

# Biblical perspectives on sexuality

Steven Schweitzer

**M**any readers of the Bible are surprised to discover that it contains more than one opinion on a variety of issues. The church has often tried to identify *the* biblical view of a particular topic, but rarely do our scriptures speak with a single voice. Instead, the Bible contains multiple voices—an ensemble or chorus—sometimes producing harmony and sometimes discordant reverberations. Sexuality in the Bible is no exception. It is not presented in a monolithic perspective but in several positions often in tension with one another. We will survey this variety by looking at a few representative and classic texts about sexuality in the Old and New Testaments. Then I will offer some conclusions to guide us as we approach these perspectives on sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

## Genesis

At the beginning of the biblical narrative, in Genesis 1, gender differentiation is understood as part of God's ordered cosmos: God creates *ha-adam* ("the human") in two forms, one male and one

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female. Both are created in the image of God without qualification. While theologians have long debated about the precise scope of the *imago Dei*, scholars now argue persuasively that the language of Genesis 1:26 echoes formulae found throughout the ancient Near East describing the kings as the "image" and "likeness" of the gods.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Genesis 1 uses royal language, democratizes it, and applies it to all humanity—of both genders. According to Genesis 1, the king is not the unique repre-

sentative of the gods; all humans reflect God's image. In a recent book, David Carr has argued that we should press this insight further: the human body itself—both male and female—should be

seen in this story as “a mark of our connection to God” rather than a “sign of human limitation” or “a mark of slavery.” Our bodies are the means by which God’s representatives on earth (all of humanity) can perform their royal functions, as the language in Genesis 1:28–30 makes clear.<sup>3</sup>

Genesis 2 contains a different version of the creation story, with the LORD God acting as one who sculpts the human from the earth—*adam* from the *adamah* (v. 7). Thus, the “earthling” is connected to the “earth.” The “image of God” language is absent; instead, God breathes into *ha-adam* the “breath of life,” causing *ha-adam* to become a *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is often understood as “soul,” but the Hebrew word does not designate a metaphysical component in a physical shell. The concept is more holistic, applying to the whole person.<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament, “the human being does not have a body. He or she is body.”<sup>5</sup>

The two creation accounts agree that physicality is an essential part of being human, but Genesis 2 adds a concern for relationship. The LORD God observes that “it is not good” that *ha-adam* should be alone, so God intends to create a “helper” (*ezer*).<sup>6</sup> When animals prove inadequate in this role, God forms a woman (*ishah*) from the man (*ish*), and gender differentiation enters the picture. It seems that the “only way for God to create an equal of the first human was to begin with a bodily part of him.”<sup>7</sup>

Although other types of sexuality beyond gender are not mentioned up to this point, the explanation of subsequent cultural practice in Genesis 2:24 is explicit. Sexuality within marriage (“a man clings to his wife”) exists because men and women are created for relationship. We notice that the physical—sexual—body is seen in a positive light, and that consummation produces something new: the two become one flesh. The unashamed nakedness noted in the final verse has been understood both literally—they were unclothed—and metaphorically—they were entirely vulnerable and transparent with each other. The relevance of this double meaning is evident when these utopian conditions are undone in chapter 3. Our experience ever since demonstrates a struggle to recapture such unashamed nakedness between men and women.

In turning to Genesis 3, we note a striking absence in the text.<sup>8</sup> The word *sin* is not used until Genesis 4, in reference to Cain’s

anger (v. 7). Whatever happens in the “fall,” the text of Genesis does not label the humans’ disobedience (3:11) “original sin.”<sup>9</sup> Also missing is any explicit connection between the woman’s actions and sexual intercourse. Although many have seen allusions to sexuality in the language of Genesis 3, Carr correctly notes that the issue at stake is “the knowledge of good and evil,” that the fruit of that tree was desirable “to make one wise.”<sup>10</sup>

Relationships—between animals and humans, between the earth and humans, and between human beings—are the subject of the curses in Genesis 3:14–19. Deficient and strained gender relations, including those between husband and wife, are part of the new and shattered world, but sexuality itself is not “cursed” in Genesis 3:14–19. Many contemporary treatments of this text say that sexuality has been distorted or twisted as a result of God’s statements, or that the fall has perverted something God created to be good, that human sexuality is now part of this

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“fallen world.” I would suggest that the relationships between men and women—including sexuality—have been altered from the idyllic presentations in Genesis 1 and 2, but that sexuality itself is not vilified in Genesis 3.

