



Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire

Jennifer Wright Knust

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“An explosive, fascinating book that reveals how the Bible cannot be used as a rulebook when it comes to sex. A terrific read by a top scholar.” —Bart Ehrman, author of *Misquoting Jesus*

Boston University's cutting-edge religion scholar Jennifer Wright Knust reveals the Bible's contradictory messages about sex in this thoughtful, riveting, and timely reexploration of the letter of the gospels. In the tradition of Bart Ehrman's *Jesus Interrupted* and John Shelby Spong's *Sins of Scripture*, Knust's *Unprotected Texts* liberates us from the pervasive moralizing—the fickle dos and don'ts—so often dictated by religious demagogues. Knust's powerful reading offers a return to the scripture, away from the mere slogans to which it is so often reduced.

Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire Details

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From Reader Review Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire for online ebook

Naftoli says

This book Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire by Jennifer Wright Knust is a gem. It is scholarly yet flows easily. Written for an educated audience that is also Bible-literate there is much to learn from Knust's presentation of current issues as portrayed in Jewish and Christian scripture. Here is a religious scholar who is also an ordained Baptist pastor and yet she is able to speak critically about these sacred texts; one wonders if her windows are bullet-proof.

Knust does not shy from any issues. She tackles menstrual emissions, semen, gay marriage, adultery, bodily parts, sex between humans and angels, sexual politics, miscegenation laws, kashrut, and circumcision. Surely I left a dozen topics out. I found her to be very thorough: she references the scriptural canon, books that didn't make the final cut, historical documents, and the words of the great luminaries of whichever time period under discussion. One cannot ask for a more comprehensive study in the short space of about 300 pages.

The overall message of her book is that the Bible does not speak with one voice. She relates this to the contemporary push among Christian activists to formulate one view of scripture then present it as the *only* view. One point she makes clearly is that the Bible does not state that the definition of marriage is one man/one woman. This simply is not found in scripture.

In fact, the overall message of the New Testament is "celibacy for the strong; marriage for the weak." She uses not only the words of Paul to make this point but corroborative gospel accounts. It is indeed bizarre that Christian pastors tend to encourage, promote, and support marriage when they should be focusing on lifetime celibacy. I cannot imagine a preacher telling a congregation that they need to commit their lives to celibacy in order to focus on the Lord's work.

I have a vivid memory from long ago, Jesse Jackson on TV shouted to a crowd of black activists, "Be fruitful and multiply." Obviously he was addressing racial inequalities and wanted more blacks born to displace white privilege but, as a preacher, his message should have been, "People, stop having sex altogether, this is the message of Christian scripture." Yeah, right. And the Mormons, are they taking the New Testament message of celibacy seriously? Me thinks not.

If the NT's focus on lifetime celibacy were taken seriously we'd have less and less fundamentalist Christians, not more. Celibacy is for the strong; marriage is for the weak. Though what kind of marriage is difficult to pinpoint, there are so many versions of marriage and quite a number of possible sexual relationships as presented in the Bible - not just among the villains but among the heroes as well!

Mike says

The premise of the book is fascinating: Have we completely misunderstood what the Bible says about sex? And if we have misunderstood it, is there another legitimate way to interpret some of the more misunderstood passages?

than Knust to answer them. It constantly seems like she has already made up her mind to arrive at particular conclusions (such as the legitimacy of extra-marital, homosexual and polyamorous sex) and then finds a way to have the Bible say this. This method of knowing what you want to find before you look is disingenuous and dangerous.

Knust approaches the Bible like it is secret literature of a bygone era and sees no authority to it. She treats it with no more reverence than the tablets of Hammurabi or an inscription on the inside of the Giza pyramid. Because of this, when there is an obvious interpretation to a Scripture passage she doesn't like, she ascribes it to the prejudices of the people who lived when that book was written.

There are a number of Bible stories that she addresses where she could have legitimately brought up controversial interpretations - and she completely misses these opportunities.

Her conclusions are beyond ludicrous at times. She suggests that Ruth and Naomi were lesbian lovers. There is no textual reason she believes this...she just struggles to understand how two women could love each other with such devotion without getting sexual.

It is a waste of time reading this.

