

✻✻✻ THE BIBLE
AND HUMAN SEXUALITY:
CLAIMING GOD'S GOOD GIFT

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The Bible and Human Sexuality: Claiming God's Good Gift

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United Methodist Women PURPOSE

The organized unit of United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.

The Vision

Turning faith, hope and love into action on behalf of women, children and youth around the world.

Living the Vision

We provide opportunities and resources to grow spiritually, become more deeply rooted in Christ and put faith into action.

We are organized for growth, with flexible structures leading to effective witness and action.

We equip women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.

We work for justice through compassionate service and advocacy to change unfair policies and systems.

We provide educational experiences that lead to personal change in order to transform the world.

❖ ❖ ❖ CHAPTER 1

It Was Very Good: The Creation Stories

Recently, I sat with a beloved granddaughter. She is a young, committed public school teacher with a vibrant Christian faith. She is also in the formation of a love relationship for the first time. I take delight in her joy as she speaks about all these new feelings. When I asked her what she likes best about the special man in her life, she replied that she likes the word “partner,” used often by same-sex couples. This young man respects my granddaughter and he is coming to know her as a whole person.

Together, they are striving for mutuality as their love grows. The love of Christ and guidance of the Bible are important to both of them. I also gathered that they will be responsible in determining the role that sexual intimacy will play in their lives. What she has from her parents and grandparents is a trust that faith, grounded in Scripture, will be very much a part of their growing relationship. They understand that, in a genuine, healthy, loving relationship, the lovers are whole persons willing to submit to each other. They see this model of mutuality as grounded in the biblical witness, conveying God’s unconditional love for all created life, theirs included.

Now we move backward in time:

Picture a blazing fire lighting the dark of evening in the community. The work of the day is done at last. Little children grow drowsy in their parent’s arms. There is an air of expectancy. The storyteller rises from a place near the fire. Tonight’s story begins. Once more, the story is told of the God whose

love for the world led to the creation of night and day, sun and stars, water and land, plants that provided food, fish in the sea, and animals roaming the land. The storyteller's voice grows more dramatic. Anticipation can be felt around the fire. The storyteller tells how God reflects on all that has been created in intense love and finds something still missing. This great God, who remains mysterious in many ways, desires relationship with the creation. Creation is not finished until it produces life that can respond to the Creator. The voice of the storyteller rises to a crescendo as once again the story is told of the first humans. A man and a woman are blessed and given a beautiful garden to live in and to cultivate in loving and grateful harmony with the God who has breathed into them the gift of life.

We know that centuries of oral tradition, the telling of stories of history and faith, came prior to the written word. This is true of both Israel and its nearby cultures. The stories began long before Israel understood itself as a special "people of God." Biblical scholars are able to determine the various groups of writers who began to produce written accounts of the story traditions by examining the writing styles and theological emphases that reflected their particular communities. Beyond these groups of writers, there were editors who put the stories together in an effort to weave together the various traditions. These were the redactors who added their own interpretations to the material. A vivid example of the way stories came together can be found in the first two chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2. There are similarities and differences in these two creation accounts. *The New Interpreter's Bible* suggests that Genesis 1:1–24a can be assigned to a writer or writers of the Priestly tradition and Genesis 2:4b–25 to a Yahwistic writer.¹

In college, I had a professor of religion who had a Bible that was color coded according to what scholars have come to understand as four traditions of writers who were part of the compiling of the Hebrew Scriptures. What scholars noticed was that there were two words for God in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. The first tradition was named the J source after the German spelling for Yahweh (Jahwe), the name used for God. Possible dating for this source was the ninth or tenth century BCE. The E source used

Elohim as the name for God. This source is thought to have originated in the Northern Kingdom in the ninth or eighth century BCE. The P or Priestly source was the third and was likely produced in the exilic or postexilic period. The fourth tradition, the D source, seems to have accompanied a centralizing of the Yahwistic cult and suppression of the Canaanite cults. This occurred over a long time and is also dated in exilic or postexilic times.²

THE CREATION ACCOUNTS

There are differences in the progression of creation in the two Genesis accounts. But both creation accounts witness to the relationship between female and male as one characterized by equality and mutuality.

