

SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN THE BIBLE

A Brief Survey

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In one sense, the Bible says little or nothing about sex. Indeed, the word "sex" does not even occur in the Authorized Version. "Sex" is an abstraction and a generalization with which the biblical authors do not deal.

However, the kinds of activities and relationships which are covered by our word are mentioned and dealt with in the Bible with some measure of frankness and candor. Sexual intercourse is seen as an action that can be either good or bad, depending on circumstance.¹ Becoming "one flesh" is seen as the proper aim for man and woman (Gen. 2:24). Sexual desire is realistically recognized, and it is seen as sometimes a potentially dangerous force. Although our concept of "sexual perversions" is also a generalization for which the biblical languages evidently do not have equivalent words, there are sexual activities which are strictly forbidden, and some of these are sometimes thought of as "unnatural." Sexual activity is associated in the Bible with pleasure and procreation, both of which are seen as being good, in the proper context.

Together with elements of frankness and candor in the Bible, however, there are also other elements of reticence and circumlocution, seen in some of the euphemisms for sexual intercourse and sexual organs. Some of the more familiar euphemisms for the act of sexual intercourse are "to know," "to lie with," "to go in to," and "to uncover the nakedness of." The male sexual organ is sometimes referred to as "flesh," "feet," or "thigh" ("loin").²

One important influence on the attitude of the ancient Israelites was the role of sex in the pagan cults with which the religion of Yahweh was in competition. Canaanite religion was generally oriented to nature, and one of its chief concerns was fertility—of the fields, of the flocks, and of people. In Canaanite mythological thought, this fertility was seen as resulting from intercourse between gods and goddesses. Sacred prostitution (both heterosexual and homosexual) was a kind of sympathetic magic by which divine intercourse was encour-

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¹C. R. Taber, "Sex, Sexual Behavior," *IDBS*, 817 ff., gives a well balanced brief presentation of the entire subject. He describes OT ambivalence on the subject as being "like the gingerly caution with which one handles a dangerous explosive."

²Examples given by O. J. Baab, "Sex, Sexual Behavior," 3, *IDB*, 4:298 f.

aged. There was, then, in Canaanite religion what might be called a "theology of sex" which the Yahwists of Israel strongly opposed.

Marriage and the family were important to the ancient Israelites. This is related to a strong desire for children, especially sons. There seems to have been a general assumption that everyone ought to be married, so that Jeremiah had to explain why he was not married (Jer. 16:1 ff.).³ Though marriage is most frequently monogamous, polygamy (i.e., polygyny) is seen in the time of the patriarchs. From the time of the kingdom, this appears to be limited to kings. Divorce was permitted to men by the law (Dt. 24:1 ff.), though one of the prophets saw that practice as a moral abuse (Mal. 2:13 ff.).

Prostitution⁴ is referred to in the OT in several kinds of contexts. Cult prostitution is mentioned more often than common prostitution. Sometimes prostitution is mentioned in a context which has no clear moral evaluation. For example, in the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38), Judah's fault was that he did not give his youngest son Shelah to beget a child to his deceased older brother according to the custom of "levirate" marriage (Dt. 25:5 ff.), not that Judah, a widower, had intercourse with a prostitute. Tamar's fault was adultery, since she was considered to be betrothed to Shelah. Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, is portrayed as a heroine for her protection of Israelite spies, and there is no moralistic disparagement of her for being a harlot (Josh. 2). On the other hand, harlotry is most commonly thought of as at least vaguely disreputable, and some kind of moral or ceremonial disparagement is implied in the sanctions against a priest's daughter's becoming a harlot (Lev. 21:9), or a priest's marrying a harlot (21:14), or an Israelite's making his daughter a harlot (19:29). Cult prostitution is strictly prohibited (Dt. 23:17). Indeed, in some of the prophets, notably Hosea and Jeremiah, harlotry becomes (appropriately, in the light of Canaanite practice of cult prostitution) a kind of metaphor for idolatry and the worship of foreign gods. Harlots and "strange women" appear rather prominently in the book of Proverbs, but the considerations related to the advice to avoid them seem to be more those of prudence and expediency than of morality as we would more commonly understand it.

