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## God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says

Michael Coogan

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Michael Coogan. *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*.

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Reviewed by Eric A. Eliason

Once, while serving as a military chaplain, I attended a training event in Colorado Springs. There we toured the world headquarters of the Evangelical “Focus on the Family” ministry. Our friendly guide explained to us that their organization existed to promote the “biblical model” of the family in the modern world. A cheeky question popped into to my mind: “By ‘biblical model’ do you mean the polygamy practiced in the Old Testament, or the celibacy encouraged in the New Testament?” But I held my tongue, as I wanted to be a polite guest. But since this event, I have often reflected on how many ways the Bible has been used in contemporary discussions over policies regarding the family, marriage, and sexuality.

As Latter-day Saints, we have the teachings of the living prophets to help guide us through these issues. But many potential allies and adversaries use the Bible centrally in their arguments about these topics. Since we count the Bible as scripture too, it might behoove us to stay up to speed on what people are claiming the Bible says. One voice in this matter who speaks with considerable clout is Harvard’s Michael Coogan, editor of the acclaimed *Oxford Annotated Bible* and author of a slim and handy volume, *God and Sex: What the Bible Really Says*, where he brings his training to bear to explain what the Bible’s authors and earliest readers likely saw as its message about the regulation of sex and family relations.

Michael Coogan approaches the Bible from a more secular approach than many Latter-day Saints would be comfortable with. Yet he brings up several topics of specific interest to Mormons and even pronounces that, contrary to most other Christians, we have it exactly right in how we interpret certain biblical passages. Most dramatically, on patriarchal polygamy—which many Christians have tried to interpret away despite it being nowhere proscribed in the New Testament—Coogan has this to say:

So, with the authority of the Bible behind them, early Mormons argued for “plural marriage,” and some Mormon fundamentalist sects continue

to practice polygyny. They were and are right: if the Bible provides authoritative models, then a man should be allowed to have more than one wife, as did Abraham, Jacob, David, and other biblical heroes, with no hint of divine disapproval. (79)

But perhaps the most compelling issue he brings up for Mormons is the textual and archeological evidence that the earliest Israelites believed their god had a goddess wife—a belief that later Bible authors and redactors tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, to excise from the Bible. Despite the Bible’s many references to Asherah as an unauthorized foreign import, she may have actually been an earlier Israelite goddess (167) who sat on the council of the gods mentioned several times in the Old Testament (172). In an interpretation familiar to many Mormons, Coogan claims that Genesis 1:26–27—where God says “let us” create humans “in our own image,” “male and female”—is most likely a reference to a divine couple, a father god and mother goddess as heavenly parents (176). Coogan also makes a case that certain passages traditionally seen as metaphorical can justifiably be read with the presumption that their authors intended them to be read literally. The first ten chapters of Proverbs, where Wisdom is personified as a woman who has been God’s consort since the beginning and through whom the Lord made all things, and Ezekiel 16 and 23, where the prophet likens Israel to two of God’s wives who have gone astray, are two examples. For Latter-day Saints who believe that many plain and precious truths have been taken out of, or obscured in, the Bible, and who also believe in a Heavenly Mother, this should all be very provocative.

However, as Coogan explains, the Bible is a polyphony that “sings with many voices.” It is a library or discussion of not necessarily unified ideas (17), and some of these ideas, when understood as the authors intended them, will not sit well with modern sensibilities. He points to a great deal of evidence suggesting that women were seen as property and that adultery was seen as akin to theft. Adultery as defined in the Bible was not, as we define it today, sexual relations involving at least one person, male or female, who is married, but was sexual relations where one party was a married woman (102). Other sexual relations were deemed unwise, ritually impure, or even illicit but did not rise (or sink) to the level of adultery. This helps explain not only polygamy, but also the way prostitutes—either actual, such as Rahab (154) or acting, such as Tamar (111, 153)—are little condemned in the Bible (103, 158) and why primary restitution for rape was made to the victim’s father. While moderns would share biblical peoples’ sense that rape is a terrible crime, we realize we are in a different world when we read in Deuteronomy 22:28–29 that biblical provisions for the rape victim allow her to demand that her rapist marry her and forbids the rapist from divorcing

her. In a world where romantic love was secondary to financial security in marriage arrangements, this ensured that she was not left unable to marry and without long-term support (87).

This book advances several challenging readings of the Bible and demonstrates how understanding Bible-era gender roles can help us see the Bible through the eyes of its writers and first readers and not anachronistically project back in time our own modern understandings. Coogan warns of this tendency when he discusses how some feminist interpreters have claimed that the fact that women were the first to witness Jesus's resurrection indicates the honored place Christ had in mind for women. In a postfeminist (or biblically prefeminist) reading, however, this might only show that burial duty was women's work, and they had to come back on early Sunday morning since they would have been prohibited from finishing their work on the Sabbath. Relevant to assessing women's somewhat advanced roles among Jesus's followers, Coogan points out that Jesus's message to Mary and Martha was still to immediately go and inform male authorities (57).

Mormons might also be thankful for the role that modern prophets—and modern attitudes for that matter—play in the regulation of contemporary sexual practices when Coogan informs us that nowhere in the Bible does it explicitly prohibit a man from sleeping with his own daughter or marrying his cousin (71), nor does it speak about lesbian relationships (135). As Coogan explains, the Bible is another country where their ways are not always our ways. Its people and their God have little regard to our tender contemporary sensibilities. This is borne out multiple times in his book. Coogan suggests that if we try to tame or Americanize the Bible into something we find easier to digest, we change it into something that may be useful politically but we warp its message and stretch the most likely historical meanings of the text. If this is so, we may have cause to wonder how useful it can be by itself, without the Holy Spirit and modern prophets, as a guide for regulating family relations in our own country and in the international arena.

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