



God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says

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For several decades, Michael Coogan's introductory course on the Old Testament has been a perennial favorite among students at Harvard University. In *God and Sex*, Coogan examines one of the most controversial aspects of the Hebrew Scripture: What the Old Testament really says about sex, and how contemporary understanding of those writings is frequently misunderstood or misrepresented. In the engaging and witty voice generations of students have appreciated, Coogan explores the language and social world of the Bible, showing how much innuendo and euphemism is at play, and illuminating the sexuality of biblical figures as well as God. By doing so, Coogan reveals the immense gap between popular use of Scripture and its original context. *God and Sex* is certain to provoke, entertain, and enlighten readers.

God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says Details

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From Reader Review God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says for online ebook

Mike says

I picked this up on the spur of the moment in the library today, and I'm fairly pleased. It's not a perfect work -- I personally would have liked to see a LOT more hard linguistic discussion in such a textual topic -- but I appreciated its historo-critical approach. That's probably the biggest hurdle for a potential reader. But then, if the reader isn't OK with a historical approach, he or she probably isn't going to be on board with a book that subtitles itself "What the Bible Really Says."

Emily says

I read this at about the same time as I read *Unprotected Texts: The bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* by Jennifer Wright Knust. And then I got busy and waited a bit to write this review, so I'm afraid the two books are now hopelessly and inextricably smooshed together (yes, that's a technical term) in my brain. So please keep that in mind as you read the review...

Dr. Coogan starts out laying the foundation of his premise regarding the Bible: "These books [the books included in the Bible] were written over the course of many centuries, and, like all other books, they reflect the presuppositions and prejudices, the ideas and ideals of their authors (almost entirely men) and of the societies in and for which they were written." As a result, "in studying the past, we have to learn how they did things there, being careful not to project our own values and social constructs onto other cultures, and recognizing that words can have different meanings and nuances." This is infinitely difficult to do because we are often unaware of the assumptions we make based on our current societal expectations, but it's so vital to evaluating the Bible and its statements on their own merits.

For example, "the Bible's pervasive patriarchal bias has been selectively utilized by past and present religious leaders, who find in the Bible license, even authorization, for the subordination of women." But do we read this today as simply a reflection of the societies at the time those passages were written, or a universal truth that should be applied to all children of God throughout all time?

Again, "in our culture, marriage is closely connected with the idea of romance." However, "this was not the pattern in ancient times, notably in the biblical world...The primary function of marriage was to produce offspring--especially, as in most patriarchal societies, male offspring."

One interesting perspective I gained had to do with the passages in Leviticus that cover certain aspects of the Mosaic law. "Keeping categories distinct underlies...prohibitions, including some dietary laws and laws against crossbreeding animals, plowing with two different species of animals, planting different crops in the same field, wearing clothing woven from different kinds of yard, and cross-dressing." Dr. Coogan points out that the writers of Leviticus included same-sex relationships in this list and states "it is arbitrary to assert on the basis of biblical authority that some of them, such as sex between men, are intrinsically wrong, whereas others, such as wearing clothing made from wool and linen, are not: the biblical writers make no such distinction." Moving to the New Testament, Dr. Coogan parses Paul's definitions of "natural" and "unnatural" in conjunction with this line of thinking as well.

One point that gets me steamed is the ancient law that rape is not considered a crime against the woman raped; rather, "the damage is to the woman's father rather than to her, and the man is obliged to marry the woman he had deprived of her virginity." In that society, rape "violated the rights of the men under whose control the victims were--their fathers, brothers, fiances, or husbands. What had happened to the raped women themselves was of minor significance."

Slightly off the titular topic, but also interesting, is this insight: "For most of ancient Israel's history...strict monotheism was not the norm. Worship of other gods and goddesses is repeatedly attested, and polytheism pervades biblical language." As evidenced by the number of times Israel is rebuked for worshipping other gods and exhorted to worship Jehovah alone, it was obviously an ongoing issue for Israel.

Dr. Coogan asserts that "we must [read] the Bible on its own terms--what it meant to its original writers and audiences. That also means reading the entire Bible, in all its grandeur and complexity and horror, not privileging only those parts that say what we think it should say or what we want it to say. We should not use it just as an anthology of proof texts to be cherry-picked for scriptural support for preconceived conclusions." There's a great deal of insight to be gained from the struggle to reconcile the contradictions and troubling passages and there is value in that struggle as opposed to sweeping it under the rug or glossing over the difficult parts.