Chapter 1 proceeds in a certain order and culminates in the creation of male and female human beings in the image of God. It is essential to note that being created in the image of God is not becoming God. Rather, it is to be God's representative. *The New Interpreter's Bible* states, "The image functions to mirror God to the world, to be God as God would be to the non-human, to be an extension of God's own dominion."³

Genesis 1 reminds us again and again that the creation is good, culminating in the creation of human beings and the admonition to the woman and man to be fruitful and to exercise dominion over all aspects of creation. As the sixth day ends, God pronounces that all that has been made is very good. The language of the naming of responsibility for the humans is one of stewardship and caring for creation, not dominating it for human use alone. Phyllis Trible, biblical scholar and theologian, reminds us that in this section of Scripture the two humans are treated equally. She says, "The context itself identifies two responsibilities for humankind: procreation (1:28a) and dominion over the earth (1:26, 28b), but it does not differentiate between the sexes in assigning this work."⁴ In Genesis 1, the man and woman are created at the same time, totally equal and both given responsibility to care for the creation. Thus, "according to our likeness" applies to both.

As we consider the second creation account, we can note that there were similar creation narratives emerging in the writings of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. A significant difference remains in the unique relationship of God and humanity, however. Other written accounts of the period speak of rulers or other figures in terms of a blending of human and divine qualities. This is not true of the biblical account. Adam is created from the dust (clay) of the earth. Eve is created of the same. The dust of the earth is a living entity, created by God and brought to life on earth.

In Genesis 2, the man (Adam) is created and located in the Garden of Eden where God invites Adam to name all living things. Becoming aware that a partner for the man is missing, God puts Adam into a deep sleep and his partner is created. This is the first instance of sexual differentiation in the account. Genesis 2:18–25 culminates in the man and woman who are now bone of bone and of one flesh. Phyllis Trible says of the passage, “From one comes two; from wholeness comes differentiation. Now, at the conclusion of the episode, this differentiation returns to wholeness; from the two come the one flesh of communion between female and male. Thus Eros is consummated.”⁵ Both accounts honor the wholeness of human creation, including our sexuality. Sexuality is the human capacity for sexual feelings. Both stories affirm the wholeness of humanity as created by God.

There is no hierarchy mentioned in either chapter. But some interpretive stereotypes of a hierarchy continue in the face of sound biblical scholarship that would remind us of the wondrous act of God that breathed into us the breath of life and created us as sexual beings for relationship with other human beings. As the two live in the garden, they are not ashamed of their nakedness. They have all that they need. They have each other and the abundance of their surroundings. It seems sad that these two beautiful creation accounts are sometimes used to name being female as subordinate to male when their identity as partners is evident in the language of the text. This study will help us to understand that being faithful to the interpretation of Scripture is to perceive the equal worth of all persons, regardless of sex.

Many biblical scholars suggest that the first eleven chapters of Genesis present a theological view of humanity in relationship to God. This seems to be the case in the Garden of Eden with the man and woman who are given the garden and its abundance. The story takes a fascinating turn in Genesis 3 as first the woman and then the man yield to temptation. There are two trees: the tree of life, the fruit of which can cause them to live forever; and the tree that contains the knowledge of good and evil, which is forbidden to humans. We can interpret the desire to know what God knows as “hubris,” a pride that mistrusts God’s power and God’s work. By giving in to temptation, the woman and man become ashamed of their nakedness. They become aware of their limitations. God is revealed as God chooses, not as humanity demands. Here also we get the first indication that enmity will exist between the man and woman and a hierarchy is established (Genesis 3:16–19). Centuries of debate have ensued regarding this passage, much of it reflecting negatively on the woman. She gave in and enticed her husband to sin, say some. At the same time, the passage could reflect the sociology of growing patriarchy in Israel. The “rule” of the man over the woman is part and parcel of the judgment on the man as much as the woman. The biblical writer understood that patriarchy and related ills came as a consequence of sin rather than being the divine intention.⁶

In the twenty-first century, we continue to deal with various interpretations of the garden story. One is the indication for some that the subordination of women was intended as a part of God’s punishment for eating of the forbidden tree. Another came centuries later when the sin was deemed sexual in nature. Some have even related sex to what some call “original sin.” We will discuss this more fully later as we seek to understand issues around shaming with regard to our behavior as sexual beings.

