Chapter 1

The Bible and Sex

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For centuries Christians have argued about sex. The Bible figures prominently in this history of argument, perhaps more prominently than anything else in Christian traditions. Across the generations, Christians have cited biblical texts to endorse or prohibit various sexual behaviors, argued with those same texts, and attempted to place them within broader theological frameworks. In the history of Christian theology, biblical texts are summoned as truth, dismissed as irrelevant, cited in isolation, and woven together in broad tapestries. "What does the Bible say about sex?" many Christians ask. This seemingly simple question yields anything but a simple answer. The Bible says many sometimes conflicting things about sex, so in some regards this is the wrong question to be asking. Christians ought first ask, "What is the character of the book we call Scripture?" Attention to that question must precede discussion of the often thorny subject of the Bible and sex. With that in mind, this chapter surveys three approaches to the Bible and sex that

broadly frame current debates: (1) an approach that focuses on the explicitly "sexual texts" and sees the Bible as a guidebook on sex; (2) an approach that deems the Bible an insufficient, outmoded, and even oppressive text on many issues, including sexuality, in the contemporary age; and (3) an approach, which I advocate, that views Scripture as itself a narrative of desire, situating sexuality as one moment within other expressions of relationship.

The Bible as a Guidebook for Sexual Behavior

Perhaps the most common way of reading the Bible with regard to sex is to view it as a guide for sexual behavior. The Bible, in this view, offers clear prohibitions of specific sexual behaviors and might be described as a "how-not-to" manual, though it also provides some general principles for conceiving "godly" sex. One assumption about sex in this approach is that sex is a gift in the proper context and dangerous in the wrong context. One of the fundamental guides for godly sex occurs near the beginning of the biblical canon, in the creation stories. "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:24-25). Here, "one flesh" is taken both as a metaphor for the nuptial covenant and for the intertwining of bodies in sex as the seal of that covenant. Evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz offers one interpretation of this text, with an eye to sex in marriage: "Whenever the couple engages in sexual intercourse they are reaffirming the pledge made on their wedding day and are giving visual representation of the content of that vow."[1] The model of Adam and Eve becomes the pattern for rightly ordered sex: without shame, with restraint, shared with one other person (of the opposite sex) in marriage. Whatever departs from this pattern *ipso facto* is questionable. What is cause for the cry of elation within marriage, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23), is cause for lamentation anywhere else.

Once this norm—marriage between a man and a woman—has been established for godly sex, the sexual prohibitions within the Bible appear to make sense. Sex that occurs outside of marriage must be viewed as suspect, not merely because it undermines the marital covenant but because it also does injury to the body of Christ—that is, the extended Christian community of which the couple is a part. Paul's vice lists enumerate activities that inflict such injury. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul admonishes his readers for abusing the Lord's Supper in ways that marginalize the poor (11:17-34) and for engaging in power struggles (1:10-17). He also specifically condemns a man for living with his father's wife (5:1). This specific instance of illicit

sex Paul names *porneia*, generally translated as "fornication" or "sexual immorality" in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but a term that Paul himself never clearly defines.[2] Paul often constructs vice lists related to *porneia*. For readers who assume that Paul offers specific rules for sex in this and other passages, *porneia* has come to mean nearly any sexual behavior other than penile-vaginal intercourse within marriage: masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, sex practiced with inordinate passion or desire.[3] One problem with the understanding of these vice lists as a guide is that it is difficult to discern what Paul is actually condemning. In 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions *porneia* in reference to prostitution and illicit marriages; in Galatians 5:19 he seems to use it more generally, without connection to specific sexual behaviors. This vagueness has allowed each generation to redefine the meaning of *porneia* to be whatever departs from the supposedly self-evident mores of each era. Even the common, specific definition of fornication as "sexual intercourse between unmarried persons" admits of exceptions in most contemporary Christian ethics. As Anglican systematic theologian John Macquarrie writes, "the presence of a measure of commitment makes it undesirable to apply the word 'fornication' indiscriminately," particularly to persons in a "stable relationship."[4] Yesterday's fornication, in short, often becomes today's sexual norm.

