

# PROF. ROBERT GAGNON'S RESPONSE TO PROF. L. WILLIAM COUNTRYMAN'S REVIEW IN *ANGLICAN THEOLOGICAL REVIEW*: ON CAREFUL SCHOLARSHIP

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L. William Countryman, professor of New Testament at The Church Divinity School of the Pacific (an Episcopal seminary of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif.) has written a highly tendentious review of my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). Countryman's 452-word review appeared in *Anglican Theological Review* 85:1 (Winter 2003): 196-97. Shortly thereafter the same review appeared on the web at [http://www.elgs.org/5/5\\_9\\_1.html](http://www.elgs.org/5/5_9_1.html).

The following response to Bill Countryman's review will deal with the five charges raised in his review:

1. The charge of "maximalist" arguments as regards (a) the interpretation of the Sodom narrative and (b) the so-called "silence of Jesus" on homosexual practice.
2. The charge of imposing natural law theory on Jesus and Paul.
3. The charge of careless exegesis in the interpretation of Jude 7.
4. The charge of careless arguments in assessing the impact of culture on the incidence of homosexuality.
5. The root problem of Countryman's review and of his scholarship on sexual ethics generally.

We will begin with some important background information and brief mention of a telling omission in Countryman's review.

## **I. Background Information**

On Sept. 24, 2002, I had the opportunity of dialoguing/debating with Bill Countryman on the issue of the Bible and homosexuality, in Orlando, Florida. Bishop John Howe and the Episcopal diocese of central Florida sponsored the event. It was here that I first learned—not from Countryman—that Countryman was writing a review of my book for *Anglican Theological Review*.

It would be an understatement to say that I was not optimistic that the review would be fair.

First, Countryman had announced at the start of the discussion in Orlando that he was a “gay man” (divorced from his wife). It seemed to me that he was too personally invested in justifying his homosexual identity to deal fairly with the biblical witness on same-sex intercourse.

Second, even for a prohomosex advocate, his positions on sexual ethics were extreme. He had written the following in his book *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Fortress Press, 1988):

- Paul regarded same-sex intercourse only as an “unpleasingly dirty aspect of Gentile culture” but not as sinful (pp. 104-23). I know of no reputable biblical scholar who has followed Countryman’s interpretation—not even on the prohomosex side (not, for example, Bernadette Brooten, Martti Nissinen, or William Schoedel).
- “The gospel allows no rule against the following, in and of themselves: . . . bestiality, polygamy, homosexual acts,” or “pornography.” As regards such matters we are not free to “impose our codes on others” (pp. 243-45).
- With respect to incest, Countryman conveniently avoids the subject of incest between adults. Although he seems finally to draw a line against adult-child incest, Countryman is the only biblical scholar that I know who argues that society’s “taboo” against adult-child incest is too high (pp. 257-58). Nearly everyone views strong societal revulsion for adult-child incest as a good thing, namely, as an effective deterrent against would-be perpetrators. Furthermore, the reason that he gives for adult-child incest being problematic—it preempts the process of sexual maturation—does not explain why incest *per se* is wrong. It treats only the facet of age, not the facet of blood relatedness.
- Perhaps at times prostitution “may serve to meet legitimate needs in the absence of genuine alternatives” (p. 264).

[In response to a question](#) about how the Church should respond to nonmonogamous homosexual relationships, Countryman has said: “I would be *distressed* if the drive toward blessing gay unions merely applied Reformation understandings of heterosexual unions to gay unions.”

I could think of few, if any, other persons whose views on sexual ethics would be more opposite to my own.

Third, in my book I had strongly critiqued Countryman’s isolated view that Paul regarded same-sex intercourse as “dirty” but not sinful (*Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 273-77). In fact, I think that it is correct to say that, of all the prohomosex positions that I refute in my book, Countryman’s was the easiest to refute. Most likely he would be out for blood.

Finally, my interaction with Countryman at the Orlando event indicated to me a certain unfortunate shallowness in Countryman’s response to evidence. When presented with a mountain of evidence against his position he would simply say “That’s not true,”

or words to that effect, and move on without supplying any arguments to the contrary. To me Countryman exhibited a prior commitment to dismiss Scripture’s credibility on the matter of same-sex intercourse, irrespective of the evidence.

While I was not hopeful that Countryman would give a fair review, I thought that, at the very least, he would have to discard his criticisms of my work that I had already refuted at the Orlando event and for which he had no response. Sadly, he did not do even this. He makes the same unsubstantiated charges as if he had never heard my rebuttal at Orlando, apparently banking on the fact that his readers have not heard that rebuttal. So it is necessary to make that rebuttal available to readers here (and then some). Then readers can decide for themselves whether Countryman has given my book a fair review.

With one or two minor exceptions, the entire review is negative. The two minor exceptions are as follows. First, Countryman states in the first sentence, somewhat neutrally, that I offer “a detailed argument, framed in terms of critical biblical scholarship.” Second, in the second-to-last sentence, he notes my “breadth of reading” as the book’s “principal value,” though he follows this up with a criticism regarding the lack of a bibliography. Since the book contains indices for modern authors and ancient sources, perhaps Countryman has in mind by “bibliography” a subject index. Regardless, I had wanted to include a subject index and a bibliography but could not because Abingdon Press had informed me that if, I added these, I would have to subtract an equivalent amount of pages of text from the book.

## **II. An Implied Countryman Concession?**

The overall impression left by Countryman’s review is that he was desperate to say as many bad things about the book as he could possibly think of. In view of that, it is telling that Countryman makes no attempt to overturn my critique of Countryman’s own thesis; namely, that Paul viewed same-sex intercourse as dirty but not sinful. Apparently, Countryman knows that this thesis cannot be sustained.

