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## A Reflection on *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*

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# A REFLECTION ON *GOD AND SEX: WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS*

by Michael Coogan

HOWARD WAGNER

REL 2040: Great Books: Bible and Western Culture, Fall 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Sharon Showman

Howard Wagner is a junior majoring in Organizational Leadership. He grew up in Coldwater, Ohio and intends to pursue a career in Human Resources.

## **Howard notes:**

This writing opened my eyes to the extreme difference in culture between the ancient Israelites and modern day society. I hope this work allows for the audience to explore their own explanations of the Bible and allow for personal growth.

## **Dr. Showman notes:**

Howard's paper is an assigned reflection on a book that is chosen by the student from a list of recommended titles, which is offered in addition to the textbooks for the class. A reflection paper seeks to combine academic content with a student's personal response to what is being studied. It is to be a well-constructed academic paper, but it permits personal insights, questions, responses, observations, and experiences on the part of the student to be included in the paper. Howard's paper is exemplary in that he is able to acknowledge, confront, and reconcile important academic information which clashed with, or informed what, he had been previously taught about the Bible. This is sometimes hard for students to do especially for those coming from strong family backgrounds with a non-negotiable religious foundation, but Howard is able to achieve this through an honest appraisal of his lack of academic understandings of the Bible, humor, and a sense of personal clarity that does not religiously frighten him, as much as it informs his quest for knowledge. He is also able to embrace that spiritual faith is an ongoing process of refinement, as opposed to something that is set in stone. Howard's writing has grown stronger over the course of the semester. He has worked hard on his writing skills and this submission is evidence of a student who has benefited from an integrated writing course.

A Reflection on *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*  
by Michael Coogan

Throughout my life and interaction with the Catholic faith, I had always seen the Bible as the Word of God, speaking a message that was cut and dry. However, after participating in The Bible and Western Culture class and reading a variety of biblical texts, as well as Michael Coogan's *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*, it became clear to me that everything was not as simple as it had once seemed. During my childhood and throughout my adult life, the Bible was only ever taught to me from a single perspective. This perspective, while providing me with a set of morals and beliefs, has also limited my understanding of the beliefs of others and what values and messages they hold true. The Bible is but one book. Yet Judaism and Christianity have an abundance of branches from the same religious root and each with their own interpretations of the same material.

From the beginning of the book it became clear to me that I had misinterpreted much of what I was reading in the Bible, particularly stories related to sex. This was caused by a misunderstanding of the Biblical words, many of which are unfamiliar to those in modern society. Words such as "feet," "know," and "eating" were all used as sexual innuendos (Coogan 6). For instance, in Genesis after the forbidden fruit had been consumed, the Bible says, "the man knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain." I had read this exact story for this class earlier in the semester and was totally oblivious to what was actually being said. Noticeably, I understood the result of Eve becoming pregnant, but for whatever reason, I did not correlate the word "knew" as being synonymous with sexual relations.

It is not just the wording that I failed to recognize, but even more so, the meanings behind the stories themselves. Sex appears in the Bible far more than I had anticipated upon first reading, and I believe my misunderstanding was mostly due to the nature of church, and the strong dislike of sexual conversation within the Mass. While it is true that some stories are considered inappropriate for your Sunday gatherings, I was astonished to have not heard them at all. The stories relating to Lot and his daughters were particularly shocking, as well as the general idea that a woman's purpose was primarily to produce offspring.

In biblical times, women, especially daughters, were considered very much as a form of currency. The father had rights to establish who his daughters would marry as well as setting a marriage price, which fluctuated based on her virginity, or lack thereof (27). Women were also not able to hold public office; they contributed to the religious ceremonies by playing music, cooking, and performing other menial tasks (39). Now, while women currently still face instances of discrimination, it seems we have come a long way from the views of the early Israelites. After reading the chapter that Coogan had designated to the role of women in the pre-monarchic era, I was flabbergasted. Today, we commonly see women side by side with men providing leadership during church services. They can contribute in almost all forms of the ceremony, and they certainly have the right to choose their own spouses. In my opinion it is shameful to put a price on a human, let alone a family member, and allocate their worth based on various factors including sexual activity. Reading this made me feel great sympathy for the women of that time, as well as creating a new found respect for the devout sacrifices they made for their family and religion.

It was also humbling to read of the importance of fertility to the women, and the extent to which families would go to ensure they “carried on the family name.” Wives that were unable to give birth would commonly allow their husbands to take another wife, so that she may produce in her stead. Such conduct is shown through the story of Abraham and Sara. In this day and age, this would be considered an extreme breach of fidelity.

It should be noted that to understand the scenario of Abraham and Sara, it must be understood the way in which marriage was viewed during ancient times. Throughout that time period, marriage had a sole purpose of producing offspring, not creating an everlasting love between two inseparable beings (63). In fact, this time period would suggest marriage occurred numerous times in a man’s life so that he could produce sons to continue his legacy once he had perished. It explains why many important biblical characters had several wives, and also elaborates on the Bible’s lack of text concerning love within marriage.

With that being said, in today’s society love is considered the most valuable part of a marriage and the sole purpose for continuing that relationship. We no longer fear that our family will one day die out of

existence, or that we have not made our worldly impact without creating a strong bloodline. In my experiences with the Catholic faith, it is clear that the church's primary focus in the sacrament of marriage is to form two compatible people into one holy being. This is what I have grown to know and continue to believe. The time periods have changed, the environment has changed, the need for constant reproduction is behind us, and so marriage may now be seen as something more.

The book also discusses the forbidden sexual relationships found in the Bible. This consists of primarily the seventh commandment; "Thou shall not commit adultery." The initial interpretation of the seventh commandment was meant for Israelite men to abstain from having sexual relations with another man's wife. The idea was formed because women were considered property, and through marriage the man had paid for his wife, so adultery created an expropriation of property and possibility of pregnancy (102). The common belief is that the commandment was set in place as an extension of preserving others property, just as you would not take their slave, ox, or anything belonging to your neighbor, nor should you take his wife (102). Nevertheless, ministers and preachers have continued to put their own interpretation of the commandment as a ban on sexual immorality. The Catholic Church has magnified the meaning of the seventh commandment to encompass everything from rape and prostitution to premarital sex and artificial birth control, and all that ranges in between (103).

In my opinion, the seventh commandment is open to interpretation. The prior reasoning makes sense. However, the Bible was written in a much different time and applying our own personal truths to its content can be just as precarious as ignoring them in the first place. For instance, the Bible commands that people are not to touch the skin of a pig. Does modern day society condemn football and its participants? The problem occurs when people take an ancient teaching from the Bible, accept it as Truth, and expect all others to do the same. Much of religion is based upon interpretation rather than factual information, and our failure as a society to recognize that fact creates the religious hostility that we see today.

Coogan's writing gives me great insight into the parts of the Bible that I had not previously known of, nor understood. I believe that the Bible does set a sexual standard throughout its writing and creation, but

that standard varies from person to person, time period to time period, and from one religion to another. Much of what we believe is based on our own moral values, what we have been taught, or even more probable yet, what suits the lifestyle that we enjoy.

### **Works Cited**

Coogan, Michael. *God and Sex What the Bible Really Says*. Second ed. New York City: Twelve, 2011. Print.