I love this from his conclusion: "Taken as a whole...the Bible can be understood as the record of the beginning of a continuous movement toward the goal of full freedom and equality for all persons, regardless of social status, gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation...To put it somewhat differently, like the Constitution, biblical teachings have proven to be flexible, adaptable to new situations vastly different from their original contexts. Like the Constitution as well, the Bible must be interpreted--interpreted critically--to ensure that its underlying principle of love of neighbor in fact does apply."

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Mike Day says

Michael Coogan lays out some info that I did not know before. I will never look at "laughing" or "mocking" the same way (see Genesis 21). I will contend that Coogan, while making some excellent points, does miss out on analyzing Genesis 39:9. In this text, Joseph looks at sleeping with Potiphar's wife as "sinning against God" - something that I do not think he took seriously in his book.

Joseph, at least, sees adultery (or in his case fornication/adultery - fornication for him, since he wasn't married) as sinning against his God. I understand that ancient Israel did not look at fornication the same as the saints in Paul's day did, however, I feel that Coogan could have gone into this issue. I believe that the overall framework (as Coogan uses it on page 192) does declare certain behaviors to be against what God would want for Israel to engage in. So on one hand, we do need to read the Bible on its own terms, and understand that the ancients did not see things as we do, but on the other hand, I do believe that the Bible does hold some authority.

I say "some" authority because as Coogan points out, Christians and Jews follow the parts of the Bible that they "accept" or "like" and disregard other parts. By what authority do we do this? Coogan asks, "Can an individual believer or a community of believers, for whom the Bible is authoritative, dismiss these passages (passages that deal with Jehovah as insanely jealous and an abusive husband- or any passage we "don't like")

out of hand? Are only some parts of the Bible authoritative? Is so, what criteria do such individuals and communities use to decide which ones?" (page 188)

Social mores, our history as we have dealt with the text, are probably the best answers. As a believing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I would say the authority on issues really doesn't come from the Bible, but from God through the mouth of his living prophets. Once one understands that God cares for us, and that we have living prophets today, the Bible can be understood even better. We can get rid of this silly nonsense that the Bible is infallible and the final word on everything. If there is anything that Coogan absolutely destroys, it is this myth that the Bible is consistent and infallible. Even on a subject that should be relatively simple to understand (see the Proclamation to the World on the Family by the LDS church), the Bible is not only inconsistent, but a reflection of the values of the men that wrote the text, and the values of the ANE peoples that lived in that time period. That being said, the overall framework of the Bible is what Coogan says it is. I would only add that the overall framework also depicts sex as something that married people should share, and that chastity matters.

For examples of the lessons learned by those who violate this law, see:

David, Samson, Judah, the people of Sodom, and Amnon for starters! These are a few examples of the destruction and chaos that are brought into the lives of people who cannot figure this out.

Nathan says

Leaving this book with more questions than answers. :l

Callie Rose Tyler says

I choose this book hoping that it would present an objective view of the bible as a piece of literature; however I was left disappointed in many aspects. The author is a Harvard lecturer on the Old Testament and as a result most of his focus is on the Old Testament, which is fine.

However, when he does mention the New Testament he offers a very incomplete and flawed picture of the text. He makes statements that I can easily refute using common texts and commonly accepted treatment of the text by both secular and religious readers, and I am far from a Harvard scholar. That fact combined with his often mocking tone and unnecessary digs shows me that he is not entirely objective, he has his own agenda to serve that goes beyond merely stating the facts.

I did enjoy his referral to the original terms in the Greek and Hebrew and a look at how certain terms have changed over the thousands of years since the Bible began.

I found this book to be thought provoking, but nothing earth shattering, this is by no means a must read. In my own subjective and often cynical opinion I believe Coogan is simply cashing in on the taboo surrounded by the subject of God and Sex but really has very little to offer on the subject that could be considered ground breaking or faith altering.

Lee Harmon says

If you're hoping for a biblical Harlequin, look elsewhere. This is a heavy little book, even a little overwhelming, as it delves into the sexual inequalities of biblical times. I found the book rather dark in places; an obvious agenda of the author is to extol how grateful we should be to have outgrown the biblical view of women as property. Indeed there are multiple horror stories of how women were treated in the Bible, but is it healthy to overdose on this topic? Coogan touches only briefly on the other side of the coin--the radical change in treatment encouraged by Jesus and his earliest followers. Even Paul, says Coogan, suppressed women, as he argues against current scholarship that many of the suppressive teachings recorded by "Paul" were actually later writings.

