

The Relative Insignificance of Sex in the Old Testament: A Study of the Degrees of Sexual Sin and Consequences of Sex in the Old Testament

Abstract: The Church has historically maintained a strong sexual ethic which has been anachronistically read back into the Old Testament. The ancient world was concerned with the family and safety of its members more than sex. Sexual sin that threatened the family (e.g., adultery) merited severe consequences, whereas sexual sin that did not threaten the family (e.g., sex with a prostitute) merited indifference. The sexual sin of adultery was severely condemned, not because of sexual infidelity, but because it jeopardized the patrilineal line of the husband. Similarly, fornication was criminalized because it jeopardized the security of a woman and affected the financial remuneration of a father. Sex with prostitutes, however, did not threaten a family, jeopardize the security of a woman, nor affect the bride price of a daughter. As a result, prostitution, with the exception of cultic prostitution, was not criminalized. While the criminal sexual laws may lead a reader to conclude that sexual activity in the Old Testament that does not hurt another person was insignificant, the ethical sexual exhortations in the wisdom corpus present different consequences for sexual indiscretions which reveal that sexual sin is still significant. Sexual sin is still sin and Prov 22:14 teaches that God uses women to mete out his anger upon men with whom he is angry. Ironically, the man who sins sexually flirts with the instrument which God will use to destroy him. Furthermore, Prov 22:14 and 23:27 teach, through metaphor, that sexual sin is difficult to overcome. The man who engages in sexual sin will find himself entrapped in it. Finally, while adultery may primarily apply to women, the man who sins sexually against his wife has, according to Prov 23:28, committed a treacherous act against his wife. While the married man could consort with prostitutes without criminal consequences, the ethical exhortations in Proverbs teaches that he has committed an enslaving treacherous sin against his wife which has angered the Lord who will use the object of his affection to destroy him.

The children of the purity movement have grown up, and many of them have become disenchanted with their parents'/pastors' attitudes toward sex. For many, the purity movement promised wedded bliss, but what they experienced was pain and confusion. Brenda Marie Davies, Zachary Wagner, and Rachel Joy Welcher, for example, explain their stories of how purity culture failed them, but they present very different responses concerning the direction forward.¹ A study of the Old Testament sexual sins can help the New Testament believer in Jesus the Messiah avoid overemphasizing sex as was often found within the purity movement, but also the sexual licentiousness of some of their children.

The Significance of the Criminal Heterosexual Sexual Sins

In the Old Testament, some heterosexual sins were significant, but others were not. Adultery was strongly condemned (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18) and merited the death penalty (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:23–27). The man who had consensual sex with an unbetrothed woman was required to pay the bride price and could be required to marry her (Exod 22:16–17[H: 15–16]). A similar penalty was assessed to the man who raped an unbetrothed virgin, except he would be

¹ Brenda Marie Davies, *On Her Knees: Memoir of a Prayerful Jezebel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021); Rachel Joy Welcher, *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020); Zachary C. Wagner, *Non-Toxic Masculinity: Recovering Healthy Male Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2023).

prohibited from divorcing her (Deut 22:28–29). The Old Testament law, however, was indifferent to a man having sex with a prostitute. The different penalties for sexual sin reflect different degrees of sexual sin.

The Old Testament was less concerned with sex than with its effects. The Old Testament law was unconcerned with sexual activity that did not jeopardize the preservation of a man's name (e.g., adultery), the financial position of a father and security of his daughter (e.g., fornication), or the holiness of God's house (cultic prostitution). Proverbs 1–9, however, warns young men against having sex with prostitutes not because it is a criminal offense, but because they will leave him destitute (Prov 5:9–11). Sexual sin in the Old Testament merited different penalties relative to its effects. Brenda Davies writes, "I was conditioned to believe that sex outside of marriage was a grave offense."² Sex outside of marriage is an offense, but the Old Testament considers the preservation of a man's progeny and abandonment of a woman as greater offenses than sex. An analysis of the criminal sexual sins supports this thesis.

Adultery and the Preservation of a Man's Name

The Old Testament was more concerned with the preservation of a man's descendants than the act of sex. This statement is reflected in the judgment against a woman who seizes a man's genitals (Deut 25:11–12),³ the requirement of Levirate Marriage (Deut 25:5–10), the severe penalty for adultery (Lev 20:10), and the story of Tamar (Gen 38). The discussion here focusses on adultery. New Testament Christians who equate the injunction against adultery to modern sexual licentiousness create a false analogy.