In the laws of the OT there are, as noted, strict prohibitions of some kinds of sexual activity. These include adultery (intercourse between a man and another man's wife or betrothed), incest (Lev. 18:6 ff.), bestiality (Lev. 18:23), and male homosexual intercourse (Lev. 18:22). Female homosexual intercourse is not mentioned in

³Cf. O. J. Baab, "Marriage," 5, *IDB*, 3:286.

⁴Cf. O. J. Baab, "Prostitution," *IDB*, 3:931 ff.

the OT, but once in the NT is classed with other sexual transgressions (Rom. 1:26). Rape of an unmarried, unbetrothed woman was not punishable, but the man had to marry her, and could not later divorce her (Dt. 22:28 f.). Similarly, seduction was not punishable, except that the man had to pay the "marriage present," and the father could refuse to give her to him as a wife (Ex. 22:16 f.). Transvestitism was prohibited (Dt. 22:5). Nakedness was generally thought of as shameful,⁵ after the original loss of innocence (Gen. 2:25). Isaiah, however, is depicted as going naked for three years as a token of forthcoming captivity (Isa. 20).

Legislation on sexual matters is generally more severe on women, and depreciatory of women, though sometimes the severity is equal in the prescription of capital punishment (Lev. 20:10). Pre-marital virginity of women is at a high premium (Dt. 22:13 ff.; though Lev. 21:14 and the example of Hosea imply that a non-priest might marry a harlot), but this concern does not extend to men. The birth of a daughter brought twice as long a period of uncleanness for the mother as the birth of a son (Lev. 12:2 ff.).⁶ Adultery is thought of consistently as an offense against a man, never against a woman. One strange law deals with a situation in which a man suspects his wife of adultery. The legal prescription is a kind of ordeal for the woman: she must drink water into which sweepings of the sanctuary have been mixed. Her physical reaction to this signifies her innocence or guilt (Num. 5:11 ff.).

The NT is at least as strict in its norms of sexual behavior as the OT. 1 Cor. 5-6 provides evidence that Paul had difficulty imposing these on some gentile believers. In some areas, the NT is more restrictive than the OT. Prostitution is uniformly disapproved (though Jesus is depicted in Mt. 21:31 f. as saying that harlots enter the kingdom before the chief priests and elders to whom he was speaking). Monogamy is tacitly assumed. Divorce is much more limited, if not entirely forbidden (Mk. 10:11 f.; Mt. 19:9). "Fornication," which later came to designate sexual intercourse between unmarried persons, appears to refer to any heterosexual intercourse outside marriage.

Jesus is pictured as saying very little about sex, but one saying indicates that at the resurrection there will be no marriage, but people will be "like angels" (Mk. 12:25).

In 1 Cor. 7, Paul discusses the advisability of marriage. A careful reading of this chapter indicates that Paul is here defending the legitimacy of marriage against some Corinthian Christians who disap-

⁵O. J. Baab, "Sex," 4, *IDB*, 4:299.

⁶For further examples of discrimination, see Lev. 27:1 ff. and 30:2 ff.

proved all sexual intercourse. There has been some disagreement about whom his argument is directed against. It seems likely that in his preaching in Corinth, Paul had had to emphasize very strongly that some attitudes and actions relating to sex were unacceptable. Some of his hearers had evidently been "overconverted" to the point of rejecting sexual activity altogether. In this chapter, then, Paul gently corrects that overreaction, firmly asserting the legitimacy of marriage and sexual intercourse. A similar rejection of the requirement of celibacy is found in one of the Pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 4:3), which is commonly seen as a reaction against Gnosticism. At the same time, Paul feels that those who (like him) have the gift of continence (7:7) should use it for a more single-minded service to the Lord (7:32 ff.), especially in view of the urgency implied by the shortness of time before the Lord's return (7:26, 29).⁷ This cautious recommendation of celibacy may have some relation to the words attributed to Jesus about those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:12).

In speaking of "gender" in the Bible, we are clearly speaking primarily of the feminine gender, and the role of women. The Bible is a man's book, written chiefly if not exclusively by men, and dealing much more prominently with men than with women.

