



THE EROTIC WORD

SEXUALITY, SPIRITUALITY,
AND THE BIBLE

DAVID M. CARR

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David M. Carr

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To Colleen, my love

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Acknowledgments

I wrote this book with the goal of making my Biblical scholarship available to a broad circle of people. I hope that my scholarly colleagues will find something of interest here too. Note: In the process of revision I followed editorial suggestions to spell out the name of the God of Israel (Yahweh) rather than give only consonants (as is my usual practice in publications). The concern was that a spelling of the divine name with just consonants (YHWH) would have confused many readers. My apologies go to those Jewish readers for whom this presents a significant problem.

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Contents

- 1 Introduction: The Bible and Eros 3

I THE EDEN GARDEN AND THE LAW

- 2 Before the Garden: Made in God's Bodily Image 17
- 3 The Eden Garden, Part 1: Created for Erotic Connection 27
- 4 The Eden Garden, Part 2: The Tragic Loss of Connectedness 39
- 5 The "Rules": Biblical Sexual Morality 49

II ISAIAH'S VINEYARD GARDEN AND THE PROPHETS

- 6 Marriage to God: Isaiah's Vineyard and Other Images of Divine-Human Sexuality 59
- 7 Unromantic Eros: Divine-Human Gender Terror, Religious Exclusivism, and Love Gone Wrong 75

III THE GARDEN OF THE SONG OF SONGS AMIDST THE WRITINGS

- 8 Other Gardens: Women's Worlds and Ancient Love Poetry 91
- 9 Come to the Garden: A Walk through the Song of Songs 109
- 10 The Erotic and the Mystical: Bringing Sexuality and Spirituality Together in Reading the Song of Songs 139

IV CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

11	The Word Made Flesh: Echoes of Old Testament Gardens in the New Testament	155
12	Epilogue: The Erotic Word	171
	Notes	179
	Index of Scriptural Citations	207
	Index	211

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1

Introduction

THE BIBLE AND EROS

The Bible. Sexuality. What word next comes to mind? Few people I know would say “spirituality.” Yet, in this book I will be arguing that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, can help us bring our sexual and spiritual lives together. Biblical garden texts will be our orientation points. Starting with the paradise garden in Eden and continuing to the New Testament, we will examine often overlooked sensual aspects of the Biblical tradition. Many Biblical texts testify to how love can go wrong. Yet I will be arguing that we can read the broader Bible as a call to a life of erotic passion: passion for others, passion for God, passion for the earth.

This book focuses throughout on the connection between sexuality and spirituality. So often the Bible has been used to separate the two. The garden of Eden story has been seen as an account of sexual sin. Laws in Leviticus are used to stigmatize gay and lesbian people. Many have used the New Testament to condemn “the flesh” in general. When the Bible is used in these and other ways to shut down sexuality (or certain sexualities), spirituality is shut down as well. Meanwhile, there are other forms of passion that are spiritually important too: love for beauty, for friends, for good work, and so on. Advertising, media, peers, family, and work make multiple claims on our hearts. The Bible can help us attend to the spiritual dimensions of such multiple claims and passions. Read as a whole, it can bring many aspects of our erotic life together. That is what this book aims to do.

The Origins of This Book in a Puzzle about the Song of Songs

I did not set out to write this book on the Bible as a whole. Instead, I started with a puzzle having to do with the Song of Songs (also called the

Song of Solomon or Canticles), a tiny group of love poems tucked away in the Old Testament. In these poems, a man and a woman sing their love for one another. Occasionally a chorus adds its voice to the poetic drama. These poems take up only about ten and a half pages of the standard Hebrew Bible, ministers rarely preach on them, and the standard Biblical introductions rarely devote more than a page or two to their discussion.

This tiny, ignored book was once among the most often copied, commented on, and preached on portions of the Bible. Rabbi Akiba, one of the founding figures in rabbinic Judaism, is reported to have said: "The whole of time is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. All the writings are holy; the Song of Songs is the holy of holies." Within the Christian tradition, the Song of Songs (hereafter often just "the Song" in this book) was one of the most often read and commented on parts of the entire Christian Biblical canon. There are more Latin manuscripts of the Song than any other Biblical book, and there are more medieval sermons on the Song than all other Biblical books except the Psalms and John. For these ancient men and women, the Song of Songs was their fifth gospel. It was read more often in some contexts than the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

What is interesting to me as a Biblical scholar is that people cherished the Song of Songs only as long as they could read it as a song of love between God and God's people. Some saw the poems as about God and the individual believer. Others saw them as about Christ and the church. Most Jews read the Song as about Yahweh (the God of Israel) and the people of Israel.