Failure to father a son was considered a great tragedy in the ancient world. A father lived on through his son, so fathering a child and raising that child to manage his inheritance was of utmost importance. Block explains, "The worst fate one could experience was to have his 'seed' cut off and his 'name' destroyed from his father's household."⁴ The importance of progeny is reflected repeatedly in the Old Testament. In Gen 15, after the Lord tells Abram, "Your reward will be very great," Abram responds indifferently to God's blessing because he has no heir, "Lord God, what will you give me since I continue childless" (Gen 15:1–2). Abram's response precipitates the Lord's covenant with Abram to provide a descendant. Saul made David swear not to cut off his descendants after he died (1 Sam 24:21–22 [H:22–23]) and the King of Babylon's descendants are cut off as an act of judgment (Isa 14:21).

The ancient family was more concerned about children than sex. Sex was simply the means to accomplish this goal. Block writes, "In ancient Israelite marriages a primary concern of a husband was the fathering of children, which added to the significance of the consummation of the marriage in sexual intercourse."⁵ Deuteronomic laws, according to Block, concerning a betrothed woman (Deut 22:23–27) and military conscription for a man (Deut 20:7) exist "out of a concern for progeny . . . [seeking] to protect the patrilineal cohesion of the family."⁶ Similarly, according to Tigay, "Levirate marriage aims to provide a dead man with a son in order to prevent

² Davies, *On Her Knees*, 39.

³ Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 712; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 329; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 371.

⁴ Daniel Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 81.

⁵ Block, 46.

⁶ Block, 58.

his name from being blotted out.”⁷ While an additional benefit of levirate marriage was the provision of the widow, the primary purpose of levirate marriage was the preservation of the deceased’s name. The importance of descendants in the Old Testament is also reflected in a woman’s grief because of an inability to conceive. Block explains, “For ancient Israelites the most important contribution a woman could make to a household was to present her husband with children.”⁸ The importance of children provides the background for the severe injunction against adultery and other laws in the Old Testament.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary reflects a modern definition of adultery “[The] voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than that person’s current spouse or partner.”⁹ David Freeman applies this definition to the biblical world, “ADULTERY. In Scripture, sexual intercourse by a married man with another than his wife, or by a married woman with another than her husband.”¹⁰ This definition focuses on the sexual act itself rather than any of its effects. Mary Shields, however, defines biblical adultery differently, “Adultery may be defined as a man having sex with another man’s wife, or a married woman having sex with (‘lying with’) a man other than her husband.”¹¹ Note that a man (married or unmarried) having sex with an unbetrothed woman or a prostitute was not considered adultery. Elaine Goodfriend notes that adultery primarily concerned women and crafts her definition from that perspective, “Sexual intercourse between a married or betrothed woman and any man other than her husband. The marital status of the woman’s partner is inconsequential since only the married or betrothed woman is bound to fidelity. The infidelity of a married man is not punishable by law but is criticized (Mal 2:14–5; Prov 5:15–20). Biblical law shows similar leniency for sexual relations before a woman’s betrothal (Exod 22:15–6; Deut 22:28–29; for possible exceptions [Lev 21:9, (*sic*) Deut 22:13–21]).”¹² The biblical world loathed adultery because of its paternal ramifications.

Ancient marriage vows always bound a wife to marital fidelity because of patrilineal concerns, but the man was primarily bound to provide for his wife (Exod 21:7–11).¹³ In Prov 2:17, the strange woman abandons her husband and “forgets the covenant of her God.” In Ruth 3:9, however, Ruth entreats Boaz to “Spread the hem of your cloak over your maidservant.” Ruth’s gesture symbolized the provision and protection which a husband would covenant with his wife. In the context of a man taking an additional wife, Exod 21:10 states, “If a man takes another wife, her food, her clothing, and her זָנוֹה (oil?) he will not diminish.” While the meaning of זָנוֹה is debated, it likely refers to oil—in other words, he cannot stop providing for her as a wife.¹⁴ While monogamy was God’s ideal for marriage (Gen 2:24; Song 6:9), the ancient biblical man did not typically covenant with his wife to “forsake all others;” the wife, however, did.

⁷ Jeffrey H Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, ed. Nahum M. Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 482.

⁸ Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” 72.

⁹ “Definition of Adultery,” May 19, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adultery>.

¹⁰ David Freeman, “Adultery,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 58.