It is a common observation that in the opening chapters of Genesis we have two creation stories.⁸ These stories differ somewhat in their understanding of man and woman. In the former story, which gives the six-day framework of creation, it is said that "God created the *adam* (human) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (1:27). The implication is that both maleness and femaleness represent the image of God. In the latter (though probably chronologically earlier) story, however, God first created only one *adam*. God saw that it was not good for the *adam* to be alone, and created the various kinds of animals, but none of them was a "helper fit for him." God then created woman from one of his ribs to be his companion. It was only then that the distinction between man (*ish*) and woman (*ishshah*) came about. Translations differ on the question of when *adam* changes from meaning

⁷Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 40 (1972), 297, argues that Paul's reasoning here is related not to a sense of the imminent advent, but rather to primary concern for the larger eschatological community of the Church as against the smaller community of the family.

⁸I am much indebted in this section to the orderly and detailed material presented by Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (N.Y., Simon and Schuster, 1974), 41-88. John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed, The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) provides a corrective for exaggerating woman's subordinate status in the OT, sometimes overstating his case.

simply "man" (human) to the personal name Adam. Eve appears to have taken the initiative in deciding to eat of the forbidden tree, and her leadership was followed by Adam. The subsequent subordination of woman to man is seen as being a part of the curse that was put on her for her disobedience to God, just as the man was cursed with the necessity of eating his bread in the sweat of his face.

When we look at the laws of the OT, it is immediately clear that the apodictic laws (thou shalt, thou shalt not) are addressed to males. Sometimes when "the people" are spoken of, males are meant; women are not so much excluded as ignored. The family has a place of centrality in the legal system. Adultery was seen as an act of theft on the part of the adulterer, and of rejection of authority on the part of the adulteress. A few passages seem almost to classify a man's wife with his chattel property, but others make the distinction clear. A woman was, nevertheless, normally under the authority of a man—first her father, then her husband.⁹ Divorce was the prerogative of the husband. The grounds for divorce are ambiguous, and these were the subject of later rabbinic discussion. The law says that if the wife "finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her" (Dt. 24:1), a husband may divorce her. Presumably this "indecency" originally meant something short of adultery, as the penalty for that was death. Inheritance was always through male heirs if there were any, and a story is told of a special instance in which daughters could inherit, only because there were no sons (Num. 27:1 ff.). Widowhood was thought of as a disgrace, perhaps connected with punishment for sin.¹⁰ Widows, having no reliable source of protection and support, were evidently sometimes abused; some of the prophets felt obliged to utter injunctions and exhortation to kindness to widows. As a mother, a woman had considerable authority,¹¹ and a mother of a *son* sometimes attained a status comparable to that of a man.

In the narratives of the OT, there are some women who stand out prominently. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, in some measure shared leadership with them. Deborah was a judge of Israel who moved Barak to a military expedition against the Canaanites. Ruth, a woman of Moab, was rewarded for her loyalty to her mother-in-law and her piety to Yahweh. Esther was a heroine who saved her people from annihilation. Jezebel, though perceived as wicked, was a power to be reckoned with, and evidently was dominant over her husband Ahab. Other women occupy a second rank of prominence: Jael, who

⁹Cf. O. J. Baab, "Marriage," 1b, *IDB*, 3:279 f.

¹⁰Cf. O. J. Baab, "Widow," *IDB*, 4:842.

¹¹O. J. Baab "Family," 3b, *IDB*, 2:239.

slew the Canaanite general Sisera; Rahab, who aided the Israelite spies in Jericho; Bathsheba, who helped secure the royal succession for her son Solomon; Huldah the prophetess, who authenticated the book of the law found in the temple; and the wise women of Tekoa and Abel. Several women are especially remembered as mothers: Rizpah, who protected the bodies of her executed sons from the carrion-eaters (a role similar to that of Antigone in Greek tradition); the harlot who would not permit Solomon to divide her child between her and the mother of a dead child; and Sisera's mother, whom Deborah and Barak visualized as waiting for the return of her victorious son.

In the wisdom literature of the OT, still other images of woman appear. Proverbs 31 describes the ideal wife, who industriously involves herself in every manner of business and good works, providing for her family and enabling her husband to sit among the elders in the gate. Some other women in Proverbs, however, are pictured in far less complimentary way: the contentious woman (27:15), the loose woman (5:3), the adventuress (6:24), and especially the adultress (7:10 ff.). In the Song of Songs, however, there appears to be a large measure of equality and reciprocity between the lovers.