Then, in the 1800s, an increasing number of Biblical scholars began arguing that the Song was not about the love between God and God's people. Instead, it was meant to evoke the love between a woman and a man. This reading did not take hold at first. As it did, however, Christians and Jews started to turn away from the Song. It might be used for marriage counseling occasionally, but few used it to depict God's relationship with God's people. Biblical scholarship had, in effect, killed the influence of the Song of Songs on communities of faith. Though the Song was still in the Bible, it was "merely" sexual.

I became interested in trying to put these two readings together. Might it be possible, I wondered, to read the Song on multiple levels, *both* as a song of passion between humans *and* as something more? Typically, the ancients read the Song as a song of love between God and humans, *not* about actual sexual passion. They rejected and even persecuted those who said otherwise. Recently, Biblical scholars had done the reverse: argued that the Song was sexual and not spiritual. But might there be some truth in both approaches? I was naturally allied with those who read the Song as a

book about human love. Still, I felt something was lost when communities stopped reading this book as something more. Furthermore, what did this have to say about Biblical scholarship as a whole? In at least this instance, the historical method at the heart of much of what I do appeared to have killed the use of a Biblical book by communities of faith. Was this an exception? Or might this just be an extreme instance of a broader pattern?¹

The Church and the Separation of Sexuality from Spirituality

One key issue at the heart of all this is the assumption that sexuality and spirituality are opposites. So far I have been talking about opposing interpretations of the Song: the Song was perceived as either sexual *or* spiritual. Yet these opposing readings reflect a much deeper separation of sexuality and spirituality, mind and body, which runs through the heart of Western culture, particularly Western Christian culture.

From the outset, Christianity has depicted sex as a dangerous, chaotic, antispiritual force. In this, the early Christians were influenced by antisexual elements of the Greek tradition. Already in the sixth century, the Greek Pythagorean philosophic movement had praised keeping the body pure from sex. Perhaps influenced by that, some of Plato's most important works (for example, the *Republic*) argue that the only way a soul can gain freedom from the chaos of temporary pleasures like sex is to redirect its desire to higher goods, like beauty and truth. The Stoic movement also encouraged the cultivation of *apatheia*, the freedom from being moved by any passion. There were other, more eros-affirming strains of Hellenistic culture, but the early Christians built on and extended the more antisexual elements.²

The belief of early Christians in the end of the world may have influenced them in this antisexual direction. If everything were ending soon, why be distracted by sex and family? The Gospels depict Jesus as single. His single life anticipated a coming kingdom of God where people "neither marry nor [are] given in marriage" but instead are "like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25).³ This Jesus rejects the traditional family in favor of those who "do God's will" (Mark 3:31-35),⁴ and in one gospel he even praises those who "made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:10-12).

Anticipating just such an end to the world, the apostle Paul likewise criticized the institution of family. When one of his communities, the Corinthians, wrote to inquire if "it is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1), Paul urged unmarried believers not to marry unless marriage was the only way to keep from being "afame with passion" (1 Cor. 7:8-

9). Though Paul cites Jesus in telling people to stay in already existing marriages (1 Cor. 7:10–11), his own discussions focus on how married life is only for those who cannot maintain self-control without sex (1 Cor. 7:1–9). Later on, he argues that “those who marry will experience distress in the flesh” (1 Cor. 7:28) and that their “interests are divided” (7:32–34). Given how soon the world would end, Paul thought it best for singles to remain single, for married couples to remain married, and for even those who are married to avoid sex if they could do so without losing self-control (1 Cor. 7:25–40).⁵

Other types of sex had no place in Paul’s world. Like many of his time, he was intensely hostile to all forms of nonmarital sexuality: adultery, sex between men, and sex between women.⁶ For him, these were all works of the flesh, which opposed the spirit and freedom. His opposition to sex is well summed up in his words to the community in Galatia:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. . . . Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness. . . . Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16–25)⁷

Most of the rest of Christian history is dominated by this hostility toward sex, including marital sex. Often this hostility is articulated through interpretation of Biblical texts like the garden of Eden story in Genesis 2–3. The great Eastern theologian Gregory Nazianzen blamed Eve for “beguiling [Adam] by means of pleasure.”⁸ Augustine, who set the foundation for Western Christian theology, argued that unruly sexual desire was God’s punishment for Adam and Eve’s disobedience.⁹ Theologians like these see sex as a sadly necessary evil to have children, but otherwise praise the celibate life as humanity’s highest calling.¹⁰ Eventually, large sections of the church developed a “culture of celibacy,” where priests, leaders, and authoritative thinkers were required to abstain from sex and were marked as spiritually superior for doing so.¹¹