¹¹ Mary Shields, “Adultery,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 1:57.

¹² Elaine Adler Goodfriend, “Adultery,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 82.

¹³ Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” 48.

¹⁴ Alexander presents four views concerning the meaning of זָנוֹה, T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 478.

Ancient Hatred for Adultery

The ancients' hatred of adultery is reflected in their writings. The man who raised another's children thinking that they are his own was grievously sinned against. Note the progeny focus of Sir 23:22–26:

Thus shall it go also with the wife that leaveth her husband, and bringeth in an heir by another. For first, she hath disobeyed the law of the most High; and secondly, she hath trespassed against her own husband; and thirdly, she hath played the whore in adultery, and brought children by another man. She shall be brought out into the congregation, and inquisition shall be made of her children. Her children shall not take root, and her branches shall bring forth no fruit. She shall leave her memory to be cursed, and her reproach shall not be blotted out (KJV).

Philo claims adultery is “the greatest of crimes” and explains:

Very painful, too, is the uncertain status of the children, for if the wife is not chaste there will be no doubt and dispute as to the real paternity of the offspring. Then if the fact is undetected, the fruit of the adultery usurp the position of the legitimate and form an alien and bastard brood and will ultimately succeed to the heritage of the putative father to which they have no right. And the adulterer having in insolent triumph vented his passions and sown the seed of shame, his lust now sated, will leave the scene and go on his way mocking at the ignorance of the victim of his crime, who like a blind man knowing nothing of the covert intrigues of the past will be forced to cherish the children of his deadliest foe as his own flesh and blood. On the other hand, if the wrong becomes known, the poor children who have done no wrong will be most unfortunate, unable to be classed with either family, either the husband's or the adulterer's. Such being the disasters wrought by illicit intercourse, naturally the abominable and God-detested sin of adultery was placed first in the list of wrongdoing. (Philo, *Decal* 128–31, Colson)

Because adultery affected so many people, including the innocent offspring, Philo considered it the greatest of sins against one's neighbor, even greater than murder.¹⁵ Comparatively speaking, the sexual fidelity of the man or woman was *not* the concern, the lineage of the children was. Adultery is a sexual sin which had severe consequences because of its effect on a man's paternity.

Adultery's Female Focus

Since women have children, the Old Testament laws concerning adultery primarily concern women. In Lev 20:10, adultery concerns not just a woman, but *another man's wife*, “Now the man who commits adultery with a man's wife, he commits adultery with the wife of

¹⁵ Philo's claim that adultery is the “first in the list of wrongdoing” reflects the LXX's ordering of the Decalogue where the prohibition against adultery precedes the prohibition against murder. Frymer-Kensky observes that these two crimes were “crucially dangerous to the fabric of Israelite society and are therefore punishable by death,” Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers 5:11-31),” *Vetus Testamentum* 34, no. 1 (1984): 11.

his neighbor, he will surely die, the adulterer and the adulteress.”¹⁶ Two times the woman is identified in relationship to her husband.

The female focus of adultery is also evident in the law concerning unfaithful wives in Num 5:11–31. A husband may suspect his wife’s unfaithfulness resulting in a “spirit of jealousy” coming upon him. This husband would then take his wife to the priest, go through the ritual, and entrust the matter to the Lord. If his wife was unfaithful, God would prevent her from having children and jeopardizing his progeny. If his wife was faithful, God would allow her to conceive, and the husband could be sure that the children were his own. The law protected the wife from an irrationally jealous husband and the husband from an unfaithful wife who would jeopardize his progeny.

In an effort to defend the presumed sexist nature of the Old Testament, scholars have failed to recognize the way the law protected *both* the husband *and* the wife. Jacob Milgrom correctly argues that the woman’s “public ordeal was meant not to humiliate her but to protect her, not to punish her but to defend her.”¹⁷ Milgrom, however, fails to see how the law likewise protected the man’s progeny labelling him a “proud husband.” Paul Copan, also attempting to prove God is not sexist, claims the law could have equally applied to men, “Consider the context, which gives us every reason to think that this law applied to *men* as well. . . . It wasn’t just the husband’s prerogative to call for this special trial; the wife could as well.”¹⁸ Copan fails to understand the reason adultery was such a consequential sin and incorrectly applies the law to the husband. This Old Testament law protected husbands and wives from harming each other in different ways, both of which concern the effects of sex, not sex itself.