This point bears repeating, given the long history of Christian condemnation of sexuality and the general embarrassment about it: sexuality is not sinful; sexuality is not condemned; sexuality is not the problem. The degradation of male-female relationships produces the corruption of sexuality, not the other way around. Somehow we have believed that marginalizing or even banishing sexuality will allow us to have ordered relationships between women and men, which in turn will help humans create an ordered society. But we have it backward. We need healthy relationships so that we can have healthy sexuality—one of many qualities of human relationships. In other words, sexuality is not a means to an end but has value on its own.

### **Songs of Songs**

Continuing this positive perspective on human sexuality in the Old Testament is the Song of Songs. While this collection of

erotic love poems stands out in the Bible, the ancient Near East produced a multitude of comparative compositions of a similar genre and content.<sup>11</sup> Given the popularity of the genre, the question is not, why is *this* in my Bible? but, why is there *only one of these* in my Bible?

The book was a favorite of Christians—especially monks and mystics—from the early church until the early modern period. The erotic nature of the text had been allegorized, read not as a love story between a man and a woman but as an expression of love between God and the church or between God and the individual believer. As biblical scholars moved away from an allegorical reading to a historical reading—as a love song between two humans—the book lost its appeal. Christians and Jews have had a long history of redirecting its sexual images; when asked to read this poetry as dealing with real people in sexual situations, they avoided the book.<sup>12</sup> This brief historical review reminds us that the issue with the sexual language in the Song of Songs is with us, not with the text. The text is sexual and celebrates sexuality—and we should, too.

The Song contains many exchanges between a woman and a man, with comments by other voices interspersed throughout the poetic narrative. While this book is often used as an example of the beauty of sexuality in marriage, little in the book suggests that the two individuals are married.<sup>13</sup> The woman and the man each celebrate the physicality of the other in endless metaphors describing body parts and appearance. He alludes to his sexual arousal (5:2), and to her genitals using the metaphor of a garden (4:11–15; 5:1), but she is the one who speaks most about orgasm and sexual penetration (3:1–4; 4:16; 5:3–8; 7:10–8:4), and she longs for their hidden love to become public (7:10–8:4).

She is sexual, she is passionate, and she enjoys her intimacy with her lover. The intimacy she desires is physical connection but also an emotional and interpersonal bond. She calls her lover a friend (5:16) and expresses her desire to be a seal upon his heart (8:6). This biblical text is a positive portrayal of a sexually confident woman, who shatters the categories provided by the ancient dichotomy, which asks us to classify all women as either virgins or whores. Sexually confident women may threaten males (and other women), but this poetry suggests that they should not relinquish

their sexuality in response to oppressive societal, cultural, and supposedly Christian norms.

The Song revels in passion, physicality, and sexuality in both men and women. It stands alone in the Bible in its lengthy, explicit affirmation of sexual intercourse. It does not mention procreation as a justification for the act. The woman does offer

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one caution three times: “Do not arouse or awaken love until it is ready” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), but never provides more details or criteria by which to judge when it is appropriate to enliven love. The uncertainty in knowing how to evaluate the Song is not resolved by the enigma of its concluding chapter. As Carr notes, “the Song ends, without any clear resolution. An American movie would have

the lovers riding into sunset. A more tragic approach would have them separated forever. But the Song teases us with a relationship in limbo. The love is still clandestine, the lovers not yet together. . . . Mutual desire, risk, joining, separation—all of these mix in this ambiguous ending to an elusive song.”<sup>14</sup>

The Song remains a difficult text to handle well. While many prefer to ignore it, allegorize it, or relegate it to reading for engaged couples in premarital counseling, as an anticipation of what good sex can be like in marriage, I suggest that it affirms sexuality, period. Both in its obsession with the physical and in its quest for intimacy that stretches beyond intercourse, it promotes sexuality. In fact, as Carr again correctly observes, the text “describes yearning for and celebration of lovemaking without ever clearly describing the lovemaking itself.”<sup>15</sup> The Song is more about the *context* in which love can be “as strong as death” (8:6). It offers a view that intercourse is only one factor among many that contribute to authentic sexuality. While some may be tempted to think of the Song as suggesting foreplay, I prefer to think of its advice for a more holistic view to sexuality: this is not foreplay with the goal of intercourse (a means to an end) but passionate desire to be enjoyed on its own. The Song promotes sexuality for sexuality’s sake, and for the sake of both human partners, and not in service of some greater good, whether it be procreation or the proper restraint of desire within marriage.<sup>16</sup>

## Jesus

In the Gospels,<sup>17</sup> Jesus interacts with women and elevates them far above the status provided for them by the cultural norms of his time. But Jesus says little about sexuality, and the suggestion that the celibate, unmarried, childless Jesus of the New Testament is “not a model for active sexuality, marriage, or family” seems harsh, but nonetheless correct.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Jesus’s words and actions regarding sexuality are ambiguous at best.