## **III. A “Maximalist Argument”?**

In his first paragraph, Countryman claims that my book develops a “maximalist argument” against homosexual behavior. He had made the same claim at the Orlando event. The purpose of this claim is to get people to think that the Bible’s witness to same-sex intercourse is full of ambiguities; Gagnon takes every ambiguity and imposes a definite antihomosex spin. Countryman cites two, and only two, examples.

### *(a) Sodom.*

According to Countryman, I seek “to reclaim the Sodom story for [my] purpose after most scholars on all sides of the question have set it aside”—this from a person who stands alone in his untenable belief that Paul did not view same-sex intercourse as sin.

Most scholars have set aside the Sodom narrative (even Richard Hays). But I contend against such scholars that they should not do so. In fact, one of the main messages of the book is that scholars have underestimated the strength and interconnectedness of the biblical witness. Countryman would like readers to think that my interpretation of the Sodom story is improbable. An interesting aside is that I devoted 15-20 minutes of my presentation in Orlando to this interpretation. At no time did Countryman attempt to rebut this with counterarguments—an odd state of affairs had the case for an antihomosex reading been as improbable as Countryman infers.

As it is, the case for an antihomosex reading of the Yahwist's Sodom narrative is overwhelming. It is a "kitchen sink" story of Canaanite depravity: not just about rape, but about gang rape as severe inhospitality to travelers seeking temporary lodging; and not just about this but about treating males not as males but as though they were females with an orifice for male penetration. That male-male intercourse per se is a significant compounding factor in the story is evident from many considerations:

- The Yahwist's story of the creation of woman in Genesis 2:18-24 and its clear portrayal of woman as the one and only sexual "counterpart" for man.
- The Yahwist's story of Ham's incestuous, same-sex rape of Noah in Genesis 9:20-27, with its ideological links to the laws against (non-coercive) incest and male-male intercourse in Leviticus 18.
- The probable antihomosex interpretations of the Sodom story in Ezekiel 16:49-50 (Ezekiel interprets the Sodom narrative through the lens of Holiness Code or something very much like it) and in Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:7, 10, to say nothing of a number of antihomosex interpretations in early Judaism.
- The parallel story of the Levite at Gibeah in Judges 19:22-25, told by a narrator (the "Deuteronomistic Historian") who elsewhere abhors the receptive homoerotic associations of the *qedeshim* (literally, "holy ones," but referring to "homosexual cult prostitutes").
- The absolute prohibitions against male-male intercourse in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.
- The ancient Near Eastern context, which often disparages males who *willingly* play the role of females in sexual intercourse.
- The implications of the rest of the Old Testament canon, which in any material dealing with sexual relations always presumes the sole and exclusive legitimacy of heterosexual unions.

For the documentation behind the claims made above, I refer readers to *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 43-157 (esp. 63-110) and *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, 56-68. In short, one needs to read the Sodom narrative *contextually*—that is, in the light of an array of literary concentric circles that fan out from the text itself: (1) other material in the Tetrateuch by the same author, the "Yahwist"; (2) other material in early Israelite literature; (3) other material in the ancient Near East; and (4) the subsequent history of interpretation. When one does that, there is little doubt that the story rejects all male-male intercourse on the grounds of structural discomplementarity. For the narrator the difference between consent and coercion is the difference between a man who

willingly dishonors himself by serving as the sexual counterpart to another male and a man who is forcibly dishonored by others.

(b) *Jesus*

According to Countryman the other example where I create a “maximal argument” involves Jesus’ view of same-sex intercourse. “He *even* argues at length that Jesus’ silence on the subject confirms his position” (my emphasis). I spent 20 minutes laying out this position at the Orlando event. Once more Countryman did not bring forward a single argument that might have rebutted my position; nor does he do so in the review.

As with the Sodom narrative the case for claiming that Jesus was opposed to every form of same-sex intercourse is overwhelming. One need only consider:

- The univocal and intensely strong rejection of same-sex intercourse in both the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism.
- The univocal and intensely strong rejection of same-sex intercourse by Jesus’ earliest and closest followers—including Paul, who was a far more vigorous critic of the law of Moses than Jesus.
- Jesus’ view of the law of Moses generally, in which Jesus prioritized “the weightier matters,” amended the law to close loopholes, and intensified many of its demands, without abrogating any portion thereof (Matt 5:21-48; 23:23).
- In particular, Jesus’ intensification of other areas of sexual ethics, including divorce and remarriage (Mark 10:2-12; Matt 5:32 and Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10-11) and adultery of the heart (Matt 5:27-28), and the application of the saying about cutting off offending body parts to sexual behavior (Matt 5:29-30).
- Jesus’ back-to-back appeal to Genesis 1:27 (“*male* and *female* he made them”) and 2:24 (“for this reason a *man* . . . will be joined to his *woman/wife* and the two will become one flesh”) as normative and prescriptive texts for defining human sexual relationships (Mark 10:6-9). While focusing on the indissolubility of marriage, Jesus clearly presupposed other-sex pairing as the essential prerequisite, believing that the Creator God had ordained marriage as a lifelong union of one man and one woman into a sexual whole.
- Other sayings of Jesus that implicitly forbid same-sex intercourse: on “sexual immoralities” (*porneiai*; Mark 7:21-23); on the Decalogue command against adultery (Mark 10:17-22); on Sodom (Luke 10:10-12 and Matt 10:14-15); and on not giving what is holy to the “dogs” (Matt 7:6).

