

A Study of Morality: What Does the Bible Teach?

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The wonderful thing about Torah communities is that new questions are constantly being asked. This is not only because people who are striving to live out the ways and precepts of Torah have come to appreciate a Hebraic perspective on life, but also because we realize that some of what we were taught in the past was just plain wrong. We find ourselves reasoning this way: “if I was taught that the Torah was bad, and now I realize that it is supremely good, what else was I taught that was merely the traditions of men, but not the teaching of the Holy One of Israel?” So we find ourselves asking “where does it say that,” or “is that clearly taught in the Scriptures?”

One area that seems to foster questions is that of basic morality. And specifically what constitutes the boundaries between moral and immoral. For instance, we have it as a long standing teaching of the church that sex before marriage is wrong. But do the Scriptures teach this? Is it okay for consenting adults to engage in sexual relationships as long as they don’t do so with someone who is married? What exactly constitutes “fornication.” And what exactly is “adultery?” Is polygamy really wrong, or is that just what the church decided?

Obviously, I don’t intend in this short essay to tackle all of these questions. But I’d like to share some brief thoughts on this issue of sex outside of marriage. What does the Bible (Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures) have to say about the sexual relationship between a man and a woman? Is there any permissible sexual relations outside of marriage, or is marriage the only ordained union between a man and a woman?

The Torah

The first male/female relationship spoken of in the Torah is that of Adam and Chavah (Eve). God brings Chavah to Adam indicating that He had fashioned her as a companion for him. Adam’s response is one of poetic joy (Gen 2:23): “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” The word translated “now” is הַפַּעַם, *hapa’am*, and gives an added sense not conveyed by the English. *Pa’am* relates to things that reoccur or that come in successive intervals. Thus, Adam, who had looked over all the animals and categorized them by giving each its name, failed to find a companion suitable for himself. When he is introduced to Chavah, he says, “This is *now* bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...” or we could paraphrase: “I looked and looked, but at long last this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” Chavah and Adam were made for each other by the Creator.

This first mention of the male/female relationship is captured by Moses as a fitting place to interject a theological axiom of ethics (Gen 2:24): “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” For what reason? What is the foundational truth upon which Moses makes this categorical principle? It is that male and female as God created them were made for each other.

But the relationship that is engendered between man and woman is one of leaving father and mother, and being joined to one’s wife (the Hebrew has no special term for “wife,” but designates a wife as “his woman,” אִשְׁתּוֹ *’ishto*). The “leaving” involves a shift in relationship. Whereas before the man was reckoned legally within the context of his immediate family, and directly under the authority of his parents, “leaving” that arrangement renders the man legally responsible. But the leaving is paralleled with “joining.” The word is דָּבַק, *dabaq*, “to cling,” “to latch onto,” and envisions a union of the man and the woman in a covenant sense. This is demonstrated by the use of *dabaq* in Deut 10:20, “You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name.” This covenant sense of “clinging to” means that one is so attached to one’s covenant partner that there is no sense of divided loyalty. Even as Israel was not to divide her heart between other gods and the one true God, so the man was to cling to his wife in a relationship of exclusivity.

It is to this first basic principle of male/female relationship (Gen 2:24) that Yeshua refers when confronted by His colleagues regarding the issue of divorce. His view, based upon Gen 2:24, is that “what God has joined together, let no man separate.” In other words, the *dabaq* of Gen 2:24 is viewed by Yeshua as a covenant established by oath which should not be dissolved. (His further teaching on this subject allowed for divorce where a matter of “fornication” [πορνεία, *porneia*] is involved.) The relationship of man and woman, then, built upon this foundation of the Torah precept, is one of exclusivity—one man and one woman, joined together exclusively to each other.

This basic tenant of the male/female relationship thus expected that a man and a woman would remain free from sexual relations until they came together in this covenant relationship we call marriage. There was not to be any “clinging” to a woman before marriage. Thus, a woman was to be a virgin when she married. Consider the text of Deut 22:13-21:

13 “If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then turns against her, 14 and charges her with shameful deeds and publicly defames her, and says, ‘I took this woman, but when I came near her, I did not find her a virgin,’ 15 then the girl’s father and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of the girl’s virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. 16 “The girl’s father shall say to the elders, ‘I gave my daughter to this man for a wife, but he turned against her; 17 and behold, he has charged her with shameful deeds, saying, “I did not find your daughter a virgin.” But this is the evidence of my daughter’s virginity.’ And they shall spread the garment before the elders of the city. 18 “So the elders of that city shall take the man and chastise him, 19 and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give it to the girl’s father, because he publicly defamed a virgin of Israel. And she shall remain his wife; he cannot divorce her all his days. 20 “But if this charge is true, that the girl was not found a virgin, 21 then they shall bring out the girl to the doorway of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death because she has committed an act of folly in Israel by playing the harlot (זנה) in her father’s house; thus you shall purge the evil from among you.