The Gospel of John (2:1–11) notes Jesus’s presence at a wedding, and his miracle there becomes his first “sign,” but does this narrative really “validate” weddings?<sup>19</sup> Jesus also affirms marriage and condemns divorce and adultery (Mark 10:2–12//Matt. 19:3–10//Luke 16:18; and Matt. 5:27–32, which includes the exception clause for *porneia*—sexual immorality—in agreement with Matt. 19:9). He forgives an adulteress, with encouragement to “go your way and from now on do not sin again” (John 7:53–8:11). While rejecting divorce—and likely without the qualifiers found only in Matthew—Jesus mentions the possibility of women divorcing their husbands (Mark 10:12 only), something clearly at odds with the tradition, if not unique within his context.<sup>20</sup> But this says more about his valuing of women than about his view of sexuality.

Jesus even goes so far as to redefine adultery. It is not only the act of intercourse but also lustful desire itself that is an issue (Matt. 5:27–28). His hyperbolic advice to remove the offending part of the body does little to assist us practically in controlling our passions, which have just been condemned.

Jesus redefines family obligations (Mark 3:31–35//Matt. 12:46–50//Luke 8:19–22; Luke 14:25–26) and suggests that remaining unmarried as a eunuch is a special gift but not a requirement for those desiring to be numbered among his followers (Matt. 19:10–12). In a rare statement on conditions and events after the future day of resurrection, he says that they “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mark 12:25//Matt. 22:30; the parallel of Luke 20:34–35 is even more negative on the contrast between the present deficient practice of marriage and its absence in the future).

Thus, in the Gospels, Jesus seems to affirm marriage and celibacy (though not without some ambiguity), while condemning divorce, adultery, and lust. But beyond this, we find no extensive treatment of sexuality in the teachings of Jesus.

## Paul

In contrast, Paul writes extensively about issues related to sexuality. One of Paul's earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians, desires holiness for believers and rejection of "fornication" or "sexual immorality" (*porneia*), without any examples or further description (4:3–8).

The apocalyptic worldview that undergirds this letter is also found in 1 Corinthians 5–7, in which several other concerns come together. First, the Corinthians seem to have a spiritual superiority complex. Among them are at least two main groups, both accepting the Hellenistic view that the spiritual is good and the physical is evil: the libertines who say, "The body is irrelevant, so I can do whatever I want," and the ascetics who say, "The body is irrelevant, so I must repress it."

To combat the libertines, Paul rebukes them in 5:1–13 for celebrating the incident of the man sleeping with his "father's wife" (probably his stepmother); provides a list of sins, including

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sexual ones, that exclude one from the kingdom of God (6:9–11); and claims that sexual intercourse with a prostitute causes the two parties to "become one flesh" (6:12–17). In 6:9, Paul describes two groups, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* [the NRSV translates these terms "male prostitutes" and "sodomites"], using terminology that is far from clear; in fact, Paul seems to have coined the second word.<sup>21</sup> Many scholars conclude that these terms do not refer to homosexual actions in general but to the practice of pederasty (older men and younger boys) common among the Hellenistic upper class.<sup>22</sup> Paul concludes with

an affirmation of the holistic person, akin to the view we saw in the Old Testament. Sexual sins affect the whole person, not just the body (6:18), a conviction that presupposes a Jewish view and not a dualistic Hellenistic understanding of anthropology. Thus, Paul rejects an "anything goes" sexuality.

To combat asceticism and in response to the ascetics' maxim "It is good not to touch a woman," Paul asserts that marriage is not a sin (7:28). He maintains that both husband and wife should honor conjugal rights and not deprive each other except by

mutual agreement for prayer (7:1–7). In contrast to typical Jewish and Hellenistic writings of the time, Paul thus not only elevates the status of women within the marriage but also affirms that sex is not a sin. However, throughout chapter 7, Paul expresses two additional views: being celibate is the preferred choice for both men and women, especially since the return of Jesus is imminent, and that marriage functions as a context for sexual release, especially for those who lack self-control. Both views contribute to the idea that sexuality is a hindrance to spirituality (7:32–35).