For further documentation of these points I refer readers to *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, ch. 3 (pp. 185-228) and *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, 68-74. When referring to the “silence” of Jesus regarding same-sex intercourse, “silence” has to be put in quotes because, in so many ways, Jesus was not silent about same-sex intercourse—any more than he was silent about incest or bestiality. Countryman’s feigned shock over the contention that Jesus was opposed to same-sex intercourse is the equivalent of saying: “Gagnon even argues at length that Jesus’ silence on the subject of man-mother sex confirms Jesus’ opposition to such behavior.” Of course, there is

overwhelming inferential evidence that Jesus agreed with the strong and unequivocal consensus against man-mother sex in the Jewish Scriptures and throughout early Judaism. The absurdity would be to argue otherwise—that Jesus’ so-called “silence” indicates some equivocation about, or even affirmation for, man-mother sex, or that Jesus’ view on such matters is beyond knowing.

When Paul received an oral report regarding an adult consensual relationship between a Christian man and his stepmother at Corinth, it was not necessary for Paul to pace the streets of Ephesus trying to figure out, *in the absence of an explicit saying from Jesus*, what Jesus’ position on man-mother incest might have been. The answer to “WWJD?” (What Would Jesus Do?) or “WIJD?” (What Is Jesus Doing?) was a no-brainer. Paul urged the Corinthian community “*in the name of the Lord Jesus*, when you and my spirit are gathered together with *the power of our Lord Jesus*,” to disfellowship temporarily the offender in the hopes of rescuing him for the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 5:4-5; cf. 6:9-10). The same certainly would have applied to serial, unrepentant participants in same-sex intercourse; note the references to “soft men” (viz., effeminate men who play the sexual role of females) and “men who lie with males” in the vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9. Jesus did not loosen the restrictions on sexual freedom; he tightened them, albeit in the context of an aggressive outreach to the lost. Paul, and the early church generally, understood this quite well. The question is why Countryman does not.

As regards the Sodom story and Jesus’ views on same-sex intercourse, I have not adopted a “maximalist argument,” as opposed to Countryman’s “minimalist argument.” When a strong preponderance of historical and literary evidence pushes in a single direction, terms such as “maximalist” and “minimalist” are out of place. Countryman isn’t adopting a more cautious approach to an allegedly ambiguous trail of evidence. He is ignoring altogether the one and only trail that historical and literary evidence gives us.

#### **IV. An Imposed Natural Law Theory?**

Countryman alleges that I rely

on a theology of creation that appears to have originated in the last century as a kind of Protestant counterpart to Roman Catholic natural law theory. Genesis 1 and 2 are read as establishing a permanent and exclusive order of heterosexual monogamy. Jesus and Paul are perceived not simply as making use of Genesis for their own purposes, but as anticipating this later systematic understanding of the passage in all its implications. Gagnon also finds this created order manifest in “nature” through the “obvious complementarity” of male and female genitalia.

It is clear what rhetorical trick Countryman is trying to play. Without any substantiation of his claims, he tries to raise the suspicion in readers’ minds that I have committed an anachronism, imposing some elaborate modern apparatus regarding creation and nature on Scripture. However, nothing particularly elaborate is required and no anachronism is committed. There are some very basic principles here that the ancients grasped long before Roman Catholic natural law theory. Indeed, the latter was

constructed on the foundation of significant antecedents in the ancient world. I am surprised that Countryman seems not to know this.

Before tackling the question of a *heterosexual* prerequisite, I need to address briefly Countryman's charge that I see Genesis 1 and 2 "as establishing a *permanent* and *exclusive* order of heterosexual *monogamy*" (emphasis mine). I confess to agreeing with Jesus: The logic of Genesis 1 and 2 does imply that sexual unions are to be *lifelong* and *monogamous* (Mark 10:2-12), to say nothing of male-female. In general, this logic worked itself out in ancient Israel for women; but human—chiefly male—hardness of heart led to some time-limited concessions in the Mosaic law as regards divorce and polygamy. Would Countryman, out of concern for the extreme rarity of lifelong monogamy among homosexuals, care to argue that Jesus got it wrong?

Now on to the matter of a heterosexual or "other-sexual" prerequisite.

- **Genesis 2:18-24** portrays an originally binary human split down the side into two sexually differentiated counterparts. Clearly, marriage is imaged as a reconstitution, into "one flesh," of the two constituent parts, male and female, that were the products of the splitting. One's sexual "other half" can only be a person of the other sex. Men and women are complementary sexual beings whose (re-)merger brings about sexual wholeness in the sphere of erotic interaction. This is so obvious a point that it is ludicrous to deny that the Yahwist had no clue about the negative import of this story for same-sex intercourse—and all the more ludicrous in view of the Ham and Sodom narratives in the same literary corpus. Does Countryman really believe that the absence of the missing sexual complement in same-sex erotic unions would have been inconsequential to the Yahwist? The one prerequisite most stressed in the narrative is the other-sex dimension. Aristophanes' myth of human origins in Plato's *Symposium* (191e-193c) tells of the splitting of primal male-female, male-male, and female-female humans and its effect on same-sex and opposite-sex pairing. Obviously, then, the ancients were capable of conceiving of the implications of the kind of account given in Genesis 2:18-24.
- Would Countryman have us believe that the Priestly Writers in **Genesis 1**—in a chapter that gives special attention to issues of structural congruity or "kinds"—failed to notice that there is anything structurally essential to an other-sexual union?
- Countryman belittles the notion that **ancient Israel** could have both developed an other-sex prerequisite for valid sexual unions and justified that prerequisite with structural considerations based in creation and nature. And yet the Old Testament shows a strong interconnected witness against male-male intercourse and provides absolutely no support anywhere for homoerotic relationships. There is no attempt anywhere in Scripture to distinguish between good and bad types of homoerotic relationships for the simple reason that all such relationships were unacceptable to the authors of Scripture. All the extant evidence indicates that there was indeed a heterosexual prerequisite operative in ancient Israel (to the extent that Israel remained faithful to the values of the tribal confederacy of old) and this prerequisite persisted, of course, in early Judaism, and early Christianity. So are we to believe that ancient Israel maintained, over and against more porous