There are a number of issues with this text which have no ready answers. For instance, how is it that the man discovers his wife is not a virgin? We know that physiological indications of virginity are not trustworthy. And what are the “signs of her virginity” produced to prove her innocence? The so-called “marriage cloth” is usually given as the interpretation, but again, we know that such a thing (or the lack thereof) does not necessary prove virginity. Perhaps the parents brought out the wedding contract in which witnesses verified their daughter’s virginity.

But in spite of these enigmas, there are some clear and indisputable facts we glean from this Torah text. First, it was to be the norm that a woman was a virgin when she married. Secondly, not to be a virgin when a woman married was a disgraceful thing, and to defame a virgin of such promiscuous activity drew a stern rebuke. Moreover, if the accusation was found to be true, capital punishment was administered. In other words, it was a capital offense for the woman to have had sexual relations before she was married. (Obviously, there are exceptions, such as the levirate marriage, or the marriage of a widow, but the exceptions do not overturn the rule.) Thirdly, a woman who was found not to be a virgin at the time of her marriage is equated with a harlot: “she has committed an act of folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father’s house.” Quite often in the Tanach, the Hebrew word זנה, *zanah*, is used to describe both harlotry (illicit sexual relations, cf. Lev 21:9; Num 25:1;) and prostitution (sex for hire, Gen 38:15; Lev 21:7; Josh 2:1; 6:17, 22, 25). The point is simple: whether sex is merely illicit or put out for hire, it constitutes the same kind of sin—a disregard for the basic structure of male/female relationships set down by God from the beginning. Finally, it is clear that the scenario given in this text, in which a woman who was not a virgin on her wedding day is put to death when her sin is discovered, does not describe a prostitute. Had the woman been engaged in prostitution, she could have never presented herself as a virgin on the day of her wedding. The fact that she is discovered not to be a virgin only after the marriage takes place indicates that her former sexual relationship(s) were hidden. In other words, she wasn’t regularly standing on the corner. So our text is clearly dealing with sex outside of marriage, which is just as clearly condemned.

But what about the man? Is he also to come to the marriage without prior sexual relations? While the Torah is essentially silent on this, the logic is inescapable. Every time a man has sexual relations with a woman outside of marriage, he has caused her to fall from the expected norm of virginity at her

wedding. It takes two to tango. If the woman commits a sin worthy of death (playing the harlot in her father's house), then the man who willingly participated with her is also sinning. The divine order puts the onus upon the woman, because if a woman is chaste, no man will sin with her. One might protest at this, but this is God's divine order of things. It seems to be a fairly well established reality in God's created world that the female attracts the male, and not visa versa. In a society in which all unmarried women adhered closely to the norms set down for her by God, no man would be drawn to commit fornication with a woman. Moreover, where men are concerned that God's ways be lived out in a community, they would never take from a virgin what rightly belonged to her future husband. If they held God's viewpoint, that a woman was to be a virgin on her wedding day, they would never engage in sexual relations with an unmarried woman. In summary, the point is clear in this Torah text: God expects a woman to be a virgin on her wedding day, which means He expects men to also remain chaste. Put simply, God does not allow sexual relations outside of marriage.

It is upon this basis that the writer to the Hebrews states: "Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the *marriage* bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb 13:4). Actually, the text does not have "marriage bed," but only "bed" (κοιτῆ, *koite*). "Bed" is used as a euphemism for "intercourse." So how is "intercourse" to be "undefiled?" It is undefiled when it is done in accordance with God's guidelines, that is, within marriage as an exclusive relationship between a man and his wife. The verse goes on to make this explicit: "for fornicators (πορνῶς, *pornos*) and adulterers (μοιχῶς, *moichos*) God will judge." Generally, the Greek word *moichos* is reserved for sexual infidelity within marriage. *Pornos*, translated "fornicators," often is the broader word which includes harlotry, prostitution, and all manner of illicit sex. That the writer to the Hebrews includes both words in this verse emphasizes that sexual relations are to be kept within the marriage bond. Thus, "defiled intercourse" is that which occurs outside of marriage; for the "bed" to be "undefiled" means that intercourse is reserved only for a husband and his wife.

