Genesis on Marriage and Sexuality

By Stephen Bauer

Is the Bible relevant for informing our moral views concerning sexuality, sexual behavior, and marriage in the twenty-first century? The question is important, for the inquiry itself assumes something critical about the Bible. We do not find people asking questions such as, *How is Plato's view of love relevant today?* or *Are Aesop's fables meaningful for in 2014?* Such questions are irrelevant because we see neither Plato nor Aesop having moral or spiritual authority in our lives. They are merely human authors whom we can take or leave without consequence.

The question of biblical relevance assumes some kind of prescriptive authority over our lives because we take the Bible to be different from Plato or Aesop. We accept the Bible's own claims to be God's revelation and therefore a moral and spiritual authority. On these assumptions, we ask the question of relevance. As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, the sole authority for faith and life-practice, and thus we wrestle with the question of relevance. How can a book we claim to be the supreme spiritual and moral authority be meaningful in the twenty-first century when its literature was penned about three and half millennia ago? Is the Bible merely a quaint yet outdated moral guide, suitable for pre-scientific ages, and one that has outgrown its relevance?

I would like to suggest two reasons why the Bible is still relevant for modern people. First, I believe human nature has not substantively changed since the time it was written by Moses and others. Technology, society, political structures, nations, and religions come and go, but human nature remains essentially unchanged. We have the same fundamental ambitions, desires, and fears as past generations. The expressions and details of these concerns have changed, but not the underlying nature of humanity. Thus, themes and counsels on love, marriage, and sexuality will always be relevant.

Second, and more critically, we believe that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (1 Tim 3:16, RSV). The inspiration of Scripture means a claim to timeless moral and spiritual authority. Peter asserts that Scripture is more reliable than eyewitness testimony (2 Pet 1:16–21), while Christ said it cannot be broken (John 10:35). Thus Jesus and the apostles viewed Scripture as normative for the Christian. Just as human nature has not fundamentally changed, God has not changed. He says, "I the LORD do not change" (Mal 3:6, RSV). "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8, RSV). Divine inspiration and consistency demand that the follower of Christ view Scripture as God's timeless and authoritative word to humankind. Unless one is willing to assert, either that the Bible is simply a product of Jewish and Christian religious communities and thus is not divinely inspired, or that God was mistaken in what He revealed to the biblical authors, then we must accept Scripture as an authoritative message from God to be taken seriously in all ages, at all times.

Resistance to the relevance and authority of Scripture comes, in part, from perceived tensions between current societal beliefs or desires and the claims of Scripture. Just as the biblical view of origins stands in sharp contrast to some beliefs and theories of materialist evolution, biblical norms for sexual behavior and marriage also stand in stark contrast to a number of contemporary values and practices. This contrast is especially pronounced when one believes God instituted marriage, designing it and the accompanying erotic expression of it for specific, holy purposes. This clash between contemporary and biblical values tempts some to conclude that the inspired wisdom of antiquity concerning intimate relationships is no longer relevant in a scientific age.

Considering these factors, I assert that biblical insights into sexual behavior and romantic relationships are exceedingly relevant. I shall illustrate this relevance by surveying such issues in the book of Genesis.

Foundations

The book of Genesis functions as the theological and philosophical introduction to the Bible. Genesis 1–4 gives the philosophical definitions for God, man, and the nature of reality used by the rest of Scripture. In addition, persons and themes that play a vital role in the rest of biblical theology are introduced throughout the book. For example, Paul builds his doctrine of righteousness by faith in Romans, and to some degree Galatians, based on Abraham's story—"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6, NIV). Genesis thus provides the primary, foundational basis for Paul's argument. In addition, Paul's depiction of sin as a domineering, enslaving power (Rom 3:9; 5:12, etc.) seems rooted in the first biblical use of the term "sin" in Genesis 4. Here sin crouches at the door like a predator stalking Cain, who is called to gain mastery over it, and hence depicted as a predatory power—a theme Paul extensively uses. Based on these examples, we can reasonably expect that Genesis also provides a moral and theological introduction and foundation for themes involving romance, marriage, and sexuality.