The first three chapters of Genesis are part of what *The New Interpreter’s Bible* calls “The Primeval Story.” This suggests universality in the writer’s understanding of God’s design for creation and the place of humanity in the created world. The stories in these chapters deal with cosmic situations: God-human relationships, human-human relationships, human-nonhuman

relationships. The stories relate human response to God, the sin of hubris in human attempts to either reject or ignore the presence of the Creator. There is a common need to receive and respond to the divine presence in the human world.

HUMAN SEXUALITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISRAEL

I remember a little book in my Sunday school room when I was beginning to learn the stories of the Bible. There was a picture of a man in a long robe, with a beard and holding a wooden staff. They told me his name was Abraham. The man named Abraham was looking into the sky full of stars. I learned that Abraham heard God telling him that he was to take his family, his tents, and his flocks of sheep and goats and leave the place where he lived to go where God led him. In the picture, Abraham seemed to be listening intently.

With Abraham, God seeks to move on from the destruction caused by the flood (see Genesis 9). The rainbow has appeared and God seeks a new beginning with humanity. Abraham is responsive, a covenant is offered, and promises are made. God promises Abraham, “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3).

Abraham keeps the covenant in listening to and keeping faith with God. Some biblical scholars suggest that the covenant with Abraham is universal in that all the families of the earth are to be blessed through him. At the same time the ongoing story of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and Joseph in Egypt signifies the beginnings of Israel’s story. Thus chapters 12–50 of Genesis move the reader from the “primeval history” to the “patriarchal history” of the biblical story.

In Genesis 12, early in the the covenant between God and Abraham, we read of an incident that is repeated twice in Genesis, by Abraham in Chapter

20 and by Isaac in Chapter 26. Each story involves giving the wife to a foreign leader in order to protect the man of the family. The foreign rulers are portrayed as more just and hospitable than either Abraham or Isaac. Biblical heroes can have feet of clay. Through stories like this, we come to know the attributes and failings of the human family. Where is the voice of Sarah in these incidents? She is silent and acquiesces to her husband's demand. Adultery took place and Sarah was powerless in the situation. The same is true of Rebekah. This truth constitutes a challenge for those who would derive sexual behavior from a literal interpretation of biblical accounts. At God's prompting, Abraham and Isaac are taken to task by the foreign king.

It seems clear that in the development of the covenant of God with humanity, and later with the people considered the chosen ones, the value and worth of women and girls is diminished and the birth of sons is given ultimate importance. As early as Genesis 3, we get the first ranking of the female in the prediction that there will be enmity between man and woman and the woman will suffer pain in childbirth and will be ruled by her husband (3:15–16). Later, we see that the patriarchs could marry several wives as well as adding concubines to their households. At times actual violence and rape happened to women without clear objection that this was not to be tolerated.

In Genesis 19, two angels visit Abraham with a third companion, possibly Yahweh God, and continue on to Sodom, encountering Lot. They intend to spend the night in the square, but Lot invites them into his house. Once in the house, the men of Sodom demand that the men who came to visit be sent out so that the men of Sodom may have sex with them. Instead, Lot offers his two virgin daughters and says the men may do to them as they please. The angels intervene and the men of Sodom are struck blind and cannot find Lot's door to force it open. This passage has been used to condemn homosexuality, but it makes more sense that this is an episode of violence on the part of men who are out of control and ready to rape whomever they can. Lot, who is soon saved with his family, including sons-in-law who are to marry the same

daughters he would have thrown to the savage crowd, is never questioned or judged for his willingness to sacrifice his daughters. We come to know through some biblical stories the complexity of the people who act in heroic and far less than heroic ways as the community evolves.

The nomadic existence of the time of the patriarchs continued for many generations. Their stories mark the beginnings of what was to become the nation of Israel and the concept of a chosen people in a special covenant with God. The admonition to be fruitful and multiply was one of necessity to a people who had to struggle with weather, food supply, health issues, and an abundance of enemies. Only the birth of many children could preserve life and a future for the people.

