender; the Book of Jonah is about the problems of being human. But transgender experience is human experience, and the questions trans people face are questions that face us all. Everyone, transgender or not, must decide what aspects of ourselves we will and won’t express, when we can’t and when we must subordinate our individuality in

order to fulfill our roles in relationships, families, and communities. When we read the Book of Jonah through the lens of transgender experience, we are reminded that the crisis it dramatizes is one that many of us will face at one time or another: the crisis of realizing that either we live what makes us different or we cannot live at all (56).

She argues that the Bible is ultimately about the common humanity that we share—that the stories in the Bible are ones about our struggles, and how we overcome those struggles. In that sense, she says, we strive “to understand what in humanity reflects the image of God” (57).

Similarly, Austen Hartke draws a comparison between Moses changing someone’s name and granting them a new identity in Numbers 13 to a transgender person choosing their own name when they transition (76). Hartke and Ladin agree that religious interpretation, while not directly calling to trans and other queer people, can be enriched with transgender perspectives. And it is in the opinion of Joy Ladin that it is our responsibility to use these perspectives to expand our current definitions of humanity, and our understanding of God, to be more gender inclusive (56).

Ultimately, as Kristen Benson, Eli Westerfield, and Brad van Eeden-Moorefield gather from their interviews in “Transgender People’s Reflections on Identity, Faith, and Christian Faith Communities in the U.S.,” the Bible is first and foremost a book about acceptance and embrace. They relay a statement from Sally, a transgender, devout Christian woman.

Sally described that through the process of coming to understand God’s plan for her life, she became a more devoted Christian in knowing that Jesus would spend time with her despite her marginalization, and explained: “I understand more about what it meant to be an outcast in society. And in my own theology that, that is who Jesus spent time with. He didn’t go to the religious people. He went to the people that nobody else cared about, no one else would have. They weren’t good enough for the established religion. That was who Jesus chose to spend his time with ... And that’s very, very comforting to me” (406).

The authors point out that the Bible is a book with a significant emphasis on love, rather than hatred and condemnation.

In our interview, Robert Gnuse said, “Christianity calls upon people to be open and accepting and loving of each other. And in that regard, we shouldn't be putting people down—shouldn't be putting down black people—shouldn't be putting down slaves—shouldn't be putting down gay people...[the Bible] simply says embrace people....” Gnuse argued that the message of love and acceptance in the Bible trumps any other. At the end of our interview, he claimed, “everybody is a child of God, created by God, the way they are. They need to accept themselves for who they are and accept others. That's the real message of the text” (Gnuse Interview).

God's Intent

This section takes a look at the notion of “God's intent” for LGBTQ+ people. It examines the questions, Did God intend for certain people to be queer?, and Did God make a mistake when creating transgender people?, explaining that many believe their queer identities to be intentional and God-given.

Austen Hartke opens his book, *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, with the question that he claims he gets asked most from Christians who are unfamiliar with transgender people: ““So, if God made you female, but you identify as male, does that mean you think that God made a mistake?”” (1). He goes on to say that, “[w]ithout oversimplifying the argument too much, it seems that the biggest stumbling block for many Christians when it comes to the diversity framework [which suggests that God intended for people to have diverse gender identities] is the belief that biological sex is both cut-and-dried and also divinely decreed” (43). Hartke explains that many Christians have a hard time accepting transgender people's identities because they believe that trans people are rejecting God's intended design for them. But Hartke, himself, completely rejects the idea that God made a mistake in creating him: “I believe God made all of me—gender identity included—and intended

for me to be a transgender person who sees the world through a different lens. I don't think God made a mistake. I think God made me transgender on purpose" (2).

Hartke is also not alone in his beliefs; according to Melissa M. Wilcox, in her article "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," many Christians believe their LGBTQ+ identities to be sacred gifts from God—something to be not only tolerated by other Christians, but embraced and celebrated. (505) She writes that "[i]n contemporary Christian circles a claim to have been created lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender by God is much stronger than a claim simply to have been born that way" (504). As Hartke notes in *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, the difference between being born queer and created queer tends to be very important in non-LGBTQ+ Christian circles, as a deciding factor in determining their support and acceptance of queer people.