But, thankfully, the book isn't entirely about sexual inequality. Some of the topics are more light-hearted. You'll learn about sexual innuendos which shed light on several passages in the Bible; you'll find out whether David and Jonathan were gay lovers (they weren't); you'll learn about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (it wasn't sodomy, or even sexual perversity); you'll learn about Yahweh's wife in Israel's most primitive beliefs, including several passages from the Bible. I highly recommend the book, and I guarantee you'll learn from it.

Scott Freeman says

I was somewhat disappointed with this work. Despite the glowing reviews I found a book that lacked cohesion and was devoid of any conclusion.

Although I agree with the author on two of his main premises, that the Bible can only really be viewed in the primitive context in which it was written and that all theological language is nothing more than metaphor, I felt that he did nothing with the texts to provide a modern-day interaction.

A so-so effort.

Jessi says

This is a good overview of sexual language, gender roles, and scriptural passages regarding adultery, prostitution, abortion, and homosexuality in the Bible. The text focuses more on the Old Testament than New Testament, but as the Old Testament includes much more in terms of heredity and social laws of the time, this isn't surprising.

The title "God and Sex" may be slightly misleading. Although we are talking about the Bible, and while God is certainly mentioned, it is really more an examination of scripture as a study of the culture in which the ancient Hebrews and early Christians lived.

Coogan seems to strive to deliver interpretations the average person may not have considered, backing up his interpretations with his knowledge of the scripture as well as the Hebrew language. In my opinion, he does so mostly without necessarily taking any particular moral or ethical standpoint. It isn't until the very end in his "conclusions" that he gets a bit preachy in warning against the folly of trying to hold onto snapshots of the past as unchanging truths in a time that bears little resemblance to those days.

What I enjoyed most was probably the explanations of the many sexual euphemisms scattered around the Bible. This shed light on many passages that, when I was younger, puzzled and frustrated me. Unfortunately, I suspect many Believers will find these revelations to be distasteful, especially when these euphemisms potentially appear in passages regarding Jesus and his female followers.

The book is very thoughtful and well-cited, if a bit dry in parts. A more well-read theology scholar would probably not find much here they didn't already know, but the book is tailored to the laity, and for that purpose I think it did its job well.

Graham says

A decent overview of what the Bible has to say about women's rights, abortion, marriage, homosexual behavior, and sex both in and outside of marriage.

One of the more interesting points was how women were viewed as property in biblical times. Marriages were more like transactions of property between husband and father than consensual acts of romantic union between husband and wife.

Another noteworthy part was the passages describing Yahweh as a jealous god, and how he treated Israel as the victim of an abusive husband, that later cools down and then is nice to her. I'm curious as to how apologists reconcile a jealous (envy being a cardinal sin) abusive husband with that of an omnibenevolent deity.

The last interesting entry was a discussion of Sodom and Gibeah. In both cases when the inhabitants wished to rape "male" angel visitors they were offered women instead as apparently it is better for men to rape women than men. However in the case of Gibeah, the rapists actually take one of the women offered. They gang rape her all night. Upon returning to her husband's home (the person who offered her), he cuts her up in to pieces. In the first case Lot is saved even though he offered his virgin daughters for rape. This is because he was hospitable to visitors, which Coogan argues is the main point of both stories. Lack of hospitality, not homosexuality, is the high crime of Sodom and Gibeah. This is enforced in a later passage when Jesus says that a city that is not hospitable to him and the Twelve will suffer a fate similar to Sodom.

There were two characteristics with which I took issue. First, while the author is a highly respected biblical scholar, he found it necessary to take small swipes at Yahweh periodically (for example calling him a homicidal deity). While he was describing death at the hands of Yahweh, I found it an unnecessary aside that weakens the objectivity of the book. The stories speak for themselves, his opinion is superfluous.