attitudes in the ancient Near East generally, an unbending stance against male-male intercourse without the aid of any rationale regarding the way males and females are made? The creation stories in Genesis 1-2 transparently provide foundational legitimation for this prerequisite. As regards nature, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 emphatically reject any attempt to supplant a woman in sexual intercourse with another male on the grounds that it compromises a man's gender integrity ("...as though lying with a woman"). The Deuteronomic prohibition of cross-dressing and special disgust for males serving as the receptive partners in intercourse with other males convey the same lines of structural demarcation for the sexes. The logic of sexual intercourse, the way men and women are constructed by God, requires a complementary sexual other. Although a specific word for "nature" is not employed in the Hebrew Bible, there is a "natural theology" of sorts already present in the biblical text (cf. James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* [Clarendon, 1993]).

- Because of conceptual affinities already present in the Hebrew Bible **early Judaism** had little problem adapting Greek terminology of natural law to their own distinctive male-female prerequisite. Countryman needs to review carefully the material in ch. 2 of my book ("Same-Sex Intercourse as 'Contrary to Nature' in Early Judaism," 159-83). So far as extant evidence indicates, it was the universal view of early Judaism that God had structured men and women in ways that made all same-sex intercourse an incongruous and obscene affair.
- As regards **Paul's view of creation**, the fact that the two key creation texts, Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 2:18-24, clearly lie in the background of Paul's indictments of same-sex intercourse in Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, respectively (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 289-97), leads to an inescapable conclusion: Paul understood the creation stories as establishing an other-sex prerequisite. It is also no mere coincidence that Jesus lifted up the same two creation texts, Gen 1:27 and Gen 2:24, to define normative and prescriptive human sexual behavior (see above), texts that stress a male-female, man-woman prerequisite. Given the clear evidence laid out in my book, it is intellectually perverse for any reviewer to allege that it was beyond the capacity of Jesus, Paul, and first-century Jews generally to view the creation stories as having implicit proscriptive force against same-sex intercourse.
- It is also evident from **Romans 1:24-27** that Paul believed that there was a **natural, structural complementarity** to male-female unions and a corresponding unnatural, structural discomplementarity to female-female and male-male unions. The whole point of the discussion in 1:18-32 is to stress that humans have deliberately suppressed the clear evidence of God and God's will for human behavior available in creation/nature. Idolatry and same-sex intercourse are highlighted because Paul considered both to be prime instances where humans, especially Gentiles, consciously and absurdly deny obvious, often visible, and important structures of material creation.
- There is nothing anachronistic about asserting that Paul saw the complementary character of male and female sex organs as a significant clue to God's will for human sexual relationships. We see this kind of thinking in **Philo, Josephus, and some Greco-Roman moralists and physicians**. For example, the physician

Soranus (or his translator Caelius Aurelianus) described the desire on the part of “soft men” to be penetrated (cf. 1 Cor 6:9) as “not from nature,” insofar as it “subjugated to obscene uses parts not so intended” and disregarded “the places of our body which divine providence destined for definite functions” (*Chronic Diseases* 4.9.131). A similar point is made by Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria in describing the actions of the men of Sodom: “Although they were men, (they began) mounting males, the doers (i.e., the active partners) not standing in awe of the nature held in common with those who had it done to them (i.e., the passive partners)” (*Abraham* 135). Craig A. Williams also acknowledges this point: “some kind of argument from ‘design’ seems to lurk in the background of Cicero’s, Seneca’s, and Musonius’ claims: the penis is ‘designed’ to penetrate the vagina, the vagina is ‘designed’ to be penetrated by the penis” (*Roman Homosexuality* [Oxford University Press, 1999], 242). So does William R. Schoedel: Ancient writers “who appeal to nature against same-sex eros find it convenient to concentrate on the more or less obvious uses of the orifices of the body to suggest the proper channel for the more diffused sexual impulses of the body” (“Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* [ed. D. Balch; Eerdmans, 2000], 46). In view of the evidence, when Countryman claims that I have imposed an argument from design on Paul and his contemporaries, it is self-evident that Countryman is either unaware of the data—in which case he has not read my book carefully and should not be doing a review—or, worse still, he has deliberately chosen to suppress that data for his audience.

- I would add, parenthetically, that Countryman knows, or ought to know, that I do not limit the argument for **male-female complementarity** to the visible, anatomical dimension. The complementarity of the sex organs is a very important dimension of the whole, as is evident from the health hazards and repulsive quality of men who eroticize the anal cavity of other men for penetration and even oral activity. Anatomy is also a clue not easily falsified, unlike the malleable and non-congenital character of human desires. Christians are not anti-body gnostic dualists. But the matter is about more than sex organs. It is about essential maleness and femaleness. It is as if Paul says in Rom 1:24-27: Start with the obvious anatomical “fittedness” of human anatomy. When done with that, consider procreative design as a clue. Then move on to a broad range of interpersonal differences that define maleness and femaleness. The image behind this is the splitting and holistic reemerging of the two sexual halves in Gen 1:27 and Gen 2:21-24.

In sum, if there is any anachronism in the discussion of creation, nature, and homosexual practice, it is in Countryman’s claim that the creation texts and embodied sexuality were as inconclusive in establishing an other-sexual prerequisite for the authors of Scripture as they are for Countryman.

## V. On Careless Exegesis and Jude 7

Countryman writes:

The author is not always careful with exegetical details. In Jude 7, for example, he wants the ‘harlotry’ of the men of Sodom to be homosexuality rather than sex with angels, a reading that ignores Jude’s statement that they acted ‘in the same way’ as the Watchers of Genesis 6 (87-88). Indeed, he seems to have misplaced the phrase in question into Jude 8 in place of the weaker comparative language there.