Some Christians also take to the idea that queerness is something God explicitly intended, though not always with such a progressive mindset. Karen Keen, author of *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, highlights a unique belief held by some individuals that suggests that gay people are not just created gay on purpose, but are in fact holy individuals, under the condition that they remain celibate. In describing a more modern interpretation of Christianity, Keen explains that some Christians believe that "[c]elibate gay Christians are held up as admirable examples of how to live a self-sacrificial life" (7). She illustrates the connection between the "historically positive posture toward vowed celibacy for the priesthood" and the conservative church's historical response toward homosexuality, in which celibacy is often suggested as the solution to desire. As Keen describes, in the eyes of many, to be gay is to be chosen by God and offered a life of self-sacrifice and purity (6).

Bryce Cook, in “What Do We Know of God’s Will For His LGBT Children?: An Examination of the LDS Church’s Position on Homosexuality,” also discusses God’s intent, as the title of his article suggests. He explains the importance of the issue, stating that the determining factor in whether or not LGBTQ+ Christians tend to stay with their religious denomination tends to be what they believe God’s will for them to be. If they internalize the anti-LGBTQ+ doctrine of the Church, they may believe that they are an abomination in God’s eyes, and that God condemns their attraction and their potential relationships. Cook notes that this can lead to disastrous consequences, resulting in a damaged psyche and potentially to suicide. However, he also offers an alternative; Cook explains that some people “are able to maintain a healthy attitude and sense of self-worth because they do not internalize what the Church tells them. They believe that they are whole and undamaged, that being gay is how God intended them to be” (45). Ultimately, Cook favors the Bible’s ideals of love and acceptance over persecuting people for something that the Bible is only allegedly against (48).

Many more Christians also draw on God’s intent to come to a place of self-love and self-acceptance. In “Transgender People’s Reflections on Identity, Faith, and Christian Faith Communities in the U.S.,” authors Kristen Benson, Eli Westerfield, and Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, explain from their interviews that “[t]he majority of participants believes that they were intentionally made transgender by God, and therefore, are not ‘mistakes’ as some of the dogma they had been exposed to suggest. Rather they are created as a part of God’s plan.” One participant said, “Genetics can get pretty screwed up, but I love the way I am. I’m loved the way I am. We are all loved the way we are, no matter how we’re born” (403-404). Similarly, some participants were stated to have placed God’s omnibenevolence above all else, claiming

that transgender people, like all people, are God's creations, and they should be accepted and treated as such. Travis, a 24-year-old transgender man explained:

“Gender is a human construction. When God looks at us he's not like, alright penis or vagina? You know like, 'wow you're a person, I created you. What have you done to spread my glory throughout the earth? What have you done to serve me?' He's not going to sit there, 'who did you sleep with? What gender are they? What gender are you?' He's not going to sit there and ask all these questions because he's God and he's already past that” (404).

Another participant, Sally, stated that she was “fearfully and wonderfully made,” exactly as God intended for her to be, and that self-hatred would be a violation of God's will for her.

Additionally, Donna, another trans woman that participated in the interviews, “described that God has love for all things created by God. She emphasized that all people are valuable and should live without judging others” (406). Overall, most participants felt both that their transgender identities were God-given, and that God loved them as God's children above all else.

Mary Elise Lowe, in “From the Same Spirit: Receiving the Theological Gifts of Transgender Christians,” claims that many transgender Christians have a very unique perspective on God's intent for them in their identities, in that they are, in a sense, co-creators with God. While many Christians may say that transitioning away from your gender assigned at birth is going against God's will, Lowe argues that transgender individuals are building upon God's creation as God's ongoing work, “demonstrating God's ongoing creative activity in the world” (30). Lowe quotes the theologian Martin Luther, saying, “All creatures are God's masks and disguises; God permits them to work with God and help God create all sorts of things.” She continues, claiming, “The transgender person who chooses a new name and pronouns is co-creating with God” (30).