Paul further states that the Lord commands that women and men should not divorce their spouses (reflecting the tradition in Mark 10:2); additionally, Paul expresses his opinion—and not on the basis of the Lord’s sayings—that believers should remain married to unbelievers if the unbelievers are willing. Paul sees such marriage as an opportunity to “save” or “win” the spouse (7:10–16). Paul also states that the believer in such a marriage makes the unbelieving spouse and their children “holy” (7:14), but he does not explain the meaning of these enigmatic words or how this choice may affect the inclusion of spouse and children in the kingdom of God.

The sexuality issues raised by Paul in Romans 1 bring to a close our discussion of his views. The focus of the chapter is to demonstrate how the Gentiles are guilty before God (the Jews will be the focus of chapters 2–3). Paul claims Gentiles have access to God through creation, but they did not honor God (1:18–23). In response, God “gave them up” to three things: to degrading their bodies, degrading passions, and a debased mind. These three negatives have, in turn, produced sexual immorality, among other things. Thus, Gentiles exhibit sexual immorality, a sign that they are disobedient and will be judged (1:28–32). What is clear in Paul’s language here are references to homosexual and lesbian activities; what is not clear (just as in 1 Corinthians 6:9) is the type or scope of these activities. In his argument “from nature,” Paul strongly echoes other Hellenistic Jewish writers of the time, who claim that homosexuality—especially and explicitly pederasty—is a Greek practice in which Jews do not participate.<sup>23</sup> Thus, although much of Paul’s theology of sexuality—especially his preference for celibacy and ideas about suppressing the passions—is “consistent with advice offered by Hellenistic moral-



ists,”<sup>24</sup> in his rejection of homosexual behavior (of some type), Paul is thoroughly Jewish or (perhaps better) Hellenistic Jewish in his outlook.<sup>25</sup> This Jewish concern is almost certainly based on the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18 and 20, which also rejects homosexual behavior and incest. The Greek translation known as the Septuagint uses some of the terms Paul uses here. It is worth noting that just as Paul affirms the wife’s conjugal rights and a wife’s ability to divorce, Paul also mentions lesbian sexual activity (of some type)—although as a negative practice. Thus, Paul is consistent in affirming the equality of women with men in terms of sexuality, something rare in antiquity.

Paul seems to be expressing his views on sexuality within the cultural context of his day, sometimes agreeing with conventional

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wisdom and practices, and sometimes rejecting them; sometimes sounding like a Greek philosopher and sometimes like a Hellenistic Jew; sometimes upholding marriage and sometimes promoting celibacy as the ideal. Other influences on his views include the holistic view of the person and the rejection of some type of homosexual behavior in continuity with Old Testament provisions, his belief in the apocalyptic and imminent return

of Jesus, and his overwhelming concern to create ordered communities of believers (evident in all his letters, but especially those to the church at Corinth) so that the Roman Empire does not become interested in suppressing the Christian movement (Rom. 13:1–7). If we have any hope of understanding Paul’s controversial statements on sexuality (whether heterosexual or homosexual), we must understand him in his ancient cultural context.

The New Testament “does not offer a comprehensive and systematic sexual ethics”;<sup>26</sup> it is “also remarkable for its lack of interest in aesthetics, pleasure, or the erotic.”<sup>27</sup> Neither Jesus nor Paul approaches the overt affirmation of sexuality found in Genesis and in the Song of Songs.

## Conclusion

I conclude with some reflections that may help us discuss sexuality constructively in a way that takes the Bible seriously.

1. The Bible contains multiple perspectives on sexuality. To reduce them to a singular or dominant voice is to miss the complexity and honesty of the biblical texts. Recognizing the diversity of views makes us sensitive to theological development within the canon of scripture itself. Perhaps this model of preserving differing opinions should be a model for our own theological processes.

2. The biblical perspectives on sexuality must be understood in their ancient contexts—literary, historical, cultural, social, political, philosophical, and anthropological, to name a few.

3. The Bible associates sexuality with procreation and marriage, perhaps obviously so. However, there is an interpretive choice about whether sexuality is a good by itself, or if sexuality has value only in the service of other concerns such as preserving fidelity in marriage or allowing for appropriate sexual release or promoting procreation. I would argue that the Old Testament favors the former, while the New Testament encourages the latter.

4. The Bible assumes heterosexuality is normal. When they do appear in brief comments, homosexual actions (with some ambiguity as to their precise nature) are viewed negatively in both Old and New Testaments. The reasons for rejection of homosexual behavior appear to reflect common cultural understandings in the ancient Near East and especially Hellenistic Jewish worldviews, in opposition to Hellenistic practices. More must be done to understand the cultural contexts in which homosexual practices are being addressed in the Bible, if we are to make sense of the biblical material for our contemporary cultural contexts.

