



Biblical Perspectives on Sexuality*

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To examine the Old Testament view of sexuality I've decided on two tracks which I hope will avoid the threat of proof-texting on the one hand and the trap of spouting biblical principles which never touch the actual text on the other.

My first task I see as descriptive. That is, I will give some indication of where in the Old Testament issues of sexuality are addressed. Within this track, I will have time to make only passing reference to the problems of interpreting individual texts.

My second task will be to raise certain interpretive difficulties which come not so much from the text itself as from questions which arise from our own perspectives as twentieth-century Americans, male and female.

I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE TEXTS

Many of the laws in the Old Testament, found largely in Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, deal with sexual behavior. Israel's laws are unusually severe in the field of sexual transgression; transgressions are considered abominations, profanations, and perversions, often punishable by expulsion from the community or death. Sexual transgressions are seen as either religious offenses, related to worship of Yahweh, or as breaches of laws of family and property. If one looks exclusively at the legal texts, certain behavior is openly condemned, including adultery, incest, and male homosexuality, while other behavior such as child abuse and female homosexuality isn't even addressed.

All of these laws are presented with the understanding that law is gift. The law is a gift of God which allows for ordered life within the community. Love of

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God and love of neighbor are intimately linked. Some believe we could simply end the discussion here. Read it and weep. But there are serious difficulties to which I will return later.

Law is not the only part of Scripture which addresses the issue of sexuality. One must look also at narrative, beginning with the first chapter of Genesis. Gen 1 does not deal explicitly with issues of sexuality except in so far as there is a divine command to reproduce the various species; however, the pronouncement that both male and female are created in the image of God is a profound declaration of the dignity, worth, and responsibility of all human beings. From the perspective of the Ancient Near East, this claim is radical. Females as well as males are created not as slaves of the gods and not in some royal or sexual hierarchy, but rather all humans, male

and female, are created to be royal caretakers of God's creation. God's creation would include humanity, so we are created, by logical extension, to care for each other as well as for the earth. Built into the very creation are notions of justice, goodness, and an eternal rhythm of sabbath rest which claims creation as God's own. Gen 1 is a proper context, therefore, for any discussion of sexuality.

Gen 2 and 3 are really the first texts which deal with issues of sexual intimacy. Humans, male and female, are created in mutuality. Sexuality is a matter of great joy, and its creation is the occasion for the singing of the very first biblical song. Sin, however, leads to lack of mutuality, to division, to accusation, to dominance, and to shame.

The Song of Songs can rightly be viewed as an attempt to recapture the life and love of the ideal garden. Again, one finds mutual sexuality without domination. Work and play are united, and the world is invited to rejoice with the lovers. Interestingly, evil in this book comes from the world, from the lust of the men of the city.

Other Old Testament narratives provide important glimpses into sexual issues and relationships. Mainly, the narratives reveal homey, realistic glances: What happens when two sisters love and are married to one man, but only one is loved in return while the other has the children? What happens when the wife of a patriarch is so beautiful that her beauty might cause unwelcome jealousy which could threaten the life of the patriarch? What happens when there is rivalry over children, or jealousy and animosity among spouses? Sex in the biblical narratives is, at times, dangerous and violent: look at the stories of Dinah, Hagar, Lot's family, the Levite concubine, Bathsheba, and Tamar (the sister of Absalom). Sex can also be tantalizing and fun. The best example is the book of Ruth, in which the third chapter has more sexual innuendo and double entendres than any D. H. Lawrence novel. Sex is also often risky, as it is with Ruth and Tamar (the daughter of Judah).

