

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*

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The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story. By Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. 288 pages.

The late New Testament scholar Richard Hays wrote a book, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, in the final year of his life that offers a moral re-vision of his understanding of the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in Christian life and community. Hays co-authored the book with his son Christopher, an Old Testament scholar, with Richard writing the chapters on the New Testament and Christopher writing the chapters on the Old Testament. In the elder Hays' view, the new book was necessary because the exclusion of LGBTQ persons that was perpetuated by his earlier work *A Moral Vision on the New Testament*.¹ *The Widening of God's Mercy* is not a rehashing of the exegesis of the six verses typically used to make arguments about the morality or immorality of homosexuality. Neither is it a rejection of the exegesis of those verses in *A Moral Vision of the New Testament*. His interpretation of these verses hasn't changed. Instead, Richard and Christopher argue that those few passages are not the only ones necessary to discern God's will on this subject. They have come to understand that the approach of looking to those verses alone is too narrow.

The Hayses' approach to Biblical interpretation is particularly relevant for Christians in this moment, as many in the United States struggle with how to understand the Biblical text. What takes priority when there seem to be conflicting ideas present? Interpretive emphasis impacts not only what is considered godly, but also who is welcome in our churches, in our communities, and even in our country. *The Widening of God's Mercy* helps us to see that today's conflicts around interpretation are not unique because the Biblical text articulates the same difficulty.

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¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

The book's title, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, offers a glimpse into its content. Working together, the Hayses tell a narrative story of God's involvement in the world drawing from both of what Christians call the Old and New Testaments. They show how the arc of the story of God as described in the Bible is a continual widening of love and mercy for the whole world. They write, "To speak of God's mercy is to point to God's overflowing love, God's propensity to embrace, heal, restore, and reconcile all of creation."² This is the ever-present work of God, and everything that is of God points to this merciful activity.

The widening they describe results in God changing his mind. The Hebrew word *nacham*, meaning one who changes his mind, is repeated frequently throughout the Old Testament. *Nacham* happens when God has relented on punishing people in the way they deserve. They highlight an example of this in the book of *Jonah*. Jonah doesn't want to bring a prophetic word to the Ninevites precisely because he is afraid that God will have mercy on his enemies. He would rather them be punished than repent and be saved. They are enemies after all, and Jonah seems to like the idea that the Ninevites would suffer rather than experience mercy. The Hayses argue that from the beginning of the Biblical narrative, God repeatedly chooses mercy over condemnation. This is true even for those who are not considered insiders. Their book shows that this is God's way. They say, "God's widening mercy comes as an unsettling surprise to those who had thought of themselves as God's most resolutely faithful followers."³ Jonah and many others don't want to share God's mercy. But drawing hard lines about who is in and who is out seems to be more about human nature than about God's will.

The Hayses address moral questions in the Biblical narrative that have been reversed over time in several of their chapters. A particular focus is on the treatment of foreigners. Christopher lays the groundwork so that present-day readers can understand the extreme situations in which the foreigner is discussed. He shows that the early communities of Bible readers were exclusive and exclusionary so it is significant that the text would include foreigners in God's mercy and even on some occasions held up as examples of Godliness. He emphasizes that the unconditional inclusion of the foreigner would have scandalized the original audience.⁴ It would have been against everything that they stood for to include foreigners within the holy community as fully as God does in Isaiah 56:7. And yet, this is the arc of the Biblical narrative. While some verses justify exclusion, the underlying movement toward inclusion calls out for attention.

² Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 18.

³ Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 206.

⁴ Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 104.

God's will on this particular issue needs discernment, and we can be drawn to the specific verses that address the issue. The Hayses acknowledge the importance of understanding these verses both within their pericopes and as a part of a larger narrative. Interpretations require careful attention to historical context, language, and cultural norms, to name a few of the layers that need to be attended to when understanding meaning. But discernment around meaning extends beyond the end of a verse, a chapter, or a book. Discernment is ongoing. Discernment takes the larger story into consideration. Discernment relies on the continual revelation of the Holy Spirit, which brings new understanding even now.

