Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship consists of a collection of essays held together around the common theme of queer readings of selected biblical texts published by the Society of Biblical Literature’s Semeia Studies series, which likely grew out of a number of sessions at the SBL regarding Queer Readings of the Bible. This book contains a preface by the editors, Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone (“Already Queer: A Preface”), which offers some helpful methodological pointers as well as an attempt to offer some coherence for the collection of essays, which may easily have come across as disparate: thirteen essays that roughly falls into a shorter section on queer readings of Hebrew Bible texts and a longer section on New Testament–related texts and themes. The volume is framed by an introductory response by Ellen Armour (“Queer Bibles, Queer Scriptures? An Introductory Response”) that considers how the volume explores the disruptive and reinscriptive possibilities of the Bible that in the past has done great harm to the LGBTQ community, an insightful response to the first section of the book by Tamar Kamionkowski that places queer readings within the larger context of historical-critical exegesis (“Queer Theory and Historical-Critical Exegesis: Queering Biblicists—A Response”), and, finally, a concluding response by Michael Joseph Brown entitled, “What Happens When Closets Open Up? A Response,” that responds mostly to the New Testament contributions rather than the book as a whole.
The title of *Bible Trouble*—a play on Judith Butler’s important book *Gender Trouble* (1990)—introduces the main goal of this book: to contemplate “troubling” biblical texts in terms of queer theory but also to confuse or “trouble” disciplinary lines between biblical scholarship, queer theory, feminist theory, as well as postcolonial theory (cf. the description of the editors’ invitation on 10). This collection of essays, moreover, seeks to disturb gender categories—something encapsulated with the provocative term “genderfuck,” which shows how masculine and feminine gender codes are mixed in order to subvert the dominant gendered norms (cf. Ken Stone’s and Deryn Guest’s application of this term first introduced to the field of biblical studies by Erin Runions in her work on Micah and the film *Paris Is Burning*).

“Queer readings of the Bible” is defined by Ken Stone as “a diverse set of approaches to biblical interpretation that take as their point of departure a critical interrogation, or active contestation, of the ways in which the Bible is read to support heteronormative and normalizing configurations of sexual and gender practices and sexual and gender identities” (94). Including the “who’s who” in queer biblical scholarship, many of whom have also made a name in feminist as well as postcolonial scholarship, this stimulating volume engages a wide range of biblical texts.

For instance, in the Hebrew Bible section one finds the following four essays:

(1) Deryn Guest (“From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens”) builds on the work on gender reversal in the Judg 4 portrayal of Jael. Guest considers how Jael serves as a liminal figure who obscures traditional gender categories and hence briefly becomes a recognizable figure to those lesbian communities who consider themselves as “butch” but who do not want to be pigeonholed into either male or female categories. Guest argues that Jael “breaks the borders between male and female and reveals that all gendered acts are performative” (31).

(2) Erin Runions shows in “From Disgust to Humor: Rahab’s Queer Affect” how Rahab is a queer figure who troubles the sexual and ethnic divides associated with the “disgusting” Canaanites according to which “forbidden sexuality is expelled from the land like bad tasting food from the body” (50). In light of the work done on disgust as an emotion that circulates and sticks to particular bodies, Runions considers the role of humor or laughter to disrupt this circulation of emotion in terms of the Rahab narrative.

(3) Employing Erin Runion’s earlier work on gender hybridity, Ken Stone brings together the portrayal of drag performers in *Paris Is Burning* that subvert dominant norms of gender, race, and class with the gender portrayal in the narratives depicting the house of David and the house of Saul in an essay entitled “Queer Reading between Bible and Film:
Paris Is Burning and the ‘Legendary Houses’ of David and Saul.” For instance, with reference to Jonathan, Stone argues that one finds a classic mixture of masculine and feminine gender codes (a notion described by the term “genderfuck”) that serves the purpose of countering and/or subverting heteronormative and normalizing tendencies.

(4) Heidi Epstein (“Penderecki’s Iron Maiden: Intimacy and Other Anomalies in the Canticum canticorum Salomonis”) engages with New Musicology in order to read musical treatments of the Song of Songs that may contribute to a greater sense of the complexity of the themes encompassed in this book. Specifically, she employs the notion of “carnal allegories” in order to challenge spiritualist tendencies in the interpretation of Song of Songs, which in turn contributes to the challenging of a heteronormative sexuality.