The chief prohibition that often comes to the fore in the "guidebook" approach to sex is the condemnation of homosexuality, supposedly another instance of *porneia* that violates the conditions of godly sex. According to this view, the holiness codes of the Hebrew Bible can be applied to contemporary society. Leviticus 18, for example, is devoted exclusively to sexual holiness, prohibiting various degrees of incest, sex with women during menstruation, adultery, bestiality, and the oft-cited: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (v. 22). In Leviticus 20, this command is reiterated, this time with the stipulation that those who commit such acts shall be put to death (v. 13). These two verses are the only times the phrase, translated more literally as "the lying down of a woman," occurs in the entire Hebrew Bible. They appear within long lists of prohibitions meant to distinguish Israel's religious practice from other Near Eastern tribes. Certain behaviors, and the avoidance of certain behaviors, distinguish these people of the covenant from all others: from clothing, to diet, to rules for appropriate sacrifice. Prohibition of specific sexual behaviors occurs in the midst of these various other prohibitions. For the guidebook approach to reading Scripture, this context and concern are of little consequence, as the behaviors prohib-

ited for Israel are taken as valid for our time as well. Hence, conservative Presbyterian theologian Robert Gagnon can write that anal intercourse

> constitutes a conscious denial of the complementarity of male and female found not least in the fittedness (anatomical, physiological, and procreative) of the male penis and the female vaginal receptacle by attempting anal intercourse (or other forms of sexual intercourse) with another man. Anal sex not only confuses gender, it confuses the function of the anus as a cavity for expelling excrement, not receiving sperm. . . . For one man to "lie with" another man in the manner that men normally "lie with" a woman was to defile the latter's masculine stamp, impressed by God and evident in both the visible sexual complementarity of male and female and in the sacred lore of creation.[5]

The "lying down of a woman," for Gagnon, means any male-male sexual intercourse, whether in the context of a committed partnership or in the midst of an orgy. Gagnon's approach, moreover, assumes to know what "the lying down of a woman" means: it means gay sex, which constitutes a violation of the created order. However, such extrapolation avoids the specificity of the text. Strictly speaking, even if one were to accept the correlation between the Levitical prohibition and gay sex, the prohibition would only extend to the partner who penetrates the other in instances of male-male anal intercourse.[6]

Contemporary rule-based understandings of sex, however, do not simply appeal to Levitical holiness codes. They often claim a broader framework for condemning homosexuality in Romans 1–3. Embedded in a sweeping indictment of Jew and Gentile are these phrases: "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Rom. 1:26-27). Among all scriptural references to same-sex acts, this is the only one that includes women. Again, determining what sexual behaviors Paul condemns here is difficult: temple prostitution? ritual sex? pederasty? While scholars have argued incessantly about what kinds of behavior are implied, Paul seems to be rather unconcerned with the specifics. His chief concern is idolatry, exchanging the glory of God for other images, serving "the creature rather than the Creator" (v. 24). Idolatry caused God to give the people up "to degrading passions" (v. 25). Despite the claims of

contemporary rule-based theologies of sex, the condemnation is not against same-sex activity but idolatry that brings forth disorder in the body. This focus on idolatry is something that a rule-based approach tends to obscure.

The rule-based approach tends to enumerate extensive prohibitions. In the rightly ordered sexual universe, one simply says "no" to prostitution and homosexuality; extramarital and premarital sex; fornication and too much passion within marriage; bestiality and masturbation. Though most rule-based approaches distinguish between many sexual behaviors, with some practices being more serious violations of rules than others, the norm against which all behaviors are measured is a marriage between one man and one woman. As evangelical theologian Lauren Winner puts it, "Abstinence before marriage, and fidelity within marriage; any other kind of sex is embodied apostasy."[7]

To summarize the problems with the rule-based approach to the Bible and sex: passages that seem to talk about sex, or have come to mean sexual subjects, are primarily devoted to other matters. Romans 1–2, which routinely gets cited in condemnations of homosexuality, is instead concerned with demonstrating the need for the gospel; Sodom and Gomorrah, another oft-cited text (Gen. 19:1-29), is about hospitality and the denial of hospitality, not sex. Leviticus is concerned with idolatry first and only derivatively with sexual behaviors that are evidence of idolatry. Only recently have the so-called sexual meanings of these texts come to the fore. All these factors have led some to throw up their hands when it comes to the Bible and sex. Mark Jordan, for example, states this frustration baldly: "There are, in short, no self-evident lists of biblical passages about sexual matters."[8]

