

# Sexuality and Scripture

by Debra W. Haffner

*Oh, may your breasts be like  
Clusters of the vine.  
And the scent of your breath like apples,  
And your kisses like the best wine that  
Goes down smoothly  
Gliding over lips and teeth...”*  
*Song of Songs, Chapter 7, Verses 9–10*

*The Song of Songs is a delightfully erotic, sensual dance between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is almost by definition, a statement of a sexually healthy relationship: the lovers’ desire for each other is mutual; their passion is mutual; their fulfillment is mutual. The emphasis is on passion and intimacy; there is no discussion of marriage or fertility.*

After twenty years as a sexuality educator and advocate for sexual justice, I began to study for the ministry. In May 2003, after nearly seven years of intense preparation, I was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister. People are often surprised to find out that I identify myself as a sexologist and a minister, believing that the combination is an oxymoron because sex and spirit are generally regarded as so separate in the culture. But, my call to ministry grows out of my belief that our spirituality is one of nature’s most life fulfilling and life giving gifts, and that our sexuality and spirituality are inexorably linked.

Many sexologists are wary of organized religion. We have been bruised in our struggles with politically active Christian conservatives in battles about abortion, sexuality education, and sexual orientation. We have had personal experiences with organized religion that have alienated us, or clients whose sexuality has been damaged by religious teaching. But others of us have had experiences that support reaching out to religious leaders and communities of faith, recognizing that politically active Christian conservatives do not represent the majority of faith traditions.

I believe that as a field we have ignored religious influences on our students and clients’ sexuality for too long. Yale professor David Kelsey writes, “Religion is an enormously powerful part of American culture, almost as powerful as sex.” (Yale Alumni Magazine, September/October 2003, p. 41) Americans are profoundly religious: According to Gallup and Pew Polls, 96 percent of Americans believe in God, 67 percent belong to a church or synagogue, and 40 percent attend a worship service regularly. Ninety-three percent of American homes have a Bible, and 33 percent of adults say they read the Bible at least once a week.<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder that religion influences our clients’ and students’ understanding of their sexuality.

Just as sexuality is a difficult and complex issue to talk about, touching on the most primitive emotions and early experiences, so is religion. Yet, few sexologists and theologians address both sexuality and religion in their work. The purpose of this paper is to give sexologists

tools to help dispel clients' myths about what the Bible teaches about sexuality and to provide suggestions for how sexologists can reach out effectively to faith communities.

## **Sexuality in Scripture**

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Song of Songs, Chapter 7, Verses 9–10 <sup>2</sup>

The Song of Songs is a delightfully erotic, sensual dance between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is almost by definition, a statement of a sexually healthy relationship: the lovers desire for each other is mutual; their passion is mutual; their fulfillment is mutual. The emphasis is on passion and intimacy; there is no discussion of marriage or fertility.

And, it is only one of the places in the Hebrew Bible where physical beauty is affirmed, where pleasure is good, where heterosexual marriage is not the only blessed relationship, and where sexuality is shown to be both a source of pleasure and pain in people's lives. The Bible is replete with sexual references. There are more than thirty-five sexually themed stories in the book of Genesis alone. In the 1st Letter to Corinthians, Paul addressed seventeen of the thirty-seven topics that are ideally addressed in a comprehensive sexuality curriculum.

Many people who think they know what the Bible teaches about sexuality actually do not. They believe the Bible teaches that sex is only for procreation, and that masturbation is wrong, abortion is wrong, and contraception is wrong, when actually the Bible is silent on each of these. Or they believe that the Bible is hopelessly patriarchal and should be disregarded completely, when there are texts that emphasize mutuality and equality.

## **Examples of Positive Sexuality Expressed in Scripture**

The Bible begins with an affirmation of humans as sexual beings. There are two versions of creation in Genesis. In the first chapter of Genesis (which is believed to have been written after the second), it says, God created "humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female, He created them." (Gen 1:27) The very first command that God gives to human beings in Genesis 1 is "be fruitful and multiply." (Gen 1: 28) In Genesis 2's alternate version of creation, God is displeased for the first time because God recognizes that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18) and sets out to find Adam a companion. God brings each of the animals forward to Adam, and suggests it as a companion. Adam rejects them all. It is only then that God puts Adam to sleep to create woman. The centrality of sexuality is emphasized in the last line of the chapter: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh." (Gen 2: 24) The goal of union is sexual pleasure; procreation is not mentioned anywhere in Genesis 2. Side by side, the two different creation stories emphasize the equality of men and women, recognize that we need companions and

helpers in life, affirm sexuality as both procreative and re-creative, and underscore that God is pleased to offer humans this gift.