Fornication and the Protection of Women

Just as the Old Testament was more concerned with progeny than sex, so also was it more concerned with the protection of women. A man who seduced an unbetrothed virgin (Exod 22:16) or a man who raped an unbetrothed virgin (Deut 22:28–29) were required to pay the bride price and marry the woman, and in the case of rape, the man would not have an opportunity to divorce. Tigay notes, “It is not a capital crime because it is not adulterous.”¹⁹ While still a criminal offense, sex with an unbetrothed virgin was less significant than adultery. The father of the girl retained the right to refuse her daughter’s marriage and it is assumed that she would have a say in the matter as well. These regulations accomplished multiple objectives: (1) They disassociated marriage from sex. Just because a couple had sex did not mean that they were married.²⁰ (2) They protected the father from financial loss. A scheming man may have sex with a woman to decrease the bride price and fetch a better bargain.²¹ (3) They prohibited a young woman from subverting her father’s wishes by having sex with her lover.²² (4) They provided a

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture translations are my own.

¹⁷ Jacob Milgrom, “A Husband’s Pride, A Mob’s Prejudice: The Public Ordeal Undergone by a Suspected Adulteress in Numbers 5 Was Meant Not to Humiliate Her but to Protect Her,” *Bible Review* 12, no. 4 (August 1996): 21.

¹⁸ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 105. [Emphasis his]

¹⁹ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 208.

²⁰ Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 509–10.

²¹ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Virginity in the Bible: Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Bernard Levinson, Victor Matthews, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 91.

²² Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 361.

protection to a woman who otherwise could have been forced into a life of poverty.²³ Tigay explains, “The main concern of the law in such cases is to protect the girl and her father from the harm they would suffer from her loss of virginity, namely, the girl’s diminished chances of marriage and the father’s loss of a full bride-price.”²⁴ Her father would be able to assess the situation and make a decision that would best provide for his daughter. Davidson summarizes, “The biblical system of law thus serves to protect women, who were more vulnerable to the stigmatizing effect of sexual impropriety than men in a society that tended toward male dominance and where virginity was so highly prized.”²⁵

While many moderns read these laws and find them odious, the purpose of the laws was to protect the women in the ancient world. The relative insignificance of sex in comparison to the importance of protecting a woman is illustrated in the rape of Tamar by Amnon. Deuteronomy 22:28–29 stipulated that Amnon should have married Tamar and never been allowed to divorce her. After Amnon rapes Tamar, he hates her and commands her to leave. Tamar responds, “No! Because to send me away is *an even greater evil* than what you have already done to me” (2 Sam 13:16).²⁶ Tsumura writes, “Having ruined her life, he had a responsibility toward her. Tamar seems to be protesting that Amnon’s action of sending her away is much worse than raping her.”²⁷ In the biblical world, abandoning a woman after having sex with her was a greater sin than the act of sex itself.

Prostitution

Deuteronomy 23:17–18 forbade the religious harlot (קדשה), but this restriction concerned ritual prostitution rather than economic prostitution. Further substantiation for this position comes from Deut 23:18 where the wages of a harlot were not permitted in the house of the Lord. Israel was not to copy their Canaanite neighbors who used prostitutes to garner income for their respective cults. Lundbom writes, “Cultic prostitution is widely believed to have flourished in the ancient world, being particularly indigenous to Canaanite and Phoenician cults and the Ishtar-Astart cult in the ANE.”²⁸ Deuteronomy 23:17–18 forbade this practice being associated with the Lord.

Sex with a prostitute did not threaten the progeny of a man, nor did it jeopardize the security of a woman, so it was *not* a criminal offense. The father exhorts the son, however, to avoid the prostitute based upon financial concerns, “Lest strangers are satisfied with your wealth; and your labors are in the house of a foreigner” (Prov 5:10). Prostitution was ethically condemned (Prov 5–7), but adultery was criminally prosecuted (Lev 20:10). This distinction is clearly reflected in Prov 6:26, “For the price of a prostitute is as much as a loaf of bread, but an adulteress hunts his precious life.” Fox explains, “The author seems relatively untroubled by prostitution (which is not forbidden by biblical law) and is willing to downplay its cost in order

²³ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 342.

²⁴ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 208.

²⁵ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 361.

²⁶ Several textual issues plague this verse, but Tamar’s response clearly elevates the evil of sending her away above the evil of rape. For a discussion of the difficult syntax and textual issues see Andrew Steinmann, *2 Samuel*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2020), 238.