Though there are certainly exceptions to this antisexual attitude, most of Christianity has been more hostile toward sex than is almost any other world religion.¹² Many non-Christian cultures allow for birth control, masturbation, or premarital sex. In contrast, the early church prescribed strict punishments for all of these and for other forms of nonreproductive sex.¹³ Judaism celebrates marital love and sex between spouses. Some Jewish laws

stipulate that a Jewish man must be willing to have sex with his wife on Sabbath eve, even if he refrains on other days of the week.¹⁴ In contrast, early Christian writers forbade even marital sex across huge parts of the church year, including church seasons, holidays, and fast days.¹⁵ Such rulings reinforced the impression that bodily pleasure and spirituality do not mix.

To be sure, in more recent times, large portions of the church have affirmed marriage and a slightly more positive place for sex in life. Starting about four hundred years ago, Protestant reformers like Martin Luther argued that sex is medicine for the soul, as important to life as eating and drinking.¹⁶ Such churchmen endorsed marital sex even when it did not lead to having children. Yet this was not an emergent affirmation of sex *per se*. One of the main reasons Luther and others endorsed marital sex was because they saw it as an antidote to sex outside the family. Moreover, he, Calvin, Wesley, and other founders of Protestant denominations still argued strongly that the celibate single life was spiritually preferable to marriage.¹⁷

American culture has been deeply shaped by the family focus of Protestants like these. From the Puritans onward, Americans have long associated the church with the “family.” During the Victorian period of the 1800s, this evolved into a celebration of the nuclear family and the marital love between a husband and his wife.¹⁸ Increasingly, women—at least white, middle-class women—were depicted as naturally passionless, while men had to work to tame their lawless desires. African slaves, American Indians, and others were depicted as sexual savages. In this context, the churches, particularly groups of Christian women within them, fought to protect the nuclear family and purge society of sexual “deviance” through outlawing contraception, eliminating red-light districts, and ending the sexual double standard by requiring men to be faithful to their wives.¹⁹

Even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, major sections of the church are defined by their opposition to various forms of sexuality. Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestant Christians are at the forefront of fights against homosexuality, sex between teenagers, and other forms of nonmarital sex. Moreover, Biblical texts about homosexuality and other aspects of sexuality often figure prominently in such debates. In light of this, it is little wonder that many people do not associate spirituality with the Bible and sex.

Meanwhile, in recent years, sex has been separated from spirituality by a completely different way of viewing it: as a commodity to be exchanged between consenting adults. In the past, sex had been viewed mostly as an affair of power (males over women or younger boys), payment (prostitution), or love. But especially during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, more people began to see sex as something that could be freely given between two adults who were not necessarily “in love” with one another.²⁰

At a time when religious authorities had largely lost their hold on the enforcement of specific sexual mores, much sexual behavior was modeled on the trade of economic goods, which increasingly dominated the rest of society.²¹ Industrial capitalism was ever more dominant. More women and men were laborers, having to sell their services on the wage market. As employers and employees increasingly saw people as commodities, it was easier to view sex as a commodity too.²² And though this model has diminished some with the onset of AIDS and other diseases, it remains a powerful force for good or ill. Often, more openness has been good, particularly for those poorly served by traditional marriage structures. At other points, exchange of sex has become a new way for people's spirits to be separated from their bodies.

In sum, the battle lines shift, but many still find their sexuality disconnected from their spirituality. While some move toward sex as a good to be exchanged, much of the church continues to define itself by wars against various forms of sexuality. Previously, the church emphasized celibacy as humanity's true calling. Any bodily pleasure was implicitly antispiritual. Now, in many contexts, married sex is OK, but other forms of sexual desire or behavior are not. Generally, men are depicted as sexual animals, while women are seen as "naturally" passionless, except insofar as they desire their men. Few live up to the contradictory ideas about sex in circulation in contemporary culture: sex (or sexual attraction) as bad, romance as heavenly, family as good, women as pure, sex as a good to be exchanged, and so on. This is not an issue of having one ideal that does not correspond to our natural desires. It is an issue of having multiple cultural-religious ideals that are not reconciled with each other or our bodies. We are alienated from our erotic selves. As a result, our sexuality and spirituality are sharply separated. Both are harmed.