The opening line is an interesting negative formulation: “The author is not always careful with exegetical details.” Countryman made the same comment and gave the same example from Jude 7 at the Orlando event. After I had shown the flaw in Countryman’s own exegesis of Jude 7—which, incidentally, Countryman did not attempt to rebut—I asked him whether he had any other examples of careless exegesis on my part. He declined to offer any. “Not always careful” suggests other instances of carelessness, yet from a book with about 470 pages of text Countryman was not prepared to cite another example in my presence (or in the review). And the one instance of carelessness that Countryman alleges comes from a text that is not at the center of the debate, to which I devoted only one paragraph in my book.

Even so, Countryman has misunderstood both Jude 7 and what I say about Jude 7. Here is Jude 5-8 (my translation):

<sup>5</sup>Now I want to remind you, although you know all things, that the Lord, having once saved a people from the land of Egypt, the second time destroyed those who did not believe (or: were unfaithful). <sup>6</sup>Angels, too—those who had not kept their own sphere of influence (or: position of authority, rule, station, domain; *archen*) but who had left behind (or: deserted, abandoned) their proper dwelling—he (i.e., the Lord) has kept until (or: for) the judgment of the great Day in eternal chains under (or: in) darkness (i.e., of the nether regions), <sup>7</sup>(just) as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, which, *in a manner similar to these* (or: in the same way as they; *ton homoion tropon toutois*), *committed sexual immorality (ekporneusasai) and went after ‘other flesh’* (or: strange/alien flesh, another kind of flesh, flesh other than their own, i.e., angelic flesh; *kai apelthousai opiso sarkos heteras*), are set before us (or: are exhibited) as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. <sup>8</sup>Yet, *similarly* (or: in the same way, likewise; *homoios*), these dreamers also defile (the/their?) flesh, reject authority (lordship, dominion; or: bearers of authority, dominions), and slander glorious beings (i.e., angels).

Countryman contends that I ignore the comparison that Jude makes with the angelic “Watchers” in v. 6. This is false, as is Countryman’s assumption that readers must choose between two evils, male-male intercourse and sex with angels. As I note:

The two actions (committing sexual immorality and pursuing angels) are to be treated as related, but distinct, actions. . . . In their lust for sexual intercourse with other men, the men of Sodom inadvertently put themselves in the sacrilegious position of pursuing sexual intercourse with angels. “In like manner” the false believers, against whom Jude wages combat, had through their lust for immoral sexual behavior come into conflict with the angelic guardians of this world order. (pp. 87-88)

Nor do I “misplace” the phrase “in a manner similar to these” in v. 7 into v. 8, as Countryman falsely alleges. The Greek adverb introducing v. 8 (*homoios*), which I translate “similarly” above, can also be rendered, as in my book, “in like manner.” Jude sees the actions of the Sodomites as sharing similarities with the actions of the rebellious angels, known as “the Watchers,” recorded in Genesis 6:1-4 and in much Second Temple Jewish literature (note the expression “in a manner similar to these [angels]” in v. 7). Jude also sees similarities between these two actions and the actions of the false believers criticized in Jude’s letters (note the word “similarly” introducing v. 8).

Apparently Countryman thinks that the Greek text of Jude 7 *requires* that the actions of the Sodomites match exactly the actions of the rebellious angels who copulated with human women. It does not. (Countryman actually made such a claim in the debate at Orlando and falsely accused me of bad translation.) The two places where Countryman might claim an exact correspondence do not substantiate his claim. (a) The Greek phrase *ton homoion tropon toutois* in v. 7 can be rendered *either* “in a manner similar to these” *or* “in the same way as these.” The actions of the Sodomites in “committing sexual immorality and going after other flesh” bear similarities to the actions of the rebellious angels in copulating with humans. However, the extent of the similarity and the degree of dissimilarity are not specified. (b) By the same token, in isolation the phrase “committed sexual immorality and went after other flesh” could be construed as a hendiadys (literally, “one by two”: coordinating two words with “and” to express a single idea, with one of the words being in a dependent relation to the other). Countryman seems to interpret the expression along these lines, as meaning “(the Sodomites) committed sexual immorality *by going after* other flesh.” However, it is just as possible that the first word in a hendiadys expresses the subordinate idea (see examples in Blass, Debrunner, Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, section 442 [16], p. 228a). In that event the phrase could mean something like “*by (or: in the act of) committing sexual immorality* (the Sodomites) went after other flesh.” It is also possible that the coordination of the two participles in this instance is not a hendiadys.

Not only is it not required by the wording of the Greek text that *ekporneusasai* (“having committed sexual immorality”) refer exclusively to copulation with angels, there are also at least six indications that *ekporneusasai* alludes, at least in part, to attempted male-male intercourse.

- Both the story of Sodom in Genesis 19:4-11 and the subsequent history of interpretation **portray the men of Sodom as being unaware of the angelic identity of the visitors** (e.g., *Testament of Asher* 7:1 states clearly that the men of Sodom “did not recognize the Lord’s angels”). In the story line, two angels are sent by Yahweh to Sodom, in human disguise, to investigate whether the outcry against the cities’ sin was accurate (Gen 18:16-22, 33; 19:1). The Sodomites, unaware of the true identity of the visitors, treated them as they would have treated any foreigners. It is precisely at this point that the parallel with the actions of the Watchers breaks down. Both Genesis 6:1-4 and the subsequent history of interpretation presuppose intent on the part of rebellious angels to subvert the divide between divine and human.