It is no surprise then that both Jesus and Paul use the creation story to ground moral standards for marriage and sexual behavior (Matt 19; 1 Cor 6; Eph 5). Genesis 1–2 says that because it was not good for humans to live alone, God created a corresponding partner of a differing gender, so that in marriage a male and a female would become "one flesh." Moses treats the creation of Eve for Adam as a prototypical moral example for mankind and declares, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24, RSV). Interestingly, both Jesus and Paul quote from the Septuagint (LXX)[1] version of Genesis 2:24 in which the LXX has the word "two," namely, "the *two* shall be one flesh" (Matt 19:5; Eph 5:31). By adding "two," the LXX translators nuance the context of Genesis 2 to more clearly depict the ideal of one man plus one woman—two people in total—as constituting the ideal marriage.

Jesus upholds the Edenic ideal of "one flesh" as a moral foundation calling us to treat the marriage union as something permanent that is not to be violated or broken (Matt 19:5, 6).[2] This strong emphasis on uniting man and woman in marriage seems to explicate part of what it means for humans to be made in the image of God. As God is a plurality united in oneness (the Trinity), similarly husband and wife are to be a plurality in oneness. Jesus' application shows that the ideal from Eden is a permanent marital union of one man to one woman with exclusive sexual privileges. This ideal, however, was eroded by sin.

In the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, the ideal for marriage begins to degrade as Adam and Eve lose their oneness by falling into dysfunctional blame games. One's spouse becomes at least a part-time enemy to be blamed for personal problems. Neither Adam nor Eve is willing to take responsibility for their actions or for their own contributions to the developing mess. Self-preservation and selfish desires erode the unity and sanctity of the bond, fragmenting the relationship. Such dynamics are amazingly similar to marital dysfunction today. But these Edenic dysfunctions caused by the Fall were only the beginning of the departure from God's design.

Distortions
Polygamy

The story quickly proceeds to a new development in Genesis 4. Lamech, a descendant of Cain, takes two wives (v. 19). Here we have the first recorded deviation from God's design for sexuality and marriage and, most interestingly, it is a case of polygyny.[3] In the biblical record of history, polygyny precedes promiscuity and other deviations from God's ideal. It suggests that the first steps from the divine ideal occurred in a context of ostensibly preserving the concept of marriage while redefining it to include multiple marriage partners. Polygyny appears to have been a tipping point that opened the way for more daring deviations in the future.

Polygamy is certainly a relevant subject today. With marriage under radical redefinition in the Westernized culture, polygamy is being reintroduced into political and moral discussions as a legitimate option for legal and moral approval. Additionally, in many parts of the world where cultures are not strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian morality, polygamy is permitted or encouraged. In polygamous cultures, the wives are viewed, to some degree, more as property of the man than as full, independent persons made in the image of God.

Polygamy again rears its head in Genesis 16 and 21 with Hagar. What seems to be a help to Abraham in getting his promised son turns into a relationship nightmare between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah demands Abraham to abandon Hagar and send her away with Ishmael. The dynamics of family dysfunction, rejection, divorce, and abandonment resonate with many modern people thrust into similar circumstances. The drama continues in Genesis 29 with Jacob's plural marriages to four women, doubling the numbers of Abraham's marriage partners. The dysfunction in Jacob's family, how he came to take four wives, and the resulting intrigue, deception, alienation, kidnaping, and slavery do not commend Jacob's clan as God's ideal for family life. As polygamy gains more media attention as a legitimate alternative form of marriage, the dynamics of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, as well as Jacob's family introduce a deeper biblical theme of negatively recording polygamy and its effects.

Voyeurism

Returning to Genesis 4, having started the downfall from God's ideal with polygamy, we descend to voyeurism in Genesis 9. Here we have an odd little story about Ham viewing his father's nakedness while Noah was drunk. In the context, God had recently reiterated the Edenic blessing and command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen 9:1). Before leaving the ark to start filling the earth, God reaffirms the value of human life and makes a covenant never to destroy the earth by a flood. With these assurances, Noah and his sons leave the ark (9:18) to begin fulfilling the task of being fruitful and filling the earth.