LAW CODES DEVELOP

With the coming of Moses several hundred years later, the Exodus marks the development of a new stage of Israel as chosen people and the codifying of law that would determine the future of the nation. Following the years of desert wandering, the dream of the Promised Land was achieved through war with the Canaanites who lived and worshiped in the same territory. The spiritual warfare was over the Canaanite religious belief and practice. We know now that this was a challenge to Israel over the centuries, often resulting in syncretistic practice of both faith traditions. This challenge also affected the covenant relationship and the Deuteronomic law that developed over the years.

Old Testament scholar Cheryl B. Anderson discusses the impact of the laws for the Hebrew people as “speech acts of God.”⁷ Thus, the biblical laws were more than laws that were formed and later written. They were God’s word for God’s people. They served to form the identity of Israel as a nation. “Biblical laws, therefore, are directive statements that have illocutionary force in the direction of world-to-words. It is that illocutionary force which prompts the hearer to conform his or her actions to the words. In turn, that force, that

ability to affect behavior, helps to explain the ability of biblical laws to shape identity.”⁸ Illocutionary force suggests that these laws are not just good ideas. They are meant to be obeyed and practiced, because they are the words of God to the people.

We look to Leviticus and Deuteronomy to examine the many laws that became binding during the development of Israel as a nation. There are laws that cover every aspect of life. Some are sublime in their hope for a human community that lives as a faithful people of a living God. We still speak of the Jubilee year, when debts are erased and all are free to begin again. There are laws covering hospitality and the treatment of widows, orphans, and those who sojourn in the land. Sabbath practices develop honoring a God who rested after six days of creation and remembering the liberation from Egypt. Some of the laws involved purity, designating what was clean and unclean, particularly having to do with food, as well as purity codes that dealt with the body.

Sexuality as such was affirmed in ancient Israel, especially in the process of procreation. Children were needed to continue and strengthen the community. Barrenness was a great tragedy for women. Sometimes the taint of sin was associated with the failure to bear children. At the same time, purity codes developed, affecting attitudes toward the body, sexual practices of the Hebrew people, and gender issues that ensued from the law codes relating to men, women, singleness, and marriage. Punishment and reward were instituted to enforce such laws. Cheryl Anderson reminds us that, “By punishing some types of conduct and rewarding others, laws shape and define the behavior deemed appropriate for an adherent of that value system.”⁹

Bible scholar Michael Coogan says in *God and Sex*, “Within this patriarchal framework, women, daughters, wives, mothers, sisters—were subordinates, and, like younger sons, are often not mentioned. Even when they have narrative significance, they are frequently unnamed: we are never told of Noah’s wife, Lot’s wife, Jephthah’s daughter, Samson’s mother, Job’s wife, and many other notable women.”¹⁰

Judges 11:34–40 tells the tragic story of Jephthah’s daughter. Her father makes a vow and she, nameless, is the one who is sacrificed in order that her father keep the vow.

This occurred during the time of the judges, who were leaders before the monarchy was established. The truth is that the patriarch had that kind of power over his family. As in all patriarchal societies, the family was dependent on the benevolence of the male leader. This was far from true in Judges 19:22–30. A Levite went to claim his concubine who had fled to her father’s house. Sometime later they left to return home, and they entered Gibeah but were not welcomed into a home for the night. At last, an old man welcomed them. That night, men of the town come demanding the male visitor for their sexual pleasure. Instead, the old man offers his virgin daughter and the visitor’s concubine. The visitor then thrusts his concubine into the crowd where she is gang raped and left for dead at the doorstep. In the morning the master sees her there and says, “Get up, we are going.” He puts her on a donkey and proceeds to travel. At some point the woman dies of her injuries. This is an extreme example of the power of a master over a member of the family, but it is in the Scriptures without a word of judgment for the man who surrendered the woman to the brutal violence of the male crowd.