- **Jude 7 emphasizes moral culpability** when it presents Sodom and Gomorrah “as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” for their culpability in heinous immorality—a culpability that would be inexplicable if “committed sexual immorality” referred exclusively to attempted sex with angels.
- **Hebrews 13:2** exhorts believers: “Do not neglect the love of strangers, for because of this some, without knowing it, have received as strangers angels.” This text undoubtedly echoes the Sodom tradition, in inverted fashion. In sinning against visitors one may be sinning against angels, as did the men of Sodom. The moral is: So do not sin against strangers. The rationale of Jude 7 is similar. The men of Sodom “committed sexual immorality and [in the process of doing so] went after ‘other flesh.’” Rather than honoring their guests, the men of Sodom dishonored them, both by attempting coercive sex and by treating their guests’ embodied masculinity as though it were embodied femininity (cf. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.200-201, which combines the themes of inhospitality and dishonoring passions for same-sex intercourse). As it happened, their outrageous act of sexual immorality was made more grievous by the fact that the visitors turned out to be angels.
- After recounting the stories of the Watchers (v. 6) and of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 7), the author makes an **application to false believers in his own day**: “Yet, *similarly*, these dreamers also defile (the/their?) flesh, reject authority, and slander glorious beings” (v. 8). As with the adverbial phrase “in a manner similar to these” (*ton homoion tropon toutois*) in v. 7, the adverb “similarly” (*homoios*) suggests a certain degree of correspondence but nothing like precise identity. In the view of Jude, the false believers’ lust for immoral sexual behavior had put them on a collision course with the angelic guardians of this world order, which subsequently led them to revile angels, not to lust after them. In a similar way, the immoral sexual desire of the Sodomites, in this case for male-male intercourse, led them to pursue sex with angels unknowingly.
- This interpretation of Jude 7 that I espouse in my book and here fits best with **“Second Peter’s” own read of Jude 7-8**, referring as it does to the “licentiousness (*aselgeia*) of conduct of the lawless” at Sodom (2:7) and to those who follow in their footsteps as “going after (i.e., following, indulging) (the/their) flesh in (or: with its) defiling desire (or: lust)” (2:10). The “defiling desire” of the Sodomites can only refer to their desire to “know” or have sex with Lot’s male visitors, whom they did not recognize as angels.
- According to the ***Testament of Naphtali* 3:3-4**, the descendants of Naphtali shall not be like the Gentiles who changed “the order” of nature by devoting themselves to idols; instead, they shall recognize in the heavens, earth, and sea “the Lord who made all these things, in order that [they] may not become like Sodom, which exchanged the order of its nature.” **Strikingly similar motifs to Rom 1:19-27** make it likely that either Paul formulated Rom 1:19-27 with this tradition in mind or *T. Naph.* 3:3-4 is another Christian interpolation into the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. I think the former is more likely, but either supposition increases the probability that the clause about Sodom exchanging “the order of its nature” refers to same-sex intercourse. This is important because, like Jude 7, the actions of the men of Sodom are compared with the actions of the

angels in Gen 6:4, who “similarly (*homoios*, cf. Jude 8) exchanged the order of their nature” by copulating with human females (3:5). Again, the “similarly” suggests similarity but not identity. How far does the similarity go? Both the Sodomites and the angels acted against “the order of their nature,” engaging in, or attempting to engage in, structurally incompatible forms of sexual intercourse. Both acts involved, or threatened to involve, human-angel copulation. Yet the very concept of “exchange” implies volition, an intentional action—as with the exchange of nature’s order for idols—and that is precisely the point where the analogy between the Sodomites and the angels breaks down. This volitional element comes across clearly in Rom 1:18-27, which correlates the concept of exchange with a conscious suppression of truth in creation/nature. Consequently, one should probably understand *T. Naph.* 3:3-5 in a way that confirms our interpretation of Jude 6-8: the Sodomites deliberately exchanged the order of their nature as males by attempting intercourse with other males. In the process they got more than they bargained for, unknowingly attempting sex with “other flesh,” angels. The primary exchange is opposite-sex intercourse for same-sex intercourse but the undertone is unintended sex with angels. The latter component solidifies a connection with the rebellious angels—a connection already intimated by the fact that both, in different ways, consciously exchanged the natural for the unnatural. Cf. also the observations of J. A. Loader on *T. Naph.* 3:4: “In this context the changing of its order by Sodom can only refer to the homosexual aspirations of the Sodomites mentioned in Genesis 19:5” (*A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish and Early Christian Traditions* [CBET 1; Kampen: Kok, 1990], 82; cited in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 88 n. 121).

In conclusion, if Jude 7 is the best example that Countryman can cite of careless exegesis on my part, then he is in trouble. I trust that it will be clear to most readers that all that Countryman has done is shown his own capacity for both careless exegesis and careless remarks about the exegesis of others.

## **VI. On Careless Arguments and the Effect of Societal Approval**

Countryman charges:

[Gagnon] can also be careless in constructing arguments. After citing David Greenberg, for example, to the effect that societies lacking proscriptions against homosexual behavior may show little homosexual activity, he then concludes by claiming that any approval of homosexuality will necessarily increase its incidence (414-416).

This is another example where the carelessness lies entirely with Countryman. The fact that homosexual behavior is unknown, or virtually so, in some societies that lack proscriptions against homosexual behavior in no way disproves the assertion that cultural *endorsement* of homosexual behavior can affect significantly the incidence of homosexuality or even that strong cultural *disapproval* can reduce the incidence of

homosexuality. That Countryman does not understand this logical distinction is very surprising.