So much for general history. What about personal experience? Perhaps you have your own story to share about this: a gay friend who could never forgive the church for its role in encouraging young men like him to hate their sexual desires, a female friend for whom sex was so associated with religiously based shame that she was incapable of enjoying it, a lesbian couple who sought out non-Christian forms of spirituality more affirming of their love. Sometimes it is a question of a person feeling permanently judged by Christians and Christian traditions for a sexual misdeed that he or she would never want to repeat. Take, for example, a man who left an unhappy marriage to be with another woman and now feels torn between joy in his new marriage and a sense that he is continuing his sin by loving his new wife.

Redefining Eros

Out of exactly such conflicts, some have attempted to rethink Christian theology in an eros-affirming way. In particular, women, gay and lesbian people, and others whose sexuality is most judged by traditional Christianity are exploring what it might mean to speak of a broader eros that encompasses the myriad of ways people live out their deepest selves. One part of the past repression of sex has been restriction of it to a small part of life—closeted, heterosexual, exclusive. In contrast, some thinkers are urging a wider concept of eros that would embrace not only sexual passion, but work, play, deep friendship, art, and many other sorts of profound pleasure. Such an eros would include the passion of lovers' desire, and also the sensual joy of a shared meal or an abiding thirst for justice.

In a now classic essay, Audre Lorde, a member of a number of these marginalized groups, defines "the erotic" as

those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.²³

This is a vision of eros as flavoring all of life. Many people experience such passion most in sexual longing and fulfillment. But others know similarly intense passion when playing music, windsurfing on a sunlit bay, or discussing a new and exciting idea with a friend. So often, the word *erotic* is taken as equivalent to "sexual." Yet the word *eros* originates in Greek culture, where it included all sorts of core desires: certainly the sexual, but also intellectual, artistic, and spiritual yearnings.

Lorde is not a theologian. Nevertheless, she provides tools to Jewish and Christian writers who want to counter the ancient Christian animosity toward sexuality and eros in general. Writing in the wake of the sexual revolution in the 1970s and early 1980s, Christian feminists like Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima Brock rejected a reduction of sex to pornography and affirmed the power of eros—broadly defined—as a central aspect of the Christian life.²⁴ Judith Plaskow, a Jewish feminist, showed how the category of eros could be a resource for reenvisioning Jewish theology and practice.²⁵ And gay men such as Daniel Spencer and Michael Clark added their experiences to the discussion, with a particular emphasis on the implications of erotic theology for the care of creation.²⁶

One exercise that I have found helpful in conveying the interplay of sexuality and spirituality comes from the psychotherapist and writer Terry Kellogg. At a workshop on intimacy, he asked, "What kinds of words would

you say for spirituality? Give me one-word concepts of spirituality. What would you say?" He and the audience arrived at a list including:

wholeness	love
reverence	oneness
relationship	communion
meaning	letting go
safety	spontaneity
faith	gratitude
transcendence	warmth
trust	connectedness
serenity	

Kellogg went on to say, "Think back to the words we just used. How many of those words would not apply to sexuality as well?" Much of the rest of his lecture then explored how spirituality and sexuality are interwoven, and how problems in one often translate into problems in the other.²⁷

I work here on that premise—that sexuality and spirituality are intricately interwoven, that when one is impoverished, the other is warped, and that there is some kind of crucially important connection between the journey toward God and the journey toward coming to terms with our own sexual embodiment. Both sexuality and spirituality require space in one's life to grow. Neither flourish amidst constant busy-ness and exhaustion. Both require an openness to being deeply affected by someone outside oneself, whether one's lover or God. Both involve the whole self. Finally, at their most intense, both spirituality and sexuality involve an interplay between closeness and distance. Neither sexuality nor spirituality work if one is seeking a constant "high." Just as it is a mistake to expect everyone to feel a constant mystical connection to God, so also many people harm themselves and others through seeking consistently superlative sexual ecstasy.

Just such considerations led me to rethink the sexual-spiritual split in past readings of the Song of Songs and in Christianity in general. I do not mean to sexualize anyone's relationship with God. Nevertheless, I wonder about how narrowly people define sex and then separate it from their spirituality. Many assume that real sex is a genital thing that men do with women, mainly out of an ancient drive to reproduce. Yet Freud argued persuasively that the channeling of sexual drive into heterosexual behavior was something society did in order to encourage reproduction. He argued that humans are born polysexual beings, attaching sexlike erotic desire to almost anything. Boys and girls learn to focus this energy in societally approved ways through a complex process of attachments and disattachments to parents and others.