Sheri says

What does the Bible have to say about sex? Many contradictory things. If all the Bible's sex-related prohibitions were literally enforced, we'd have to stone or at least kill about a quarter of the population.

Knust breaks up the book into topics (e.g., marriage; desire/lust; body parts; the relationship between the sexes; etc.) and lays out in detail everything the bible offers on each topic. She takes care with the issue of translations, and how those have affected what we think the Bible says. She also provides contemporaneous writings in the societies where the various books of the Bible were written to show the context for the biblical texts. She drops in a few personal anecdotes, some of which feel not quite on point, or not particularly interesting. My biggest beef with the book is its redundancy. She tells you what she's going to tell you; then she tells it to you; then she tells you what she just told you. This strategy may work great for a lawyer making an oral argument that lasts less than half an hour, but it drives this reader crazy. Knust could have used a good editor to eliminate all these redundancies. At bottom, this is a highly informative book for anyone interested in the topic.

Mohamed says

1. The real sluts in the Bible, we learned, were women like Jezebel, the evil wife of King Ahab of Israel and rival of the prophet Elijah. I knew this story well. King Ahab made the mistake of taking Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, as his wife. Following her lead, he went and served Baal, her idolatrous god (see 1 Kgs. 16:31). Seduced by the foreign queen, Ahab abandoned the one true God, Yhwh, for Baal, the perverse god of the Canaanites, and pretty soon both Israel and Ahab's morals were on their way down a slippery slope from which it would not be easy to recover. Ruthlessly persecuting Elijah and other legitimate prophets of Yhwh, Jezebel invited 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah to join the royal court. But, the Bible assured us, she would not succeed forever. As Yhwh promised, she would eventually be overthrown—tossed over the palace walls, her flesh to be eaten by dogs. Even so, when the

day of her demise finally arrived, she flaunted her slutty ways one more time. Hearing that the royal family had been massacred by Yhwh's choice prince Jehu, she "painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window" (2 Kgs. 9:30), taunting the new claimant to the throne. Unluckily for her, however, the palace eunuchs had changed sides, and they pushed her out this very window. She was trampled to death by horses and then left for the dogs. By the time the dogs were done with her, only her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands remained. Sluts, the Bible taught us, deserved what they got.

Could that be how the Islamic veil was installed?

2. Try to read Song of Songs, a love poem attributed to King Solomon, and daughters of Jerusalem if possible.

3. The biblical patriarch Judah, for example, was quite content to solicit a prostitute while out on a business trip, offering her a kid from his flocks in payment for an opportunity to "go into" her. It was only later, when he learned that this "prostitute" was actually his daughter-in-law Tamar that he became angry. Sentenced to death for playing the whore, Tamar stood up to her father-in-law, proving to him that he had been her one customer. She was forced into the ruse by Judah, she explained, since he failed to give her the support she was due after the death of her husband, Judah's son. Repenting of his mistake, Judah let her live, admitting, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my [living] son Shelah" (Gen. 38:26). With her life spared and pregnant with Judah's sons, Tamar went on to bear twins, Perez and Zerah, one of whom became an ancestor of both King David and Jesus. Does the Bible have a problem with prostitutes or prostitution? Not necessarily, I have come to learn.

Prostitution?! Say incest to the least, what the hell is going on? Jesus and David was born to the ancestry of a perverted sexual encounter.

4. Solomon's harem included seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines. Women, however, are permitted only one husband at a time. So, this is not special to Muhammad?

5. Deuteronomy commands Israelite men to stone to death any young woman who fails to remain a virgin prior to marriage. If the woman does not bleed on her wedding night, she is to be executed on the doorstep of her paternal home "because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house". How can Islam be to blame for these rules if Islam was as a matter of fact derived from Judaism.

6. allowing the Jews to execute all those who seek to destroy them "Jewish festival of Purim"
Most if not all of Jewish stories end in a bloody massacre and they are not barbaric.

7. , from the perspective of the Bible, the worst form of sexual deviance was not sex outside of marriage or even incest and bestiality but sex with angels. Sexual mixing between Israelites and foreign women or, even more troubling, between God's people and angels was widely denounced, with the attempted rape of angels by the men of Sodom recalled as a particularly egregious example of improper human lust.

Sex with angles, creepy but let's wait and see.