Recent studies, both American and British, indicate a significant upsurge in homosexual self-identification over the past decade. Prohomosex apologists like Countryman would like to explain this rise as due entirely to homosexuals having greater freedom in accepting their allegedly predetermined and rigid orientation. This is at best an inadequate explanation. As I note in my book, there are many lines of evidence that suggest that macro- and microcultural factors have a significant impact on the incidence of homosexuality per se. For example:

- Significant **cross-cultural differences** in the incidence and forms of homosexuality have existed over the millennia and even within our own time between the “first world” and “third world” (cf. David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* [University of Chicago, 1988]). Congenital influences do not explain such differences. Nor is it likely that these differences can be attributed in all cases to forced ritual conformity. For instance, in ancient Athens homoerotic practice flourished despite the absence of mandatory homosex rituals. See my book, pp. 413-16. Implicit in Countryman’s statement above is that I have misunderstood Greenberg--though Countryman’s own comments suggest that he knows Greenberg’s work only through my own. Here is what Greenberg himself says (note the strongly pro-homosex cast to Greenberg’s statements):

To some, the social-constructionist position has seemed troublesome because of its political implications. When heterosexual chauvinists have told homosexuals to change, essentialist theories have provided a ready response: I can’t. When parents have sought to bar homosexual teachers from the classroom lest their children (horror of horrors!) become homosexual, essentialist theories have provided a seemingly authoritative basis for denying the possibility. The present study . . . cannot make concessions to such opportunistic considerations. It should be pointed out, though, that nothing in the social-constructivist position legitimates the denial of rights. . . . Assertive gay liberationists have argued that it may be strategically wiser to concede the possibility that a few students might be influenced to become gay by having an openly gay teacher as a role model, and to say, “So what?” (p. 492)

By chance in the past few days I came across in [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org) a 1989 review of Greenberg’s book, written by Don Browning, professor of religion and psychological studies at the University of Chicago Divinity school, and originally published in *Christian Century* (Oct. 11, 1989, pp. 911-16). It seems that Browning came to the same conclusion that I did over a decade later in my own independent reading of Greenberg: “Accepting Greenberg’s thesis might suggest that the new tolerance of [mainline] churches, especially the move toward the ordination of homosexuals, is one more way modern societies help create, not just liberate, individuals with gay and lesbian identities” (p. 916).

- Researchers for the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), mostly from the University of Chicago, found large differences in the incidence of

homosexual self-identification in the United States correlating with **geographical (rural, suburban, urban) and educational variables**. They concluded: “An environment that provides increased opportunities for and fewer negative sanctions against same-gender sexuality may both allow and even elicit expression of same-gender interest and sexual behavior.” Their study also confirmed that there are significant differences in the way that men and women respond to cultural stimuli. See my book, pp. 416-18.

- Studies have indicated that **the sexual identities of adolescents** are less stable than those of adults (which is also common sense). See, for example, G. Remafedi, et al., “Demography of sexual orientation in adolescents,” *Pediatrics* 89:4 (Apr. 1992): 714-21. Here’s is the authors’ abstract:

This study was undertaken to explore patterns of sexual orientation in a representative sample of Minnesota junior and senior high school students. The sample included 34,706 students (grades 7 through 12) from diverse ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic strata. . . . Overall, 10.7% of students were “unsure” of their sexual orientation; 88.2% described themselves as predominantly heterosexual; and 1.1% described themselves as bisexual or predominantly homosexual. . . . Gender differences were minor; but responses to individual sexual orientation items varied with age, religiosity, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Uncertainty about sexual orientation diminished in successively older age groups, with corresponding increases in heterosexual and homosexual affiliation. The findings suggest an unfolding of sexual identity during adolescence, *influenced by sexual experience and demographic factors*. (emphasis added)

If adolescents experiment in homosexual behavior, those whose sexual identity is still somewhat in flux will probably experience a higher incidence of homosexual proclivity than if they had never participated in such behavior. We also know now that the brain rewires in accordance with experiences in life; in short, nurture can become nature (cf. my book, pp. 398-99).

- We also know that those who self-identify as homosexuals are several times more likely to have experienced **sex at an early age**, nearly always with an older male. It seems difficult to believe that these older males are so adept (clairvoyant?) in picking out those youngsters who will one day self-identify as homosexual. The most obvious interpretation is that it is the early homosexual experience that increases the likelihood of subsequent homosexual self-identification. See my book, 412-13.
- The work of Bell and Weinberg indicates that even most exclusive homosexuals (category 6) have experienced, at one time or another in life, some degree of heterosexual arousal. This speaks to **a degree of elasticity in sexual desire**, which could be elevated or decreased in one direction or the other depending on macro- and microcultural influences. See my book, 418-20.
- Research has indicated a strong correlation between early manifestations of **gender nonconformity** and the development of homosexual attraction. Yet even gender nonconformity does not lead in a straight line to homosexual development. There may be a connection between gender nonconformity at an early stage of life and congenital influences. But the link between congenital influences and

homosexual development is at least one step further removed. Different family, peer, and societal influences, along with incremental choices and responses to life's unique experiences, best explain why early gender nonconformity leads to homosexual development for many but not for all. See my book, 408-12.

- A standard textbook on psychiatry makes the following observation: “Genetic factors play some role in the production of homosexual behavior, but . . . **sexual behavior is molded by many influences**, including ‘acquired tastes’ (or learning) closely related to the culture in which the individual develops. . . . It is possible . . . to picture a future in which homosexual behavior will be so much in the cultural experience of every individual that the genetic contribution will become undetectable” (Paul R. McHugh and Phillip R. Slavney, *The Perspectives of Psychiatry* [2d ed.; Johns Hopkins, 1998], 184-85; both authors are professors at the John Hopkins University School of Medicine). Cited in my book, p. 402.
- The two best **identical twin studies** to date suggest an insignificant correlation between, on the one hand, genes and intrauterine hormonal influences, and, on the other hand, homosexuality. One of the two, by prominent Northwestern researcher J. Michael Bailey, is cited in my book (pp. 404-405). The other was published after my book went to press: Peter S. Bearman (Columbia University) and Hannah Brückner (Yale University), “Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107:5 (2002): 1179-1205. They concluded that “less gendered socialization” in childhood, not genetic or hormonal influences, plays the dominant role in the development of same-sex attraction.

