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## **The Bible and Sexuality in Netflix's Coming Out Colton: 'There's a Lot to That Book'**

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### **Abstract**

Popular and academic discussions about 'the Bible and homosexuality' often centre on a small but consistent number of passages from the Old and New Testaments. Given this consistency, the conversations around sexuality and Christian faith in the Netflix series *Coming Out Colton* are remarkable for not referencing any of these texts, while still repeatedly mentioning the Bible in general, as well as specific biblical texts. The show opens up a small but significant window into the range of ways in which biblical texts are currently used and given meaning and authority in connection with sexuality. The show confirms the tendency observed in previous research that contemporary Bible users who operate in a digital context are interested specifically in 'therapeutic' texts and uses of the Bible, at the expense of 'propositional' ones. Given the show's wide audience, the presentation of the Bible in it can be expected to have an influence in shaping how biblical texts will be seen and used in conversations about sexuality in the near future. This may mean that appeals to the Bible in the context of sexuality will increasingly be more fluid and therapeutic, and move away from the 'clobber texts' that have often dominated this discourse.

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### 1. Introduction

Discussions about 'the Bible and homosexuality' have often centred on a limited corpus of passages from the Old and New Testaments. Both popular and academic interpreters tend to focus on the same texts – sometimes referred to as 'clobber texts' – when aiming to describe 'what the Bible says' on this issue. These texts are the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1–11, specific laws in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, Paul's comments in Romans 1:26–27, and the terms listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:10. In addition to this core selection, a further group of text that are also, though less consistently, discussed include the creation story in Genesis 1–2,

the interaction of Noah and Ham in Genesis 9:20–27, the relationship between Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth, the relationship between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18–2 Samuel 1, Jesus’ healing of the slave of a centurion in Luke 7:1–10 and references to the ‘beloved disciple’ in the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> Given the consistency in discussing this particular group of texts, the conversations around sexuality and Christian faith in the Netflix series *Coming Out Colton* are remarkable for not referencing any of these texts, while still mentioning the Bible in general, as well as specific biblical texts, in connection with a ‘coming out’ story. The show thus opens up a small but significant window into the range of ways in which biblical texts are currently used and given meaning and authority when it comes to sexuality.

The approach of this paper is informed by recent research into the Bible in a digital context. Based on an analysis of engagement with the Bible on social media, Peter Phillips has argued that there is a shift in the usage of biblical texts away from ‘propositional’ texts, towards texts that are characterized as ‘therapeutic’ and are focussed on well-being and interpersonal relationships.<sup>2</sup> This change is epitomised in the replacement of the “‘poster boy’ text of the 20th century”, John 3:16 ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ by the increasingly popular Jeremiah 29:11 ‘For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.’<sup>3</sup> Texts that address a second person ‘you’ and that can be seen to concern personal wellbeing are favoured over texts that are connected to Christian doctrine and more general statements about God and the world. Phillips connects this shift to the change in religious behaviour observed by sociologists particularly in connection to youth culture, towards more informal and experience focussed religiosity.<sup>4</sup> Content-oriented forms of belief tend to be replaced by ones that are multidimensional and express faith and trust. For example, Abby Day notes a change in ‘Euro American modern societies’, from ‘propositional forms of belief to practice centred forms of belief’.<sup>5</sup>

In relation to the Bible, this development is confirmed in Phillips’ observations that statements about Jesus’ death and resurrection, about salvation or divine intervention into the world, and other themes that are usually understood to represent doctrinal positions, are mentioned less frequently. Instead, motivational ‘anthropocentric’ verses aimed at a second person ‘you’ increasingly dominate.<sup>6</sup>

Two characteristics of the references to the Bible on Coming Out Colton invite the ‘Netflexegesis’ that this paper attempts, in light of Phillips’ findings: the first is the prominence of Jeremiah 29:11 on the show, as a text with specific meaning for sexual identity. The second is the absence of the group of biblical texts identified above, which are habitually connected to homosexuality and seem indicative of propositional, content-oriented belief – however these texts may be interpreted. The lack of explicit references to these texts and the presence of Jeremiah 29:11 raises the question whether there is a similar shift evident in this Netflix show, away from the ‘propositional’ towards the ‘therapeutic’, as established by Phillips in other digital contexts.