The Bible as Insufficient, Outmoded, or Oppressive on Sexuality

Not only do some contemporary theologians deny that the Bible gives self-evident rules about sex, they furthermore argue that the Bible has problematic aspects that make it an insufficient, outmoded, or oppressive guide to sexual matters. From this perspective, the Bible must be read with a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding sex and sexuality. One glaring problem is the Bible's patriarchal assumptions. Take the paradigm of marriage as an example. The commandment against coveting a neighbor's wife (note the gender)—and by implication, the commandment against adultery—is couched in the language of property. Adultery becomes in this context less an affront to marriage than to the property rights of the male possessor: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male

or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exod. 20:17). Scriptural rules of sexual behavior, moreover, tend to implicate women more than men. Some of the Pastoral Epistles are especially evident of this tendency, singling out younger widows as particularly prone to sins of the flesh: "But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge" (1 Tim. 5:11-12). The author here is urging his audience not to have younger widows make vows of perpetual chastity; instead he urges that they remarry. Women are singled out in this list as if they are more prone to sexual vice than men.

Given this perspective, it is not surprising that the pastoral epistles also suggest that women are more likely to be swayed by false teaching. For example, 2 Timothy refers to "silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (3:6b-7). This correlation of women as more susceptible to sin is by no means restricted to Deutero-Pauline literature.[9] In 1 Peter, husbands are to "show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life" (3:7). Texts like these pepper the New Testament and have affected many modern approaches to gender, sexuality, and marriage. In the eyes of some who would use these texts to frame an understanding of theology and sex, the approach is straightforward: be wary of sex, and be particularly wary of women who display their sexuality openly.

The majority voices in Scripture, in other words, assume male privilege and the secondary status of women. Within the broad swath of biblical narrative, women are blamed for sin (Gen. 3:12; 1 Tim. 2:12-15), enjoined to remain silent in assembly (1 Cor. 14:34), and assumed to belong to their husbands in a manner analogous to property (Exod. 20:17). More glaringly, the trope of the loose woman or harlot is used throughout Hebrew Bible and the New Testament to epitomize unfaithfulness, whether the whore of Hosea (chaps. 2–4), who is stripped naked and exposed, or the whore of Babylon who is burned and devoured (Rev. 17:16).

Even the more benignly sexual texts of the New Testament—such as the paeans for marriage—are soaked in patriarchy. In the Deutero-Pauline Epistles patriarchy is assumed and celebrated. Ephesians, for example, enjoins wives to be subject to their husbands, comparing a husband's "headship" to Christ who is "head of the church" (Eph. 5:22-23). Husbands, by contrast, are enjoined to love their wives, "as Christ loved the church" (Eph. 5:25). Subjection, in this view, is a decidedly one-way street (see Col. 3:18-19). Where

mutual submission to one another is encouraged, marriage is connected to slavery and the problematic assumption of "owning" another person: "For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Cor. 7:4). It is no coincidence that the exhortations to husbands and wives in Deutero-Pauline literature occur near injunctions toward slaves and masters. Paul simply makes this connection even more explicit—marriage itself is a kind of mutual slavery, by which one's bodily rights are given over to another.

For some contemporary theologians, texts with these patriarchal and hierarchical assumptions about women and sex cannot be taken at face value as guides for godly sex because the rules they appear to offer no longer apply. The connections between male headship, slavery, and even mutual submission, make the biblical framework for marriage nearly irredeemable:

> The institution of slavery with its attendant violence and injustice is accepted as part of the general world-view of the New Testament. The point to carry forward is that the theology of marriage is so integrated into the institution of slavery and the hierarchical order of social relations which slavery services that, once slavery has been repudiated by Christianity (after nineteen centuries), the theology of marriage based upon it must also be repudiated.[10]

Simply put, use of the Bible alone in constructing a view of sex and marriage is naïve and anachronistic at best, and dangerous at worst. It leads either to ignoring the patriarchal and hierarchical context in which these texts arise or to perpetuating these patterns without end. Reading the Bible literally and applying it for today "oppresses its victims and it undermines the gospel."[11]