One is left in narrative with a description of a range of human experience as it relates to sexuality: joy, danger, tragedy, violence, humor, and affection. These narratives can be used to engage our imaginations and teach us much about human sexual behavior. These texts, however, are descriptive, not prescriptive. When we try to read these narratives as law, we get into deep trouble. A current example of such trouble is the misuse of Gen 19, where Lot offers to give his two virgin daughters rather than his guests to the rabble, and Judg 19, where the Levite pushes his concubine out the door to save himself from the mob. Both of these texts have been used as evidence that homosexuality is a greater sin than rape. When we treat

such texts as law, we lose all perspective on the narrative context. Any sense of irony, tragedy, or subtlety flies out the window. While there may well be prescriptive implications of these narratives, one cannot get to these directly. These narratives are not law.

Other significant texts include the Proverbs accounts which pit the two poetic figures of Dame Wisdom and Dame Folly against each other. Both figures are pictured as sexually enticing to men, yet one leads to ruin while the other leads to life. In the prophets, one of the prime metaphors for sin is female harlotry, a metaphor which has had important effects on biblical interpretations of sexuality.

When we deal with issues of sexuality in the Old Testament we sense a strong tension between the pictures which are presented in the law and those which are presented in the

narratives. The narratives have more give, more of a human face; the law stands. Both must be dealt with to get a full picture of the issues involved. A rushed survey (like this one) simply will not suffice. Each text has its own hermeneutical issues.

II. HERMENEUTICAL CONCERNS

In the particular issue of sexuality, biblical narrative and poetry have not been at the center of the debate. Rather biblical law is the major focus of concern. Whenever I come to the issue of law, I find myself full of admiration for the biblical principles of law on the one hand, while, on the other hand, I am uncomfortable and downright disdainful of some of the specifics. This is a problem. I find myself caught between a love and respect for the traditions of Scripture and church and a modern hermeneutic of suspicion born largely from coming to these texts as a twentieth-century American woman.

Here are some of the issues which lead me to reject certain legal specifics:

1. Issues of sexuality and power are intricately related. Actually, this is not only a modern observation. Many of the biblical narratives specifically encourage this perspective. Nevertheless, the observation that sexuality and power are linked is a particularly modern and feminist observation. Sexuality is power on the most personal level. Power is not necessarily bad. Power shaped by love, justice, and mercy is good. However, power in evil hands, particularly in the sexual arena, is devastating. When sexuality is discussed without addressing the issue of power, I get nervous. I want always to ask the question, who has power in this text?

2. The laws of Scripture are written entirely from a male perspective. Since sexual issues are also issues of power, this fact makes an enormous difference. As a woman, the sexual power which I fear most is different from the sexual power men fear. I, like most women, am exceedingly fearful of rape, heterosexual rape. This is not a fear reflected much in the biblical text. The laws which deal with rape are largely concerned with male property and proper family responsibilities (cf. Deut 22:23ff.). The male who rapes is guilty because he violated his neighbor's wife. The issue is the violation to the neighbor rather than to the woman. If a virgin is raped, the rapist pays the father the bride price, and the matter is settled, except that he cannot later cast her aside. The fact that the woman lives out the rest of her life with a man who has raped her is of no account.

The narratives about rape also are largely tied to male-centered issues (Dinah,

Judges 20, Tamar). Only in the story of Tamar is the woman's perspective brought in at all. The result of Amnon's rape is her shame.

3. As a woman, I am not personally involved in the issue of male homosexuality. Clearly, mine is not the perspective of the biblical text. Male homosexual rape in the two narrative accounts is pictured as personally repellent and a severe breach of the social structure. In law, male homosexual behavior is seen as an abomination. Yet female homosexuality is a non-issue, perhaps because, in the biblical context, no power issues are involved.