Austen Hartke shares that belief in his book: “God created us with the ability to also be creators, and some of those creators created surgical procedures and medical procedures and

concepts and ideologies and systems and communities that do wonderful things! If we aren't taking part in that creative process, then we're going against our very created nature" (4). He argues that God specifically intended for people to have creative freedom when it comes to their own bodies and identities, and that it would be a violation of God's will to forgo those freedoms. Hartke later quotes Asher, a fellow trans man, sharing his thoughts on whether or not God would approve of trans people changing their bodies: "I think that God knit us together in our mother's wombs, but I also think that God is active in our lives, knitting us together in every moment," Asher said. "God's been knitting me together every day since. I don't think that as soon as we were born God was like, OK, all done! I think that creation continues" (141).

Hartke writes that he believes God is intentional in all of God's actions. That, he says, is why he thinks God did not make a mistake in creating him with a body designated female at birth. He explains,

I don't believe God made a mistake in creating me just as I am. God created me with a body that was designated female when I was born—a body that I struggled to connect with for the first twenty-six years of my life and that I now finally feel at home in—but God also created me with a capacity for change and with a mind that identifies as male (2).

Further, he writes, "I had grown up singing 'Jesus Loves Me' and internalizing the message that God knew me better than I knew myself. I thought that if these things had been true my whole life and if I'd experienced these gendered feelings that whole time, then God's love and my trans identity could not possibly be mutually exclusive" (88).

Joy Ladin, in her article "In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology," similarly believes that God intended for her and her fellow queer people to be exactly the way they are. However, in saying that, she claims that it is not specifically a question of whether God wanted people to be gay in the first place. She writes that while God may not have

specific intention in mind for queer people, God has intention for all people, and queer people are included in that. The experiences and stories relayed in the Bible are human experiences, telling tales of self-love and self-acceptance. The messages here may not be specifically targeted towards LGBTQ+ people, but like they do to all other people, the messages and the will of God certainly apply (58).

The Church's Role in LGBTQ+ Liberation and Embrace

This section reexamines the church as an institution for positive change, and a place of warmth and acceptance for LGBTQ+ people. It discusses the reconciliation that some LGBTQ+ people are able to achieve between their queer and religious identities, highlighting the benefits of being able to create that coherence within religious communities.

Kristen Benson, Eli Westerfield and Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, after conducting their aforementioned in-depth interviews of transgender people, explain that, although many transgender people have reported a personal struggle with organized religion, having dealt with discrimination, some also found comfort, and even positive experiences in religious communities, that helped them in their transitions (396). From their interviews, these researchers found that God's presence in the lives of transgender people is often both comforting and affirming in their identities. Religiosity, for queer people, tends to help them reach a place of self-love and acceptance, when met with the right conditions (non-discrimination and open-mindedness) (405).

To demonstrate this, Benson, Westerfield, and Eeden-Moorefield detail the account of a 24-year-old engaged trans man:

Travis shared experiences where church members explicitly welcomed him, and made him aware that he was wanted in the church community. Travis describes a priest who had been a strong supporter and advocate for him, and was planning on marrying him and

his fiance. Travis explains coming out to the priest and the response he received: “He sent me a letter and it’s like, wow what a strong and brave letter from a strong and brave person. Your gender doesn’t bother me, you know, when I think of you as a person I just think of you as a good person and I know this is going to be difficult, so I wish you blessings” (408).

The researchers explain that, when transgender individuals are met with love and openness in their religious community, the church can be a major support, and even a sort of lifeline (408).