Our resulting belief in the “naturalness” of certain forms of sex is as arbitrary as any ancient sexual superstitions. To be sure, reproductive sex plays an essential role in the continuation of the human species. Yet whatever its origins, human eros has long been about far, far more than this. Humans are distinguished from most of the mammalian world by the fact that even bodily sex is not specifically connected to female fertility cycles.²⁸ Add to this the fact that human cultures have shown an almost infinite variety in the structuring of sexual activities. Although cultures almost always include some provision for reproduction (groups like the Shakers being an important exception), otherwise human groups show an amazing flexibility in the kinds of arrangements and behaviors that are endorsed or condemned.²⁹

In light of this, the Western confinement of “real” sex to orgasmic or heterosexual sex appears increasingly restrictive. Why is it that we so sharply separate sex from the rest of our lives? Why are we surprised when our words for spirituality resemble our words for sexuality? Why is it that the theological readings of the Song of Songs are so rare now that we find it curious that the ancients would have read such erotic poetry as being about God?

Once we start asking such questions, we are prepared to reread Biblical texts like the Song of Songs without the opposition between sex and spirituality that has so often preoccupied those before us. The original author may have meant just to create some beautiful, erotic love poems. Later readers of the Song often aimed to use it to replace human erotic love with an erotic love of God. But we, in our sex-saturated and yet often spiritually empty culture, somehow need both. Rather than enshrining sexuality by itself or pursuing a sex-denying spirituality, perhaps Biblical texts can be used to do something more—to cultivate a human passion less divided by categories like sexuality and spirituality. Perhaps texts like the Song can help us cultivate eros or, more specifically, erotic love.

The Erotic Word and Biblical Gardens

This book is about far more than the Song of Songs. The more I have become clear about the way the Bible has been used to repress sexuality, the more I have moved toward a rereading of the Bible as a whole. I do this out of a conviction that real change requires an engagement with the cultural resources we already have. Only thus can our solutions connect with where we are and take us forward. To be sure, there are some who would prefer simply to disregard the Bible, but it is too deeply embedded in many of us and in our culture. We ignore it at our peril. Just when we

think we are free of it, old interpretations of the Bible come back and misguide us again.

That is where my rereading of the Bible comes in. It is aimed at bridging the sexual-spiritual divide that continues to characterize much of Western culture. Where past interpretations of the Bible have repressed human longing, we will see how the Bible can be read to celebrate human eros, including sexual eros. For too long the Bible has been used to shut down eros and alienate human beings from our bodies. This book will show how the Bible might be used to cultivate a rich life of passion—for God, for the earth, for others. Of course, not all eros is good. The Bible reflects this too. Nevertheless, this book will show how the Bible also affirms a link between spirituality and a broad range of erotic dimensions of human life.

This eros-positive reading of the Bible must be selective, just as all readings of the Bible are. But this reading can be more faithful to the Bible itself because it does not pretend to present the one Biblical perspective on sexuality or law. Past readings have often been distorted by their authors' desires to make the Bible fit a particular program. Early Christians used the Bible to repress sexuality, ignoring ways the Bible did not fit such a program. Victorian reformers thought the Bible promoted an ideal of the family, and they downplayed the antifamily portions of the New Testament. Recent promotion of the family among conservative Christians is a variant of this approach. At no period have religious interpreters presented an objective picture of a single Biblical norm regarding sexuality. That is because there is no such single Biblical norm. Instead, any such group promoting one picture of sexuality as "Biblical truth" only reveals the failure of that group to be honest about its own selectivity and larger aims.

Before moving on, it is important to note that sex is not and will not be a positive category for many people, at least as long as "sex" is limited to erotic bodily contact. Many have been so wounded by sexual violation that sex is irredeemably distressing for them. Others cannot or do not want to be sexual because of physical limitations or because they are not with someone with whom they want that kind of relationship. In a society where bodily sex is sometimes presented as the be-all and end-all of human existence, it is important to recognize that sexual eros is not everything.³⁰ And it is important to recognize that there are forms of sex that are violent, painful, and harmful. This will come up again later.

Such "no's" to sexual eros should be articulated, but the main point of *this* book is to say a Biblical "yes" to erotic love. This erotic love encompasses bodily contact, but is not confined to such desire. Instead, it is a category embracing all forms of core longing, including our sexually erotic love for others.³¹