

On sex, Bible has something for everyone

Mary E. Hunt | Jul. 18, 2012

UNPROTECTED TEXTS: THE BIBLE'S SURPRISING CONTRADICTIONS ABOUT SEX AND DESIRE

By Jennifer Wright Knust

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Bible thumpers who rely on the text for their arguments have a tough job. On marriage and divorce, for example, Mark and Luke offer no recommendation on who should marry, while Matthew says not to if one can be a "eunuch for the kingdom of heaven." They agree that remarriage is adultery, but Matthew stands out for his support of divorce if the wife is sexually immoral. And so it goes, with one passage contradicting another from Genesis to the end. Who knew?

Jennifer Wright Knust, an American Baptist pastor and professor of religion at Boston University, tells all in her popularly written work based on contemporary biblical scholarship. It is a broad sweep through the text with focus on the nittier, grittier matters of bodies and what we do with them. She argues that the Bible does not speak in one voice on almost anything sexual, though the general principles of love, justice and "abundance of life" keep surfacing. Beyond that, it is all over the map.

She "invites readers to encounter the full complexity of the biblical witness, taking both the diversity and the peculiarity of the Bible into account." If you don't like Paul's sometimes stern approach, thumb right over to the Song of Songs for some delicious directives on how to please a partner. Now there's a biblical book worth reading if you are over 18!

The Bible comes off as a rather confusing volume in need of an editor. But I doubt that the religious right, to whose rhetoric this volume seems intended as a corrective, will buy the argument.

There really is something for everyone. What fun is that when you want to make an argument in favor of same-sex marriage or against sexism? A lot, as it turns out, if you figure no one else can argue the opposite side of the coin. But the Bible is contested turf, every line of every page, in struggles that play out in the voting booth and the bedroom.

Biblical contradictions make for odd bedfellows. Take the nuptial imagery of God marrying "his" spouse, Israel, in the Song of Songs. Nuptials everywhere: the bride and bridegroom, the church and Jesus, Israel and God. Knust writes that "allegorical interpretation takes the slippery slope of gender roles of the Songs even further, troubling the notion of who desires whom."

Imagine Moses, Abraham and company lined up as the would-be wives of God. Contemporary gender fluidity comes bubbling to the surface as men marry a male God, or maybe same-sex marriage is really a very old idea. Take your pick. The Roman Catholic church bases its prohibition on the ordination of women to the priesthood on the same nuptial imagery, a rather shaky foundation.

Knust concludes with a chapter on everything you wanted to know about the sacred foreskin of Jesus,

conjectures on Mary's menstrual history, and other such delicate matters.

Her argument, though subtle, seems to be how far we have come from a time when biology ruled to a time when symbols are all. Agreed.

I missed more explicit feminist and postcolonial biblical insights. I wondered why, if there really are consistent themes of love and justice in the Bible, they didn't come in for more attention. But, I appreciated this overview of that complicated book that continues to be read and used throughout the world, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer.

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