

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR in BIBLE TIMES

— Jim Punton

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article is condensed from a much fuller and more thorough treatment (available on request) of all the Biblical evidence. The fuller version brings together material scattered through a variety of sources - Bible dictionaries, commentaries, concordances and specialist studies. It is material not readily available to the lay Bible student and is usually omitted from popular commentaries, which is a pity.

The Bible is much more realistic and down to earth than it is allowed to be. Writers, prophets, apostles were better aware of the realities of the world in which they lived than we are of ours. They faced squarely the consequences of man without God in societies which make ours look mild by comparison, with perhaps one important exception.

The depersonalised and violent attitude to sexuality shown by a growing number of Hells Angels' Chapters and the link especially in the Midlands with the occult have uncomfortable parallels to Bible times. The Clockwork Orange's glimpses of the future may be a reflection of a more remote past.

The significance for frontier youth workers. Of this biblical study is therefore intensely relevant. In particular we note

- the high view of marriage and serious view of adultery;
- the destruction of man-as-God-intended in the cultic misuse of sex;
- the radical change in attitudes to women Christ brought about;
- the lack of any specific advice on a whole range of contemporary adolescent questions.

Christ's challenge to His followers to share a new dimension of love is seen to be breathtakingly audacious when we understand the kind of world in which they were expected to live. This kind of living changes the world. It is the only strength which can cope with the toughest frontiers _ _ _ _ _

INTRODUCTION

An adequate study of how human sexuality as understood and expressed through the biblical period would require a full consideration of each writing in the context of its times.

But the Hebrew society experienced many changes over the centuries. We can look only briefly at some of

the data but will attempt to allow it to speak to us from its own age and culture. Only then can we ask ourselves what kind of response would be analogous today.

POLYGAMY

Whatever the Hebrews may have held as an ideal for society in ideal conditions. throughout their history they were polygamous. The only limitation on the number of wives was the supply of women, often augmented by captives. It was more a question of status and prestige than of sensuality.

If a man had sexual relations with an unengaged virgin his penalty was the obligation to marry her and the forfeiture of the right of divorce. If a married man had sex relations with an unengaged virgin. he took her also as wife. In this way. apart from resort to a prostitute there really was no question of pre-marital sex. Nor. apart from the children of prostitutes. was there the problem of illegitimacy. Polygamy was not without its difficulties the husband might love one wife and hate another; already Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and Elkanah preferred Hannah. Polygamy was widely found in the first century (Herod the Great had nine wives) but had become more the exception than the rule among ordinary folk. Presbyters should be monogamous, says Paul (*1 Tim.3:2,12*) but others are free to have more than one wife as they are able. In the Corinthian community the man who had outraged them associated with one of the wives of his father.

By a custom known as '*levirate marriage*' the nearest relative of a man who died without children brought his widow to conception and the child was credited to the dead man.

ADULTERY

Adultery in the Bible means 'wife-stealing'. It was an offence against another man, not against a woman, offending property rights rather than marital fidelity. For a married man to have relations with an unengaged virgin was not adultery. An unmarried or unengaged girl could not commit adultery. It was intercourse with another man's wife or fiancée. The thought of other seed introduced was intolerable to a Hebrew; it would falsify the family line. So adultery was a serious crime punishable by death for both persons.

By NT times adultery is no longer simply intercourse with another man's wife or fiancée. It is adultery to

marry a divorced woman and to marry again after divorcing. To marry a widow. however. is not adultery. Jesus makes it clear that adultery has its source in the human heart. *'I tell you that every man looking longingly upon a married woman with a view to craving her has already committed adultery with her in his heart'* (Mt 5:28; 2 Pet 2:14). *'You who say that one must not commit adultery'*, asks Paul, *'do you commit adultery?'* (Rom 2:22). The story of the woman caught in adultery shows Jesus' understanding of the woman and her accusers. They condemned themselves, but to her Jesus said, *'I don't condemn you. From now on don't go on failing'* (Jn 8:11). He placed things firmly in the context of love for God and neighbours. Clearly for the early church married persons were bound to each other for life. *'Let marriage be held in honour in all respects ... God will judge adulterers'* (Heb 13:4).