They further comment on the degree to which more churches are leaning towards acceptance of queer people, saying that “[s]ome Christian faith communities are intentionally inclusive and have established lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) welcoming policies and public statements (National LGBTQ Task Force, 2016). Many of these organizations have addressed same gender marriage explicitly and include transgender-inclusive language.” It should be noted, they say, that the extent of transgender inclusivity in Christian faith communities is still in need of further study (397).

Despite there still being a multitude of oppressive and discriminatory religious bodies, much like the Church of Latter-day Saints, Benson, Westerfield, and Eeden-Moorefield explain that Travis’s church is not an anomaly. The researchers state, “Although not an exhaustive list, LGBTQ inclusive dominations and organizations include: Unitarian Universalist, Metropolitan Community Church, United Church of Christ, Lutheran Reconciling in Christ, United Methodists Reconciling Ministries, Episcopal Church Integrity USA, Catholic Dignity USA, The Evangelical Network, and More Light Presbyterian” (397).

Karen Keen, author of *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, also notes the growing number of LGBTQ+ inclusive organizations. She talks about the rise in number of accepting evangelicals since the 2000s, saying, “Over time, ex-gay Christians themselves began to realize that sexual orientation is not as changeable as was once believed. As

a result, numbers are now growing among celibate gay Christians as well as gay-affirming evangelicals” (9). Keen suggests that from this point on, drawing from history, it is likely that the conservative Christian church will continue to become more tolerant, more accepting, and eventually more embracing of LGBTQ+ people.

In “What Do We Know of God’s Will For His LGBT Children?: An Examination of the LDS Church’s Position on Homosexuality,” Bryce Cook shows the value of a loving and accepting church, and the benefits it can bring to a community. He also offers new realms of interpretation that can bring people to be more accepting. In this reexamination of the LDS Church as an institution, Cook acknowledges that, despite its blatant anti-LGBTQ+ moral stances, the Church has “taken a number of steps that demonstrate improved understanding of, and greater compassion for, its LGBT people.” (9). Some examples include its 2012 release of a website, mormansandgays.org, which acknowledges that same-sex attraction is “a complex reality,” a 2015 announcement that Church members could publically advocate for gay marriage without threat of apostasy, and positive public support of the Boy Scouts of America’s 2013 policy change, allowing gay youth to participate. In 2015, the LDS Church even lobbied for an LGBT nondiscrimination and religious rights bill in Utah, applauding when the bill was passed (9). Cook shows that, with its power as an institution, the Church is capable of seriously improving people's lives beyond just giving them a community of faith.

To the question of ways in which the LDS Church community can reframe their homophobic notions of love and marriage to instead focus on acceptance and embrace, Cook explains the solution through the lens of many Christians across the sexual spectrum.

Many members have received answers to this question by the power of the Holy Ghost. They include our gay members who have wrestled for years with this question and have paid the price to know—they have studied, pondered, attended the temple, and pleaded with God in the depths of humility to know what he wants for them. They include faithful

parents who have desperately sought answers to help them teach and raise their LGBT children in a way to best balance their spiritual and emotional well-being. They include members who are neither gay nor have LGBT family members but who have hearts that know and feel with a godlike empathy the pains our gay brothers and sisters have had to bear (34).

Cook proposes that the way forward is empathy. He suggests that Christian faith communities must put aside their prejudices in light of new information and knowledge about LGBTQ+ people, and that through understanding, the church can be a much more accepting place (35).

Though many scholars and average Christians alike advocate for the benefits of faith *communities* giving people a place of warmth and embrace, Melissa M. Wilcox, author of “When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians,” argues that it is religious *individualism* that is truly liberating. Wilcox acknowledges the rift that is often formed between religious communities and LGBTQ+ people. She writes, “The message here, as in the lives of many other Christians who come out, is that one cannot be both LGBT and Christian. In such cases of uncertainty about or direct challenge to one's place in the social order, the societal shift toward religious individualism may facilitate LGBT Christians' efforts to create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities” (500). Wilcox establishes that the shift towards religious individualism and individual spirituality, rather than organized religion, can be a very positive change for LGBTQ+ people in terms of creating coherence between their Christian and their LGBTQ+ identities (502).