In the longer New Testament section, one finds the following essays:

(1) With reference to Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ, and challenging the traditional understanding of soteriology that valorizes submission, Teresa J. Hornsby (“Capitalism, Masochism, and Biblical Interpretation”) proposes that, as masochism becomes synonymous with a masculinity that idolizes victimization, space is created for a queer heteronormativity to emerge.

(2) Reading the story of Lazarus with a group of prisoners from Parklea Prison, New South Wales, Australia, Jione Havea seeks to “queer” the story of Lazarus in his essay, “Lazarus Troubles,” that is, focusing on those elements that stand over against the normal and the natural. According to Havea, “this chapter is about the troubles of Lazarus and how the story of Lazarus troubled us” (159).

(3) Sean D. Burke (“Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch”) focuses on the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who embodies ambiguity in terms of his religious as well as sexual identity. Employing queer theory that seeks to “deconstruct and denaturalize identity categories” (176), Burke considers the way in which the eunuch emerges as a queering figure in the context of ancient masculinities.

(4) Bringing into conversation the plight of undocumented Mexican workers who find themselves in the borderlands as expressed in the literature by Gloria Anzaldúa with the way the eunuch is portrayed in Acts 8, Manuel Villalobos (“Bodies Del Odro Lado Finding Life and Hope in the Borderland: Gloria Anzaldúa, the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8:26–40, y Yo”) argues that “a new way of being human might be possible when we cross borders, challenge institutions, and follow the spirit who breathes new life into us” (192).

(5) In light of the way in which certain medical and psychological professionals view trans people as suffering from a disorder as well as the way in which Paul frames the
Corinthian women prophets in terms of concepts such as suffering and status, Joseph A. Marchal (“The Corinthian Women Prophets and Trans Activism: Rethinking Canonical Gender Claims”) considers first how these dominant scripts function in both ancient and contemporary society and, second, seeks to resist and resituate such scripts.

(6) Gillian Townsley explores the very difficult text of 1 Cor 11:2–16 in her essay, “The Straight Mind in Corinth: Problematizing Categories and Ideologies of Gender in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16” in light of Monica Wittig’s philosophy of gender. This passage, which raises all kinds of questions regarding gender and sexuality, is important to contemplate, considering the way this text has been used “to buttress notions of male ‘headship’ and/or authority, and to reinforce heteronormativity as a divinely ordained paradigm” (274).

(7) In “The Pastor and His Fops: Gender Indeterminacy in the Pastor and His Readers,” Jay Twomey considers the way in which the patriarchal readings of the Pastoral Epistles can be used to undermine, or “queer,” the text. Twomey’s exposition includes examples from as broad a range of subjects as Gore Vidal’s novel Live from Golgotha that “rewrites” the New Testament to church fathers such as Augustine, Chrysostom, and Anselm, concluding with eighteenth-century writer Philip Doddridge.

(8) Offering a queer reading of the highly influential image of the Great Whore of Babylon, Lynn R. Huber (“Gazing at the Whore: Reading Revelation Queerly”) proposes that such consideration of this image in light of the apocalyptic rhetoric as well Revelation’s imperial context may help people reread Revelation, which has in the past so often been used to condemn members of the LGBTQ communities.

(9) Jeremy Punt (“Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Biblical Interpretation: A Preliminary Exploration of Some Intersections”) contemplates the relationship between a number of critical approaches that deal with gender, sexuality, and identity, including also the intersection between queer theory and postcolonial theory and the value that these methods hold for generating a broader hermeneutical framework for the New Testament.

It is never an easy task to review a book with such diverse contributions as contained in Bible Trouble. This difficulty is also evident in the decision of the respondents to this book (Tamar Kamionkowski and Michael Joseph Brown) to choose a few essays to which to respond. Rather than responding only to those contributions that have captured my attention, I will identify some common themes that run through many of the contributions as well as highlight one or two questions that emerged in my reading of this volume.
First, the contributors to *Bible Trouble* can rightly be described as masters of theory and exegetical practice—“accomplished sailors,” as the introductory respondent, Ellen Armour, calls them, using a sailing metaphor to denote the queer theorist’s endeavor of sailing against the wind (3). The volume is worth reading just for the careful expositions of the most important theorists and theories related to queer, gender, and postcolonial theory and the creative application to selected biblical texts that make up this collection of essays. Particularly insightful was the connections between postcolonial interpretative method and queer theory outlined by several of the contributors that show how queer theory builds on both gender and postcolonial theory.

