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# Turning the Bible on its Head — Newsweek Goes for Gay Marriage

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*Newsweek* magazine, one of the most influential news magazines in America, has decided to come out for same-sex marriage in a big way, and to do so by means of a biblical and theological argument. In its cover story for this week, “[The Religious Case for Gay Marriage](#),” *Newsweek* religion editor Lisa Miller offers a revisionist argument for the acceptance of same-sex marriage. It is fair to say that *Newsweek* has gone for broke on this question.



Miller begins with a lengthy dismissal of the Bible’s relevance to the question of marriage in the first place. “Let’s try for a minute to take the religious conservatives at their word and define marriage as the Bible does,” Miller suggests. If so, she argues that readers will find a confusion of polygamy, strange marital practices, and worse.

She concludes: “Would any contemporary heterosexual married couple—who likely woke up on their wedding day harboring some optimistic and newfangled ideas about gender equality and romantic love—turn to the Bible as a how-to script?” She answers, “Of course not, yet the religious opponents of gay marriage would have it be so.”

Now, wait just a minute. Miller’s broadside attack on the biblical teachings on marriage goes to the heart of what will appear as her argument for same-sex marriage. She argues that, in the Old Testament, “examples of what social conservatives call ‘the traditional family’ are scarcely to be found.” This is true, of course, if what you mean by ‘traditional family’ is the picture of America in the 1950s. The Old Testament notion of the family starts with the idea that the family is the carrier of covenant promises, and this family is defined, from the onset, as a transgenerational extended family of kin and kindred.

But, at the center of this extended family stands the institution of marriage as the most basic human model of covenantal love and commitment. And this notion of marriage, deeply rooted in its procreative purpose, is unambiguously heterosexual.

As for the New Testament, “Ozzie and Harriet are nowhere” to be found. Miller argues that both Jesus and Paul were unmarried (emphatically true) and that Jesus “preached a radical kind of family, a caring community of believers, whose bond in God superseded all blood ties.” Jesus clearly did call for a commitment to the Gospel and to discipleship that transcended family commitments. Given the Jewish emphasis on family loyalty and commitment, this did represent a decisive break.

But Miller also claims that “while the Bible and Jesus say many important things about love and family, neither explicitly defines marriage as between one man and one woman.” This is just patently untrue. [Genesis 2:24-25](#) certainly reveals marriage to be, by the Creator’s intention, a union of one man and one woman. To offer just one example from the teaching of Jesus, [Matthew 19:1-8](#) makes absolutely no sense unless marriage “between one man and one woman” is understood as normative.

As for Paul, he did indeed instruct the Corinthians that the unmarried state was advantageous for the spread of the

Gospel. His concern in 1 Corinthians 7 is not to elevate singleness as a lifestyle, but to encourage as many as are able to give themselves totally to an unencumbered Gospel ministry. But, in Corinth and throughout the New Testament church, the vast majority of Christians were married. Paul will himself assume this when he writes the “household codes” included in other New Testament letters.

The real issue is not marriage, Miller suggests, but opposition to homosexuality. Surprisingly, Miller argues that this prejudice against same-sex relations is really about opposition to sex between men. She cites the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* as stating that “nowhere in the Bible do its authors refer to sex between women.” She would have done better to look to the Bible itself, where in [Romans 1:26-27](#) Paul writes: “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

Again, this passage makes absolutely no sense unless it refers very straightforwardly to same-sex relations among both men and women — with the women mentioned first.

Miller dismisses the Levitical condemnations of homosexuality as useless because “our modern understanding of the world has surpassed its prescriptions.” But she saves her most creative dismissal for the Apostle Paul. Paul, she concedes, “was tough on homosexuality.” Nevertheless, she takes encouragement from the fact that “progressive scholars” have found a way to re-interpret the Pauline passages to refer only to homosexual violence and promiscuity.

In this light she cites author Neil Elliott and his book, *The Arrogance of Nations*. Elliott, like other “progressive scholars,” suggests that the modern notion of sexual orientation is simply missing from the biblical worldview, and thus the biblical authors are not really talking about what we know as homosexuality at all. “Paul is not talking about what we call homosexuality at all,” as Miller quotes Elliott.