8. Bible truly means or what the Bible must truly say. The Bible is complicated enough, ancient enough, and flexible enough to support an almost endless set of interpretive agendas.

That's what is really hated about religion, the Bible clearly telling stories about the slaves, and how their male master is in charge of them sexually, but the Bible says love the neighbor so the soul of the book rejects slavery, WTF! if we used the same principle in medical textbooks you'll have no hospital survivors.

9. The Song of Songs, an ancient biblical love poem that speaks frankly of towering breasts, flowing black locks, kissable lips, and the joy of sexual fulfillment, offers a particularly striking example of this phenomenon, but other biblical passages are nearly as forthright. Ruth, King David's grandmother, conspires with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to seduce Boaz, one of Naomi's wealthy relatives. "Uncovering his feet," a Hebrew euphemism for uncovering a man's genitals, Ruth succeeds at gaining a home for herself and for

Naomi, a woman she has promised to love until they are parted by death. By loving both her mother-in-law and her partner, Boaz, Ruth's bold desire secures a future for herself and her family. The love between Naomi and Ruth is paralleled by the devotion of Jonathan to David, a friendship so strong that Jonathan comes to love David more than he loves women. After Jonathan's death, when David spies the beautiful Bathsheba bathing, he invites her for a sexual rendezvous in the palace, though he already had many other wives to enjoy. The child of their adultery dies, but Bathsheba later becomes pregnant with Solomon, the famously wise king and the purported author of the Song. In these biblical passages, sexual longing refuses to be limited to the love between a husband and wife, or even between a man and a woman. In the case of the Song of Songs, desire's heat can be applied not only to the love between a woman and a man, but also between humanity and God.

Are those the great prophets?

10. Read this way, "With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste" can be understood as a reference to oral sex offered by the woman to the man's "tree"

Is this really attributed to king Solomon, the great king of the Jews.

11. Described as descendants of the incestuous union of Lot and one of his daughters (see Gen. 19:30–38), Wtf did I just read

12. Ruth and Naomi have returned to Israel, secured an inheritance for themselves, and, with the assistance of Boaz, one of Elimelech's relatives, given birth to a son, Obed, the grandfather of David.

If the claims made in the books are genuine, then I'm fucked royally in what I know as facts of life.

13. These thoughts are so dangerous that it would be better to cut off a body part than to succumb to them. Perhaps Jesus did want some of his followers to self-castrate.

It was illegal in the Roman empire and was followed by loss of status, yet a lot of devout followers did it anyway following the teachings of Matthew.

14. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. I'm having the fun of my life reading this book.

15. As this statement implies, Jewish tradition expected men to initiate divorce, though actual practice was much more complex.

The similarities between Islam and Judaism is simply non deniable.

16. Exodus and Deuteronomy assume that, given a chance, men will take multiple wives and have intercourse with as many of their slaves as they like.

Tell me more about feminism.

17. From Reverend Young's perspective, heterosexual, married sex is the salve that God has provided to cure the ills of contemporary America.

And they say middle eastern religious authorities are crazy.

18. emphasized the ties of the Christian "family" over traditional kinship relations, calling Jesus's followers "brothers" and "sisters,"

Who also emphasized the concept of the religious family! Muslims.

19. Jewish writings known as the Mishnah, advising husbands and wives to provide regular sex to each other. Husbands in particular were required to give their wives sexual satisfaction, and on a regular basis

Tony says

There are good arguments to be made about some of the issues she brings up. However, in some attempt to make it readable to a general audience, I think Dr. Knust has removed too much solid argumentation from her work. This reads like a Patheos blog rather than a scholar. You can do better, Dr. Knust!

In-depth review here: <https://sinnersinthehandsofanangryblo...>

mike says

Raised as a fundamentalist Baptist but having drifted from the dogma, I am sympathetic to the author's point of view and was looking forward to well-argued and footnoted exposé of the Bible's internal contradictions.

What I got was certainly well-footnoted, but argued? Not so much. I measure these kinds of books in their ability to sway people of other viewpoints. This book plays to the like-minded but is unlikely to convert the born-again.