A great danger is seeing the trees while missing the forest. They write: "Drawing conclusions based only on these passages would be like basing a biblical theology of slavery on Exodus 21:2 (which assumes one can buy a slave) and 1 Peter 2:18 (which tells slaves to be subject to their master), or a theology of immigration on Ezekiel 44:9's exclusion on foreigners from the sanctuary."⁵ When a community of faith, and by extension a nation, draws conclusions based solely on a few verses, great pain and injustice is often the result.

The Hayses acknowledge that a new vision, or re-vision, can feel unsettling and even downright scary. The painstaking work of the church is to make space for a new vision and the ranges of emotions that come with it. This wrestling started during Jesus' life when he prioritized the spirit of the law over the letter (e.g. when he healed sick people on the Sabbath). In the earliest days of the church, there was a lot of disagreement over which laws took priority. They fought about whether new Christians needed to be circumcised or if they could still be a part of the community without changing their dietary practices. Led by the Spirit, Jesus' followers acted boldly, and in many cases in the opposite direction of certain laws, to continue the expansion of the body of Christ (e.g. Philip baptizing the foreign eunuch in Act 8:36-39).

These courageous actions build on previous Biblical precedents. These reversals do not cast aside previous texts and traditions but set them within a bigger story. The Hayses put relationships at the center of these shifts in both the Bible and for today. Serving God, side by side with someone who is uncircumcised, who doesn't eat kosher, who is foreign or who is LGBTQ, yields important understanding. What may seem wrong or sinful about a person lands differently within a relationship. As the eunuch in Acts 8 says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Many years of relationships with LGBTQ Christians eroded the distance between the Hayses and the LGBTQ community such that intense focus on sexuality

⁵ Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 206-207.

began to feel irrelevant and, at times, cruel. They write: “We see LGBTQ Christians all around us who are contributing their gifts and graces to the work God in the world and in the church.”⁶ Who are they (the Hayses) or any of us to stand in the way of this good and godly work?

Richard changed his mind because of Biblical authority. He is confident in advocating for full inclusion of LGBTQ Christians because the Biblical witness taken as a whole points toward doing so. Again and again, with Jesus leading the way, the larger call to inclusion and love transcends any other echoes of exclusion and condemnation of LGBTQ persons or anyone else who is seeking membership in the body of Christ. They quote Augustine, who outlines what our priority should be as we endeavor to understand the Bible. He writes: “Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.”⁷ The book reinforces the idea that harm should never be done in God’s name. In their words, “it’s better to be wrong in love,”⁸ than to be right without love.

Keeping priorities godly is bound to be a challenge. This challenge may be the most important reason for prioritizing relationships and communities of the faithful. It is only through continual commitment to one another in love that anyone can remember God’s emphasis on mercy. When I consider my experience in the Army Chaplain Corps, I realize that mercy is one of the threads that is woven throughout our community. Mercy is learned through relationships, between chaplains from different Christian traditions and communities and from other religious traditions and communities. It is deepened through encounters with those who suffer. When I still my heart and prepare to meet the living God in the soldier in my presence, I am led by compassion. Being an Army chaplain teaches me how to prioritize mercy and to draw near to the person sitting next to me to provide competent spiritual care.

Toward the end of the book, Richard points his readers to Romans chapters 12-13, where Paul describes the faithful community. Paul calls people of faith to rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, suffer with those who are in pain, be generous to the other, and live in harmony. Celebrating humility, generosity, and diversity cultivates an environment for loving one another, especially when confronted with conflict. Paul describes a faith community where many are welcome, even when their differences may cause significant challenges. As I reflect on my years as an Army chaplain, I see

⁶ Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 213.

⁷ As quoted in Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 220.

⁸ Hays and Hays, *Widening of God's Mercy*, 220.

a parallel between Paul's description of a faithful community and the Army Chaplain Corps. Though I have had some difficult, even harmful experiences, overall, I believe we are guided by love and mercy, ready to serve soldiers.

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