In light of these difficulties, some feminist theologians argue that one needs to read against Scripture in the name of a more liberating understanding of sex. Anne Bathurst Gilson claims that the Christian tendency to prize disinterested agape at the expense of eros infects the history of the church and the canon itself. Better, in the tradition's eyes, to love another selflessly than to affirm the self (and other) through eros. Better to love without too much passion than to desire. Gilson claims that this preference for *agape* over eros reaps rotten fruit that we must cast aside, whether found in Scripture or elsewhere. Biblical prohibitions of specific sexual behaviors, for example, create a culture of compulsory heterosexuality among Christians, "the belief that the one-man, one-woman, one-flesh relationship in

the context of lifelong marriage is not only God-given but God-*demanded*."[12] So entrenched is this belief within Christianity that the church generally abhors other expressions of sexual relationships. In the face of Scriptures that demean women and even foster violence against nonheterosexual persons, Gilson argues for the development of an erotic faith, a faith articulated less in scriptural narratives than it is in the power of an immanent God: "God is the power of eros, affirming bodyselves, yearning with us away from eroticized violence and into embodied justice and erotic mutuality. . . . God as the power of eros is She who is with us, who is moved and changed and touched by and with us."[13] In this vision, the Bible appears only on the margins, often as a foil to erotic justice.

The Bible as a Narrative of Desire

Another approach to the Bible focuses on reading it as what I am calling a narrative of desire. From start to finish, the Bible expresses relationships: of creation's relationship with God, of human persons' relationships with one another; of God's election of a nation for particular relationship with God in covenant and of the extension of that covenant to the world in Jesus Christ. As the Bible narrates these relationships, which are intimations of grace and incidents of sin, the reader glimpses divine desire that makes us participants in desire. Like a lover who longs for consummation, God desires human fulfillment in communion with God and one another. Read as a narrative of desire, the Bible's supposedly nonsexual texts have much to say about sex.

The first glimpse of God's desire occurs in the Genesis creation stories. The desire to create in the first narrative stems from God's delight, illustrated in the frequent recurrence of the phrase, "God saw that it was good," and the final phrase, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen. 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Everything in creation is contingent, made for relationship with God and the rest of creation. God creates not out of lack but out of the desire for others to be, a desire that is fulfilled by word and breath. The breath of God that stirs all to life in creation breathes through human beings. The opening word of divine desire in the Bible, then, can become the basis for reframing some contemporary understandings of desire. Most accounts of desire, especially sexual desire, conceive it as stemming from an internal hunger or emptiness, an absence that can only be filled by clinging to another to make one whole. This opening biblical account of desire, however, proceeds from fullness to fullness: "Creativity bespeaks fullness that overflows, that wants to give of its resources to express itself. The paradigm case is once again the creation of the world. As God is portrayed in

the Hebrew Bible and Christian theology, God does not lack. The divine is in need of nothing. Yet God desires to create the world and desires to make it beautiful."[14] God desires out of abundance and creates in order to share that abundance with all that is.

In the second creation story, God's desire becomes intimately physical, as God forms the man from the dust of the ground and breathes into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). As human beings speak for the first time, they become partakers of God's desire, a desire expressed in the longing for companionship with another. After the creation of a partner, the man's exclamation in the garden rings with the satisfaction of desire and desire's intensification in sex, the sharing and mingling of flesh: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). The approach of a companion does not extinguish desire but makes it flourish in togetherness.