²⁷ David Toshio Tsumura, *The Second Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 207–8.

²⁸ Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 658. Tigay disagrees and claims the קדשה is simply another word for prostitute, but this seems unlikely, Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 215–16; 480–81. For arguments in favor of a cultic prostitution view see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 351; Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 312–13; Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 656–60.

to make the contrast more dramatic.” Fox notes that a prostitute did normally cost more than a loaf of bread (cf. Gen 38:17). Sex with a prostitute, however, was incomparably inexpensive compared with committing adultery. Non-religious prostitution was, relatively speaking, unimportant because it did not jeopardize a man’s progeny, nor did it leave a woman in a vulnerable economic position.

Conclusion

The reasons the criminal sexual sins were considered grave sins no longer apply to Western Culture. Paternity tests can confirm a child’s lineage, paternity itself is a less significant concern to Western man, fathers are not paid a bride-price by a prospective groom, and premarital sex usually does not leave a woman in an economically vulnerable position. Teachers who appeal to these regulations in an effort to bolster Christians’ resolve for sexual purity overstate their case.

The Significance of the Ethical Heterosexual Sexual Sins

A study of the criminal sexual sins might leave a student thinking that extramarital sex is not that significant of a sin. The children of the purity movement have noted the relative insignificance of sex and, in varying degrees, are more open to sexual indiscretions. For example, in an effort to destigmatize sex, Wagner refuses to take a clear stance against premarital sex:

It is at least reasonable that the greatest acts of physical intimacy correspond to the greatest level of relational vulnerability and commitment. The point, in my view, is not to save everything possible for your wedding day or soon after. It’s to make sure, in your own conscience, the physical intimacy you pursue and invite is not out of balance with the level of your relational commitment. Additionally, for those who continue to believe the Bible requires extramarital abstinence, the matter is one of obedience to God.²⁹

While Wagner himself believes one should wait to have sex until marriage, he acknowledges disagreement over the issue and resolves that each individual should be convinced in his own conscience. Wagner’s view seems to reflect the sentiment of the modern church.³⁰ As has been demonstrated elsewhere, however, extramarital sex is not a conscience issue for the Christian.³¹ Even if the consequences for adultery and fornication no longer apply, they still reflect the morality of God and thus are still considered sins. Furthermore, while the penalties for extramarital sex may not be as severe as they were in the ancient world, penalties still exist for rebelling against God’s design for sex. While the Song of Songs primarily uses a virtue ethic and cultivates the affections of singles to love according to the order of creation, the wisdom corpus also presents ethical consequential reasons to avoid extramarital sex which still apply to the New Testament believer in Jesus the Messiah. This paper explores three ethical consequences why a person should avoid sexual sin.

²⁹ Wagner, *Non-Toxic Masculinity*, 140.

³⁰ David J Ayers and Matt Chinworth, “First Comes Love, Then Come House Keys,” *Christianity Today* 65, no. 3 (April 2021): 37–41.

³¹ Mark A Snoeberger, “A Biblical Argument against Premarital Sex,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 20 (2015): 45–63.

God Uses Wicked Women to Punish Men

The man who defiantly engages in extramarital sex will likely be destroyed by the very object of his affection—women. God hates sin; it makes him angry, and he punishes those with whom he is angry (Isa 13:9–13). The individual who presumptuously sins against the Lord provokes the anger of the Lord and Prov 22:14 teaches that one way in which the Lord punishes the wicked is through women, “A deep pit is the mouth of strange women, the one with whom the Lord is angry will fall there.”

God uses the immoral woman to punish the one with whom he is angry (זעם).³² The verb זעם could be translated “curse” or “anger,” both meanings could fit in this context. When the Lord, however, is the subject of זעם the idea of “curse” disappears and, according to Wiklander, “Yahweh appears as the righteous judge, the punishing and avenging God.”³³ The emotion behind the Lord’s righteous judgment is his anger. Wiklander explains how these meanings are related, “If we assume that the basic meaning is ‘threaten’ or ‘injure,’ the sense can be expressed more precisely through words (‘curse’), actions (‘punish, condemn’), or the implicit emotional state (‘be angry’). It is hardly possible to distinguish clearly among these meanings.”³⁴ Thus the Lord is pictured as angry and punishing the wicked man using women. The wordplay and parallelism between strange women (זָרוֹת) and anger (זָעִים) also supports the connection between the Lord’s anger and his instrument of judgment—women.