## **Bodies Are Good**

Paul taught that the “body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,” (1 Cor 6:19) and this message occurs many times in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Bible often comments on the attractiveness of the main character: Rebekah “was very fair to look upon” (Gen 24:16), Rachel was “graceful and handsome” (Gen 29:17), and Joseph was “well built and good looking.” (Gen 39:6) Jacob and Rachel are the first recorded instance of love at first sight, partially because of their physical beauty. Jacob it is written waits for her for seven years that “seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.” (Gen 29:20) The lovers in the Song of Songs are fiercely beautiful and each part of their body is exalted.

## **Genitals and Body Fluids**

The Bible speaks openly and honestly about the genitals and bodily functions. It is remarkably up front about menstruation and seminal emissions. Menstruation is actually used as a plot device in the story of Rachel’s deception of Laban—who saves the items she and Jacob have stolen by placing them under her and saying she has her period so he can’t ask her to get up nor can he touch her bedclothes. (Gen 31:32–35) There is also the story of the woman who Jesus touches and cures, despite her having suffered from dysfunctional menstrual bleeding for more than twelve years (Matthew 9:20). Leviticus prescribes extensive steps to be taken when a man has “a discharge issuing from his member” and seminal emissions, and when a woman has discharges besides menses.

## **Pleasure**

Sexual desire occurs many times in Genesis and other stories. Divine beings are said to desire beautiful human women (Gen 6:2), Sarah describes the pleasure of sexual intimacy in old age (Gen 18:12), Isaac is noticed “fondling his wife Rebekah” (Gen 26:8), and Leah and Rachel negotiate for who gets to sleep with Jacob on which night (Gen 30: 14–16). Delilah is able to subdue Samson only after three instances of sexual bondage! (Judges 16) Proverbs says this about sex in long-term relationships: “let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you be intoxicated always by her love.” (Proverbs 5:18–19)

## **Celibacy**

Sex is frequent in the Hebrew Bible and publicly accounted for. Celibacy is not a good thing in the Hebrew Bible, and at most, an option for the few in the New Testament. Celibacy only appears during times of disorganization: Jeremiah remains single because of impending disease and destruction. (Jer 16:2) Jephthah’s daughter begs her father for two month’s reprieve from her death sentence so that she can “bemoan my virginity.” In fact, the daughters of Israel are said to go out each year to mourn her because “she had never slept with a man.” (Jud 11:39)

But what about Paul's: "it is better to marry than be aflame with passion?" (1 Cor 7:8) First, it is important to understand that he was answering questions from the Christian Church in Corinth, which believed that the end of time was near. They wrote Paul, asking him if people should proceed with wedding plans in light of the coming apocalypse, and he answered basically, "It depends." Paul recognized that permanently abstaining from sexual relationships is a special gift: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind, and another a different kind." (1 Cor 7:7)

And he admits that this is his personal belief only: "Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord." (1 Cor 7:25) Indeed, for those who were already married, Paul counsels that both spouses owe each other their "conjugal rights" (1 Cor 7:3), that they have "authority over the body" of their spouse (1 Cor 7:4), and that they shouldn't go too long without sex: "do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time." (1 Cor 7:5)

## Relationship Models

Neither Abraham nor Jacob (two of the three patriarchs of the Bible) are monogamous, nor are any of the heroes until we reach Jesus (who is presumably celibate, although some historians believe he was most likely widowed, since Jewish men were married generally by their late teens in arranged marriages.<sup>3</sup> Solomon, the wise man, is said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines. (1 Kings 11:3) David, his father, has a paltry twenty-one wives; in fact the text tells us that when David is depressed in his old age, a young woman is presented to him as the cure, although he is too depressed to take advantage of her! (1 Kings 1:1–4)