My key complaint is the author's tendency to cherry-pick translations, and even more disturbingly, to fall back on her own personal "my translation" in a substantial portion of cases. The unconvinced or cynical would suspect she was just making stuff up when she couldn't find a translation that matched her thesis. She's a self-proclaimed Biblical scholar, but one earns scholarly respect by proving an understanding of precedent, then challenging it defensibly. To ignore precedent as often as she does, without first having proven her authority to do so, is to invite suspicion/presumption of bias, or worse, incomplete understanding of existing opinion.

As a Baptist minister, the author would undoubtedly know that many fundamentalists consider the King James Bible to be the last authoritative translation, and to convince this audience, she would need to go back to King James and expose internal inconsistencies using that text. I do assume that they are there, but I am not a scholar myself, so my opinion is immaterial. I was looking for a scholar who would take this approach.

I am still looking.

Matt says

goodreads does not allow half ratings, but I really give the book 3.5 stars, rather than just three. It's a fine read in many ways: nice prose style, accessible, clear, and engaging. Certainly pleases you in the department of readability.

As far as the merits of the work as a piece of Biblical Scholarship my opinion of it is a little lower. This book certainly demonstrates that the Bible has no unified view of sexuality or sexually permissible behavior. But then again, that conclusion could not really be doubted by anyone with an open mind who actually reads and compares the various books that make up the Bible.

There are some very interesting discussion of sex and sexuality throughout post-biblical Christian tradition

(it was odd to learn of the Medieval cult of Jesus Christ's "foreskin"!!!!) and several of the Biblical stories (most notably the story of Ruth and the tale of the lovers who sing out in "Song of Songs") were rather nicely explained and conveyed.

I found the author's intimation that David and Jonathan had a homosexual relationship to be unwarranted by the texts and the traditions. She is very convinced that a few phrases here and there prove that David and Jonathan "got it on," but the bulk of scholarship simply does not support this reading and it seems pretty clear to me that it is a very "wishful thinking" reading of the text.

Don't get me wrong: I would love it if a major biblical hero had a gay relationship, I would be the first to celebrate it! But It seems that, in this case, the evidence is simply lacking.

All in all, then, I enjoyed the read and do recommend the book to those interested in the relationship between religion and sexuality. Indeed, the the book is not particularly exceptional as a work of scholarship it is a very fine popular writing on the issue. When so many condemn the sexual acts of us as "against the Bible" it is nice to be able to explain clearly, carefully, and with texts to back it up, that the Bible teaches inconsistent views of sex, and that some of what it teaches is just plain, silly, antiquated, or even down-right wrong.

John Willis says

Very interesting read.

Tom says

Jennifer Knust's central thesis is that the Bible cannot be taken as a guide to sexual behavior because it is entirely and completely self-contradictory on the subject. This is a provocative thesis, so surely she has convincing evidence and powerful arguments on her side, right??

Well, she has *arguments*. Lots of them. Knust's approach is to bombard the reader with every possible argument against whatever aspect of Biblical sexuality she is attacking. She will even present two different arguments against a text even if they seem mutually contradictory. And she holds up strange fringe interpretations of passages as proof of those passages supposed incoherence.

In fact the author seems drawn, almost compulsively, to the weirdest interpretations she can find. If any scholar or interpreter in history has ever read something particularly bizarre into a passage, she takes it as gospel. This happens throughout the book, but perhaps the most glaring example is the chapter in which she claims that Biblical authors were obsessed with protecting people from having sex with angels. This startling claim is based on a four word tag to Paul writing in regards to women in worship where he recommends they cover their head "because of the angels."

I'll grant this is a somewhat strange aside in Paul's writing, but your average reader probably wouldn't leap from these four words straight to the conclusion that Paul *was paranoid about sexually aggressive angels*. For Knust, however, this is the only possible explanation, and once stated will be taken as fact throughout the book. Similarly, the ideas that David and Jonathan were gay lovers and that Ruth administered oral sex to

Boaz in the middle of a crowded barn obviously need no further defense.

Knust can't seem to tell a good argument from a bad one. On the occasions that she does offer up something that makes the reader go "hmmm" she will inevitably follow it up with one that is so ridiculous that the reader is likely to forget about the first one entirely.