This man who falls under God’s judgment has already sinned. The sinful actions are unstated allowing the text to speak to a wide array of sins. Fox notes, “This man has presumably already sinned. God’s curse will make him sin further and then suffer the deadly consequences.”³⁵ Men should refrain from sinning to avoid the judgment of God. The immoral man who believes sexual sins are insignificant ironically flirts with God’s instrument of his own destruction—women.

Qohelet, in Eccl 7:26, broadened this principle out to include not only illicit relationships, but even one’s wife. We possess no record of Solomon breaking any of the criminal regulations concerning sex and it seems difficult to imagine him consorting with prostitutes. Having married a thousand women, Solomon presumably experienced the best sex a man could want. Yet at the end of his life, he laments, “And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters. The one who pleases God escapes from her, but the sinner is captured by her.” Solomon testifies to the same truth taught in Prov 22:14 that the way to avoid the wicked woman is to please God. Inversely, Prov 18:22³⁶ and 19:14³⁷ teach that an excellent woman comes from God. If a man desires to marry an excellent woman then he should

³² The verb זעם, when referring to the Lord means “to be angry,” (cf. Isa 66:14; Zech 1:12; Mal 1:4).

³³ B. Wiklander, “זעם,” *TDOT*, 4:110.

³⁴ Wiklander, 4:110.

³⁵ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 18B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 702.

³⁶ While several textual and interpretive issues surround Prov 18:22, Waltke correctly explains, “The proverb assumes that God is good and rewards the man who fears him with a wife equal to him (see 31:10, 30). Moreover, the echo [with Woman Wisdom in 8:35] may presume that the good wife, like Wisdom, has to be sought from the Lord (see 8:34; 19:14),” Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 94.

³⁷ Similar to the Prov 31 woman, Prov 19:14 refers to a wife’s ability to manage a house wisely. As in Prov 18:22, the Lord is the providential provider of this woman. Waltke writes, “In spite of all human activity [in the selection of a spouse], the wise know that success in this attempt and fortune in life do not depend on humans but on divine providence,” Waltke, 108.

focus on pleasing God. The wisdom corpus teaches young men that the way to marital heaven or hell concerns God's approval/disapproval and encourages them to live a life that pleases God.

Sexual Sin Is Terribly Difficult to Overcome

Sexual sin is also terribly difficult to overcome. The metaphors in Prov 22:14 and 23:27 prove this point. In Prov 22:14 the *mouth* of the strange women (זָרוֹת) is a deep pit (שׁוּחָה עֲמֻקָּה). Now in Prov 23:27 the harlot (זֹנֶה) herself is the deep pit (שׁוּחָה עֲמֻקָּה). This idea is substantiated in Prov 23:27 where the foreign woman (נְכַרִּיָּה) is a narrow well.

Three different words for these women emphasize the many ways in which she may appear: strange women, harlot, and foreigner. זָרוֹת (22:14) is a plural communicating the wicked man consorts with many women. As strange women, they are women who are not his wife. The harlot serves this man for economic income and the foreigner is an ethnic term which, as I have argued elsewhere, “functions as a metonymy for the pagan/unbelieving character of Dame Folly.”³⁸ While textual issues concern זָרוֹת and זֹנֶה, the evidence favors the MT.³⁹

The metaphor “deep pit” communicates that the man has fallen into a trap from which he cannot get out. Streete disagrees and believes these metaphors contain a sexual allusion, “The symbols of a deep pit and a well that seeks to be filled are heavily sexual: the foolish young man will ‘enter’ such a woman only to find a *vagina dentata*, a vagina with emasculating teeth.”⁴⁰ Waltke similarly writes, “The hunting metaphor a *deep pit* represents either her house (see 2:18; 5:5) or, more aptly, her bodily orifices. In 22:14 her ‘mouth,’ which is probably a double entendre (see 30:20) for the orifices of the mouth and of the vagina, is called a deep pit. . . . Once she has trapped her victim, he cannot escape the pit because it is deep.”⁴¹ This interpretation, however, reads too much into the metaphor. For example, Streete notes that the pit and well “seek to be filled.” As Waltke acknowledges, the pit is a hunting pit—nobody *wants* to go into a hunting pit. The young man in Prov 22:14 *falls* into the pit, he does not desirously go into it. Proverbs speaks frequently of the mouth of this woman (Prov 2:16; 5:3; 6:24; 7:5, 21), but not normally in this way. Her flattering speech deceives the wicked man to fall into the deep pit from which he cannot recover. In Prov 23:27, the woman herself (not her mouth) is the deep pit. Steinmann refers to two historical examples in support, “The obvious implication is that a man will not be able to extricate himself from [the deep pit], as Joseph (Gen 37:22–28) and Jeremiah (Jer 38:1–13) almost perished in literal pits before they were taken out of them.”⁴²