This brings up the question of what constitutes a sexual relationship. The idea that God only prohibits intercourse, but other acts of a sexual nature are allowed, is preposterous. If hating someone is on the level of murder, then lusting is likewise on the level of fornication (Matt 5:28). Only the fool thinks that he can engage in sexual behavior, but stop short of intercourse. If one is intent on not burning down his house, he disciplines himself not to play with matches. Moreover, the "clinging to" one's wife, as described in Gen 2:24, involves all of the emotion and romance that leads to this "clinging." The finale of a symphony is worthless without the previous movements, even as the opening movements remain unfulfilled without the finale—a symphony is what it should be only when the opening motifs are culminated in the finale. This is why Paul admonishes those who "burn" to get married (1Cor 7:1–2). If from Paul's perspective sexual relations outside of marriage were permissible, then his words in this passage are meaningless. He would just encourage those who "burn" to fulfill their passions. But it is clear that for Paul, the passions of sexuality are to be fulfilled only in marriage. Indeed, he prescribes marriage as way of curbing immoralities (plural of *porneia*, v. 2). And Paul didn't make this up: he's simply teaching the principles of Torah (Gen 2:24) to the Jewish/Gentile congregations under his care.

But someone might bring up this scenario: a single man lives a life of immorality, and then comes to faith in Yeshua. He meets a single woman who has also lived immorally, and only recently has come to faith. Since both of them have already been sexually active, what difference does it make if they engage in sexual relations without being married? Well, it makes a big difference. First, once we come to acknowledge our sin and trust by faith in the cleansing work of Messiah, we *turn from our former way of life*, and strive to walk according to God's norms. We've already established that God does not allow sexual relations outside of marriage, and so these new believers should strive to live out this precept in their newly born faith. They should accept the principle that the "bed should be undefiled," meaning that it is reserved for marriage. Secondly, believers in Yeshua must realize that no one lives unto themselves. Having come into the family of God, they have a responsibility to live in a way the exemplifies God's standards. God considers marriage holy, and He has taught us that He wants those who marry to remain sexually pure until they marry (Deut 22:13ff). So it becomes the responsibility, and the privilege, of those who are His children to live in accordance with His revealed will. Thirdly, if when a person becomes a believer, "the old things have passed away, behold, new things have come" (2Cor 5:17), there is a very real sense of starting over again. The old person has been crucified with the

Messiah, and the new person has been recreated (Rom 6:6; Col 3:10). This means that there is a fresh start, and new life in which the ways of God can be lived out. In this sense, those who have been saved from a life of immorality have the privilege of starting over. In a sense, if and when they do marry, they come to their partner as having “all things new.” Fourthly, chastity before marriage demonstrates the ability to say “no” to the flesh. If the single man or woman demonstrates his or her ability to abide by God’s standards of morality before they are married, their spouse can be confident that faithfulness within the marriage can be achieved. But if one is willing to share the intimate relationship of sex before marriage, there often remains the nagging doubt whether faithfulness can be maintained after marriage. After all, if one was willing to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage, what confidence is there that he or she will be able to remain sexually faithful within marriage?

Finally, the whole point of marriage as God has ordained it, is that the union between a man and his wife is to be a divinely prescribed picture of His relationship with His chosen people (cf. Eph 5:32). The passions of sexual relations are God-given: they demonstrate His own passion for His bride. Likewise, as those who are chosen to be His people, our longing is for Him and for Him alone. Sexual relations within marriage portray this covenant relationship well. But sexual relations outside of marriage entirely ruin the picture. Sex is to be a seal of covenant love and commitment, not a fulfilling of one’s own passions. Furthermore, one of the natural results of sexual relationships is children. In God’s plan, the joining of husband and wife demonstrates the oneness of the Creator Himself. When man and woman become one, they are able to create children. In this way, marriage pictures the creative work of God, and exemplifies God’s oneness: “the two shall become one” (אֶחָד, *echad*, the same word used in the *Shema* [Deut 6:4] of God). The oneness of a husband and his wife is dramatically realized in their children. While the children are clearly different from their parents, they nonetheless partake of the “image” of their parents (cf. Gen 5:3). God has given marriage, the sexual relationship within marriage, and the gift of children, as a clear revelation of Himself. Once again, sex outside of marriage ruins that picture.

The Apostolic teaching, that marriage was given as a revelation of Messiah’s relationship to His bride (His chosen people), is not something new. It is based upon the many times in the Tanach that Israel is viewed as the wife of God (e.g., Jer 31:31–34). The message of the prophets is replete with language of infidelity on the part of Israel—she has committed spiritual adultery by pledging allegiance to foreign gods. The whole book of Hosea is predicated upon the fact that God sees His relationship with Israel as a marriage. Thus, from the very beginning (Gen 2:24), marriage is instituted by God as a revelation of His relationship with His chosen people.

Unfortunately, societies that have not accepted God’s norms for male/female relationships have always fallen into sexual immorality. This is devastatingly true of our own modern society. The norm in our modern world is that young adults engage in sexual relations. That has become the rule—chastity is the exception. As we live in this immoral society, we cannot help but be affected by it. Yet we are called to be “in the world, but not of the world” —

1John 2:15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

Perhaps one of the most significant ways that we can be a light to the world is to affirm God’s norms in the area of sexual relations, and to put marriage back into the realm of “sacred” where it has always been in God’s estimation.