The first thing Noah does is plant a vineyard and get drunk. The Hebrew text says "Noah lay uncovered in his tent." In that context, it appears Ham was playing the voyeur, turning the situation in to a live peep-show. The strong reaction of Noah to Ham's voyeurism, combined with the other two brothers' extreme reverence not to look, reinforce the suspicion that the incident with Ham was more than merely seeing his unclothed father. Noah's reaction points to something very serious. Certainly such a story seems relevant in an age of pornography and voyeuristic pleasure, reinforcing the sanctity of sexuality and God's design for it to be a private act between husband and wife, and not a public spectacle for voyeuristic pleasure.

At this point in the Genesis narrative, the trajectory of deviation from God's ideal for sexuality has moved from polygamy to voyeurism that reinforced separation of sexuality from marriage, recasting it as merely a means of achieving personal pleasure. With the story of Lot and his daughters in Sodom (Gen 19), we descend further into three new forms of deviance.

Homoeroticism

The first new manifestation of deviance presents itself when the men of Sodom want to "know" the male guests in Lot's home. Sexuality in Sodom seems to have shifted from the Edenic ideal of heterosexual marriage, past voyeurism and polygamy, to same-sex promiscuity and violence. It is significant that Lot immediately declares the proposed homoerotic activity as "acting wickedly" (Gen 19:7). The fact that Lot offers the virginity of his two daughters as a substitute suggests that he saw the rape of his daughters as a lesser evil than male-to-male sex,[4] whether consensual or not. Certainly, Lot's reaction to homoerotic sexuality is relevant to the contemporary discussion of gay and lesbian rights in Western culture.

Rape

Genesis 34 records the story of Dinah. Traditionally, this is viewed as a story of rape, a view endorsed by its similarity with the story of Amnon's rape of Tamar.[5] Most likely Dinah was forcibly raped. Consequently, the violent treachery of her brothers against *all* the men of Shechem (not just against Hamor) would seem to indicate that they saw her violation as an act of forced humiliation, justifying their forceful, deadly action.

Others would argue that Dinah's involvement was consensual. We would then have the issue of premarital sex. If Dinah's involvement was consensual, we would then be introducing the issues of pre-marital and extra-marital sex, which are again highly relevant issues for current society. Whichever way one interprets this story we have one that resonates with current victims of sexual behaviors deviating from the Edenic ideal.

Prostitution

Genesis 37 introduces the Joseph narrative. As soon as Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the author breaks from Joseph's story, inserts Genesis 38 with Judah and Tamar, and then returns to Joseph being sold to Potiphar in Genesis 39:1. If we were to cut out and discard Genesis 38 few would even miss it. Furthermore, the fact that Genesis 38 focuses on the sordid sexual behaviors of Judah's sons, and by Judah himself, makes it seem relatively unrelated to the Joseph story. I would suggest, however, that the author is using Genesis 38 to further reveal the character of Judah as a villain and thus to set up a contrast with the heroic, virtuous Joseph in the ensuing chapters. The most obvious contrast is the two stories in Genesis 38 (Judah and Tamar) and 39 (Joseph and Potiphar's wife).

For our purposes, first we encounter Tamar being widowed when her first husband (Judah's firstborn) is slain by God for an unspecified evil. Subsequently, Onan is called to raise up a son for his deceased brother by entering into a Levirate marriage with Tamar. He practices *coitus interruptus* (the withdrawal method) to prevent Tamar from getting pregnant. Onan also displeases the Lord with his action and eventually dies, leaving Tamar childless.

Tamar then expects Judah to give her his other son, but when Judah does not, she disguises herself as a prostitute and lures her father-in-law to have sexual relations with her, a situation that results in her getting pregnant. For our purpose, it suffices to note how easily Judah got himself involved with a presumed prostitute. It appears that such an exploitive affair was normal in those times. Prostitution is also a relevant theme in modern western society where some sell their bodies to get money while others buy sex to have pleasure. Such distortion of sexuality has not fundamentally changed over many millennia.

Adultery

Turning to the story in Genesis 39, we encounter Potiphar's wife who appears to view sex as an expression of power over another, and refuses to respect Joseph's "no." How many date rapes occur because one does not respect the other's expressed refusal? The themes and issues in this story are certainly areas with which twenty-first century citizens can identify.

