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Reflection on Michael Coogan's God and Sex

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**Reflection on Michael Coogan's
*God and Sex***

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Dr. Sharon A. Showman

God and Sex is a captivating read. Michael Coogan touches on subjects such as the status of women, the importance of virginity, marriage, divorce, same-sex relationships, rape, and prostitution. I really related to two components of this book: the acknowledgment that the Bible was written by and for people of that particular time period, and the enlightenment about virginity. Writers who contributed to the Bible probably did not fathom how much the world would change and advance through the years. They used words and references relevant to their time that simply are dated and unheard of for us today. Furthermore, the explanation of what it meant to be virgin sticks out to me because I am a single mother. The clarification this book has brought me has been truly fascinating.

The first thing that really connected with me is on page 3 when Coogan points out, “In studying the past, we have to learn how they did things there, being careful not to project our own values and social constructs onto other cultures, and recognizing that words can have different meanings and nuances.” I think this is a huge statement because all too often people read, or more likely skim, the Bible and interpret words in the way their modern mind automatically understands them. This causes mass confusion because everyone starts listening to this misguided person’s misinterpretations. I learned that there are many terms that are used alternately for sexual intercourse: “to know,” “to sleep with,” “to have relations with,” “uncovering the nakedness,” and “to lay at his feet” are all such examples. Here “feet” means genitals, and “flesh” can mean genitals as well. This can be very confusing. To learn what the Bible means, we must first learn what it meant when it was written, and that begins with the words themselves. The woman who bathed and kissed the feet of Jesus leaves us with a matter of translation. Could this possibly hint that sexual innuendo is present? I think it all falls on your interpretation. Until I read this book, I would never have thought twice about this sentence because I simply did not understand what feet could have possibly meant at the time it was written.

Throughout the years, any church I have been to strongly stresses that virginity before marriage is the way it should be because it is in the Bible. I would say, “Yes, they are right,” but I think this practice was somewhat set because of the time period. On page 28 Coogan states, “Virginity before marriage was prized – a man had a right to expect his wife to be a virgin, and a father had a compelling interest in making sure that she was, for the bride-price for daughters who were virgins was much higher than that for those who were not.” Because women were seen as property, and therefore very vulnerable, they needed a husband to protect them. So to be a virgin made you more sought after by your male protector. While staying a virgin before marriage was ideal, it was a tragedy to die a virgin, not because the women missed out on sexual experiences, but because they would not have borne children. The emphasize representing a wife, and therefore a mother, was huge. There is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible supporting a positive attitude toward lifelong virginity. There are frequent references to women who have not known a man, but never to a man who has not known a woman. This attitude that men were expected to be “experienced” could possibly contribute to today’s approach of parents being stricter and more over-protective with girls but being less stern with boys. If I lived in Biblical times and had a daughter, as I do today, then I would have been married off right away. It is scary to think that women had no voice back then. The stories in the Bible are great, but I would love to hear the overlooked stories of the forgotten women!

If one is to take anything from this book, I think it is to fully note that at the end of almost every chapter Coogan makes clear the Bible is inconsistent. For example, on page 98 Coogan states, “Jesus rejects the teaching of Moses, and the Torah, Paul goes beyond the teaching of Jesus, and likewise believers through the ages and especially in modern times have selectively adopted, adapted, and even rejected what the Bible says about marriage and divorce.” This goes to show that sometimes scripture can be an inadequate guide because of its inconsistencies.

The Bible is not without its difficulties. There are cultural barriers to overcome and word usage to decipher. We must keep in mind that our interpretations can distract from the original meaning. We must not craft what is not really there. Overall, I think it is best to make our own judgments and only to refer to the Bible as support if you surely understand the content.

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