The second metaphor (“well”) was a metaphor for sexual delight and refreshment (Prov 5:15) and, similarly, functions here as a sexual allusion which communicates the *manner* of her entrapment. Kitchen disagrees and argues that the “narrow well” continues the idea of

³⁸ Timothy Little, “Finding Lady Wisdom: The Excellent Woman (אִשַּׁת חַיִּל) as a Synecdoche for the Order of Creation and Interpreting Ecclesiastes 7:28,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66, no. 1 (March 2023): 64.

³⁹ The more difficult of the two concerns זָרוֹת which some manuscripts point as זָרוֹת, “strangeness.” זָרוֹת seems more likely because it contains better textual evidence and זָרוֹת is likely a harmonization with the singular פֶּה with which it is in a construct relationship. In Prov 23:26, Fox follows the LXX alone and amends זֹנֶה to זָרוֹה because “the prostitute was less of an aversion to the sages than the adulteress was,” Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 738. The LXX in Proverbs, however, is a very unreliable guide and Fox misses that the purpose of using the different words emphasizes the different manifestations of this woman.

⁴⁰ Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 110.

⁴¹ Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 260–61.

⁴² Andrew Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 477.

entrapment from the deep pit in the first line, “The point is more likely to be that he who enters into such a relationship will become unable to save himself, just as a man who has become helplessly wedged in a narrow hole.”⁴³ Waltke argues that it is a sexual allusion and connotes entrapment, “The opening to the well is *narrow* . . . which connotes that this sexual partner frustrates him. The fornicator came hoping to quench his sexual appetite, but, because he finds her incapable of the intimacy necessary to satisfy that thirst, he cannot penetrate to satisfying water. Moreover, after he has penetrated her, he discovers that he cannot turn and extricate himself from his predicament (cf. Jer. 38:6).”⁴⁴ Waltke’s “penetration” language reads too much into the metaphor. Hunter’s pits are designed to catch animals, but wells are designed to slake a person’s thirst. The wicked man falls into the deep pit unawares, but he goes to the well in expectation of water which would slake his thirst. His becoming stuck in the narrow well misses the point of the metaphor. This woman delivered an intimate encounter which failed to satiate his sexual thirst leaving him sexually frustrated and dissatisfied (as Waltke argued). As Dame Folly lures in Prov 9:17, “Stolen water is sweet,” so also is the beverage the man drinks from her well. The problem is that the narrow well has caused most of the water to slosh out of the bucket on the way up. As a result, when the young man retrieves the bucket to satiate his sexual thirst, not much water remains leaving him sexually thirsty and having to send the bucket down into the narrow well again. Steinmann gets close to this idea, “The ‘well’ is too constricted . . . to allow a person to draw water from it (cf. Jn 4:11). This would contrast to the metaphors in Prov 5:15–18, where a man’s own wife is a ‘cistern,’ ‘well,’ and ‘fountain’ who provides abundant flowing water for her husband.”⁴⁵ The narrow well metaphor captures the entrapment idea of the “deep pit,” but adds to it by explaining how the wicked man is stuck in the deep pit. This woman gives him only a little sexual satisfaction requiring him to return repeatedly. It therefore functions as a fitting metaphor to illustrate the difficulty of overcoming sexual sin, leaving the man stuck in the deep pit.

The Sexually Unfaithful Husband Commits a Treacherous Sin against His Wife [Wives]

While the Old Testament criminal legislation appears to give men a pass when it comes to having sex with prostitutes, the ethical instruction in Proverbs does not. Proverbs 23:28 teaches that an act of sexual infidelity was a treacherous act, “Surely, like a robber, she lies in wait, and increases the treacherous among men.” In this text, Dame Folly transitions from a passive role (deep pit/narrow well) to an active role (robber), hunting her prey. Longman notes, “The description is a warning not to just any male, but to males who are on the right path.”⁴⁶ The section concludes by noting that Dame Folly increases the treacherous among men. In some way, the man who had sex with Dame Folly committed an act of betrayal against someone.