This paper will therefore describe all references to the Bible in Coming Out Colton and analyse them in light of this question. Interestingly, there are signs that the makers of the show have specifically selected and edited the source material in such a way that discussions of some biblical texts have not made it into the episode. Given the show’s wide audience, the presentation of the Bible in it can be expected to have an influence in shaping how biblical texts will be seen and used in conversations about sexuality in the near future. It is therefore worth carefully exploring the show to see which texts are seen as meaningful and how. Doing so will hopefully also result in caution among biblical scholars in assuming that they can tell from their expertise on the content and history of the Bible, what it is actually about in the real world.

## 2. The background of the show

Coming Out Colton is a reality series based around Colton Underwood, a former professional American football player, who was a cast member on The Bachelorette in 2018, and then went on to become the lead of the show The Bachelor in 2019. The series tells the story of Underwood coming out as gay to those closest to him and eventually also publicly on television, across six episodes titled ‘Family’, ‘Football’, ‘Friends’, ‘Church’, ‘The Public’, and ‘The Past and the Future’. The focus in this paper will be on episode 4, ‘Church’, since this is where the Bible makes an appearance.<sup>7</sup> The show has received substantial criticism for a number of reasons, including for centering a rich white man whose experience in coming out is hardly typical. The fact that Underwood had a restraining order filed against him by a former girlfriend and fellow Bachelor cast member – who herself refused to participate in Coming Out Colton, but who is inevitably discussed throughout the show – is a further point

that is raised against it.<sup>8</sup> This article should not be seen as an endorsement of the show or its main character, but studies it as part of the cultural landscape that informs us about how discussions about Christian faith, the Bible and sexuality can take place.

I do not assume that the show provides us with an unfiltered presentation of what actually happened. We are obviously looking at a production focused on entertainment and on drawing viewers to Netflix, which is probably also aimed at telling a story that is essentially positive about this coming out experience. However, given the range of views that are included in the episode, it does not seem as if the makers were intent on presenting a single coherent image of the Bible, and in this sense the different perspectives can be taken as indicative of actual existing attitudes. In addition, the aspects that interest me as a scholar of religion and the Bible are academic and niche enough that I do not see a reason to suspect the show's creators of manipulating material in a way that compromises my observations. Still, there are indications in the show itself that on at least two occasions, discussions of certain biblical texts that were part of the original conversations were not included in the final cut. We will explore these indications and try to see what these texts and discussion may have been. I will therefore not assume that the picture that emerges from *Coming Out Colton* is either complete or representative, but rather that it offers fragmentary insight into existing views on the Bible and in turn, given its platform, may shape what these views are likely to be in the future. In what follows, I will go through the episode and discuss references to the Bible in the order in which they are shown, grouped by the different settings and the conversation partners with whom Colton (as I will refer to him in the show) engages. The various uses and interpretations of the Bible will then be discussed in light of the shift from 'propositional' to 'therapeutic' use of the Bible.

### 3. Tattoos and lyrics (0:50)

The first reference to the Bible occurs right at the beginning of episode 4 in a conversation about tattoos. When Colton notices that one of his Nashville friends has a new tattoo on his arm – one that is 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer themed' – he goes on to describe his own tattoos on his left wrist and underarm. These include a tattoo of a cross, one that says 'God's got me' and another one of the numbers 29:11, which, as Colton briefly explains, stands for Jeremiah 29, verse 11. The content or meaning of this verse are not discussed at this stage, but will play a role later on, when Colton talks to his pastor. Colton is in the process of getting some tattoos

removed as part of shedding ‘different parts of me that might not be true to who I am’, but these three will remain. He describes how he is intent on keeping his faith, which was important for him growing up and continues to be so.

The Bible makes a further brief appearance in the lyrics of the song ‘Crimes’, written and performed by the country singer Cody Belew, who is invited to sing for Colton and his friends: ‘I’ve been a crime against myself since as far back as I go. Preacher man, he slammed his fist ‘cause the Bible told him so’. The lyrics have a great impact on Colton: ‘Every word of the song hit me like a ton of bricks. With Catholic and Christian religion, homosexuality is a sin’. He goes on to describe how he prayed after watching gay pornography when he was young, asking God to stop him from doing that again.