There are traces in the OT of feminine attributes of God. The root *rhm* relates both to the womb and to the mercy that is frequently attributed to God. It has been suggested that one of the divine names associated with the patriarchs, El Shaddai, may be related to the Hebrew word for breasts. In addition, there are a few scattered passages which use clearly feminine terminology in reference to God. Thus, God is said not only to beget his people, but to give them birth (Dt. 32:18). God cries out like a woman in travail (Isa. 42:14). "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you" (Isa. 66:13).¹²

What was the historical development in ancient Israel of attitudes toward women? Phyllis Trible makes the case that "before the sixth century B.C., a depatriarchalizing principle was prominently at work in the Hebrew faith,"¹³ but subsequent writers moved in a different direction. This interpretation puts many of the data into an understandable framework.

When we come to the NT, we are in a social and cultural context in which the rabbinic injunction, "Talk not much with a woman" (*Aboth* 1:5), cautioned against a man's letting himself be deflected from his central business, the study of Torah. Jesus, however, is pictured as talking with women rather often. The Gospel of Luke, which

¹²On female images of God in the OT, see Phyllis Trible, "God. Nature of, in the OT," *IDBS*, 368 f.

¹³Phyllis Trible, "Woman in the OT," *IDBS*, 966. For a fuller treatment, see her "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973), 30 ff.

says more about Jesus' association with women than the other Gospels do,¹⁴ names several women who accompanied him and his disciples and "provided for them out of their means" (8:3). This statement is made immediately after the story of Jesus' words of forgiveness to the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36 ff.). Jesus' conversation with Mary and Martha indicates that Mary's concern for discipleship was more appropriate than Martha's preoccupation with household chores (10:41 f.). All three synoptic Gospels name women who were present, at a distance, at Jesus' crucifixion, and John says that it was Mary Magdalene (Matthew adds another Mary) to whom the risen Jesus first appeared. The Gospel of John relates an extended conversation with a Samaritan woman (4:7 ff.), and remarks that the disciples were astonished that he was talking with a woman (4:27).¹⁵ The imagery in Jesus' teaching not infrequently dealt with woman, in such ordinary situations as making bread (Mt. 13:33) and searching the house for a lost coin (Lk. 15:8 ff.). When Jesus laments over the faithlessness of Jerusalem, he exclaims, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Mt. 23:37). His strictures against divorce (Mk. 10:11 f., etc.) are best understood in terms of concern for the plight of a divorced woman. All this tends to suggest that Jesus' attitudes toward women varied significantly from the conventional attitudes of his culture.

In the book of Acts, we find women significantly prominent in the early Christian movement. When Saul was persecuting those of the Way, it is specified that he sought to arrest both men and women (9:2). Among women who are specifically named in Acts are Lydia, Priscilla, Mary the mother of John Mark, and Tabitha. The fact that Priscilla is sometimes named before her husband Aquila, both in Acts (18:18, 26) and by Paul (Rom. 16:3), suggests she may have been the more dominant member of that pair. The statement that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied (21:8 f.) shows that prominent charisma was shared by both men and women.¹⁶

It is in the letters of Paul that we find some of the more interesting and controversial passages relating to our subject. It is frequently supposed that he had a particularly disparaging view of women. The evidence, however, does not support this view. 1 Cor. 7, as already

¹⁴Constance Parvey, "The Theology and Leadership of Women in the NT," *Religion and Sexism*, 138 ff., elaborates the feminist orientation of Luke.

¹⁵On John, see Raymond E. Brown, "Role of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies*, 36 (1975), 688 ff.

¹⁶Parvey, 142 ff., emphasizes the prominence and leadership of women in Acts. Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman: Revisited," *JAAR* (1974), 535 f., suggests that egalitarianism is characteristic of new religious sects.

noted, is basically a defense of marriage and of sexual intercourse within marriage. What is most notable is that in the course of this discussion, Paul evenhandedly applies everything to both men and women. The principle of mutuality is meticulously spelled out repeatedly (7:2, 3, 4, 10 f., 12 f., 14, etc.).