Genesis also narrates the distortion of desire. Desire becomes a hollow shell of itself when it proceeds out of perceived lack, when one seeks to possess someone or something for oneself alone, apart from God. If divine desire proceeds from abundance and wanting to share in abundance, so that others might flourish, desire's shadow self stems from craving for possession. The first instance of this distortion is the multifaceted story of the tree, the serpent, and the first humans. Adam's and Eve's failure is not the desire for knowledge, not the breaking of a divinely given rule, but their perception that the tree has something that they lack which they simply must have for themselves: knowledge of good and evil apart from God. Their culpability is believing the serpent's lie that God wants to withhold something good from them. The "fall," read thus, is not about disobedience or the seeking of knowledge but about Adam's and Eve's refusal to partake in the abundance of the garden that allows desire to flourish, falsely believing that they can obtain a scarce resource outside God's provision by holding it and keeping it for themselves. Thus, the fruit of the tree becomes all the more desirable, a "delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6), that can only be satisfied by hoarding it. Almost as soon as human beings become participants in God's desire, they begin to think that it is meant for possession, not sharing. In its twisted form, desire turns in upon itself and becomes insatiable: for the fruit, in the end, does not satisfy, but only leaves the two ashamed, seeking satisfaction elsewhere, in work that degenerates into toil, in unjust relations between man and woman (Gen. 3:16-17). Begun in fullness, desire soon devolves into scarcity in human hands.[15]

God's response to this twisting of desire in the fall is to seek relationship more intensely, to pledge fidelity to a particular people even amid

misdirected desire. God's expression of relationship takes the shape of a concrete pledge, or covenant, made to an otherwise insignificant people. Through this pledge to this people, God shows the world the fullness of God's desire. As the narration of covenant unfolds, God displays the shape of desire expressed in love and faithfulness to a covenant people and grief and anger when covenant is broken (Exod. 34:6-7; Num. 11:33; 32:13). Covenant becomes the shape of God's desire, the way God sinks an anchor of flesh into the world by making concrete promises to a particular people. Desire does not become diffuse but gathers intensity as it pledges fidelity and fruitfulness to a particular people. Covenant reveals a biophilic God, who desires that all might live into the fullness of relationship. Covenant teaches believers that they need not choose between a generalized love for the world and love for a particular beloved; rather, the two are inextricably intertwined. Reading divine desire in this way demonstrates that love for the world emerges in particular promises to a beloved.

The New Testament can be read as continuing the theme of desire, as it is personified in Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel narratives portray Jesus as both the object of desire, the focus of those who seek him, and also as one who desires, who will not cease desiring until all partake in life's fullness. First, Jesus is the focus of desire, the one in whom the human desire for God finds its incarnational home. When he calls the disciples, Jesus awakens in them a desire for him: "And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Mark 1:17-18). By his very presence and his word, Jesus kindles Simon's and Andrew's desire, so much that they drop their nets at the call. As Jesus finds them, their desire finds a home.

Jesus' touch also focuses desire. In most of the stories of healing, Jesus touches indiscriminately, without regard to a person's status in life. At times those who long for healing also reach out to touch him, as in the case of the unnamed hemorrhaging woman. She appears amid another crowd, approaches Jesus from behind, and touches the fringe of his cloak, saying, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well" (Matt. 9:20-21). The language here is delicate, as the fringe of a garment can also serve as a euphemism of sexual touch. The woman's bleeding, moreover, is related to her sexuality, because according to purity codes of the time, a blood flow that will not cease prevents her from sexual intimacy (Lev. 18:19). Her touch intimates sex and the desire to be healed. Jesus' touch imparts sexual healing and the gift of life. To touch him is to desire him.

This focus of desire does not evaporate in the resurrection accounts. Indeed, as the appearance narratives in John indicate, desire for Jesus' touch intensifies rather than abates after the crucifixion. Mary first mistakes the risen Christ for a gardener, then, upon having her eyes opened by hearing her name, also desires to touch Jesus' body. She reaches out in desire, longing to hold the risen rabbi, only to be told by him, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). Mary longs for the consummation of her heart's desire, communion with her "Lord" (John 20:13). This communion expresses the life and touch of the body, the longing to embrace and be embraced; yet, this embrace will not occur until others have been told the news and invited to embrace him. Even in this intimate resurrection appearance, others are invited to touch.

Thomas sees the risen Christ after Mary does, and his desire to touch achieves consummation. Thomas, aggrieved with desire, despondent over the loss of his beloved,[16] not only touches his beloved but also enters his body through the wound in Jesus' side. Jesus invites Thomas in: "Reach out your hand and put it in my side" (John 20:27). Thomas reaches out and enters Jesus, both literally and physically. Thomas now "knows" Jesus in the knowledge of flesh touching flesh. This account of the interpenetration of flesh, which carries more than a hint of sex, is an invitation into communion with Jesus. Desire seeks communion with nothing less than the body and blood of the risen Christ.