Of course, no honest reader of the biblical text will share this simplistic and backward conclusion. Furthermore, to accept this argument is to assume that the Christian church has misunderstood the Bible from its very birth — and that we are now dependent upon contemporary “progressive scholars” to tell us what Christians throughout the centuries have missed.

Tellingly, Miller herself seems to lose confidence in this line of argument, explaining that “Paul argued more strenuously against divorce—and at least half of the Christians in America disregard that teaching.” In other words, when the argument is failing, change the subject and just declare victory. “Religious objections to gay marriage are rooted not in the Bible at all, then, but in custom and tradition,” Miller simply asserts — apparently asking her readers to forget everything they have just read.

Miller picks her sources carefully. She cites Neil Elliott but never balances his argument with credible arguments from another scholar, such as [Robert Gagnon](#) of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary [See his response to Elliott [here](#)]. Her scholarly sources are chosen so that they all offer an uncorrected affirmation of her argument. The deck is decisively stacked.

She then moves to the claim that sexual orientation is “exactly the same thing” as skin color when it comes to discrimination. As recent events have suggested, this claim is not seen as credible by many who have suffered discrimination on the basis of skin color.

As always, the bottom line is biblical authority. Lisa Miller does not mince words. “Biblical literalists will disagree,” she allows, “but the Bible is a living document, powerful for more than 2,000 years because its truths speak to us even as we change through history.” This argument means, of course, that we get to decide which truths are and are not binding on us as “we change through history.”

“A mature view of scriptural authority requires us, as we have in the past, to move beyond literalism,” she asserts. “The Bible was written for a world so unlike our own, it’s impossible to apply its rules, at face value, to ours.”

All this comes together when Miller writes, “We cannot look to the Bible as a marriage manual, but we can read it for universal truths as we struggle toward a more just future.” At this point the authority of the Bible is reduced to whatever “universal truths” we can distill from its (supposed) horrifyingly backward and oppressive texts.

Even as she attempts to make her “religious case” for gay marriage, Miller has to acknowledge that “very few Jewish or Christian denominations do officially endorse gay marriage, even in the states where it is legal.” Her argument now grinds to a conclusion with her hope that this will change. But — and this is a crucial point — if her argument had adequate traction, she wouldn’t have to make it. It is not a thin extreme of fundamentalist Christians who stand opposed to same-sex marriage — it is the vast majority of Christian churches and denominations worldwide.

Disappointingly, *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham offers an editorial note that broadens *Newsweek*’s responsibility for this atrocity of an article and reveals even more of the agenda: “No matter what one thinks about gay rights—for, against or somewhere in between —this conservative resort to biblical authority is the worst kind of fundamentalism,” Meacham writes. “Given the history of the making of the Scriptures and the millennia of critical attention scholars and others have given to the stories and injunctions that come to us in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, to argue that something is so because it is in the Bible is more than intellectually bankrupt—it is unserious, and unworthy of the great Judeo-Christian tradition.”

Well, that statement sets the issue clearly before us. He insists that “to argue that something is so because it is in the Bible is more than intellectually bankrupt.” No serious student of the Bible can deny the challenge of responsible biblical interpretation, but the purpose of legitimate biblical interpretation is to determine, as faithfully as possible, what the Bible actually teaches — and then to accept, teach, apply, and obey.

The national news media are collectively embarrassed by the passage of Proposition 8 in California. Gay rights activists are publicly calling on the mainstream media to offer support for gay marriage, arguing that the media let them down in November. It appears that *Newsweek* intends to do its part to press for same-sex marriage. Many observers believe that the main obstacle to this agenda is a resolute opposition grounded in Christian conviction. *Newsweek* clearly intends to reduce that opposition.

*Newsweek* could have offered its readers a careful and balanced review of the crucial issues related to this question. It chose another path — and published this cover story. The magazine’s readers and this controversial issue deserved better.