Jesus' message is one of love and radical inclusiveness, for both men and women and for people with differing sexual lifestyles. For example, in the book of John, Jesus shocks his disciples by revealing himself as the Messiah to the Samaritan woman who has had five husbands and who is currently cohabitating with another man; in fact he chooses her to spread the message that he is the Messiah—but he doesn't tell her to marry the man she lives with! (John 4) And in one of the most quoted passages of the New Testament, Jesus refuses to condemn the woman accused of adultery: "let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" and they all depart. (John 8:7)

## Homosexuality

There are only four passages in the entire Bible that explicitly address same gender sexual behaviors: two in Leviticus (Lev 18:22, Lev 20:13) and two in Romans. (Rom 1:26–27) Many theologians now believe that these passages related to the rejection of nearby foreign cults that included sexual acts by sacred prostitutes into worship.<sup>4</sup> The fact that there are so few explicit verses show that same gender sex was of relatively little importance. In contrast, there are ten laws in Leviticus alone prohibiting intercourse with a menstruating woman and seventeen on how to make a grain offering.

There are passages in Scripture that describe love between people of the same sex. Jonathan and David fall in love at first sight: "When David had finished speaking, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam 18:1), "Jonathan took great delight in David" (1 Sam 19:1), and David wrote, of Jonathan, "Greatly beloved were you to me, your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Sam 1:26) Other writers have suggested that the relationship of Ruth and Naomi was one of lovers,

and that Boaz may have been used only to impregnate Ruth. Certainly it is ironic that the passage often recited at heterosexual weddings: “Where you go, I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people ...” (Ruth 1:16–17) was first said by one woman to another.

But what about Sodom and Gomorrah? Many of those who use this story to condemn homosexuality ignore that Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the crowd to be gang-raped: “Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” (Gen 19:8) Later books in the Bible address the real sin of Sodom: a “bitter hatred of strangers” and “making slaves of guests who were really benefactors.” Ezekiel explained it this way: “this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” (Ez 16: 48–49)

Scripture recognizes the existence of sexual variation and sexual minorities in its passages on the eunuchs. During the time that the Bible was written, eunuchs were men who had missing or incomplete genitals (what we call intersexuals today) or who had lost their genitals in battle. They often held high positions in the court, and neither married nor raised children. According to the Book of Isaiah, eunuchs received special blessings from God: “do not let the eunuch say, I am just a dry tree... to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house, and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name.” (Isaiah 65: 3 – 5)

## **Negative Uses of Sexuality**

Scripture also tells us the stories of women and men who put their well being in peril because of ill-advised sexual decisions. For example, King David (2 Samuel 11–12) was already married to twenty women when he saw Bathsheba bathing nude across the courtyard. He brings her to him and they have sex right away; she becomes pregnant. King David then tries to get her husband to have sex with Bathsheba so that the husband will be understood to be the father of the new baby. When the husband refuses, David sends him to the front lines of battle to die, or at least so that he doesn’t suspect anything. Sexual compulsion and bad sexual decision-making are nothing new!

A more in-depth exploration of sexual themes in Scripture is beyond the scope of this paper, although there are several excellent books that explore these themes. (See the list of recommended readings.) It is important to acknowledge that there are indeed passages that do not contain a sexually liberating voice. And that in many ways, the love and inclusion messages of the Bible are even stronger than the sex positive ones.

## **Notes**

1. Deborah Haffner, *A Time to Speak: Sexuality Education and Faith Communities*, New York, SIECUS, 1998
2. The Scripture quotations used are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and are used by permission.

3. See for example, William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus*, Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 1996
4. See for example, L.W. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988 and R. Lawrence, *The Poisoning of Eros*, New York, Augustine Moore press, 1989

