

## The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality

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### Chapter 4

## Sexual Symbolism in the Scriptures

### Sexuality in Scripture

1. Beyond narratives and laws, by what means does the Bible tell us the meaning of sex and offer grounds for an understanding of sexual morality?

The means used in the Bible to tell us vastly more about sex than narratives or laws is sexual symbolism. By using sexual symbolism, the Bible tells us of the meaning of sex and offers grounds for understanding sexual morality. No symbol contains, however, the fullness of the reality it points to. It is never possible to find in the symbol all that is, in fact, true of the mystery that is symbolized.

2. Explain what the author means when he says that “our use of symbolism is not coercive as an argument” that can force a certain understanding of scripture.

The author is not trying to construct a proof from the symbolism. Instead, accepting the Church's Tradition, we seek to see how her teaching is consistent with and enlightened by this symbolism. The Scriptures are to be understood, as Catholics have always sought to understand them, in the way the Church that wrote and collected them, identified and transmitted them, has understood them.

3. Describe the difference between the two kinds of sexual symbols that are easily confused.

The first kind of sexual symbols are **things that are not sexual used as a symbol of something that is**. For example, the rose, which is not sexual as people ordinarily perceive it, is taken as a symbol for a woman's sexuality. Similarly, the snake is in many cultures, taken as a symbol for a man's sexuality. Use of such symbols avoid explicit or conscious reference to sexual matters. A psychiatrist may observe and learn a patient's unconscious attitudes through his use of such symbols. Many such symbols are in the Bible. While these symbols have some illustrative use, they cannot go to the meaning and significance of sexual activity.

The second kind of sexual symbols is very different—**those that symbolize by or through sexuality**. As seen in the previous chapter, sex organs, sexual emotions and psychic reactions, the marital act itself or even an entire marriage are actually symbols of things other than themselves and beyond themselves - of spiritual things that are not sexual at all.

### Christ the Bride of Christ

4. In the ancient Semitic world, what did it mean to give something its name or to change its name?  
To give something its name or to change its name meant to be able to know its inner nature, to govern it accordingly and to determine its destiny.
5. In the second chapter of Genesis, we find the first mention of the two-shall-become-one symbolic theme. What meanings does this represent?

The obvious sense of this theme is that the bodily union of man and woman in intercourse represents in some way, and symbolizes, the fullness of their psychological union as a couple and as parents, united not only in their own sexual union but also in the flesh of their children.

6. Describe the biblical teachings on the right use of sex that are found between Genesis and the prophets from the last years of the Divided Kingdom. Give an example.

The right use of one's sexual powers that appear in scripture between Genesis and the Divided Kingdom are always expressed in purely secular, not sacred terms. One example is the sexual union of Abraham and Sarah, through which Isaac was conceived. Through their union and subsequent conception, we witness the first fulfillment of that promise which initiates the history of salvation. Their intercourse is not seen as a religious rite, and it in fact, makes both partners ritually unclean.

7. What, does the author say, is considered one of the major gifts of divine revelation given to the Israelites?

One of the major gifts of divine revelation given to the Israelites is the awareness that God Himself has no sexuality. God is not male, though He is infinitely masculine. In His own nature He is spirit, without sexuality, which as such, belongs only to creatures and so, lies wholly outside the domain of religion and the sacred. In contrast, any Divine sexuality was always to be a sign of paganism and idolatry.

8. What two themes did the prophet Hosea develop with regard to human sexuality? What spiritual realities were illustrated by these themes?

The first theme the prophet Hosea develops is that of the People of Israel as the unfaithful bride of the Lord, the God of Israel. The second theme is that of a husband who takes back his adulterous wife whom he loves in spite of her unfaithfulness.

9. In the passage from chapters 1 and 2 of Hosea, what did the Lord propose to do that showed He was above the Law? To what human example is the Lord compared and what is His motivation?

According to the Law, if a husband took back an unfaithful, adulterous wife, both of them, husband and wife would become unclean. But the Lord is above His law. He is motivated by His pure, permanent love and fidelity to His people, in spite of their idolatry. The human example is that of the loving husband who takes back his unfaithful wife because of his love for her.

10. Describe how this theme is further developed in Ezekiel chapter 6? What is the Lord "recalling" in this passage?

This theme is further developed in Ezekiel (as one example in the Old and New Testaments) by language describing God as drawing Israel to Himself as His bride. This passage recalls the time in Egypt, the sojourn in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, and the Kingdom years. This image is the Lord's wedding with Israel, His dearly beloved, his Bride, although she had since proven so adulterous and had fornicated so often with idols and alien gods.