The patriarchal dominance of family life was both economic and spiritual. The family was an economic unit based on a male ownership hierarchy. There may have been good reasons for a structure that was meant to lead to prosperity for all its members. Without leadership, chaos could ensue. At the same time, as has been indicated above, the spiritualizing of the hierarchal laws clearly contributed to the vulnerability of those marginalized in the hierarchy. Why else would a daughter allow herself to be sacrificed because her father made a self-serving vow? While mothers achieved some authority in their families, daughters were economic units for their fathers to use in transactions with potential husbands or even owners if the father chose to sell his daughter into slavery.

Deuteronomy 22:28–29 states, “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her, he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.” Upon examination, we might ask questions of the passage. Why does the father get the money? Does she really want to marry him after she has been violated? Why is she included in being caught in the act if she has had nothing to say about what happened? While this law may seem to offer a sort of protection for women by being wedded for a lifetime, it also, upon closer examination, leaves a woman being forced to marry her rapist. Riane Eisler puts it this way, “If we look at this law objectively, in the social and economic context in which it was enacted, it is evident that it did not stem from any moral or humane considerations. Rather, it was designed to protect men’s property rights in ‘their’ wives and daughters.”¹¹

Although the biblical incidents of violence toward women in tribal culture may be few, there were clear limitations on women’s freedom of choice and on their identity as children of God equal to all God’s children. There were laws pertaining to virgin daughters who only fulfilled their destiny by arranged marriages and giving birth to children, particularly sons. Some laws covered the demand of virginity only for the bride (Deuteronomy 22:13–19). If an engaged virgin was forced into sex with a man not her fiance, both were to be stoned, the man for having sex with another man’s intended and the woman because she failed to cry out (Deuteronomy 22:23–24).

Many of us have heard of the practice of Levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). A woman who was widowed was often expected to marry a younger brother and to produce children who would honor the brother who had died. This could continue if the second brother were to die.

Divorce was the prerogative of the husband only. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 speaks of a woman who does not please her husband being handed a bill of divorce.

The wife was permitted to marry again if she received a bill of divorce from her husband, but she was not allowed to initiate divorce proceedings.

Why should we in the twenty-first century pay so much attention to the law codes of the ancient Hebrews? Literal interpretations of biblical laws are still practiced in many parts of the world. They may still be taught to our children as they mature as sexual persons. Some of the laws reflect solidarity and a sense of justice for the community, while others cause shame or hardship for individuals without voice or power. At the moment, sexuality is the central biblical background, as interpreters everywhere are asked to take sides on a whole host of sexual-political questions:

Should we be for or against gay marriage, for or against the availability of abortion, for or against the submission of women to their husbands, and for or against women's political leadership? Should we build policies assuming that our commitment to premarital virginity and abstinence can be mandated for all, or will sex education and informed consent lead young people to make healthy choices? Should we prevent gays and lesbians from serving as ordained clergy, or can God's call include everyone, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity? If women play the submissive role in relationships, what does this mean for men? How do we define sexual freedom or choice, for women, for men? What side is the Bible on? These questions and others arise from our contemporary views of sexuality and the challenges of a changing world with regard to sexual behavior.

Any view of womanhood that denigrates the God-given creation of either sex diminishes the goodness of creation. We will continue to see the ramifications of these views as we consider the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and the development of the church. But first, it is important to pay attention to the stories of some of the women who became biblical heroes, even in a culture characterized by the dominance of men who were the patriarchs.

THE TRAGEDY OF BARRENNESS

Early in the Scriptures we discover the importance of producing legitimate sons within the ethnic group. We first consider women who lived with the failure to bear children; the one expectation of a woman in the culture. Sarai, who becomes Sarah, is the first to be barren into old age. She has given up hope of having a child, a son. She gives her maid, Hagar, to Abraham and Ishmael is born. Sarah may claim him as a son because Hagar belongs to her as a servant.

Ultimately, God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation, indicating that a “true” son will be born to Sarah. The three visitors come to visit, and the one that is possibly Yahweh God tells Abraham that Sarah will conceive. We remember that she laughs as she hears the promise. God asks why she laughs and then tells Abraham, “Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14).