#### 4. Playing ball with men of God (6:30)

The idea that preachers have a special role in connection to the Bible recurs in the next setting, when Colton meets with a group of friends from his church in Denver to talk and play basketball. He is tense about this meeting: ‘If I do come out to my friends, are they still going to love me, are they still going to be there for me as Christian men?’ After some initial hesitation, he tells them that he ‘came out as gay to my parents this year’. The cautious reaction of the friends – ‘you did?’ – leads Colton to further explain: ‘You guys are all men of God, and like, you’ve helped me... Everybody always says like: “when did you give your life to Jesus?” And for me, it was when I stopped asking and praying to him to take the gay away.’ The friends come with qualified responses which suggest that they see homosexuality as a sin, but also see all people as sinners and believe that what exactly counts as sin could be a matter of opinion: ‘Jesus loves you no matter what, we all do ... if we are trying to be like Jesus, bro, we love you, like. Whether we agree with that or not.’ ‘Every single one of us are sinners.’ But Colton challenges the implication of this attitude: ‘I just don’t want me being me to be a sin.’ The friends respond with an appeal to a higher authority in the form of their pastor, and the Bible: ‘That’s a tough one, I’d be curious to see what pastor had to say ... first and kind of go off that. He’s probably going to know the Bible better than all of us, so...’ ‘There’s a lot to that book’.

The assumption here is that the Bible is going to have something to say about homosexuality, and that the pastor has the expert knowledge to interpret it and guide them based on it. The final remark, ‘There’s a lot to that book’ seems to be a hopeful statement that given the scope

or depth of the Bible, there might be something in there somewhere that can offer them a way out of what Colton identifies as a ‘state of contradiction’, of allowing people to be gay but still condemning them for it as a sin.

#### 5. Phoning the pastor (10:40)

As can be expected based on the talk with his friends, Colton’s subsequent phone conversation with their pastor includes more discussion of the Bible.<sup>9</sup> The argumentations are not easy to reconstruct in this segment, because it appears that substantial parts have been left out, but we can still recognise some significant aspects in how the Bible is discussed.<sup>10</sup>

In response to Colton telling him that he came out to his parents and has concerns now about how welcome he is in his church, the pastor asks him: ‘What would you say the cross has done in your life? What difference has it made that Jesus died for your sins? Colton answers that for him the cross is a representation of ‘what we need more of in this world right now, and that’s love and peace’.

This is when the pastor brings up the Bible: ‘With everybody that comes in with any kind of baggage, sin, trauma, hang-ups, hurts, whatever, I believe that the Bible makes it very clear that Jesus was willing to lay down his life on the cross for any of us. – But I have preached enough sermons to know I believe God made marriage between man and woman. I think sexuality is determined to be that way, and you and I can disagree on that, and I can still love you. That doesn’t change you coming or church or anything. But I would just have a different opinion than you about your story and where you’re at. The challenge with what I would call the sin of homosexuality is ... there are so many things that are sinful. If you’re a drunk, if you’re a gossip, whatever, you don’t hear much about that. – Homosexuality is really, really bad.’

It is possible that the Bible was used by the pastor to support his ideas about marriage and ‘the sin of homosexuality’ in this conversation, and there is reason to conclude this, as we will see below. However, in the part that is included here, it is only the idea that Jesus was willing to die for anyone, whatever their ‘baggage’, that is explicitly based on the Bible, although no specific text is given for this. Like the church friends, the pastor emphasises that many things count as sin, including homosexuality, but also other issues that are less frequently mentioned. There can be a difference of ‘opinion’ on this and it does not prevent membership of the church.

Colton's discomfort with where the conversation is heading is evident at this point in his movements and flushed complexion. In response, he does cite a specific Bible verse, the one that he has tattooed on his arm: 'I have a Bible verse that means the world to me. It's Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future". It makes me feel accepted and makes me feel like it is a pro-gay Bible verse.'

The pastor does not seem impressed by this and comes with a request, asking to know 'when the Bible became real' for Colton: 'Well here's my only concern. I have not heard in our discussion your conversion story to Christ, like, when Jesus really became the Lord of your life, and when the Bible became real. All of a sudden, where you feel like you really became a Christian is when you said "you know what, I am gay. I'm just going to be who I am, blah blah blah. And by doing that, now I'm liberated. Now I just ask God to use my life like Proverbs 29:11.' Colton: 'Yes'. The pastor: 'Ok, I'll be honest with you, that's just not true. I think because you identify with it, and everybody identifies with their sin in some way: "It's just who I am, it's who God made me". What I'd love you to consider is this: we spend our whole lives from the time we are born in sin and then in church there come some big ones like abortion, or divorce or homosexuality. Those three really get pinned up on the wall. As long as you don't do those you can do anything else and it's good. – Where you and I would have a different world view would be on what God says about you, and even what you're saying about who you truly are. I mean, I don't care what we are talking about, like, I would say homosexuality is a sin because the Bible makes it pretty clear that it is. I mean, Christ died for you and he just wants to change everything inside of you, not just, not just this. He wants to cleanse your heart so that you never walk in fear again.'