11. The final Old Testament presentation of this attitude of God is found in the Song of Songs. How is this text sometimes misinterpreted? How have authentic Jewish and Christian interpretations viewed this text?

This text is sometimes misinterpreted when many people see nothing in it beyond its sensuality. Sometimes offense is taken by Christians because of its glowing, incandescent love-poetry, sensuous and rich with its strongly sexual imagery. Its natural meaning is unmistakable. In contrast, authentic Jewish and Christian interpretations have viewed this text as an expression of God's love-song for His people and theirs for Him, as His rejoicing in His bride and her rejoicing in Him. It is the bright reflection into the present of a future in which God and Israel will be made perfectly one with each other - Israel no longer unfaithful, seeking only the LORD even when He seems to have vanished and she cannot find Him, not turning aside after anyone else.

12. As the Israelites began to understand more fully the meaning of these passages, how did this change their social practices regarding marriage?

The norm of polygamy was withering away as God's people began to understand more fully this symbol of monogamy as a symbol of God's love.

13. In the New Testament, how does this symbolism change slightly?

The symbolism in the New Testament is changed slightly from Israel in the Old Testament being described as the Bride of the LORD, to the Church, the New Israel in the New Testament, that is presented as the bride of Christ.

14. When Our Lord used the term “adulterous generation” to what was He referring?

By this, Our Lord means precisely what the Old Testament prophets meant, that His generation of Jews were in fact committing adultery, though this time not with idols. This time, their refusal to accept Christ, their refusal to see in Him at least a prophet sent by God, showed that Israel's heart was fixed elsewhere and, consequently, was adulterous.

15. The author mentions two passage where Jesus uses nuptial imagery, one where John the Baptist does, two where St. Paul does, and lastly, two places in Revelations. Find these verses and copy them.

Jesus: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who made a wedding feast for his son...” where of course the king is God the Father and His Son is Our Lord.

Again Jesus: “The kingdom is like ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to return from the wedding feast to take his bride into his house.”

John the Baptist in the Gospel of John 3:28-30 “You yourselves bear me witness that I said, ‘I am not the Christ’, but I have been sent before Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore, this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

St Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians 5:22-33 “As Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word [referring to baptism on the one hand and to the Jewish prenuptial bath on the other] that He might present the Church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of His body. [Now, referring back to Genesis] ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife

and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.”

St Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians 6:15-17 “Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, ‘The two shall become one flesh.’ But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him.”

Revelation (Apocalypse 19:6-9) "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [that is, the Lamb of God, the Lamb standing as slain forever] has come and His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure - for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. . . . Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

Revelation (Apocalypse 21:1-2) “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

### Father, Mother, and Children

16. How does the scriptural symbolism of spousal relations, of father, mother and children differ from a natural family? Who is Father? Mother?

The passages in scripture that deal with spousal relations between God and His people or between Christ and His Church mostly say nothing about children. Further, when children are mentioned, they are not begotten of that spousal relationship. Instead, those who are children of God are His by adoption. God is Father. He has adopted us as His children—made so by the Holy Spirit because He makes us one with Christ—and our Mother is the Church.

17. Explain how we become children of Holy Mother Church if Christ does not generate children of Her and she remains a virgin.

Christ is no where said to beget children. He is the Son, not the Father of anyone. He enters into no sexual union with His Bride. Christ’s union with His Bride leaves her still a virgin. The ancient tradition of the Church as compared her to Mary. She brings forth virginally as Mary did, the members of Christ’s Body. Just as the Holy Spirit was the agent of the Father’s begetting of the human nature of the Son of the virginal Mary, so He is the agent of the Father’s regenerating us of the virginal Church into the lie of Christ. Thus, we can be truly said to be born of the Spirit.

18. Why is it important for Christians to understand this kind of imagery?

We find, from the first page of Scripture to the last, the varied aspects of man’s sexual life being used to symbolize the relationships between God and His people. Man’s vocation and dignity, his sins, his redemption, and final glorification are presented to us under the imagery of birth, marriage, infidelity, penitence, a renewal of vows and final reunion, which becomes perfect union in eternity. This symbolism all of us must understand, for it shows us what God thinks of our sexuality: something so greatly good that it can be used to express the deepest and the highest truths about the relations between God and man.