She deploys all sorts of logical fallacies in her zealous pursuit of her thesis. Frequently she will claim that passages forbidding this or that sexual behavior cannot be valid because the Israelites in other texts engage in that very behavior. But the fact that the Israelites were extremely bad at following Mosaic law is almost the entire point of the Old Testament. It's hard to credit that a Bible scholar and theologian would not know this, so it simply seems dishonest.

Knust also cherry picks the passages she quotes with a fervor that would make any Bible-thumper blush. And just to make doubly sure the text says what she wants it to say, she frequently uses her own translations for passages. There are many, many extant translations that have been vigorously vetted by large committees of experts, but when these don't say what Knust wants she just rolls her own. At least, that is how it will come across to many readers.

The author also claims that since the Bible was once used to defend the institution of slavery that it cannot be trusted on sexual issues. Why this is the fault of scripture rather than the fault of the defenders of slavery is not made clear. Even more troubling for Bible believers, if they were to accept this argument it is not clear why it would not simply discredit the entire Bible end to end rather than just the parts about sex and sexuality.

In fact it's hard not to shake the conviction that this is just what the author is after. Although 'Unprotected Texts' is book-ended by proclamations of faith in and respect for the scripture, the actual meat of the material reads like something a very arch atheist academic might write.

This brings up the question of who exactly the author is writing FOR. From the beginning and ending, where she repeatedly notes that she is an ordained pastor, you might expect she is writing to fellow adherents of the Christian faith. But the text itself is extremely academic, steeped in the post-modern style of a typical liberal arts professor. And frankly, the weaker her arguments the more academic Knust gets.

This confusion is most evident in the final chapter which is about circumcision and impure discharges. While these topics do relate somewhat to sex, very few religious people these days are concerned about either; but Knust goes and on and on at great length as though she is delivering an obscure thesis paper on the subject to a group of seminarians. In addition, after enumerating the many ways in which the Bible is remarkably consistent on the topic of menstrual impurity across the Old and New Testaments, she concludes this chapter by claiming she has demonstrated precisely the opposite!

Reading 'Unprotected Texts' was not entirely without value. I will grant that the author is clearly very widely read on her topic. I did learn some things, and, as I said, she occasionally stumbles across a compelling argument that made me want to dig deeper. But readers who want a serious re-examination of what the scripture says about sex will be disappointed. Readers who came simply to point and laugh will, I suppose, be amused when they aren't being bored to tears.

Readers of this book who are Christians will find the author's attitude and intellectually dishonest arguments off-putting. Readers of this book who are not Christians will find it lacks academic rigor. Both kinds of readers will probably wind up confused about who, exactly, this book is for.

The fact is that the author is trying to fit her square peg of a thesis into the round hole of actual Biblical texts. It just doesn't work. This book is poorly argued and it's not going to convince anyone who wasn't already

convinced that the Bible doesn't have anything useful or important to say about sex.

Adam Ross says

A fascinating book exploring the diverse texts regarding family and sexuality in the Scriptures. Knust is a careful scholar who opened my eyes with regards to a number of issues. She still sees Paul as fundamentally opposed to women and equality, however, and I am not convinced this reading is accurate. Still, it is a book well-worth wrestling over.

Dray says

Frankly, I read this book to try to get some support for my "I'm a Christian and I have premarital sex and I don't think that makes me terrible!" tirade. I get quite a lot of disapproving looks due to my choices, even though I'm a 22 yr old adult in a monogamous relationship. So I thought maybe I'd read up on other views and have some good arguments. Too bad her supporting evidence was weak (even though there were 50 pages of it in the bibliography) and not well argued. Honestly, due to my extremely conservative upbringing, I could have taken every one of her points and given scripture that disagreed.

This book is probably the last I'll read on the subject for awhile. I've decided that if confronted about my life's decisions by my family, church, etc., my grand defense will be that it's my life and my choice. Or maybe "none of your beeswax" will suffice.

UPDATE:

I am now 23 and engaged to the aforementioned partner. The scandals continue.

FURTHER UPDATE: I am now 25, an atheist, and married to that same partner. Bam.