The pastor thus not only dismisses the meaning that Jeremiah 29:11 has for Colton, but also misidentifies the book as Proverbs, rather than Jeremiah.<sup>11</sup> Whatever Colton thinks the verse says about God guiding his life, it cannot be true, in the pastor's view, because homosexuality is a sin according to the Bible. However, it is stressed again that sin is a much broader concept than just the three sins that often get 'pinned up on the wall' which are all connected to sexuality. The pastor's tone is ironic when he says 'As long as you don't do those you can do anything else and it's good'. His intention seems to be to argue that many other actions not related to sexuality are also sinful. That is why 'not just this' would be changed but rather 'everything inside of you'.

The conversation makes Colton ‘shrink a little bit and hide’ and leaves him with many questions. He summarizes it to his brother and his friend Gus Kenworthy: ‘he views being gay as a sin and that there are scripture that flat-out says marriage is between a man and a woman and I guess that means that I can’t get married in his church.’

#### 6. A supportive hike (20:10)

In an attempt to find some answers, Colton reaches out to fellow retired NFL player Esera Tuaolo, hoping to ‘spend more time with him talking through what his faith journey has been like, as far as being a Christian and being gay.’ On a hike together, Colton tells Tuaolo that his conversation with his pastor ‘did not go great’ and left him wondering why he would want to be part of this church. ‘Even my friends in Colorado, you know, they go to church, obviously, and we attend Bible study and we talk scripture together and I think even they are confused right now.’

After Colton talks about a recent low point in his life, Tuaolo shares how painful his experience was coming out and how religion and the Bible played a role in this: ‘People tell us that God hates us, right? Who gave you that authority, right? Who gives you the authority on earth to tell me and stuff what I can or cannot do, right? ... And then put God in front of it. And then they throw the whole Bible at us and stuff like that, right? I mean, before 1946, the word “homosexuality” wasn’t in the Bible, right? ... we don’t have all day, but if you really want to dive into the Bible and stuff, then let’s dive into the Bible, because I tell you what, there’s so many things that have been changed. For me, ... you’ve got to follow your heart. This thing right here, that’s what you have to follow.’

It is not clear to what Tuaolo refers specifically in saying that ‘there’s so many things that have been changed’ when it comes to the Bible, whether he is talking about translation, interpretation, textual changes, or something else. Whatever these changes consist of, they counter, in his view, the legitimacy of those who ‘throw the whole Bible at us’ and use it to claim authority for their ideas. Tuaolo’s remark about the word ‘homosexual’ as a relatively recent introduction in Bible translation seems to serve a similar purpose, indicating how the biblical text changes over time and therefore might not be a stable or consistent norm by which to judge people and tell them what they ‘can or cannot do’.



## 7. Quoting Romans in church (25:30)

Helped by Tuaolo to find a church that is more ‘LGBTQ+ friendly’, Colton and Gus Kenworthy visit the Metropolitan Community Church of the Rockies and there talk to members of the congregation and their pastor Ben Mann. Kenworthy describes the conversation that Colton had with his pastor, how he ‘was not told that he wasn’t accepted but was basically told that this is something that he was gonna grow out of, and the closer he got to God, the further he would distance himself from his “homosexual tendencies”’. Ben Mann responds with a smile and the question: ‘So they quoted Romans at you?’ All laugh when Colton confirms: ‘We broke down the Romans verse’, and Mann adds ‘Familiar tune’. But the conversation continues not with a discussion of Romans 1, as might be expected based on the texts most frequently quoted on this issue, but rather with Romans 6. Mann: ‘Romans 6 gets batted around by my...my “peers and colleagues”. Romans 6 is the verse that says, you know: “The wages of sin is death.” If you go back to the Old Testament – and then at the very end, at Easter morning, Jesus says “It is finished”, which is actually better translated “It is paid in full”. So if you think about the wages of sin being paid in full, God, Christ has taken care of those for us. And so my belief is that sin no longer exists, period, and that we have overcome sin, that we have been given this grace of forgiveness and now it is our responsibility to live into that grace. And instead of trying to live for redemption, we have to live because we are redeemed. And so that’s why most of us are here, most of us operate in the world as a radiation of already being redeemed and not having to prove to any pastor, to any group of people, who we are and what our value is.’