The second part was that the coverage of abortion was short. While Coogan did cover the fact that accidental induced miscarriage was to be compensated by a small fee instead of the Law of Talion, he neglected to directly quote several graphic passages of Yahweh either indirectly, through agents, or directly causing miscarriages, infanticide or the killing of children. Instead he glossed over it. I felt this would have had a much stronger impact had the passages been directly quoted particularly

"Give them, O LORD--what will you give them? Give them wombs that miscarry and breasts that are dry." - Hosea 9:14

Americans often quote the Bible as their source of morality but few have actually read it. "God and Sex" is a

fairly good digest by a respected biblical scholar about what the Bible actually has to say about morality when it comes to sex and gender.

Terence says

Whilst searching my libraries to see if any had a copy of Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter* (2 did, huzzah!), I came across this interesting, potential gem.

God and Sex is a short discussion (195 pages text) of the many places in the Bible where “sex” and related subjects come up. There’s no real discussion of any particular passage but Coogan’s point in this brief book is that the Bible says many things about sex, marriage, divorce, homoeroticism*, etc., and that much of it is contradictory, ambiguous and culturally relative. He does provide citations for all the passages he quotes and a useful bibliography at the end for people who want to explore the subject further.

This is not solely a refutation of the Biblical literalist however. I don’t know whether Coogan is Christian or Jewish but he is a believer and wants to affirm that the Bible, for all its contradictions and unsavory stories, is an important foundation for a moral life. To do that he is forced to concoct a theory about the scripture’s subtext. As he writes in his conclusion:

“One can thus trace a kind of trajectory from biblical times to the present and into the future. The trajectory moves toward the goal of freedom for all, in an inclusive community. This goal, this inspired ideal, is the underlying principle of the Bible – its subtext, as it were. Any specific biblical text is an incomplete formulation of the ideal because it is historically conditioned, and so it should not be taken as absolute in any sense. Moreover, no single biblical text adequately expresses the ideal, and in fact some texts clearly are counter to it from our perspective. Taken as a whole, however, the Bible can be understood as the record of the beginning of a continuous movement toward the goal of full freedom and equality for all persons, regardless of social status, gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. How...a particular text speaks to an individual or a community in the present must be determined by testing it with the touchstone of fair and equal treatment of the neighbor, as seen in the strikingly similar sayings of Hillel and Jesus.” p. 194-95

As a “weak” atheist, I find the argument forced. If anything, my take on Western intellectual history is that the Bible is a touchstone against which thinkers created our modern, Western notions of individuality and liberty. I’m also not sure how this would appeal to a believer who wants certitude. Coogan would throw up biblical interpretation to a continual reinterpretation by each generation. A prospect I find exciting but not one I think many believers want when they go to Sunday school (or its equivalent). I’m reminded of a sentence I recently read in Sean Wilentz’s *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* where he’s discussing the concept of “democracy.” Substitute the words “freedom of conscience” for “democracy” and I think the point’s equally valid:

"Democracy is never a gift bestowed.... It must always be fought for.... Democratic successes are never irreversible." p. xix

I'd recommend it, nevertheless, as Coogan performs a valuable service collecting the information in an easy-to-read-and-use format and (as I noted above) provides a nice bibliography for further study.

TANGENTIAL ASIDES:

- The binding of this book is interesting: It's black, faux leather with endpapers of Jacob Jordaens' "The Temptation." When the librarian brought it from the hold shelf and handed it over, I felt like I was buying a copy of Hustler. A forbidden, salacious tome that no self-respecting person would be caught in public with.
- I liked Coogan's characterization of the Bible as not a book but a "library," a collection of disparate, if related, writings.
- I was also powerfully struck by Coogan's discussion of women in the Bible. I know that there's not much in the book for a feminist but the author's juxtaposition of citations and clear-headed discussion makes it all the more apparent that even in the best and most enlightened of circumstances a woman was nothing more than the property of some man, whether father or husband or son.

* Coogan prefers the term "homoeroticism" because our notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality are modern inventions.

Mary says

I love the premise of this book, and it had a lot of potential. Coogan is (apparently) a top biblical scholar, and wrote this book for the American masses to explain just what exactly the Bible does have to say about marriage, adultery, homos, pregnancy and abortion, prostitution, the status of women, and any sex- or gender-related topic that people talk or vote about these days. His purpose is to contextualize the passages that people cite simplistically for political reasons.

I love some good historical rigor, but after a strong introduction (complete with an erotic poem comparing a woman's hair to a flock of goats!) the book completely loses its cohesiveness. There's very little synthesis of ideas, only endless examples that generally end with "and that is what the book of X has to say about Y." It's a terrible read, and a mediocre reference book at best. To its credit, it is also highly informative, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't learn a good deal about the culture in which both testaments of the Bible were written. Spoiler: it was sickeningly xenophobic.