The convergence of multiple pieces of evidence puts the lie to Countryman's rigid essentialist assumption that no amount of cultural incentives and no amount of individual experimentation that goes along with such incentives could ever affect the incidence of homosexuality in the population. It was obvious at the Orlando event that Countryman did not know the relevant scientific data. Yet in the absence of such knowledge he showed no reticence in making unsubstantiated generalizations and categorical denials.

## VII. The Problem with Countryman's Review

After his unsubstantiated charge about my alleged carelessness in constructing arguments, Countryman presumes to diagnose the reason for my “difficulty”:

Part of the difficulty here is that Gagnon is writing something more like a court brief than a work of sober theology. The rhetoric is more interested in persuasion than in reflection and elucidation.

This criticism has to be seen for what it truly is: an attempt on Countryman's part to find excuses for his inability to deal rigorously, logically, and fairly with the evidence. If Countryman's previous work on the Bible and homoerotic practice, or his review of my book, is any indication of what he means by “sober theology” and “reflection and

elucidation,” then perhaps Countryman could benefit from a bit more rigor in his analysis.

Unfortunately, Countryman’s work on sexual ethics is often more an exercise in self-justification than a model of careful “elucidation” of the biblical witness. His book *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* suffers from a need to justify his own extremist brand of sexual ethics—apparently fueled by a deep personal desire to secure religious legitimacy for his life decisions and the sexual excesses that typify the homosexual community generally. This need repeatedly leads him to distort and/or trivialize the witness of Scripture on sexual ethics. Let me give three examples (many more could be cited). (1) His argument that Paul did not regard same-sex intercourse as sin is not a good example of “sober theology” or of “reflection and elucidation.” It is, rather, a classic instance of reading back into the text of Scripture what Countryman wants the text to say rather than what it actually says. (2) Another case in point is his claim that the Bible’s opposition to incest has in view only “the violation of the patriarch’s status.” This ignores the fact that a number of incest laws actually constrain patriarchal authority. Moreover, he seems oblivious to the overarching reason for the proscription of incest in Leviticus 18:6: “No one shall approach any flesh of one’s flesh to uncover nakedness.” In other words, one should not have sex with someone who is too much of a familial same—someone who is already one’s “flesh” prior to and apart from any sexual intercourse with that person. (3) Although Countryman states that the gospel allows no rules against polygamy, it is clear that Jesus’ reason for opposing divorce/remarriage implicitly forbids multiple sexual partners at one time. See my book, p. 203.

I do not know of any scholar writing on the issue of homosexuality who is not interested in persuading—including and especially the work of homosexual biblical scholars such as Countryman, Bernadette Brooten, and Dale Martin. The issue is whether the evidence is accurately represented. I make no bones about the fact that the biblical witness against same-sex intercourse is strong and the case against that witness is weak. I am not going to hide these realities just to please Countryman and other prohomosex apologists. I would not be doing him or anyone else a service by distorting the evidence. Indeed, a little dose of reality is precisely what Countryman needs. When his review is subjected to a rigorous analysis—the kind of analysis that Countryman dislikes—every criticism made by Countryman falls apart. Not a one has any merit. The historical and literary evidence indicates strongly, against Countryman, that:

- The Sodom story targets, in part, all male-male intercourse as abhorrent.
- The historical Jesus strongly opposed homosexual practice.
- Jesus and Paul perceived the creation stories in Genesis 1-2 as precluding all same-sex intercourse.
- Paul, probably in agreement with biblical authors generally and Jesus, believed that God had designed males and females as complementary sexual beings and that this complementarity was most evident in, but not limited to, the sex organs.
- The reference in Jude 7 to Sodom’s commission of “sexual immorality” contains a significant allusion to male-male intercourse.

Contrary to what Countryman infers, there is also a substantial body of scientific evidence that indicates that societal incentives for homosexual behavior can have a significant impact, over time, on the incidence of homosexuality.

When it comes to claims of doing “careful” work, the proof is in the pudding. Countryman’s review exhibits bad scholarship. Countryman is not a “minimalist” as regards the Bible’s witness on same-sex intercourse; rather, he is someone who suppresses evidence that is disagreeable to his life choices.

Obviously the aim of Countryman’s review was not to assess accurately the merits of my book but rather to do damage control for his own vested ideological interests. For him that meant doing a “hatchet job,” making every paragraph of the review negative and conceding nothing positive about any of my exegetical or hermeneutical work (except by oblique comments: “The author is *not always* careful with exegetical details,” “He *can* also be careless in constructing arguments”). It is acceptable to be very critical of a book. In this case, though, Countryman’s comments are not generated by strong argumentation but rather by a predetermined and ideologically based vendetta against the book’s message.

Countryman more or less states his motivation for writing the review in the third-to-last sentence: he does not regard my book “as an overture to friendly conversation.” To him, I am a dangerous enemy. Countryman does not like the fact that I underscore Scripture’s witness; namely, that people should reach out in love to those who commit homosexual acts while retaining a strong and natural revulsion for the act of same-sex intercourse. For Countryman, apparently, before a work can be categorized as “an overture to friendly conversation” it must first concede that there is nothing objectionable about homoerotic acts per se. In other words, only after I adopt, or come close to adopting, Countryman’s self-justifying stance on homosexual behavior can there be “friendly conversation.”

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