This exchange in church contains the most extensive biblical exegesis and also reveals a number of interesting discrepancies between what we get to see as viewers and what was discussed ‘in reality’. We learn that Colton and his pastor ‘broke down the Romans verse’ and given the claim made by the pastor that ‘homosexuality is a sin because the Bible makes it pretty clear that it is’, it seems likely that this was Romans 1:26–27, which is the section of Romans that is often interpreted in this sense. For whatever reason, this part of their conversation was not included in the show, so we unfortunately do not find out how the text was used by the pastor or how Colton responded.

A second indication that references to biblical texts were left out is the somewhat awkward transition in Mann’s words from ‘If you go back to the Old Testament,’ to what immediately follows ‘and then at the very end, at Easter morning, Jesus says “It is finished”’. It seems

doubtful that a professional pastor would introduce a passage from the Gospel of John, which is part of the New Testament, by saying, ‘If you go back to the Old Testament’ or would suggest that Easter comes at the end of the Old Testament. More likely, the phrase served to introduce Old Testament texts. There may have been further discussion of Jesus as well, which would explain the transition ‘and then at the very end, ..., Jesus says’. It seems likely therefore that there were more extensive references to biblical texts between or around the two phrases that ended up being edited together.

The texts that are explicitly mentioned here are Romans 6:23 ‘The wages of sin is death’, and John 19:30 ‘It is finished’, or ‘It is paid in full’ and the words from John are used to explain or qualify the text from Romans. By combining the two texts, Mann comes to the interpretation that the ‘wages of sin’ have been paid, and that sin now no longer exists.

It is clear from this overview of the show that the Bible appears in different ways and is given a range of meanings and uses. In light of the research by Phillips and Day mentioned above, I will categorize the various references into three types: the Bible as propositional, the Bible as therapeutic, and the Bible as fluid.

#### 8. The Bible as propositional

If we understand propositional Bible use to be theocentric and focussed on the content of the Bible and on general statements and doctrinal absolutes, it can be recognised a number of times in the episode. There are several instances where the Bible is appealed to as an authority that declares something about the way things generally are, whether in connection to sexuality or more broadly. For this type of claim, it can be enough to refer to ‘the Bible’, without indicating a specific text. The pastor does this twice: ‘I believe that the Bible makes it very clear that Jesus was willing to lay down his life on the cross for any of us’ and ‘I would say homosexuality is a sin because the Bible makes it pretty clear that it is’. Colton’s friends express a similar expectation around the Bible when they say that they want to take their cue from the pastor, who in turn derives his authority from the Bible, which he knows ‘better than all of us’.

Ben Mann does not refer to the Bible in general, but rather to two specific verses, Romans 6:23 and John 19:30, which can be combined to understand ‘that sin no longer exists, period’. Here too, a conclusion is drawn about the way things are based on the authority of a biblical text, which can be seen as propositional. The end result of this reading, however, is that the

texts actually cancel each other out, in a sense, and the proposition in Romans 6:23 about sin and death is no longer relevant. The implications of this are largely therapeutic, as will be discussed below.

As I have argued, it seems likely that the pastor also appealed to particular verses and not just the authority of the Bible in general. This may well have included further propositional texts, specifically Romans 1:26–27, which would mean that the image that the viewer is presented with contains fewer propositional texts that could have been drawn from the material.

Interestingly, the appeal to biblical propositions on the idea that homosexuality as a sin is combined with the sense that this is a matter of ‘opinion’, on which people can ‘disagree’ within the church community. Some biblical texts and concepts, such as Jesus’ love and the meaning of his death, seem to outweigh those on what constitutes sin. The contradiction and confusion that Colton observes in himself and his friends confirm the tensions within the idea of biblical authority: ‘we attend Bible study and we talk scripture together and I think even they are confused right now.’ In addition, as will be discussed below, the pastor expects the Bible to ‘become real’ and thus have a personal dimension next to, or even on top of having a general authority. This raises questions which are of course not answered within the scope of the show, about the degree to which biblical propositions and biblical authority have nuances within themselves and place some texts above others.