There are other biblical stories of women who have nearly given up hope of having a child. Rachel, who must wait fourteen years to marry Jacob, is late in giving birth to Joseph. Leah and the maids, Bilhah and Zilpah, have all had children belonging to Jacob. The Scripture says that God then remembered Rachel and she conceived and gave birth to Joseph, saying, “God has taken away my reproach” (Genesis 30:23b).

In 1 Samuel 1, we hear what is perhaps the most poignant story of barrenness in the Scriptures. Once again we encounter two wives, Peninnah and Hannah, married to Elkanah. Peninnah has children; Hannah does not. Elkanah loves Hannah despite her childless condition. As Hannah prays, the priest Eli hears her and assures her that God will grant her the child she prays to conceive (verse 16). Her petition is granted. Hannah promises to take her son to the shrine at Shiloh as soon as he is weaned, and she fulfills her promise, saying, “For this child I prayed; and the Lord granted me the petition I made to him . . .” (1 Samuel 1:22). “Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives; he is given to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:27).

There are other instances of the miracle of birth to women thought to have lost God's favor, including the New Testament story of Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist when she and Zechariah had given up hope of a family. God's grace was the component that could rescue the woman and restore her to a respected place in the community.

OTHER HEBREW WOMEN OF FAITH

Another story involving marriage and the birth of a child comes in another form as we read of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. The familiar story begins in a journey into Moab by Elimelech and Naomi because of a famine. Both of their sons marry women of Moab, and both sons and Elimelech die.

Naomi plans to return as a widow to Judah. Daughter-in-law Orpah returns to her mother's house, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. They make the journey to Judah and Naomi declares to the women that she is now to be called Mara, as the Lord has dealt bitterly with her. A widow had little status in the community, especially without sons to look after her. Subsequently Ruth, gleaning in the field for grain to make bread, meets Boaz. He favors her and comes to know her story. Despite her foreign blood, her loyalty as a daughter-in-law is respected by Boaz.

Subsequently, through creative planning by Naomi, Boaz marries Ruth and Ruth bears a child, Obed. At Obed's birth, the women celebrate with Naomi, saying to her, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, is more to you than seven sons, has borne him" (Ruth 4:15). Obed is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

What makes these women memorable is their willingness to risk and their courage in using what is available to them to make a difference for the choosing of life. God has put the choice before the people. "I call heaven and

earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Despite negative teachings with regard to sexuality, they use that very gift to affect life and the community of which they are a part. Some of these women never give up their hope of creating new life with God. Other stories of women describe ways of using sexuality to save others. Who can forget the story of Esther who literally, along with her cousin Mordecai, saves her people?

Vashti, the favored wife, also shows a form of courage when she refuses to come at the command of King Ahasuerus. Her disobedience was said to have ramifications far and wide as it would tempt other wives to disobey their husbands. Vashti is deposed as queen, and a search commences for virgins who will be groomed for a year and then be brought before the king so that he can choose a new queen. Of course, being brought before the king meant brought in the evening and dismissed in the morning (Esther 2:13–14). The women involved had little to offer except for their looks. Even so, the king loved Esther and had her crowned queen.

Soon after comes the plot of Haman to destroy the Jews in the provinces ruled by Ahasuerus. Mordecai appeals to Esther because of her position of power with the king. She tells him that one must receive the golden scepter before going before the king. She is reluctant at first, due to the danger to herself. Mordecai sends her a message saying, “If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). How many times since has someone understood that they were the one who had come for such a time? Esther gains entrance to the king and Esther arranges a banquet where Haman and his plot are exposed. The Jews are saved. She used what she had been given, risking all on behalf of her community.

In the second chapter of Joshua, we learn of Rahab. She, however, is a foreigner and a prostitute who also risked her life to save Jewish spies. This is

an exciting story of intrigue and courage as Rahab serves the cause of Israel. For helping them escape, she asks for the safety of her family when the army comes. Rahab is honored in Israel for her courage. Her position as a prostitute makes little difference to the story.