SOME NAVEL-GAZING INTROSPECTION:

This review is the perfect example of my non-faith journey of the past few years. I was a Christian who was very unsettled in my heart because I simply could not get behind much of what I was supposed to believe. This particular subject is a little shallow... "I want to have sex but am not supposed to! Wah!" but it was much deeper than that. I have never believed that people of other faiths were going to hell. I didn't believe that Jesus was the only way to heaven...or really that there was a heaven/hell, if I'm honest with myself. I have never believed that being gay was wrong. I've never believed religion had anything to do with morality. But you can't have it both ways. People like commenter Adam below, Mr. Very Concerned About a Stranger on the Internet's Sex Life, ensure that one cannot be part of a religion without committing 100%. Sure, there are people who get away with that and have a contented heart, and that's fine. They can pick and choose and still sleep at night. I wasn't one of them, though. I'm an all or nothing woman.

So this review was just a small example of that. I went looking for ways to reconcile my head and my heart, and I just couldn't do it. Nothing made sense. I didn't believe the very basics of my faith, so I tried and tried to find ways around dealing with that.

A quote I like by Karen Moning states "The most confused we ever get is when we try to convince our heads of something our hearts know is a lie." My head was a battlefield trying to live something I didn't agree with.

Slowly, I decided to cut the bullshit. If I wasn't 100% Christian, then I wasn't Christian. I needed to own it.

This was difficult, because I've been raised to believe that non-Christians go to hell. That was pounded into my head since birth. I was brainwashed. So, for awhile, I felt like I was making a decision that was sending me to hell. Even though I didn't believe in hell, the thought was still there. I was choosing to go to hell.

But then one morning I wasn't as scared. My confidence grew. I began seeing how disturbing and negative it had been for me to constantly fight what I truly felt with what I was supposed to believe.

And the freedom from Christianity has been undoubtedly more freeing than the freedom from "sin." I never received freedom through Jesus. I got it through myself.

Terence says

“(T)he truth of the Bible is never obvious, but always in need of further thought and study.” (p. 244)

Jennifer Wright Knust's *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* should terrify fundamentalists of any stripe. It should make even mainstream and liberal believers squirm in their seats for if her logic is carried to its end, her argument undermines the idea that there is a "Word of God" that is a meaningful, universal guide to human conduct. In her conclusion, the author emphasizes that readers of the Bible bring their own desires to the reading, and impose their own interpretations on the texts. To illustrate her point, she writes that Paul in his letter to the Galatians didn't care about the historical or social context of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. He needed to find a justification that Gentiles didn't need to adopt Jewish law. And he found it after some creative theologizing that reduced Ishmael and Isaac to symbols for those who lived "according to the flesh" and those who lived "according to the promise" (p. 242).

Knust's conception of what a believer's proper relationship to scripture deserves to be quoted in full:

“Nowadays, the sense that reading scripture is a creative, imaginative act has too often been lost, despite the creativity it took for New Testament writers and early Christians to claim that the law and the prophets are, when read correctly, all about Jesus Christ. Paul, Matthew, Irenaeus, and Origen came to the Bible with convictions about what should be found in its pages and, employing a variety of interpretive methods, they found what they wanted. But, unlike many contemporary readers, they did not attempt to hide their interpretive work from their audiences. Instead, they sought to persuade their readers that their interpretations were valuable by revealing the principles they brought to bear on the texts they read, whether they were arguing that Gentiles should come to God as Gentiles, that Jesus's birth was miraculous, or that the church is the best arbiter of divine truth. They did not assume that quoting a few choice verses out of context could serve as sufficient proof of what the entire Bible says and therefore of what God says as well.

“It is time for us to admit that we, too, are interpreters hoping to find our convictions reflected in biblical texts, and have been all along. Looking to the Bible for straightforward answers about anything, including sex, can lead only to disappointment. When read as a whole, the Bible provides neither clear nor consistent advice about sex and bodies, as the material presented in this book demonstrates. If one set of biblical books interprets polygamy as a sign of God's blessing, another set argues that celibacy is the best option for the faithful. If one biblical writer condemns those who engage in sex before marriage, others present premarital seduction as central to God's plan. Just about every biblical commandment is broken, and not only by biblical villains. Biblical heroes like Abraham, Moses, and David also violate the

commandments of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus, and Jesus is represented radically reinterpreting earlier scriptural teachings, including commandments regarding divorce. When it comes to sex, the Bible is often divided against itself.