What Jesus offers Thomas he also offers to all who believe: to receive his body at the communion table. To penetrate Jesus' flesh is also to taste him and be penetrated by him. Seen in this way, the institution of the Lord's Supper is itself a narrative of desire. Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread. Later, the disciples (and all subsequent believers, by invitation) recall how Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives his life to all borne by desire. What Jesus establishes in this meal is also what he has established in his ministry and promises in God's coming reign. In this meal, Jesus both embodies and gives voice to desire: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:15-16). The meal is the fulfillment of Jesus' desire for communion, as well as the continual offer for communion with him in the taste of bread and wine. Taste, the intimate form of human touch, is a profound method of communion.[17] In the sacrament of Holy Communion, believers "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8) by taking Jesus into their mouths, as lovers taste one another. The meal is meant to express Christ's

desire for the believer, the believer's desire for him, and the desire for the whole earth to taste and see.

In the book of Revelation, desire displays a tortuous path. The book documents the distortion of desire: what happens when nations twist desire into greed, violence, and lust that make martyrs out of believers. This New Testament book depicts the nations' lust for power in the well-worn image of the "great whore" of Babylon (Rev. 17:1), the woman who personifies the Roman state and captures the gaze of the nations. As the whore becomes "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus," the kings of the earth who have grown rich in her empire commit "fornication with her and the merchants of the earth [grow] rich from the power of her luxury" (Rev. 17:6; 18:3). This luxury is short lived, however, as the whore's body is laid in waste. The imagery here is horrifying and inherently problematic: vice symbolized in a woman, who is ultimately consumed in the fire of God's judgment (Rev. 18:8-9). These "texts of terror"[18] locate vice upon a woman's body, products of a male gaze that glimpses greed, treachery, unfaithfulness, and lust in the "other." This trope has unleashed its share of disaster, from blaming rape on victims, to the commercial sexualization of girls at increasingly younger ages, to domestic and sexual abuse that can make the home the most dangerous place in society for women. Much of Revelation locates the distortion of desire upon the female body. The whore image, in short, may be irredeemable, suggesting that the idolatry that the author sought to shake is evident in his own interpretation of the female figure. Desire in Revelation displays a distorted and tortuous course.

The tortured weave of the Bible's closing pages hardly presents a template for desire's flourishing. The text's concern with purity yields anything but a pure description of desire, tainted as it is with misogyny and violence. Revelation is not an easy text to read, understand, or stomach. Readers should struggle with it, just as the early church struggled with whether to include it in the biblical canon and as feminist theology struggles with its meaning and legacy.[19] Yet a struggle with the text can yield surprising riches, for embedded amid its problematic imagery is another shape of desire and its flourishing, depicted in images of the renewal of heaven and earth and the re-creation of Jerusalem, the heavenly city. In this narrative, Christ comes as the bridegroom of humanity, and the faithful are commanded to prepare for that marriage (Revelation 21). When Babylon falls, the "Lamb" emerges to take the church as his bride, making a new covenant where death and tears no longer reign, where the home of God appears among mortals

(21:3-4, 9). Traditional as the marriage image is for expressing desire, it also accomplishes queer things for the saints of the church since it makes all the faithful, both male and female, brides of Christ. In anticipation of this marriage, moreover, the erotic permeates the text.[20] In a tradition that supposedly bears the seeds of the condemnation of homosexuality, the marriage outlined in Revelation—nuptials in which Christ takes the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, male and female, as his bride (19:7-8; 21:2)—betrays more than a hint of homoeroticism. In Revelation, if desire finds a home in marriage, that home is distinctly queer, for the male saints who populate the book of Revelation become, in the end, the brides of Christ.

