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# What the Bible Really Says About Sex . . . Really?

*The Bible is brutally honest about human sinfulness in all its forms, including sexuality. Nevertheless, the Bible presents a consistent and clear sexual ethic. The issue is not a lack of clarity.*

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Has the church misunderstood the Bible's teachings on sexuality for over two thousand years? The current issue of *Newsweek* magazine reports on "new scholarship on the Good Book's naughty bits" that is supposed to turn our understanding of the Bible's teachings on sex upside down.

Lisa Miller, *Newsweek's* religion editor, wrote the article entitled "What the Bible Really Says About Sex." Well, the one thing you need to know up front is that the article falls far short of its title.

Miller bases her report on two recent books — Michael Coogan's *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says* and Jennifer Wright Knust's *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire*. Neither of these books breaks new ground. Instead, the books distill arguments that have become common among liberal and revisionist Bible scholars and homosexual activist groups.

Coogan, trained as a Jesuit priest, has served as editor of *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, a favorite study Bible among theological liberals. He currently serves as director of publications for the Harvard Semitic Museum. In *God and Sex*, Coogan argues that the biblical condemnations of various sexual behaviors and relationships should not be considered normative for today. In his words, the biblical texts on sexuality "reflect the presuppositions and prejudices, the ideas and ideals of their authors." He argues that we should not be bound by those same prejudices.

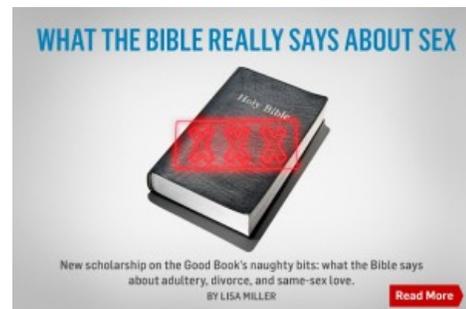
He rejects outright the belief that the Bible is in any objective sense the Word of God. The guild of academic biblical scholars has adopted a liberal approach to the Bible, he affirms, and the real problem is that the great multitude of church-goers have not joined the scholars in this liberal approach. Coogan laments the fact that "we have not succeeded in changing the way most nonspecialists and even many in the clergy think about the Bible." Instead, "people still maintain that the Bible is God's word, plain and simple: that God is the author of scripture."

Yes, Dr. Coogan, people do still maintain that belief.

To his credit, Coogan does not argue dishonestly. He is straightforward in presenting his rendering of the key biblical texts, for his main point is that the church is not bound by the "presuppositions and prejudices" of those texts.

Jennifer Wright Knust follows a very different game plan in *Unprotected Texts*, though she shares Coogan's rejection of biblical inspiration. Knust, who teaches religion at Boston University, bases her revisionism on the claim that the Bible simply lacks any consistent sexual ethic. "The Bible is not only contradictory but complex," she insists. Some parts of the Bible "promote points of view that, from a modern perspective anyway, are patently immoral."

An ordained American Baptist pastor, Knust argues that the Bible is so contradictory when it comes to sexual matters that we cannot gain any consistent sexual ethic from its pages. Her agenda is clear from the start — she wants to overthrow the normative authority of the Bible on matters of sexual morality.



Lisa Miller summarizes the arguments of Coogan and Knust by explaining that they are each attempting “to steal the conversation about sex and the Bible back from the religious right.” Putting the two books together, Miller explains that they argue along these lines: first, that “the Bible is an ancient text, inapplicable in its particulars to the modern world.” Second, that “sex in the Bible is sometimes hidden.” Third, that “that which is forbidden is also allowed.” And fourth, that “accepted interpretations are sometimes wrong.”

Well, one immediate problem with this set of arguments is that they are themselves contradictory. Is the Bible itself wrong, or just its interpretations? If the Bible is just an ancient text, which is not relevant in its particulars for the modern world, why argue over its interpretation? They need to get their story straight.

Knust and Coogan cannot even agree when it comes to the particulars. Knust claims that King David “enjoyed sexual satisfaction” with Jonathan, and that this thus serves as evidence of an authorized homosexual relationship within Scripture. Again, to his credit, Coogan is too careful a scholar to go with that kind of argument. David and Jonathan were *covenant* partners, he argues — “but despite the claims of some gay activists, they were not sexual partners.”

Lisa Miller notes that “Coogan and Knust are hardly the first scholars to offer alternative readings of the Bible’s teachings on sex.” As a matter of fact, almost all of the arguments made in these books have been around for the past thirty years. Miller argues that it is the populism of these books that sets them apart. “With provocative titles and mainstream publishing houses, they obviously hope to sell books,” she explains. “But their greater cause is a fight against ‘official’ interpretations.”

In response to that, Lisa Miller quotes me: “That’s why Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, that citadel of Christian conservatism, concludes that one’s Bible reading must be overseen by the proper authorities.” I enjoyed my conversation with Ms. Miller, but my point was not that the church needs “proper authorities,” but that just any interpretation of the Bible will not do. The authority in this issue is that of the Bible itself. Those who read it as bearing the very authority of God will read the Bible quite differently than those who see it as a human book conditioned and warped by human frailty and fallibility.

The most important point I made to Lisa Miller is that revisionist interpreters of the Bible are playing a dishonest game. Consider the audacity of their claim: they claim that no one has rightly understood the Bible for over two thousand years. No Jewish or Christian interpreter of the Bible had ever suggested that the relationship between David and Jonathan was homosexual — at least not until recent decades. The revisionist case is equally ludicrous across the board. We are only now able to understand what Paul was talking about in Romans 1? The church was wrong for two millennia?

I have far greater respect for the intellectual integrity of the scholar who reads the Bible and interprets it honestly, but then rejects it with candor. This is far superior to evasive and clever attempts to make the Bible say what it plainly does not say. The Bible is brutally honest about human sinfulness in all its forms, including sexuality. Nevertheless, the Bible presents a consistent and clear sexual ethic. The issue is not a lack of clarity.

The real problem here is not that the Bible is misunderstood and in need of revision. To the contrary, the real problem is that the ethic revealed in the Bible is both rejected and reviled.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at [mail@albertmohler.com](mailto:mail@albertmohler.com). Follow regular updates on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler](http://www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler).

Lisa Miller, “[What the Bible Really Says About Sex](#),” *Newsweek* (February 14, 2011), pages 46-49.

Michael Coogan, *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says* (Twelve, the Hachette Book Group, 2010).

Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (HarperOne, 2011).

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