There is a pair of women who must be named as a part of Israel's victories in time of war (Judges 4 and 5). Israel had to struggle for decades to secure its place in the Promised Land. There were wars upon wars, before and after Israel became a nation. In the time of the judges, before Israel had a king, the one female judge we know of was Deborah. Her position indicates that some women rose above the restrictions of the law when their leadership was needed on behalf of Israel. Deborah partners with Jael to lead Israel to victory. Judges 5:7b names Deborah a "mother in Israel." We may find it problematic that some of these women in Scripture play a part in military conquest by Israel. Yet they contributed to what they believed to be God's will for Israel and for the people of God who had been promised a land flowing with milk and honey.

Other women were important to the Israelite community. There were the midwives in Exodus, Shiprah and Puah, who let the baby boys live, going against the commands of Pharaoh.

Tamar was to be given to Selah but becomes pregnant by Judah, her father-in-law, who mistakes her for a prostitute. She saves her life and the lives of her twins by confronting Judah with tokens she had gotten from him at the time of intercourse (Genesis 38).

In 1 Kings 22, we encounter Huldah, who shares the prophetic title with two other women, Miriam and Deborah. The "Book of the Law," recovered from the Temple, is brought to Huldah. No one else has been able to read and interpret the words. Huldah interprets the book that speaks of the wrath of God at the lack of faith in Israel. The king tears his garments and the people come to hear the reading of the book, which begins the reforms of Josiah. Huldah

was too significant to the history of Israel not to name. She shares her place in the history of Israel with the women mentioned above who were named while so many women were left to us as unnamed wives, sisters, daughters, in-laws, slaves, and virgins. Such stories help us today in telling the stories of both men and women who have been faithful to God in various ways.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us the stories of women and men, faithful to their understanding of God's presence in their lives and in their communities. How are we to interpret these Scriptures for our sexuality in the twenty-first century? The biblical writings are not always one dimensional or consistent. We then must focus again on the creation story that brought us our humanity and called it good, very good. This includes us as whole persons, body, mind, and spirit. We find this creative understanding of the gift of our sexuality most beautifully expressed in the Song of Songs, a surprising addition to the Hebrew canon.

THE SONG OF SONGS/THE SONG OF SOLOMON

For centuries, scholars and other students of biblical literature have pondered this book of poetry that somehow survived the winnowing process and made it into the canon of the Hebrew Scripture. We cannot consider the Bible's view of sexuality without the Song of Songs. It may puzzle us, bother us, even embarrass us in contemporary times, but it cannot be ignored because it is there. In her commentary on Song of Songs, Renita J. Weems, a Hebrew Bible scholar coming from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, reminds the reader that it is hard to date the poetry contained in the Song of Songs.¹² There are some similarities to ancient Egyptian love poetry dating from 1500 to 1000 years BCE.

Scholars have placed the book within the wisdom tradition in biblical literature. Much of the wisdom tradition asks more questions of the divine-human relationship than it provides answers. We think of Job questioning why the

innocent suffer and Ecclesiastes concluding that all is vanity, and there is no answer to our deepest questions. The Song of Songs is said to be an examination of love and our need to be loved, body and soul. This book stands in sharp contrast to many of the purity laws that regarded bodily functions that came from sexual intercourse as unclean under the law. Ritual purification was needed to cleanse the body from sex. For women, the need to be cleansed was also associated with menstruation and childbirth. Contrast this with Song of Songs, which paints beautiful pictures of the body in the process of love and desire. There is an atmosphere in the relationship of the couple that deems the body a sacred part of life. It is essential to incorporate such love poetry into our understanding of the Scriptures as we seek to discover God's design for the gift of sexuality and the gift of our bodies. It is just as important in the present as it was when it was written.

The name of Solomon is used several times in the book. Solomon's reputation was one of wisdom and as a composer of proverbs and other wise sayings. He was also the husband of hundreds of wives and more women who were his concubines. Perhaps the writer or writers of the poetry of Song of Songs is confident that King Solomon had broad acquaintance with affairs of the heart. At any rate the clear protagonists in the book are dark-skinned lovers who long for each other and describe their love in detail. Some scholars suggest that the poetry is similar to the intense poetry in ancient Egyptian collections. Other scholars compare them to Arabic songs called *wasfs* sung at weddings.