The verb בָּגַד means to “act treacherously” which includes the ideas of betrayal and faithlessness. Erlandsson explains, “The verb expresses the unstable relationship of man to an existing established regulation, and can be translated ‘to act faithlessly (treacherously).’ It is used when the OT writer wants to say that a man does not honor an agreement, or commits adultery, or breaks a covenant or some other ordinance given by God.”⁴⁷ It is sometimes used in marital contexts, both literal and spiritual (Exod 21:8; Jer 3:8, 11, 20; 9:2[H:1]; Mal 2:14), but can refer

⁴³ John A. Kitchen, *Proverbs* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2019). Pg#

⁴⁴ Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 261.

⁴⁵ Steinmann, *Proverbs*, 477.

⁴⁶ Tremper Longman, *Proverbs*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 430.

⁴⁷ S. Erlandsson, “בָּגַד,” *TDOT*, 1:470.

to unfaithfulness concerning general covenants as well. In any case, it involves an individual not fulfilling their side of an agreement.⁴⁸

The final issue concerns the one who has been acted treacherously against. Waltke believes the young man has acted treacherously against his parents, “[Prov 23:28b] intensifies the quantity of men she seduces to abandon their loyalty to God and the covenant community, especially godly parents, by her wiles.”⁴⁹ Waltke defines בַּגַּד, “*Bāgad* expresses the unfaithfulness of a person to an existing and established relationship. Specifically, the people in view are the men and women ‘who abandoned’ their heritage of having a relationship with God and with their teachers.”⁵⁰ Waltke’s definition of בַּגַּד does not require an established agreement or covenant. Proverbs 23:26–28 begins with a plea from the father, “My son, give me your heart,” arguing that perhaps the father (family) is the one betrayed by the young man’s indiscretions, not his wife.

More likely, however, the sage has the relationship between the young man and his wife in view because they would have had a marriage covenant. Fox explains,

The condemnation of male marital infidelity as a betrayal of the wife is a rarity. Condemnation is usually directed at women who have committed adultery or men who have violated other men’s marriages, and the wronged party is the cuckolded husband. The root *b-g-d* ‘betray’ implies an existing bond between two parties, a bond that demands fidelity. The wrong done by the adulterers to the Strange Women’s husband is not betrayal as such. The bonds that are violated by the ‘traitors’ must be marriage vows, and the victims must be their own wives. Malachi uses *bgd* in reference to a man’s betraying his wife by unwarranted divorce (2:14–15).⁵¹

If the one betrayed is the father or family, then it begs the question concerning what bond the young man has broken. Perhaps the youth has betrayed the parents, or destroyed the familial inheritance as a result of his indiscretions, but בַּגַּד denotes an agreement, covenant, or bond that has been broken. Fox later states,

Adultery in ancient Israel meant sex between one man and another’s wife or betrothed. The concern was to protect the integrity of a man’s marriage and ensure that his heirs were in fact his own offspring. This proverb’s sensitivity to the wife’s right to her husband’s fidelity shows that a married man, quite apart from the prohibition of adultery, was morally bound to marital fidelity. The enthusiastic praise of the joys of monogamous sexual fidelity in Prov 5:15–20 is aimed at convincing young men to avoid harming *themselves* by being enticed into sex with another man’s wife.⁵²

⁴⁸ Erlandsson broadens the semantic range of בַּגַּד out to include the order of creation (Erlandsson, 1:472), but an analysis of the uses of בַּגַּד in Proverbs renders this distinction unnecessary. Proverbs which refer to a treacherous/unfaithful individual can easily be subsumed into the former category. Claiming that this individual is unfaithful to the order of creation is unnecessary.

⁴⁹ Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 261.

⁵⁰ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 110.

⁵¹ Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 739.

⁵² Fox, 739–40.

While not specifically labelled adultery, the sexually unfaithful husband has committed a heinous sin which Prov 23:29 calls a treacherous act.

Conclusion

New Testament believers in Jesus need to be careful not to overstate the importance of sexual sin, but at the same time, they need to call it sin. While adultery and fornication were severely punished in the ancient world, the reasons for those punishments no longer apply to the modern believer. The consequences for sexual sin may have changed and individuals today can engage in extramarital sexual expression with seemingly no consequences. Nevertheless, these sexual sins are still sins which are enslaving and invoke the anger of the Lord. The church needs to teach a full sexual ethic, explaining the consequences for sin, and, more importantly, cultivating the affections of congregants to love the way that God designed it.