In addition to these affirmations of the authority of the Bible, there are also several instances where propositional Bible use is presented in a negative sense and associated with violent or antagonistic images. This is most clear in Tuaolo’s words that ‘they throw the whole Bible at us’, to support the message that ‘God hates us’. The same sense comes across in the lyrics ‘Preacher man, he slammed his fist ‘cause the Bible told him so’, and the experience that a biblical text like Romans is quoted ‘at you’, suggesting a hostile intention. Significantly, we hear of the Bible being used in this way from people who are shown to experience it as painful and who object to this use, and in the case of Mann, offer an alternative. We do not actually see this kind of use of the propositional texts associated with homosexuality in action, but are made aware of the negative consequences that this has.

## 9. The Bible as therapeutic

The therapeutic use of the Bible is also evident in the show, particularly in Colton’s references, but is also shared to some extent by him and his pastor, in spite of their other

differences. Since the popularity of Jeremiah 29:11 is taken as indicative by Phillips of the shift towards ‘therapeutic’ Bible use, its prominent role in the show can be taken to reflect a similar tendency. Colton explains the relevance of Jeremiah 29:11 by saying that the verse ‘means the world to me’. It is a verse that seems to address a personal ‘you’, facilitated by the fact that English – unlike Hebrew – has the same personal pronoun for the second person singular and plural, which allows verses spoken to a group in the Hebrew text to be understood in an individual, personal sense. “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”. This is how Colton reads the verse, as God having plans for him personally: ‘It makes me feel accepted and makes me feel like it is a pro-gay Bible verse.’

The value of the verse does not lie in any doctrinal content in relation to sexuality, but rather in the personal meaning and effect that it has, and how it makes the reader feel. The fact that Colton has the verse numbers tattooed on his arm confirms the personal connection. Since he is having some tattoos removed that ‘might not be true to who I am’, the ones that he keeps, including 29:11, can be seen as an expression of who he truly is.

In spite of the popularity of Jeremiah 29:11 noted by Phillips and others, the interpretation of the text offered by Colton in the show of it being a ‘gay-positive verse’, does not seem to be reflected in biblical scholarship, or be widespread online.<sup>12</sup> The interpretation does reflect a practise in Queer interpretation of drawing on personal biography and challenging assumptions about the heteronormative nature of the Bible, and in this sense continues existing queer approaches.<sup>13</sup>

As noted above, the pastor combines a propositional Bible use with the requirement – ostensibly a superior requirement – that it should ‘become real’ in a person’s life, and that Colton be able to testify to this. In spite of Colton’s very personal attachment to Jeremiah 29:11, the pastor is not persuaded, basing this on his understanding that homosexuality is sin and the idea that people identify with their sin. He appears to mockingly rephrase Colton’s words to say ‘Now I just ask God to use my life like Proverbs 29:11.’ The idea of God using a person’s life as indicated by a biblical text is apparently a possible way in which the Bible can ‘become real’. But for the pastor, in Colton’s case, it is an illusion created by sin. The two different understandings of the Bible thus somehow interact, with the Bible as proposition determining the boundaries within which the personal and therapeutic experience of the Bible can be legitimate.

The interpretation of Ben Mann also combines biblical propositions with therapeutic meaning. The biblical statement that there is no more sin means that it becomes a responsibility ‘to live into that grace’ and to ‘operate in the world as a radiation of already being redeemed’. The Bible has in a way taken itself out of the equation, and the resulting situation is focussed on the personal wellbeing and interpersonal relationships that are characteristic of the therapeutic focus.

#### 10. The Bible as fluid

A final aspect that can be recognised in the show, which falls outside the propositional-therapeutic spectrum, is the notion that the Bible is fluid and malleable. Seeing the Bible in this way may complicate a propositional view and is therefore also significant to discuss in relation to these perspectives. Tuaolo’s comment that when you ‘dive into the Bible’, you see that ‘so many things that have been changed’, implies this idea in particular. While as it is difficult to know the specific referent here, the metaphor of ‘diving in’ already evokes the idea of something that is not easy to oversee but is expansive and can reveal different things as you go deeper into it. As noted above, Tuaolo uses this aspect of the Bible to counter the certainty with which the Bible is levelled against people.