Second, the value of queer readings of biblical texts is to be found on multiple levels. On the one hand, these readings have profound value for members of LGBTIQ communities—providing a “room of one’s own” of sorts that reflects the experience of people who have been marginalized by society built on a strong heteronormative basis/bias. Several of the contributions reflect the painful experience of the LGBTIQ community, “the damage” that as Armour reminds us, “continues to be done to LGBTQ people in the name of biblical authority—damage carried in the bodies and minds of many of [our] students” (1)

But the volume also has value beyond the “margins” to which such queer readings of the Bible are often relegated. As Theresa Hornsby and Ken Stone suggest, issues raised by queer readings also have value for biblical studies in general—the Bible in their mind already being queer in nature. This is evident in the complexity of the very act of biblical interpretation that has to deal “with diverse manuscripts, texts, translations, hermeneutical assumptions, scholarly and other collective traditions, [and] strategies (implicit or explicit) for reading” (x). In contrast with centuries of interpreters who seek to “concretize and canonize meaning,” “queer scholars understand that meaning is fleeting,” that meaning changes along with its readers (xii)—a vital perspective for everyone engaged in biblical interpretation.

In addition, the queer readings contained in *Bible Trouble* provide, as Sean Burke has argued, “new and productive way to read ambiguities in identity … to deconstruct and to denaturalize identities to demonstrate that what are claimed to be natural and normal essences are actually arbitrary and fluid social constructions.” The benefit of such an approach is, as Burke says it well, “to make it possible for more bodies to matter—for more bodies to be recognized as fully human” (176). It is an important insight for us all that sexuality and gender construction is more complex than we typically may have believed, potentially leading to a society in which there is more room and greater compassion for a variety of gender identities.
Third, at the heart of most if not all of the contributions in *Bible Trouble* is what can be termed the ethics of biblical interpretation, the conviction that the act of queering the biblical text does not merely offer some fascinating mental gymnastics but that reading the Bible matters. This is evident in the numerous contributions that seek to reclaim the same Bible that so often has been used to hurt and exclude members of the respective LGBTIQ communities. For instance, Manuel Villalobos uses the example of the Ethiopian eunuch, who despite being understood as “sub-human, inhuman, non-human” in terms of the criteria of his culture is able to engage in a liberating reading of the ancient scroll of Isaiah (Acts 8:26–40). Drawing on his own struggle with the biblical text as site of exclusion, Villalobos considers ways in which the Bible may be read in terms of the borderland experience that makes up the reality of many members of the LGBTIQ communities to become once again a source of not just liberation but even joy (205–6, 212–16).

I had a couple of questions in response to the insightful essays collected in *Bible Trouble*. First, I noticed that the collective term typically used to capture the experience of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersex, and queer community, LBGT and its variations (GLBT, LBGTQ, GLBTQ, LBGTIQ), was not consistent throughout all the contributions. It is true that, as Deryn Guest points out, the “popular shorthand ‘LBGT’ is a very loose grouping that can never do justice to the separate concerns of each community” (11). Even adding the extra denominators may not fully capture the unique experiences of each group that identifies itself over against the norms of the dominant heteronormative society. Something of this complexity of denoting, for instance, the transsexual experience is expressed in Joseph Marchal’s essay (229–37), which seeks to show the importance of resisting the dominant script regarding issues of gender, identity, normalcy, and community in terms of transgendered experience as well as in Guest’s acknowledgement of how lesbian feminist discourse may alienate and exclude FTMs (female-to-male transsexuals) (11).

Finally, the cynical side of me could not help but wonder whether these queer readings of the biblical text will stay regulated to the margins of biblical scholarship or whether in time it will, as gender and postcolonial criticism have done to some extent, impact those who consider themselves to be at the center of the biblical scholarship. Tamar Kamionkowski is right when she says that queer readings of the biblical text “will have a longer lasting impact and will speak to a greater audience if they are framed as a reading strategy that adds new layers to our appreciation of the Bible” (135). Hopefully *Bible Trouble* will find a wider audience that appreciate the importance of queering the biblical text for us all.