In 1 Cor. 11, in the somewhat curious passage about head covering, it appears that Paul perceives the relation of women to men as one of subordination, but also one of full interdependence.¹⁷ If this is correct, the concept of subordination is certainly not original with Paul, but is a part of the culture which he inherited. It is related in his mind to the account of creation in Genesis. However, it is not certain that when Paul says that the "head" (*kephale*) of a woman is man (11:3: "her husband," RSV is an uncertain interpretation) he is speaking of authority; it is probable that this refers rather to origin or source, as elaborated in 11:8.¹⁸

Perhaps the passage that has received the most unfavorable attention in this regard is the injunction in 1 Cor. 14:34, that "the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says." Some have speculated that this is an interpolation, partly because it appears contrary to the idea of women prophesying, a practice which is recognized in chap. 11.¹⁹ However, even if the passage is genuine, the context in chap. 14 is one which emphasizes orderliness in the Christian assembly. If this passage refers specifically to disruptive questions (which 14:35 implies),²⁰ which may have been a very specific and particular problem,²¹ then the overall impression of anti-feminism is mitigated.

The single passage in Paul's letters which most strongly implies equality between men and women is Gal. 3:28, which RSV translates,

¹⁷Scroggs, *JAAR* 40 (1972), 297 ff., however, argues quite the reverse. He goes as far as to state (283) that Paul is "the only certain and consistent spokesman for the liberation and equality of women in the New Testament." Elaine H. Pagels, "Paul and Woman: a Response to Recent Discussion," *JAAR* 42 (1974), 538 ff., gives reasons for demurring from this interpretation.

¹⁸Scroggs, "Woman in the NT," 2b, *IDBS*, 967; also *JAAR* 40 (1972), 298, n. 41. Wm. O. Walker, Jr., "I Corinthians 11:2-6 and Paul's Views Regarding Women," *JBL* 94 (1975), 94 ff., argues that 11:2-16 is a non-Pauline interpolation. His conclusion that this passage, as well as the Pastorals, Ephesians, Colossians and 1 Cor. 14:34 f., is not from Paul almost suggests that there was a post-Pauline conspiracy to make him appear anti-feminist.

¹⁹Walker, 95, n. 6. It is interesting to observe that Walker's argument for the inauthenticity of 11:2-16 removes one of the chief arguments for the inauthenticity of 14:34 f.

²⁰Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 30.

²¹Cf. Parvey, 128, who sees much of what Paul says in I Cor. 11 and 14 as reaction against Gnostic excesses.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Krister Stendahl, who refers to this passage as a "breakthrough,"²² points out that a more accurate translation is "there is no 'male and female.'" It is evidently a quotation from Gen. 1:27: "male and female he created them." In Christ Jesus, all three distinctions are broken down. A similar view is reflected in another NT writing, 1 Peter 3:7, which refers to men and women as "joint heirs of the grace of life."

Paul's references and greetings to specific women in his letters (e.g., six of the greetings in Rom. 16 are to women) make no implication whatever of their inferiority or subordination.²³

The "Haustafeln" (i.e., lists of duties of various members of the household) of the disputedly Pauline letters to the Colossians (3:18 ff.) and Ephesians (5:22 ff.) counsel the submission of wives. The latter, in making the parallel between marriage and the relation of Christ to the Church, specially emphasizes the husband's love.

In the Pastoral epistles, 1 Tim. 2:11 ff. emphasizes the subordination of women, remarking that they can be saved by motherhood. Constance Parvey thinks this "hardening of attitudes" was "related to the realization that the end times were not soon to come," and suggests further that it may be a reaction against the Gnostic sexual egalitarianism.²⁴

After this brief survey of some of the more notable passages dealing with the themes of sexuality and gender in the Bible, where does all this leave us? It seems to leave us with a mixed bag. There appears to be no uniform biblical attitude on these matters, but rather a variety and a development of attitudes. Biblical writers and biblical characters lived within specific cultural contexts. Some of the specific attitudes reflected are ones which many modern people do not find congenial. Some of them, however, seen within their contexts, suggest directions of development which are more congenial. As in other matters, we ought to be careful both to avoid projecting our own attitudes onto historical characters and also to avoid evaluating historical characters as though they were living in our 20th-century cultural context.

²²Stendahl, 32.

²³Cf. Scroggs, *JAAAR* 40 (1972), 293 f.

²⁴Parvey, 136.

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