DIVORCE

Divorce was a male prerogative. There was no provision for a wife to divorce her husband. Wives who could not be divorced were those married in consequence of rape and those falsely accused of being non-virginal at marriage.

In NT times, the regulations still held but Greek and Roman law was different. (We find Jesus recognizing their custom of wife divorcing husband.) His own teaching is clear: prostitution nullifies a man's obligations, but a man marrying a divorced woman is committing adultery and so is the divorced woman, and the husband who divorced her commits adultery if he marries another woman. Jesus recognizes divorce as granted by Moses for 'unyielding hearts', but sees remarriage as adultery. *'Don't let man separate what God has yoked together'* (Mt 19:6). *'A man's crazy to marry on these terms'*, said His disciples (Mt 19:10).

Paul urges a wife not to 'cause separation' (or if separated to stay unmarried or be reconciled); a husband should not release a wife. If the non-Christian partner 'causes a separation', let it be; otherwise the Christian partner should not leave.

FERTILITY WORSHIP

One of the most important factors for the understanding of the OT approach to sexuality is the nature of the worship which threatened to draw them away from God. The Bible traces back 'the great prostitute' to the ancient mysteries of Babylon, devised by Bel Nimrod and Semiramis. Ruler of a great empire Nimrod was credited with all manner of accomplishments. His wife affirmed his re-incarnation through the birth of a child born to her after his death. An elaborate worship of the goddess-mother and her consort son, was contrived. In various forms it appeared in Babylon, Egypt, India, Greece, Rome and nearer home. Central to it all was phallicism.

From the recognition of the male-female duality in reproduction, the deity was regarded as androgynous. The basis of the cycle of life and fertility was the sexual relationship of the male principle with the female. Sun,

moon, stars, birds and beasts were involved. The coital act was venerated and images with exaggerated genitalia were erected at shrines and adored. The Canaanites used 'high places', with great standing stones similar to Stonehenge. At these they put up great images to the god and goddess with penis and vulva most prominent (the pillars and 'asherim'). Smaller figures depicting these were made by devotees and known as 'teraphim', sacred phallic charms with prophylactic powers. They were used in Israel till destroyed by Josiah.

How readily the children of Israel turned from God to the fertility symbols of calves and bulls and serpents and to the crude phallic pillars and goddess images.

The nudity of the priests, and the practice of transvestism explain Ex.20:26, 28:42-43, Dt.22:5, while the self-removal of the sex organs by Cybele's initiate priests lies behind Gal.5:12. Phallic oaths lie behind Gen.24:2 &c. and models with which the women had intercourse (Ezek.16:17) (Hos.9:10).

PROSTITUTION

Cultic prostitution was practised widely. It was believed that if the worshippers had intercourse with men and women dedicated to the fertility gods this would stimulate harvests etc. and give large families. These prostitutes were known as 'the holy men' and the 'holy women'. The 'holy men' basically served the female devotees and were in demand by women afflicted by barrenness. The androgynous basis of the religion meant that there was homosexual coitus as well.

The 'holy women' would have sexual relations of both a heterosexual and homosexual nature. The law was explicit: *'No Israelite woman shall become a 'holy woman' (ie. temple prostitute) and no Israelite shall become a 'holy man' (ie. temple prostitute) (Dt 23:17-28)*. It was equally forbidden to resort to one. To use the circumcised penis with a temple prostitute was a serious affront to God and a committing of adultery by Israel.

We have looked at the 'holy men' and 'women', of phallic worship. All 'holy ones' were prostitutes but not all prostitutes were 'holy ones'. The law said: *'Do not prostitute your daughter' (Lev 19:29)*, but, except for a priest's daughter, common prostitution was not illegal (Lev 21:7,9).

The NT knows only one word for prostitution for both the common and the ritual prostitute. (The Latin for 'to patronize a brothel' is 'fornicare' from the underground vaults that served Rome's 'red light district'. Fornication is primarily 'brothelling' or 'prostitution').