The comment of one of Colton’s church friends that ‘there’s a lot to that book’, speaks to a similar understanding, that the Bible is not easily grasped in full and might reveal something previously unknown. While the friends appear to be familiar with the position of their church on homosexuality, and foresee that there will be disagreement, there is still hope that the Bible may contain something new or that a new interpretation can resolve some of the tension. The slipperiness of the Bible is also suggested by Colton’s remark to Tuaolo that although he and his friends ‘attend Bible study’ and ‘talk scripture together’, they are all still left confused. The meaning of the Bible is apparently not easy to pin down unambiguously.

The issue of Bible translation is mentioned twice in the episode and also underlines the fluidity of the text. Tuaolo notes that ‘before 1946, the word “homosexuality” wasn’t in the Bible’, suggesting that reading the Bible as condemning homosexuality came up at a certain point, and is therefore not absolute, but depends on specific interpretative choices.<sup>14</sup> Mann argues that the phrase “It is finished” in John 19:30 is better translated as “It is paid in full”, which facilitates a connection to the ‘wages of sin’, in Romans 6. The idea that a text can be

read and translated in different ways opens up multiple meanings and fluidity and is therefore also less easy to combine with propositional uses.

## 11. Conclusions

Based on this analysis of references to the Bible in *Coming Out Colton*, we can conclude that the show does appear to confirm an interest in therapeutic Bible use, and a shift away from the propositional focus that often dominates discourse surrounding the Bible and homosexuality. It is difficult to say to what extent this is due predominantly to the nature of the references to the Bible in the source material that the show draws from, or whether it is a consequence more specifically of decisions made about what to include in the show, what would appeal to viewers, and what would create the most entertaining and positive experience for them.

Whatever the reasons behind it, the episode as it is presents the therapeutic use of the Bible as a positive option, and propositional use of the Bible as largely having a negative impact. It also gives space to the idea that the Bible is fluid and complex. By not referencing or possibly even editing out discussions of texts that are usually seen as significant for understanding ‘what the Bible says about homosexuality’, the show makes this corpus less relevant and may contribute to shifting the discourse. Given the show’s platform, its presentation of the Bible can be expected to have some influence in shaping how biblical texts will be used in conversations about sexuality and Christian faith by those who have seen or heard about it.

What is important to observe is that the only biblical texts that end up being cited in the show and presented as meaningful in the context of sexuality are Jeremiah 29:11, John 19:30, and Romans 6:23 (Proverbs 29:11 is referenced by accident). None of these texts tend to be included in any academic discussion on the Bible and (homo)sexuality, since the reading of Jeremiah 29:11 as a ‘gay-positive verse’ does not seem to have reached scholarship, as noted above.

The ‘netflexegesis’ undertaken here thus confirms Phillips’ assessment of the change in the public image and understanding of the Bible that is evident in digital culture, compared to other domains. The development that a different group of scriptures is becoming more widely cited and used, a group that includes Jeremiah 29:11 as a prominent text, reflects a move away from a propositional, doctrinal focus to a more motivational, therapeutic engagement. Awareness of this development should lead to caution among scholars who tend to determine

based on their expertise on the content and history of the Bible – which inevitably has a more propositional focus – which texts are relevant on contemporary issues. In this case, such a propositional focus might actually end up complicating conversations in the real world, where the understanding of the Bible is more fluid, creative, and therapeutic.

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<sup>1</sup> The titles *Those Seven References* and 'Seven Gay Texts', indicate the perceived stability of this group of texts, even if there are slight variations in the selected texts (John F. Dwyer, *A Study of the References to "Homosexuality" in the Bible and their Impact on the Queer Community of Faith* (New York: Moorehouse Publishing 2021; Robert K. Gnuse, 'Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,' *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45/2 (2015): 66–128). Other examples of recent publications for a general or popular audience that illustrate the focus on these texts include: Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: John Knox Press 2006), Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway 2015); Cari Keith, 'Clarifying the Clobber Texts' <https://roomforall.com/resources/a-clergy-responds/>, Amy-Jill Levine: How to read the Bible's "clobber passages" on homosexuality, <https://outreach.faith/2022/09/amy-jill-levine-how-to-read-the-bibles-clobber-passages-on-homosexuality/>; Donald Schmidt, *The Bible and Homosexuality for Progressive Christians: Seven Session Study Guide* (Kelowna: Wood Lake Publishing 2022). Academic publication show a similarly stable focus on these passages, e.g.: Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2001); Innocent Himbaza, Adrian Schenker, Jean-Baptiste Edart, and Benedict M. Guevin, *The Bible on the Question of Homosexuality* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press 2011), Kenneth A. Locke 'The Bible on Homosexuality', *Journal of Homosexuality* (2005) 48/2, 125–156; Gareth Moore, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Peter M. Phillips, 'The Pixelated Text: Reading the Bible Within Digital Culture', *Theology* 121/6 (2018): 403–412 and *The Bible, Social Media, and Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2019). Recent research on online Bible use has found tentative confirmation for Phillips' observation, see John Dyer, 'The Habits and Hermeneutics of Digital Bible Readers: Comparing Print and Screen Engagement, Comprehension, and Behavior', *Journal of*