In the final chapter, Coogan speculates about the sexuality of the Hebrew God himself (or his prototype, whom Coogan argues had a divine wife). It's much more interesting than the rest of the book-- more ambitious and more stimulating. It's too bad that the other chapters couldn't draw conclusions together or reach across time in the way that the ending does.

Brenda says

Anytime I can read a book that may further help me understand the Bible and what God's word really means I am excited to read it, so I jumped at the chance to review *God And Sex What The Bible Really Says* by Michael Coogan. With that being said, even though it had me looking up a few scriptures, overall, the ideas presented in this book was quite different from my religious upbringing.

This book sheds a different light on the topic of sex in the Bible. He explains very simply how meanings can be lost in translation. For us to "know" someone means just that, to perhaps know them personally or know their work, but to "know" someone in the biblical sense means to know them sexually. It is easy to see how reading the Bible we should really know the true meaning of the word as it was used during Bible time. He goes on to tell us that in Hebrew time words such as hand, feet, nakedness among other terms could be used as euphemisms for male or female genitalia.

His covered subjects such as marriage, adultery, homosexuality along with a myriad of other sexual related topics. This book was an easy read, written so the average person could understand it, and included footnotes peppered throughout. He presents his ideas in a clear concise way, without sounding preachy.

While his interpretations vary from what I was taught in church, I still found this an interesting book to read.

Thanks to Hachette Publishing for providing me a copy for review.

Sarah says

This book is meant to be understood. Its title is not only provocative, but also stamped prominently in gold. The book is printed like a cheap bible (imitation leather and gold stamping with "religious" art on the flypapers) and so even though I was in search of another book on the topic, this one jumped out at me. The language is simple to understand. It lacks jargon and is heavy on example.

However, it is still a scholarly, intelligent book. The author is concerned neither with dogma nor politics. For example, to the dismay of the gay activists, he doesn't think Johnathan and David were lovers, but to the dismay of the homophobes, he doesn't think Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of homosexuality. It's forthright, it's got pictures, and if you sit around arguing about what the Bible has to say on the topics of sexuality or gender, you should give it a read. It won't take you very long and you will learn a lot without being drawn into an irrelevant emotional fervor.

Dominic Mitchell says

This was a really interesting and informative book! Despite being one of the most popular books in human history, most people have not actually read the Bible from cover to cover, and as a result, there is a great deal of misinformation in the general public around what the Bible does and does not say, particularly on issues related to sex, gender, and sexuality. What Coogan does best in this book is making clear to the reader that the Bible is often inconsistent and contradictory on matters of sex, gender, and sexuality. He also makes a great point for why the Bible should not be viewed as a sexual guidebook for our modern, more egalitarian society. He writes in a way that makes this book accessible to anyone who picks it up. This is a must read for

anyone interested in the Bible and/or matters related to sex, gender, and sexuality.

Josh says

I'm giving it five stars for its prescience and clarity about the modern relevance of Biblical text--not for its ease of reading. It is a theological book, so that it speaks about the dozens of characters as though the reader is already passably familiar with them makes sense. But it is hard to keep track of all these people with their brief stories. Coogan locates why homosexuality was criminal in the Bible in the contemporary cultural concern over mixing categories generally. It is listed as a sin alongside wearing a garment made of cotton and wool, or having two different species of animal plow the same field--concepts we have disposed of as they lost relevance. He also speaks eruditely about the role of women as property. He cites tales of rape and incest as being unfortunate only in that the woman's owner--a father or husband--will suffer financially because his wife's value has been diminished. All the puritanical and Victorian sentiments about female sexuality are rooted in this, though the Biblical authors saw nothing wrong with female sexuality innately, only its consequence of lessened fiscal returns. When someone raped your daughter, it was the equivalent of someone keying your car--you were outraged not because she was dishonored or hurt or scarred psychologically, but because someone took your money. Coogan does a great job demonstrating that the Bible was written for people in the desert millenia ago. To take it literally here and now, where you can read it on your Kindle on the subway while having no use for donkeys or slaves, is the product of simple-mindedness and willful ignorance. Coogan guides you through the passages that coherently reveal this.
