

## Ethical Issues in the Old Testament – lewdness



“There is a case where two men are fighting, and the wife of one of them comes to rescue her husband from his assailant. She reaches out and seizes him by his private parts. You shall cut off her hand. Show her no pity.” (Deuteronomy 25:11–12, NIV).

This is clearly an expression that reflects discrimination against women and male superiority.

In Genesis 19:30–38, Lot’s two daughters made their father drink wine, conspired to commit incest in order to continue their lineage, and took turns sleeping with him. Both succeeded, and their children became the ancestors of Moab and Ammon. To justify such an act is utterly unforgivable. Moreover, from a scientific perspective, incest can result in defective offspring and should be avoided.



In Genesis 35:22, Israel (the new name given to Jacob by Yahweh, Genesis 32:28) realized that his firstborn son Reuben had slept with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine, who later bore two of the sons who became heads of the twelve tribes. Yet Reuben suffered no punishment for such a heinous and disgraceful act, and Bilhah's two sons were still granted equal status as heads of tribes. This could instill the perception that leaders or those in power can be exempt from consequences no matter what they do, which is deeply problematic.

After the flood, Noah cultivated grapes as his first crop. He made wine from the harvest and became drunk, lying naked inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw this and was cursed. "Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside." (Genesis 9:22, NIV). To "see nakedness" meant having sexual relations. As Leviticus 18:6–7 (NIV) says: "No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord. Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her." In this context, seeing his father's nakedness implies that Ham either had relations with his father Noah himself, or with Noah's wife, Ham's own mother. Boasting about this to his brothers led to Noah's curse.

At least in this case, Noah cursed Ham for his immoral act. However, in Reuben's case, no such rebuke was given. This shows the discriminatory treatment of concubines. It also implies that, in Judah at that time, concubines were treated as common property.

An interesting point is that Ham's son Mizraim is said to have founded Egypt (Genesis 10:6), and Ham's grandson Nimrod is said to have founded both Shinar (Babylonia, Genesis 10:10) and Assyria (Genesis 10:11). These were considered to be immense "curses."

If we examine the biblical chronology, Noah is said to have been born in 2948 BCE and to have experienced the flood at the age of 600, around 2348 BCE. Yet even before Noah's descendants dispersed, Egypt had already entered the Early Dynastic Period (3150–2686 BCE) and the Old Kingdom Period (2686–2181 BCE). The Great Pyramid of Giza, built around 2550 BCE—nearly 200 years before the supposed flood—stood in its grandeur. This suggests that Egypt escaped Yahweh's global flood. Indeed, excavations in 1860 revealed some burial goods inside the pyramid still intact.

Before the rise of the Babylonian Empire, the region of present-day Iraq was already home to Sumerian city-states (2800–2360 BCE). The city of Ur, from which Abraham is said to have departed, fell around 1950 BCE, and the Old Babylonian Empire was established soon after. Hammurabi, well-known for his code of laws, ruled from 1728 to 1686 BCE. The Assyrian Empire began around 1100 BCE. Thus, Nimrod's supposed founding of these nations has no basis in historical fact.

The record that Ham's descendants founded Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon makes it clear that Genesis was written after the Babylonian exile. It reflects a desperate attempt to claim kinship ties with great powers in order to appeal for mercy. "Abraham comes from Mesopotamia, and Moses comes from Egypt. These two stories, regardless of whether Babylonia or Egypt was the ruling power, were stored in the archives to be used opportunely for political advantage." <sup>1</sup>

Judges 19 tells the story of "a Levite and his concubine." Staying at his father-in-law's house, the Levite lingered for days. On the seventh day, he finally departed with his concubine. At nightfall, they struggled to find lodging but were welcomed by an old man. Then "some of the wicked men of the city" (Judges 19:22, NIV) came demanding that the Levite be handed over for homosexual acts. The old man instead offered his daughter and the Levite's concubine. Ultimately, only the concubine was given to them. She was raped throughout the night and found dead at the doorstep the next morning. The Levite cut her body into twelve pieces and sent them throughout Israel.



Perhaps the story was included to emphasize that wives or concubines who are unfaithful will ultimately face karmic retribution, even if their family tolerates them. Yet it is questionable what moral lesson such a grotesque tale could impart.

A similar account appears in Genesis 19, in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction. The townsmen demanded Lot surrender the two angelic visitors for sex. Lot instead offered his daughters to them. This reveals that homosexual acts and gang rape were not uncommon at that time. But one must ask: was it necessary to record such explicit tales in a book claimed to be holy?

Ezekiel 23:19–20 (NIV) says: "Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses."

Another explicit example appears in Song of Songs 5:4 (NIV): "My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him." In the KJV, the phrase "of the door" appears in italics, indicating it was likely added later. Following the bathing scene in verse 3, this describes a sexual encounter. Here, the "hole" is a metaphor for the female sexual organ.

It seems biblical scholars toned down such passages in translation because they were too graphic. But can we, with clear conscience, hand this book to children or acquaintances and tell them to read and follow it as written?



(At this point, illustrations are sometimes included in Bibles—perhaps to dilute readers' perception of how explicit these verses are.)

The Old Testament, by recording instances of children committing incest with their parents or concubines without punishment, sends the wrong message—that such acts carry no consequences. Even when curses are mentioned, they are inconsistently applied, and sometimes those guilty of heinous crimes are described as becoming more prosperous. What are we meant to learn from this?

Would we ever say that an R-rated pornographic film is wholesome just because it contains a few lines of advice for children or couples? Similarly, even if a book contains much moral instruction, if it also includes passages of extreme violence or explicit sexuality, would it be wise to recommend such a book to our children or friends?

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy, *The Laughing Jesus*. Three Rivers Press, 2005, p.46