5. The Bible rejects sexual immorality, sometimes with examples (incest and adultery), but the precise scope of what constitutes *porneia* is often ambiguous.

6. The Bible affirms that humans—male and female—are sexual beings, with physical bodies that do matter. Humans are not eternal superior spirits trapped in inferior material forms; the body, physicality, and sexuality have value.

7. The Bible connects sexuality and spirituality. They are intertwined within each person and in humans' relationships with one another and with the divine.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an assessment of sexuality from an Anabaptist perspective, compare the essays in *Sexuality: God's Gift*, ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard F. Batto, "The Divine Sovereign: The Image of God in the Priestly Creation Account," in *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts*, ed. Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 143–86.

<sup>3</sup> How this royal language associated with humanity relates to creation care and environmental ethics is another issue. Genesis 1 presents humans as divine representatives, empowered by the deity to act *appropriately*. This is the basis from which to discuss Christian ecology claiming to derive from the opening chapter of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> In Hellenistic philosophy, especially in Stoicism and Platonism, the standard view of the human being was of a superior metaphysical "soul" trapped in an inferior physical prison.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), 138.

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible correctly notes that in almost all occurrences this word refers to God as the "helper" of humanity (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987], 90; 140, n. 13). Thus, arguments from this verse suggesting that the word implies subordination of women to men have no basis, given its strong association as a way of understanding the human-divine relationship.

<sup>7</sup> David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>8</sup> The complete castigation of women as evil, temptresses, and the cause of all sin in the world is also something not found in the text of Genesis. This patriarchal, misogynistic, and oppressive misreading of the text has no justification in the text itself, despite the way it is interpreted with a greater emphasis on Eve's culpability in 1 Tim. 2:8–15.

<sup>9</sup> The fourth century theologian Augustine is usually credited (or blamed) for developing this doctrine, largely under the influence of Paul's comments in Romans 5 and his own struggles with sexuality (see, e.g., "Letter 6 to Atticus").

<sup>10</sup> Carr, *Erotic Word*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> More details are provided by Carr, *Erotic Word*, 139–51.

<sup>13</sup> The woman is called "my sister, my bride" (4:9–12; 5:1), but no one wishes to interpret the first label literally. These are common terms of endearment between lovers in ancient Near Eastern texts (see Carr, *Erotic Word*, 119). The wedding day of Solomon is mentioned in 3:6–11 and he is invoked again in 8:11–12, but most scholars reject the notion that the male lover is Solomon, who appears as a third party in the plot.

<sup>14</sup> Carr, *Erotic Word*, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Carr, *Erotic Word*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to sexual intercourse's function as a sacrament within marriage, these two concerns are two classic "goods of marriage" as defined by Augustine, who further defined sexual intercourse without an intention for procreation as stemming from lust ("The Good of Marriage"). John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople and contemporary of Augustine, agreed that procreation and chastity were the primary goods of marriage, but in contrast to Augustine, he argued for the superiority of fidelity, since the commands in Genesis regarding procreation were shown to be inferior, given the existence of childless couples and the overpopulation of the world in his time ("Sermon on Marriage").

<sup>17</sup> In this discussion of Jesus and sexuality I am not concerned about the Historical Jesus but rather with Jesus as he is presented by the four Gospels.

<sup>18</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson and Mark D. Jordan, "Christianity," in *Sex, Marriage, and*

*Family in World Religions*, ed. Don S. Browning, M. Christian Green, and John Witte Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 79.

<sup>19</sup> Jesus performs many common cultural actions, such as attending synagogue and the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. Could his presence at the wedding also reflect a cultural expectation, without somehow “blessing” the wedding ceremony (which is different from his direct affirmations of marriage)?

<sup>20</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 23, 25; and John P. Meier, “The Historical Jesus and the Historical Law: Some Problems within the Problem,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (January 2003): 52–79.

<sup>21</sup> For more discussion of this verse and terminology, see Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 86–92.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 90–92.

<sup>23</sup> Examples include the *Letter of Aristeas* (151–52), Pseudo-Phocylides (175–206), *Sibylline Oracles* (3.185–87, 3.594–600), Philo (*On Abraham* 135–36; *Special Laws* 2.50, 3.37–40), Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.25). See Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 134–42.

<sup>24</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 127, n. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson and Jordan, “Christianity,” 83.

<sup>26</sup> Collins, *Sexual Ethics*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson and Jordan, “Christianity,” 83.

## **About the author**

In 2006 Steven Schweitzer joined the faculty of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. He teaches Old Testament. He and his wife Jill have three children. They attend Prince of Peace Church of the Brethren in South Bend.