Austen Hartke, throughout *Transforming: The Bible & The Lives of Transgender Christians*, suggests that a loving and accepting church can liberate transgender people, acting as a major support system. He writes, “although religious affiliation in families has been connected to rejection of LGBT children, faith can also be one of the largest contributors to well-being in

youth if their religious community supports them” (20). Hartke describes the feeling of finding that support within Christian circles for the first time:

These people cared about each other’s lives, and it made me feel safe enough to share a bit of mine with them. The week before I started hormone replacement, I went up and told everyone about how excited I was for my voice to drop, and to start recognizing myself in the mirror. Everyone congratulated me, and a couple of people even found me afterward to tell me they were excited to be a part of my journey. It felt amazing (102).

Supportive communities like the one Hartke found, he notes, can be potentially life-saving. Hartke states, “These kinds of experiences—where trans people are fully affirmed by their church community—show more than tolerance and go beyond defense and apologetics. These experiences are life-giving in the most literal sense” (147). Earlier in his book, Hartke recounts the experience of a transgender man named Asher O’Callaghan, who grew up in a conservative, fundamentalist church. Asher was in a constant battle in his relationship with faith; he describes wanting to love God, but being unable to, largely due to feelings of inadequacy and the love he was told he should feel for God being rooted in fear (131). After coming out as bisexual, he was rejected by his youth group and told he would burn in hell forever. As Hartke relays, Asher started to resent his body, and struggled with extreme self-harm (132). Things were looking very bleak to him, until “[h]e met a couple of new friends in this [queer theology] class, and one Sunday they invited him to come to church with them.” Asher tells the story to Hartke:

“It was the first time I’d ever experienced liturgy, and it was weird and wonderful. What really got me was the communion table. They said, ‘Everyone without exception is welcome to the table.’ And I went, not thinking much of it, but then, every single week I found myself thinking, ‘I need to go back.’ Not because I felt a sense of duty or obligation, but because I felt it sustaining me. I felt hungry for going through the line and getting the Eucharist again. I felt like it was holding my life together.”

Hartke reflects and furthers Asher’s statements:

Suddenly, the body that had caused so many problems—the body that had threatened rebellion and sin and death—was the thing leading him toward a physical manifestation of grace (133).

Asher claimed that the experience “set him free,” echoing a statement that Hartke made earlier in the book, exemplifying his overall stance on the church as a means for embrace: “To know that you belong to a God who gathers outcasts and who commands doors to open before those sitting outside the gates: this is the kind of love that leads to liberation” (99).

Conclusion

Based on the research that I have done, it seems clear to me that the Bible, as a text endowed with immense cultural power over the past two millennia, is quite possibly the most interpreted and reinterpreted book in the world. As many scholars note, this fact has precipitated the use of the Bible as a weapon to reinforce people's existing prejudices, often taking the form of oppression against LGBTQ+ people. But this has also opened the door for interpretations of the text that encourage the love and embrace of queerness. Contrasting interpretations like these have led to a struggle both institutionally—within the church and other religious bodies—and interpersonally, causing a dissonance between LGBTQ+ people's queer and religious identities.

As this literature review has demonstrated, decades of scholarship in the area of biblical interpretations and their effects on LGBTQ+ people point to the use of different modes of interpretation to justify both the oppression and the liberation and embrace of queerness. Robert Gnuse and Scott MacLochlainn claim that every individual may interpret the bible for themselves, according to their own values. Similarly, Melissa Wilcox introduces the concept of “sifting,” suggesting that readers of the Bible frequently sift through the text and cherry-pick which passages they care to follow. Many researchers, including Gnuse, Brooten, Greenberg, and Bystryn highlight the ways in which these interpretations have been used to oppress LGBTQ+ people, pointing to the involvement of the church in politics, including its opposition to gay marriage and LGBTQ+ rights. Authors Hartke, Cook, and Harrison call attention to the discrimination that queer individuals face in many Christian communities, and the devastating effects that the conservative church has had on queer people as a whole. Gnuse suggests that the way forward involves deconstructing the texts that are used to persecute queer people, as he, in his article “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” debunks

anti-LGBTQ+ Christian doctrine. Furthermore, scholars like Wilcox, Ladin, and Lowe showcase readings of the text that support and embrace LGBTQ+ people, and Austen Hartke suggests that it is through these affirming interpretations of the text—and churches that support and preach these interpretations—that transgender and other queer Christians may find liberation.