Thus far, I have suggested biblical texts read as narratives of desire when the desire implied in those texts was at best oblique and at worst problematic. There is, however, one book of the Bible, the Song of Songs, that is redolent of sex. Even here, however, we need an interpretive lens. Throughout the ages this poem has been the subject of varying attention. Some Talmudic and kabbalistic traditions within Judaism deem it the "holy of holies" in the canon, "the erotic charge of the divine revelation of Torah to the people."[21] In medieval Christendom, the Song generated more commentaries than any other book among monastics. The twelfth-century Cistercian abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, preached eighty-six homilies on the Song and never finished his sermon series.[22] A sensual poem that lingers on the body, conveying touch and desire, the Song contains the voices of two unnamed lovers. The woman's voice, moreover, occupies significantly more space than the man's (a comparative rarity in patriarchal traditions) and speaks without reservation or restraint concerning sex. "O that his left arm were under my head, and his right hand embraced [made love to] me" (Song 2:6); "My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt" (5:4-5); "My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies" (2:16). In this text, bodies are relished and desired for their taste, compared with pomegranates, nectar, milk, and spices. These are bodies meant for lingering, touching, tasting, and feeding. Given the relative sexual explicitness of its cadences, it is no surprise that most Christian traditions have tended toward allegory: the primary theme is not the earthly love between lovers, their longing for one another, but the love between God and Israel (or God and the church). Otherwise the pomegranates appear too juicy.

While much of Christian tradition has interpreted the Song allegorically, much contemporary biblical interpretation focuses on the Song as a poem

of sexual love. I suggest that this discrepancy represents a false dichotomy between two interpretations. The Song expresses desire in its earthy and divine fullness, "*rightly* [taking] human sexual love as an analogue of the love between the Lord and Israel."[23] The Song neither impels us to gloss over the sex that is dripping from the pages nor encourages us to understand sex only as an end in itself. The point here is comparison: God's desire for humanity is like a lover's desire for the beloved, body and soul: a desire to touch, commune, be close, enter into, make room for, taste.

Christian traditions have had a notoriously difficult time considering the sexual alongside the divine. Earthly love for a beloved, in most cases, is construed as in some way inhibiting the soul's communion with God—hence Paul's lukewarm defense of marriage, "For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9)—and the church's fourth-century condemnation of those who taught the spiritual equality of marriage and celibacy.[24] Throughout much of the tradition, the implicit message is that desire for one's earthly lover obstructs one's desire for God, but the Song suggests otherwise. Without mentioning God at all, the imagery encourages the reader to linger over the beloved, to touch and to taste. This is the imagery of sex in all of its earthiness: the lovers on the pages of the Song are focused on one another, attend to one another, and delight in each other simply because they are present to each other. They know each other's skin as much as their own. This narration of knowing and being known, even without the mention of God's name, is an invitation to compare God's love with the beauty, pleasure, and taste of sex.

Here, in the most sexual text of the Bible, is an absence of the rules that have come to characterize much subsequent Christian discussion of sex. Instead what we find is desire, its intensification, and even its intoxication when focused on the beloved. Part of the Song's intent is, I suggest, to invite the reader to see and taste that desire. The desire of the Song is not an either/or—either my earthly beloved or God—but, rather, an exuberant both/and to the lover and to God as lover. The desire of the Song thus "spills out beyond the limits of the Song itself,"[25] finding expression in sex but not restricted to sex.

Conclusion

Controversy over sex has been a part of Christian traditions since the calling of the disciples. Amid this controversy, the church has turned routinely to its Scripture for guidance. The New Testament records some of these controversies: Paul's letters, for example, document arguments within the early

Christian communities over sexual behaviors. Though the particulars of these New Testament controversies have receded from light, the rhetoric that Paul employs to address them abides. Though the terms of controversy over sex have changed over the centuries (with marriage ultimately gaining a status as legitimate as celibacy), the controversy remains. Even though the amount of space devoted in the Bible to sexual behavior is relatively small—especially in comparison to economic behavior—Christians still turn to Scripture for clarity about sex in tumultuous times.