## **How to Reach out to Faith Communities on Issues of Sexuality**

- 1) Become more knowledgeable about religious beliefs about sexuality. There are many excellent books on different religious views, such as in the reading list in *A Time to Build*. Examine your personal attitudes about sexuality and religion. I have experienced a negative bias against religion and faith in some of my sexological colleagues and some of our publications. I have named this “religiophobia”, the irrational fear of religion, and I believe, like homophobia, erotophobia, and gynophobia, it has no place in our lives.
- 2) Lay and religious leaders can help create sexually healthy faith communities. They can offer sexuality education programs through their religious education programs for youth and adults. Develop a referral network to community-based sexual and reproductive health services to supplement pastoral care and counseling; develop policies to assure that the congregation is free from sexual abuse and sexual harassment, and that it is welcoming and affirming of gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender people.
- 3) Get to know supportive clergy and good congregations. There are rabbis, ministers, and priests who are supportive of sexual health and justice, and can offer important counsel about sexuality issues. For example, a sex therapist may not be able to convince someone who is traditionally Catholic or Eastern Orthodox that it is not harmful to have erotic thoughts, but a clergy person from his or her tradition may be able to offer assistance. Permission giving from a religious leader can be a powerful part of sexual healing. The Religious Institute has a network of more than 2,200 clergy from almost forty denominations and almost every state that are supportive of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Contact [info@religiousinstitute.org](mailto:info@religiousinstitute.org) for a list in your community.
- 4) Sex counselors and therapists need to introduce themselves to local clergy and become part of the referral systems of local congregations. They can ask to attend the local interfaith clergy association meeting or mail letters to congregations from denominations that are known to be open on sexuality issues. Local clergy often provide pastoral care on sexuality issues, and in my work, I have found that few have adequate training or background to handle issues related to sexual dysfunction.
- 5) Educators and clinicians can offer training programs or workshops on sexuality and sexuality education for the clergy and the religious educators in the community. Know what is being taught about sexuality in community congregations and offer to train the leaders or teach certain sessions. Offer to co-sponsor programs at faith based communities for parents, young people, and adults.
- 6) Identify the diversity of religious points of views on controversial sexuality issues. The National Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education includes religion as one of thirty-seven recommended topics and identifies developmental issues on religion and sexuality for each grade level. Religion is not monolithic on these issues. Help young people explore religious influences on their attitudes and behaviors.

- 7) Anticipate and be prepared for religious opposition from certain conservative religious institutions. Work with progressive and mainstream religious leaders in your community before a community controversy erupts. For too long, the only religious voice in the public square has belonged to people on the Christian Right or the Vatican. But, there is Scriptural, historical, and traditional support for a more positive view of sexuality and sexual rights. The Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing is a progressive statement on the relationship of sexuality and religion, and a call by religious leaders for sexual justice. First published in January 2000, it has now been endorsed by more than 2,200 clergy and religious leaders from almost forty denominations.

The Religious Declaration affirms sexuality as one of God's life-fulfilling and life-affirming gifts. It calls for a new paradigm for sexual morality that is not based on specific sexual acts, but on personal relationships. It calls for relationships that are loving, just, mutual, committed, honest, and pleasurable. It says that a wedding band is not the only criterion for a moral sexual relationship, and it calls for an ethic that accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status, or sexual orientation.

The Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing was founded to promote the goals of the Religious Declaration. Its resources may be helpful to sexologists as they reach out to faith communities on behalf of their students and clients.

### **Suggested Reading**

1. David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997
2. David Carr, *The Erotic Word*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003
3. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: Womanist Perspective*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1999
4. Marvin Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith, editors, *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003
5. Marvin Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996
6. Marie Fortune, *Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us*, New York, Continuum International, 1998
7. Debra Haffner, *A Time to Build: Creating Sexually Healthy Faith Communities*, Norwalk, CT, Religious Institute, 2002
8. Debra Haffner, *A Time To Speak: Sexuality Education and Faith Communities*, New York, SIECUS, 1998
9. Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, New York, Harper and Row, 1989
10. Patricia Jung, Mary Hunt, and Radhika Balakrishnan, *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*, Piscataway, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2001
11. Karen Lebacqz and David Sinacore-Guinn, *Sexuality: A Reader*, Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 1999
12. James Nelson, *Body Theology*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1992
13. Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, New York, Vintage Books, 1988
14. William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus*, Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 1996

15. Reading list updated and used with permission, from D.W. Haffner, *A Time To Build: Creating Sexually Healthy Faith Communities*, Norwalk, CT, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, 2003. An earlier version of some of the material in the section on Scripture first appeared in “The Really Good News: What The Bible Can Teach You About Sex,” SIECUS Report, 26:1, October/November 1997.