“It is therefore a mistake to pretend that the Bible can define our ethics for us in any kind of straightforward way; such an interpretive strategy will only lead us astray while also preventing us from taking the Bible as seriously as we should. Even more tragically, a refusal to acknowledge that we are active interpreters might make it seem as if the only possible choice is between accepting the Bible as literally true or rejecting the Bible altogether. Christians should not and need not be asked to make this choice. Since neither the Bible nor a particular interpretation can limit what particular stories and teachings must mean, it is up to readers to decide what a biblically informed and faithful sexual morality might look like. If the New Testament writers were willing to admit that they were constructing their theological and moral perspective with biblical texts but not because of them, then what is preventing readers today from adopting the same strategy? The Bible provides neither a shortcut to the real work of interpretation nor a simple solution to the important task of figuring out what it means to be human and yet in love with God.” (pp. 244-45)

Where is the Bible’s authority if you can find nearly any interpretation reflected somewhere within it? Why is Fred Phelps’ interpretation that “God hates fags”^{*} less authoritative than Chris Levan’s that “It (scripture) simply asks if the relationship is functioning according to principles of justice and dignity? Does the partnership demonstrate mutual trust and compassion? Is so, it is blessed by God” (website Religious Tolerance.org, accessed July 2011)?

This is a problem I have with the conclusion, not with the rest of the book. The bulk of this work is devoted to what the Bible says about sex, desire, marriage, gender, purity, and other issues. It’s lively and well written and will provide plenty of ammunition to those who like to debate such matters with conservative religious friends and relatives (however fruitlessly).

* Or the less obnoxious interpretation that says God may not *hate* homosexuals but he certainly doesn’t think their behavior is OK.

Peggy Bird says

Everyone who uses the phrase, "but the Bible says" should be required to read this book. The author, an ordained pastor and assistant professor of religion who holds a doctorate in religion and a master of divinity, points out that almost any position on matters sexual can be bolstered by what's actually in the Bible. After discussing all sorts of contradictions and differing interpretations on celibacy, sex before or during marriage, multiple marriages and bodily fluids (just to name a few subjects) she says, in the conclusion, that when she teaches on this subject she always asks what the students want the Bible to say. Because, she says, whatever we wish for, we can probably find. We are not "passive recipients of what the Bible says, but active interpreters who make decisions about what we will believe and what we will affirm." She adds that early followers of Jesus knew they were interpreting scriptures, a creative act. We seem to have forgotten that. She hasn't and has written a book that proves it.

Tucker says

Worthwhile, extensive review of Biblical sources that present conflicting opinions on sexual morality.

Knust says "the Bible offers no viable solution to our marriage dilemmas. There is no such thing as a single, biblically based view of legitimate marriage." Under the Sinai covenant, "marriage unites free Israelite men with as many women and slaves as they can reasonably support" and "from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible there is nothing inherently wrong with visiting a prostitute." Initially Israel only prohibited intermarriage with the seven Canaanite nations (Deut. 7:1-4) but after the Babylonian exile, in the 6th century BCE, restrictions on intermarriage seemed to become more severe and Ezra said that Israelite men should immediately divorce all foreign wives. Later, Jesus discouraged but didn't forbid marriage.

Something useful I learned: Biblical texts frequently make metaphorical references to prostitution in conjunction with literal references to idolatry, insofar as worshipping other gods is considered a kind of promiscuity. (More generally, enemy tribes are accused of sexual misbehavior as a form of rebuke.)

Another curiosity: Assyrian law from the 12th century BCE recognized veils as a privilege reserved for married women and concubines and simultaneously established severe corporal punishment for prostitutes and slaves (both unmarriageable castes) who dared to veil themselves. Tertullian, a 2nd century Christian from North Africa, said women should veil themselves so as not to sexually tempt angels.

And: Bestiality, incest, and adultery are forbidden multiple times in the Bible, but homosexuality is forbidden only in Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13).

And: Unlike many other scholars, Knust doesn't believe the Canaanite temple servants called by the title "qdm" were "sacred prostitutes," after all.