While I had initially hoped to cover the vast research on the different ways that Christianity has affected and oppressed LGBTQ+ people, given my limited time to write this literature review, I needed to narrow my scope to include only scholarship with an explicit focus on the biblical text. A more comprehensive look at this topic would include the distinction that the church makes between queer identity and behavior—contributing to the conception of the ex-gay movement—and the recurring theme of misogyny in relation to anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in religious circles. Including these types of sources would have allowed for a more nuanced look at the ways in which the church has leveraged biblical texts for the oppression of queer people. I also recognize that there are many different Christian denominations that carry many different views; the bulk of my research focused on individual interpretation, and the effects of major religious bodies, though a more comprehensive review would cover the relevance of sect.

Based on the research that I did, it seems to me that more scholarship is needed to better understand how intersectional identities come into play in the field of theology. While many of the sources I examined covered the ways that the church has constrained those that identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender, I did not find as much information concerning other queer identities, or other marginalized groups.

After having conducted this research, I feel that I have a much better understanding of Christianity, the Bible, and the use of scripture in relation to queerness. Before delving into the literature, I had a very limited understanding of the ways in which the Bible had been used to

both oppress and affirm queer identities—I had always assumed that Christianity was a bastion of hatred and homophobia, given the discrimination that I had witnessed. I now see that the Christianity is not an abjective monolith, but a patchwork of interpretations and ideas. Much of the collective is comprised of bigoted dogma, largely perpetuated by the church throughout history, but many individuals and some sects are developing and encouraging more modern and compassionate views of the Bible and of LGBTQ+ people. I was especially surprised at the ability of some queer people to reconcile their relationship with Christian faith and the Bible after years of religious trauma. It seems to me that, after a lifetime of being told that you were doomed to hell, and that your natural feelings and urges were sinful and wrong, it would be easy to write off the Bible as a hateful, destructive, anachronistic text, and never touch the book again. And yet as I learned in my research, many queer Christians have found a path to coherence between their LGBTQ+ and religious identities.

However, this makes me wonder about the applicability of my research to the average Christian, or the average queer person. I understood in my research the devastating effects that the church has had on queer Christians, and queer people as a whole; even if some were able to reconcile their identities, how does this apply to the greater populus? At this point, with the Bible so inextricably associated with anti-queerness, how are LGBTQ+ people meant to feel safe within the church? In my research, one big gap that I found was the lack of universality when it came to understanding and reinterpreting the biblical text. Not everyone has the time to scrutinizingly sift through scripture, analyzing and deconstructing clobber passages—and certainly not everyone has the mental energy.

It is with this in mind that I go on to create my final project. I intend to create a resource for LGBTQ+ Christians, as well as their parents, friends, fellow church-goers, and anyone else

who has been indoctrinated into thinking that queer identities are sinful or wrong in any way. I want to create a resource for those who are searching to find that coherence between their queer and Christian identities, but who don't have time to do enough research to write a literature review. The beauty of viewing the Bible as a living document, rather than a static and objective text, is that it can be used to respond to and address the needs of our ever-shifting, ever-evolving culture. As Austen Hartke says in *Transforming: The Bible & the Lives of Transgender Christians*, "Theology done from the perspective of marginalized groups creates a richer, more comprehensible, more compassionate Christianity" (140). I hope that with my project, I can do my part in helping marginalized people feel a little less in the margins.

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