What is exceptional about the Song of Songs is that the female lover has the greatest number of lines in the poetry. She begins, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. For your love is better than wine" (1:2). Renita Weems suggests in her reflection on this verse that, "Audiences are invited to identify with a female protagonist who longs to be kissed and swept away by her lover."¹³ Her lover, a shepherd, answers back as he describes her beauty in glowing terms, "I compare you, my love to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. Your cheeks are comely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels" (1:9–10).

Each lover continues to describe the other, speaking of the body as a beautiful gift of one to the other. He speaks of her mouth, her neck, her lips, and her breasts that are “like two fawns, twins of a gazelle” (4:5). She, in turn, speaks of his body in the same passionate terms. “His head is finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set. His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies distilling liquid myrrh. His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels. His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires. His legs are like alabaster columns, set on bases of gold” (5:11–16).

The lovers speak of their longing to be together. The poetry is both intimate and erotic. This poetry is full of passion with no shame for the love being expressed. A familiar passage expresses the desire for the lovers to be together:

My beloved speaks and says to me, ‘Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth; their time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;
they give fragrance.
Arise, my love my fair one, and come away.’ (2:10–13)

The poetry also suggests that the love of these two is not without challenges. There may be those who do not approve of their love. The reasons are not explained. We only hear the desperation of the lovers to be together despite any threat to their relationship. The woman is the most persistent in calling him to come to her. She is a strong, confident woman who knows who she is and what she desires. This unnamed woman is an example of strength, unusual in biblical literature. She is willing to risk all the challenges to the love relationship with her shepherd. Above all else, Song of Songs argues for love that endures all the impediments and frustrations that may exist in the face of love at its deepest levels.

The conclusion of the book expresses love that has more power than death, leading some scholars to speculate that the poetry might have its origin in a ritual or fertility rite to ward off death.¹⁴

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
for love is as strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame!
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
If offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly
scorned. (8:6–7)

Song of Songs celebrates love relationships in the human community. There is no indication that the lovers are married; it is more likely that they are not, based on the distance expressed and the desire of the woman for him to come to her. Renita Weems comments that, “The poet is apparently sympathetic to the lovers’ desire to plead for their right to love whom they choose, irrespective of norms and prejudices, and to their desire to explore their love. But the composer also respects the power that the combined weight of custom, tradition, and attitudes has to distort even the most laudable attempts at reform.”¹⁵

This book of poetry has puzzled and alarmed people of faith through the centuries. There have been many attempts to suggest that Song of Songs can’t possibly mean what it says. After all, did not Adam and Eve become ashamed of their nakedness? Many people have been taught that such erotic expression is not biblical. Some in Israel came to interpret the poetry as an allegory for God’s relationship with Israel. In early Christianity there were those who believed the book to be an allegory of the relationship between Christ and the church.

What is there for us to discern if we let Song of Songs speak for itself? The poetry teaches us that our bodies are good, a part of human loving. It teaches us of the power of the passion that is a part of the human experience. It teaches us that even when challenges arise from culture or tradition, love

that is deep and true continues to be a reality. Surely the words and images of Song of Songs have something to say to us of God's creation of human life and love that God called very good. It is important for us to see in Song of Songs how some Scriptures flow from the concept of God's love, goodness, and grace, just as it is important for us to recognize when other Scripture passages (or particular interpretations of passages) are not helpful to individuals or to the community as each seeks to grow in Christ.

We move on then to the Christian tradition, discussing the coming of Jesus the Christ and the witness through his life and teachings.

Endnotes

1. *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1:340.
2. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, *The Oxford Guide to the Bible*, entry D, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147.
3. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1:345.
4. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 19.
5. *Ibid.*, 104.
6. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Terence Fretheim, 1:354-364.
7. Cheryl B. Anderson, *Women, Ideology and Violence* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 6.
9. *Ibid.*, 13.
10. Michael Coogan, *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says* (New York: Twelve Hachette Book Group: 2011), 23.
11. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 96.
12. Renita J. Weems, "The Songs of Songs: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 5:361-434.
13. *Ibid.*, 5:380.
14. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, *The Oxford Guide to the Bible*, 709.
15. Renita J. Weems, "The Songs of Songs: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 5:434.