The default position for reading about sex in the Bible is to discern in the text rules to govern behavior. Though explicit rules about sex are generally absent even in Paul's enumeration of vices and *porneia*, the church has had no difficulty extrapolating rules from disparate texts: sex is made for the marital bond and procreation; all other sex is inherently sinful; sexual desire must be bridled even in marriage; homosexuality is wrong, period. Even today when arguments over sex surface in the churches—typically concerning homosexuality—the same texts surface: Paul's vice lists, Levitical purity codes, perhaps an allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah. Rules, rules, and more rules: Sex must fit within these rules and the church must clarify and police them. Yet, as I have attempted to show in this essay, the rule-based approach to Scripture is fraught with problems. First, it reads Scripture in a strikingly nonnarrative manner as a handbook for behavior. Conversely, when the Bible is read as a story of God and God's beloved, it can shape the reader by the tenor and trajectories of the characters within it: God's covenant with Israel, Israel's stumbling in maintaining covenant, the extension of covenant to the world in Jesus Christ, and his rejection by those he loved. In this approach, the Bible encourages the reader to become a part of the narrative itself, to allow the biblical world to absorb the universe,[26] so that it shapes Christians not by its codes but by the story that unfolds on its pages. If believers comb the text merely for rules about sex, they not only miss the Bible as narrative but also close their eyes to its narratives of desire among beloveds, who reflect in some small manner God's desire for the world.

A second problem with combing the text for sexual rules is its invariable selectivity and refusal to acknowledge the problematic contexts within which one finds the rules. For example, the lukewarm endorsements of marriage in the New Testament assume a patriarchal view of male headship in the household. Adultery, as prohibited in the Hebrew Bible, is connected to property rights. Even when rules seem specific in the Bible, the circumstances surrounding them are morally abhorrent for contemporary readers, whether in regard to slavery or the status of women.

No wonder that the contemporary period has witnessed so many voices claiming that biblical rules regarding sex are oppressive and can no longer apply. In diagnosing the patriarchal baggage of the circumstances surrounding sexual rules in Scripture, these critics hit the mark. Yet some of their readings of the Bible, surprisingly, also reflect rule-based assumptions—namely, that the Bible supplies rules about sex that are inappropriate and antigospel for Christians today.

The alternative that I have attempted to illustrate in this chapter is to read the Bible as a narrative of desire: of God's desire for humankind and of humankind's desire for communion with God and for relationship with one another. Sex is one dimension and expression of the desire for communion and connection, intimacy and relationship. This approach to the Bible invites the reader to see how desire intensifies in its focus: God's desire for relationship with a people expresses itself in covenant; and God's love for the world is expressed in particular relationship in the incarnation—that is, God's revelation of God's very self in one human being. In each case, desire for the world gets expressed in particularity, in a focused intensification of God's love.

Contemporary culture often tells us that the focusing of desire invariably smothers it. Stay in any sexual relationship long enough—whether marriage, partnership, or otherwise—and the flames eventually fade. The jaded view of sexual relationships in contemporary culture is that intimacy quickly becomes banal; as time goes by with the beloved, mystery evaporates as people take each other increasingly for granted. Irritation rather than discovery characterizes the relationship as the years pass. The more I know about my beloved, the less there seems left to know, and thus familiarity breeds laziness and dissipation. Sex becomes, as it were, old hat, unless desire finds a new home with someone else while the old love is left behind. In Western consumer economies, sex is meant for consumption—rather rapid consumption—as desire roams from place to place in search of new loves. The commercialization of sex in American culture encourages the rapid movement of getting what we can.

If Christians read Scripture as a narrative of desire, they are encouraged to linger: to linger over the body of Christ, to linger over the history of God's desire for the world, to linger over Holy Communion, to linger in the presence of their beloved. In this context, the beloved becomes all the more enticing and desirous along the way, as Christ and Christians come to know each other. Such is the journey of sex, when conceived in light of covenant and incarnation, God's desire for humankind. Sex becomes a passage to deeper knowing of our beloved, discovery, and the yearning of desire.

This focusing of sexual desire results in neither the smothering nor containment of desire but in a growth stronger than death: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave" (Song 8:6).

The church has often preached that sexual desire has to be contained and restricted, lest it become dangerous; hence, the only place to channel sexual desire is in marriage—never outside marriage, never with the same sex. The narrative of desire as it unfolds in the biblical text suggests something different: not the bottling up of desire, but its growth and increase, where "flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame" (Song 8:6). God's desire for communion does not dissipate with the establishment of covenant with Israel or the incarnation of Jesus; rather, it continues to kindle desire until all creation finds a home in the new creation, a desire that will not find satisfaction and reward until the end of the days (Dan. 12:13).

Further Suggested Readings

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