The uses of the verb all imply ritual prostitution and appear in the same contexts as idolatry and eating sacrifices offered to idols (Rev 2:14,20, 17:2, 18:3,9); or refer back historically to cultic prostitution (Jude 7, 1Cor 10:8).

The remaining occurrence (1 Cor 6:18) probably refers to this.

Many of the Christians had been caught up in things

(including prostitution) they 'found hard to get rid of' (2 Cor 12:21). Marriage is seen as an antidote by Paul to temptation (1 Cor 7:2).

Revelation clearly refers to ritual prostitution and takes us back to Babylon as the source of the fertility idolatry (14:8, 17:4) which has spread throughout the earth (19:2; 17:2; 18:3) and even into the Church in Thyatira (2:21).

This links prostitution and eating idol sacrifices. In Acts there is this same linking (15:20,29, 21:25) and Paul is aware of the power of the cults with their male and female prostitutes. There is evidence of Christians participating in phallic rites; and perhaps the form of incestuous prostitution referred to in 1Cor 5:1 is that condemned by Amos 2:7,8. Paul's argument is that '*he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body*' (1 Cor. 6:16). This is rooted in the OT picture of Israel's faithlessness to God.

HOMOSEXUALITY

It is difficult to approach the Sodom story without presupposition. What was it that brought notoriety to Sodom? Jeremiah says '*adultery*' and '*hypocrisy*' and '*encouragement of evildoers*'(23:14); Ezekiel says '*pride of wealth and food in plenty, comfort and ease; yet she never helped the poor and wretched*' (16:49); Jude says they were '*giving themselves to prostitution and going off after different flesh in the same way as the angels did*' (7)

Clearly the incident in Gen. 19 was but a symptom of the malaise. It describes a bizarre attempt by the total male population of Sodom, to rape two male strangers. It was contemplated gang rape in violation of all Hebrew hospitality, against messengers of God, and by men of whom the majority would be of heterosexual orientation.

The Holiness Code in Leviticus makes two clear references to some form of homosexual behaviour. These laws do occur in chapters which associate different areas of unacceptable behaviour with the idolatrous customs of the Canaanites and Egyptians and legislation was to prevent Israel's contamination. Lev. 18:22, 20:13

The OT makes no references to female homosexual activity which was treated lightly in the ancient world.' These are all the references to homosexual behaviour in the OT. It will be seen that there is no treatment of the homosexual condition.

Romans 1:27 is part of Paul's description of the consequences of man's idolatrous worship of creation rather than Creator. "*Bedders-with-a-male*" in 1 Tim 1:9-10 and 1 Cor 6:9-10 exhaust the references to homosexual behaviour in the NT.

The nature of the behaviour seems clear though not explicit. The translation 'homosexual' would be inaccurate since a homosexual needn't be involved in this way and since a heterosexual can be, since certainly the Greco-Roman society of the first century knew much of bisexual activity (it is not viewed with greater horror than the other undesirable expressions

of rebellious human nature) what is surprising is that the NT refers so rarely to it.

MASTURBATION

There is nothing in Scripture that can be said with certainty to refer to this aspect of sexual behaviour. It may lie behind the Levitical notes on male discharge but this may be seen as involuntary emission. It is possible that it is referred to in the story of Onan's refusal to fulfil his obligation to his dead brother, but it is almost certainly 'coitus interruptus' that is described. And again it may lie behind the cryptic story of whatever Canaan did to his grandfather Noah as he lay naked and drunk (Gen 9:24). Nothing is said in the NT.

ASCETICISM

The tradition of Nazirites and Rechabites was brought into NT times in such communities as the Essenes with whom John the Baptist may have had association. They rejected marriage. Jesus did not identify himself with this attitude to sexuality. We have seen that He held out the ideal of monogamy without divorce as being God's intention for mankind. But Jesus recognized that the ideal is not open to everyone.

Paul has advice for virgins (1 Cor 7:25,28,34) and for the engaged man who finds himself behaving improperly towards the virgin. Paul says '*Let him do as he wishes, he's not sinning. Let them marry* (7:36,37). *The unmarried man is concerned for the Lord's affairs - matters - but the married man ... has a divided loyalty*' (7:32,33).