4. Moreover, the differences between Israel's perspective and ours are not only rooted in male bias. As a twentieth-century person, I have different notions of family, of societal structure, of taboo practices, and of science. In ancient Israel, the family was the principal political unit. The whole notion of family is seen from this perspective. Often, the prime threat to the family

unit was the state. Monogamy is reflected in certain parts of the Old Testament, particularly in prophetic imagery and in Gen 1-2, but in other parts, multiple wives are the rule, particularly for those in power. For David, multiple wives meant extended power and political connections. The central family issues in ancient Israel were issues of progeny, upholding the family name, and keeping property within the clan. These issues determine the questions which inform the laws as well as the narrative portraits of sexuality. For example, in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-11), the determination was made that daughters could inherit property because this was the only way to keep the name of their father alive and the property in the family. These are not our primary issues. When we speak of birth control, abortion, vast overpopulation, and issues of intimacy, our perspectives and questions are radically different.

5. Within the laws of the Old Testament, certain taboos are clear. In Lev 18, one finds laws against every form of incest, laws against sleeping with a woman during her menstrual period, against adultery, child sacrifice, male homosexual behavior, and bestiality. All of these laws are built on a number of presuppositions: (1) certain societal taboos, (2) a notion that the world is divided into clean and unclean, (3) a conviction of a tie between sexuality and defilement, and (4) a concern with setting Israel apart from other nations. Similar notions lead to laws against eating unclean food, against having tattoos, against women wearing men's clothes, promoting a ritual drinking of poison to detect an adulteress (Num 5), and other laws that decreed periods of ritual uncleanness after childbirth and at other times when bodily fluids are at issue.

How are we as twentieth-century Americans to deal with these laws and these perspectives? Does that ancient society determine our notions of law, of science, and of taboo? Look at the differences. We do not divide the world between clean and unclean. Such a distinction is impossible in a modern scientific society. Bodily fluids do not take on for us mystical qualities. We have some notion of taboo which centers perhaps in incest, but our societal notions of taboo are certainly in flux—witness the discussion about homosexuality. In our society, the family and clan are not the central political unit, and women are not viewed by us as legal property. How do we relate to these biblical laws?

I raise these issues not to condemn Scripture for its perspective, but rather to clarify the distance between the biblical perspective and our own.

We are left, to a certain extent, with disembodied biblical principles. We speak

of law as gift and as a guide for responsibility for neighbor and community. If law is for living out life in service to the neighbor, as I believe it is, then how does one settle on which laws do that? One cannot simply adopt all biblical law. How do we choose? We are caught between a notion of revealed law and natural law. Something of the revealed nature of this law remains, centered, perhaps, in the Ten Commandments. Or are even these laws valid only because they are natural laws?

Certain Old Testament insights and principles are of extreme importance: (1) law is seen in the context of idolatry and respect for the will of God; (2) the law centers not on individual freedom or rights, but rather on what is good for the neighbor; (3) love of God and love of neighbor are connected; and (4) there are no distinctions made between private and public behavior in that all behavior has public ramifications.

These principles are of earth-shaking significance and can certainly be used as the basis

for a biblical critique of modern sexual attitudes. I will confess to a certain amount of shock when I read the recent issue of *Ms.* magazine (May, 1989) entitled “The Heat is On: Sex, Romance, Love, and Lust in the ‘90s.” This issue, dealing with modern heterosexual relationships, reflects an almost total preoccupation with self. The good of the neighbor is simply not an issue. Even the articles which support monogamy do so because such a condition is deemed good for the individual. Concern for the other and the larger society is largely absent.

Before I close, I would like to make one final observation. Within Scripture, issues of justice and the truth offered by the powerless are always of central importance. The biblical perspective drives us to be constantly on guard, distrusting all easy societal solutions. I am always suspicious of a solution for a well-ordered society in which my own way of living is held up as the ideal—a father, a mother, two kids, and a dog. What happens to the singles, the divorced, the homosexuals, the childless, and the abused? Justice is related to issues of sexuality as well as to other social issues. A vision of truth which excludes the powerless is necessarily skewed. One must always look to and listen to the outcast.

Scripture keeps us off balance. The truth of Scripture speaks to us only with such a voice. The law throws us on the mercy of the gospel and calls us to trust in the promise. Surely this is as true for the issue of sexuality as for any other issue.