Knust says that Biblical literalism "will only lead us astray while also preventing us from taking the Bible as seriously as we should." Readers need to "acknowledge that we are active interpreters". Specific moral conclusions are "up to readers to decide". After all: "If the New Testament writers were willing to admit that they were constructing their theological and moral perspective with biblical texts but not because of them, then what is preventing readers today from adopting the same strategy? The Bible provides neither a shortcut to the real work of interpretation nor a simple solution to the important task of figuring out what it means to be human and yet in love with God."

Emily says

I read this at about the same time as I read *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says* by Michael Coogan. And then I got busy and waited a bit to write this review, so I'm afraid the two books are now hopelessly and inextricably smooshed together (yes, that's a technical term) in my brain. So please keep that in mind as you read the review...

Dr. Knust pulls out some fascinating contradictions about sex, marriage, and the body - both male and female - in the Bible between Genesis and Revelation, as well as some interesting contrasts and parallels. Early on, she explains her approach to this book of scripture as she describes the way her mother taught her as they read together. "Never once did my mom ask me to silence my questions about the Bible and its stories, nor did she tell me that I was silly or bad to wonder what these stories might be teaching me. My mom took me and my questions seriously. The bible was ours to read, question, wonder about, and deliberate, and sometimes it was the questions that mattered more than the answers." She continues: "the

Bible was not a collection of policy statements that had to be obeyed or a weapon designed to enforce particular views about morality, but an invitation to think about who God might be and what it means to be human." I appreciate this kind of honest interaction with the biblical text.

For example, Dr. Knust invites us to compare the acclaimed Jewish heroine queen Esther and Jezebel, the wicked queen whose very name has become synonymous with immorality. Each of them was "asked to serve as a representative of her religious faith from a young age." Each "remain[ed] faithful to her ancestral god once she was placed in the court of a foreign king" and "was not asked to agree to the match." Both women took the opportunities available to promote their people and the worship of their respective gods. And both "arranged for the deaths of their enemies." Dr. Knust, with only a bit of tongue-in-cheek, uses this as an example of biblical "slut shaming" - similar to what happens in middle-schools and other settings all over the world today.

Another example of these inherent contradictions in the Bible, or perhaps the contradictory positions that individuals can hold with supposed biblical support, Dr. Knust also mentions that in the 1700s and 1800s, both pro-slavery and abolitionist groups found, in their minds, incontrovertible scriptural basis for their positions.

One challenge for those of us reading the Bible thousands of years after it was written, is the vastly different culture and society that existed then. The institution of marriage then was so completely distant from what we think of when we say "marriage" today as to be almost incomparable. "State-sponsored marriage is not a matter of morality and piety but of privileges meted out to some and denied to others."

A primary difference - perhaps THE primary difference when talking about marriage - is that "the assumption that women are the property of the men in their families, to be disposed of as their fathers, brothers, and husbands see fit, informs much of biblical literature." For example, a careful reading of David and Bathsheba's affair shows that, according to the prophet Nathan, David's sin is not the immorality of adultery, so much as his violation of Uriah's property rights by sleeping with his wife. "Marriage, as the Sinai covenant codes imagine it, is...a legal arrangement guaranteeing the rights of fathers, husbands, and masters over Israelite women, children and slaves...Marriage unites free Israelite men with as many women and slaves as they can reasonably support." Dr. Knust reiterates that "these are ancient stories designed to address the needs and circumstances of Israel, not twenty-first century Christians and Jews."

Of course, various translations can influence our understanding as well. For example, a great deal of the confusion regarding the sin(s) of Sodom results from some basic differences in translation. While scripture specifically defines these sins as pride, lack of generosity to the poor, and lack of hospitality toward strangers (see Isaiah 1:10-17 and Ezekiel 16:49-50), the false idea that the sin was that of homosexuality persistently hangs on even in modern English language (i.e. the word "sodomy"). This is perpetuated by modern translations that use "sodomy" and "sodomite" for a myriad of Greek words meaning "soft" "cowardly" and "fornicators" in the New Testament.

Dr. Knust also touches on the analogy used throughout the Bible of God or Christ as the bridegroom and Israel or the church as his sometimes unfaithful wife. She discusses circumcision and bodily fluids such as semen and menstrual fluid. She investigates the Bible's presentation of prostitution and sexual desire in this wide-ranging book. While I don't agree with all of her conclusions, I appreciate the frank discussion and raising of issues as food for deep thought and conversation.

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