'The woman who is unmarried and a virgin is concerned for the Lord's matters but the married woman is concerned ... how s/Je may please her husband' (7:33). '*But no sin in marrying* (7:38). In view of the difficult period being faced, no-one should rely on anything staying permanent. This seems to be the meaning of the whole passage in which Paul suggests that married men be as though they had no wives (7:30).

Rev. 14:4, if taken non-figuratively, stands alone in Scripture for the view that for men to have sex relations with women involves defilement. But clearly it is symbolical. The 'women' referred to are the cultic prostitutes of the fertility rites, in relation to whom these men are as virgin girls. (Others relate it to 2 Cor 11:2 as a symbolic picture of Christ's Church restored to virgin purity).

MARRIAGE

It is interesting that the main Hebrew word for love caters for the full spectrum covered by the English word. (There are half a dozen other words of varying shades of meaning.) Despite marriage being 'arranged' for political, financial reasons, romantic love is obvious again and again in the Bible story. (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel.) And despite their social status, wives were loved and revered by men as in all ages.

We have noted that women were regarded in the OT

as the possessions of their fathers and then of their husbands: their rights were governed by property laws. No woman had personal rights: she couldn't inherit: her vow wasn't binding: she couldn't claim divorce. Against such a background we must set the Hebrew understanding of marriage.

Androgyny maintains that Man was created with both male and female constituents and was split into two sexes as punishment for sin, and now strives for re-unification. The Eden story has no suggestion of androgyny. Adam was a complete, independent person in God's image before the creation of Eve. Marriage is not portrayed as necessary for man to be man. Woman was created to be 'a helper as in front of him' (*Gen 2:18,20*), that is, a helper corresponding to him. Drawn from his side she will return to his side. She was given to him for companionship. She, too, is 'in the image of God'. '*Be fruitful and multiply*' was a command given to them before the fall: they enjoyed sexuality and were unashamed. Those who interpret the fall as sexual are at odds with the Bible. The expression '*one flesh*' expressed the situation existing during intercourse whether it be with wife, prostitute or whomever (*Gen:2:24, Mk 10:6-8, 1 Cor 7:2-6, Eph 5.31, Ex 21:10*). It is difficult for us not to make it mean what it couldn't have meant in Bible times. The woman becomes, in the sexual embrace, part of the man, an extension of his body and so of himself. It involves total identification and an irrevocable something has happened. The phrase is not a monogamic formula and the polygamous man was 'one flesh' with each wife.

There is little in the Bible that addressed itself directly to our 'nuclear' family. Both the Hebrew and Greco-Roman 'family' included all those who came under the jurisdiction of the head of the extended family, and

included servants and their kin, guests, livestock, etc. And there was a sense of solidarity, of oneness in diversity. Each member's self extended through all his relationship and belongings so that to eradicate Achan involved eradicating all he was intimately related with. The head of the family embodied all that the family was.

There is not much in the Bible on sexuality within marriage. A man was exempted military service when he first married. We have glimpses of physical intimacy between Abraham and Sarah, and then Song of Songs' exultant affirmation of the erotic as beautiful between those in love. Possibly this poem in praise of physical love is unrivalled. The only barrier to intercourse in marriage was menstruation and the time of ceremonial uncleanness after childbirth. Paul, interestingly, bids husbands '*love your wives since they are your own bodies*' (*Eph 5,28*). This is his meaning, rather than 'as you would love your own bodies'.

Paul is remarkably frank and fair here - there is certainly no contempt for body, for sex, or for women:

The writer to the Hebrews says. '*Let the marriage bed be undefiled*'. Is he drawing attention to the possibility of the wrong that may be done within marriage?

Finally, let us note that both the OT and the NT see marriage as a picture of God's relationship to His people. We have seen how frequently this metaphor is used in the OT. For the NT marriage is meant to reflect the union and love between Christ and the Church. That two persons should become one is to Paul '*a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the Church*'.