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*Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 8 (2019): 181–205, 194, Tom de Bruin, ‘Seeing is Believing: The Digital Bible and Bible Verses Online’ *Spes Christiana* 31.1, 2020, 123–152, 138.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, *The Bible, Social Media, and Digital Culture*, 21. All biblical texts are cited in the NRSV translation, except when quoted in the show.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips notes the work of Grace Davie and Linda Woodhead, among others, ‘The Pixelated Text’, 408–409.

<sup>5</sup> Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), 11; Phillips, *The Bible, Social Media, and Digital Culture*, 1–4.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips, *The Bible, Social Media, and Digital Culture*, 1–4, 91–113.

<sup>7</sup> The show also features a conversation between Underwood and Reverend Nicole Garcia in episode 6, ‘The Past and the Future’, but the Bible is not directly mentioned there.

<sup>8</sup> For criticism, see, e.g., Alamin Yohannes, ‘Why Coming Out Colton is a Major Fumble’, *Entertainment* December 04, 2021, <https://ew.com/tv/why-coming-out-colton-docuseries-is-a-major-missed-opportunity/>; Daniel D’Addario, ‘“Coming Out Colton” Sidesteps Colton Underwood’s Real Story: TV Review’, *Variety* November 29, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/tv/reviews/colton-underwood-netflix-1235117558/>; Jenna Benchetrit, ‘Does Netflix’s Coming Out Colton offer value to LGBTQ community?’ *CBC News* December 04, 2021 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/netflix-coming-out-colton-lgbtq-1.6273507>.

<sup>9</sup> Both this pastor and his church remain unidentified in the show, as far as I have been able to see. I therefore refer to him here as ‘the pastor’.

<sup>10</sup> I have indicated where a pause, a change in the sound, or a gap in the train of thought suggest a break in the material, by inserting ‘–’, but this is of course speculative.

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 29:11 reads ‘A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back’.

<sup>12</sup> I have not been able to find any reference to Jeremiah 29:11 that engages with this type of interpretation in queer or gender scholarship on Jeremiah, although this may of course exist. For example, in her discussion of Jeremiah in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Angela Bauer-Levesque sees potential in the gender fluidity and erotic dynamics for a range of queer interpretations, but at the same time advises caution in light of the ‘destructive functions of uses of the Bible to claim power’. No specific attention paid in this commentary to Jeremiah 29:11 (Angela Bauer-Levesque, ‘Jeremiah’, in: Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West and



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Thomas Bohache (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press 2006), 386–393, 392–393. The verse is also not mentioned in Stuart Macwilliam, 'Queering Jeremiah', *Biblical interpretation* 10/4 (2002): 384–404, or Susanna Asikainen, 'The Masculinity of Jeremiah', *Biblical Interpretation* 28/1 (2020): 34–55. There are many warnings online about applying Jeremiah 29:11 individually and 'out of context', rather than collectively (see, e.g. 'this verse isn't about you' <https://www.natepyle.com/blog/2019/3/5/rethinking-jeremiah-2911>, also 'Does Jeremiah 29:11 Apply to You?' <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jeremiah-2911-apply/>; 'Why Jeremiah 29:11 Doesn't Mean What You Think' <https://athletesinaction.org/articles/why-jeremiah-2911-doesnt-mean-what-you-think/>).

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of these approaches, see Jeremy Punt, 'Queer Bible Readings in Global Hermeneutical Perspective', in: Susanne Scholtz (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020), 65–80, 71–75; Robert E. Goss, and Mona West (eds.), *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> For the history and origin of the use of the term 'homosexual' in English Bible translation, see Heather R. White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2015), 1–14.