Joseph stands in stark contrast to the sexual attitudes exhibited by his brother and Potiphar's wife. What is even more impressive is that at this point of the story he is unmarried, and yet demonstrates amazing moral discernment. First, he clearly refuses the inappropriate advances, even to the point of running out of the room. Second, his moral rationale is stunning. "But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'" (Gen 39:8, 9, RSV).

Joseph's argument is first based on the duty to not violate Potiphar's trust in him. Potiphar entrusted Joseph with the management of his entire personal business, without reservation in any area. Thus, when we

get to Joseph's clinching point, "how can I sin against," logically, we are expecting the sin to be against Potiphar. Joseph appeals to her sense of spousal loyalty by asking, "how could you tempt me to violate your husband's trust in me?" It is brilliant in simplicity and powerful in emotive appeal, yet just as we expect Joseph to clinch the point as a sin against Potiphar, he brings in God from seemingly nowhere. How is this a sin against God?

The key moral concept in the exception Joseph mentions is: "he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself." Joseph essentially argues that in that household there was no observable difference in role and function between Potiphar and him. "He is no different from me in this house." *EXCEPT.* Ah, there is something that differentiates Joseph from Potiphar, and what is it? "You." To expand, he argues that the sole point of differentiation is that "he has you sexually and I don't." Thus to engage in sexual sport with Potiphar's wife would erode the one mark of distinction, undermining the uniqueness and exclusivity of Potiphar and Joseph's in that household economy. In Joseph's mind undermining that marital exclusivity is a sin not only against Potiphar (by implication) but a sin against God (openly stated). It violates God's design for sexual expression, first expressed in Eden but now unpacked theologically by Joseph.

In conjunction with Joseph's declaration, the entire Genesis record reveals that God's primary purpose for sexual expression is not for personal pleasure or to get a baby to prop your psyche. Furthermore, sex is not meant to be a tool to manipulate others or a means to exploit or wield power over another. *The primary purpose for sexual expression,* highlighted by Joseph*, is to create and foster a sense of uniqueness, exclusivity, and specialness between a husband and wife in their marriage*. Genesis thus provides a rich record of the drama and dysfunction that accompanies departure from God's ideal. Joseph's theology, in my view, is the apex of a theology of sexuality in the five books of Moses, setting the tone for the rest of Scripture.

Conclusion

God's ideal, then, is lifelong fidelity to one's spouse. Genesis gives us a hint of this in Genesis 2:24 where a man leaves his father and mother, is joined in a permanent bond to his wife, and only then adds the one-flesh union which fosters and maintains that sense of uniqueness, exclusivity, and specialness.

Although sin has distorted marriage and sexuality—as in polygamy, voyeurism, homoeroticism, rape, prostitution, and adultery—the Bible reveals God's plan and purpose for intimate relationships. In a world where divorce, separation, and infidelity are rampant, the Scripture promotes lifelong fidelity to a spouse. As noted above, Genesis provides not only the major theological foundations for the rest of Scripture in terms of romantic love, sexuality, and marriage but supplies suitable and relevant themes that inform the relational dynamics of the twenty-first century.

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[1]The Septuagint is a Rabbinic translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek from approximately two centuries before Christ. Scholars use with the Roman numeral LXX (70) as an abbreviation of the full name "Septuagint" due to the legend that 70 Rabbis made the translation.

[2]Paul uses the text to ground marital union (Eph 5:31) and the phrase "one flesh" as a euphemism for sexual relations (1 Cor 6:16).
[3]Polygyny, from the Greek *poly* (many) and *gynē* (a wife or woman), is to have multiple wives. Polygamy, from the Greek *poly* (many) and *gamos* (marriage, wedding), is the general term for having multiple marriage partners. Polyandry, from the Greek *poly* (many) and *anēr* (a man or husband) is the practice of one woman having two or more husbands. All polygamous relationships mentioned in the Bible are polygynous. Polyandry is not recorded in the Bible.
[4]See John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012), Gen 19:8.

[5]Both narratives use the verb "force," "humiliate" (ʿānâ). Genesis 34:2 says that Siquem "forced" Dinah, while 2 Samuel 13:14 says that Amnon "forced" Tamar.