

“A needed adult antidote to the crudity of the schoolboy culture.” —CARL R. TRUEMAN

SEX &
VIOLENCE
IN THE
BIBLE

*A Survey of
Explicit Content
in the Holy Book*



JOSEPH W. SMITH III

“All regular readers of the Bible have a vague grasp that there are references to sex and violence in the Bible, but they do not know how many references there are or how explicit the references are. This book serves the useful purpose of showing us exactly how much sex and violence there is in the Bible, as well as the precise nature of the references to the human body. It is a work of painstaking research and scholarship. If the concentration of examples makes for uncomfortable reading, it is nonetheless important that we confront the subject. We need to know what kind of book the Bible is, and additionally we can assume that the references to sex and violence in the Bible tell us something that God wants us to know.”

—**Leland Ryken**, Professor of English, Wheaton College

“At last, a book that deals soberly with the fact that the Bible addresses the earthy aspects of life and that does so in a way that honors not just the Bible’s content but also the Bible’s intentional modes of expression. This is a needed adult antidote to the crudity of the schoolboy culture that sadly seems to have gained the upper hand in church circles in recent years.”

—**Carl R. Trueman**, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Brutally blunt, delicately discreet, strongly scriptural. An excellent resource for the Christian who wants to understand the Bible’s revelation of the baser aspects of human nature and sinful reality. Smith thoroughly catalogues and examines biblical passages about sex and violence with an evenhanded fairness and respect for the Bible and his readers. This book should challenge Christian prudes and religious libertines alike.”

—**Brian Godawa**, Author, *Hollywood Worldviews*, *Chronicles of the Nephilim*; Screenwriter, *To End All Wars*

“The Bible is not for the squeamish. It is full of bodies, and with bodies come fluids and emissions, sex and seductions, battles and blood. Joseph W. Smith’s *Sex and Violence in the Bible* is an unexpurgated reminder to us that nothing human is alien to God’s Word. If you are a Victorian prude, read this book at your peril.”

—**Peter J. Leithart**, Senior Fellow, Theology and Literature, Dean of Graduate Studies, New Saint Andrews College, Moscow, Idaho

“Some people have a rather rosy picture of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. They may think the Bible is a collection of sayings that include only encouragements, promises, and high-sounding sentiments. But readers can come to that conclusion only if they haven’t actually read the Bible or have done so selectively. Joseph W. Smith wants us to come to terms with the Bible as it is—filled with stories and images of sex and violence. His purpose is to shock us, but not gratuitously. He wants to shock us into reckoning with the real Bible and the real God to which it points.”

—**Tremper Longman III**, Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“At first, looking only at the title, I was worried that this book would be mainly of prurient interest. To be sure, it is not for the faint of heart. But what the author manages to show convincingly is how very frank and honest the Bible is about subjects that are often avoided or handled gingerly by today’s Christians. In a word, he convinces us that the Bible is not a prudish book. Smith’s study provides a great resource on these two subjects, which indeed pervade the Scriptures. The take-home from this exhaustive examination of the relevant texts is that we would be well advised to share the Bible’s realism, if we wish to share its message of truth.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

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For my wife

“You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride.”



“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17

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I would also like to thank the many scholars on whose work I have relied so heavily in this text—particularly Daniel I. Block, Robert L. Thomas, the various contributors to the excellent *ESV Study Bible*, and Bernard Katz’s Internet article “Biblical Euphemisms” (<http://freethoughtperspective.net/?p=3028>). In addition, I made regular use of the excellent Bible Gateway website, which carries dozens of Bible versions and is invaluable when comparing English translations of individual texts (see www.biblegateway.com).

Unless otherwise noted, discussion of the actual meanings of ancient Greek and Hebrew terms relies on Thomas’s *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Whole Bible* (Holman, 1981); I also use the English spelling of these words provided in Thomas’s helpful book.

A special thanks to my lovely and supportive wife, who not only gave me my copy of Thomas’s volume many years ago, but also served as sole breadwinner in our home for several months so that I could finish this project. I’m likewise grateful for her careful proofreading of the final draft, which saved me from a number of embarrassing errors.

And finally, a word about two decisions I made to cut down on visual clutter in my text. First, while I made extensive use of notes in

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the *ESV Study Bible*, I have provided footnoted citations for this material only when the location is not immediately apparent. In other words, readers wishing to locate this cited matter in the original source can often do so without a citation or page number—because virtually all *ESV* commentary occurs at the chapter and verse under discussion. And second, in Scripture quotations that use only the first part of a sentence, I often left out the three ellipsis points that normally belong at the end (. . .)—when my omission did not seem to affect the meaning of the quoted material.

Introduction

“I Was Very Eager to Write to You”

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, I hosted a church-sponsored showing of the award-winning 2012 film *The Artist*. Afterward, a few attenders expressed concern over my choice, calling the film “dark,” “disturbing,” and not appropriate for a church setting.

While I apologized for inaccurately promoting the film as “family friendly”—after all, it does have drinking, attempted suicide, and what is politely known as a “crude gesture”—I was nonetheless baffled by this response. Is a film like *The Artist*—with lots of laughter, dancing, self-sacrifice, lovely black-and-white photography, and a joyous ending—really darker and more disturbing than, for example, the gory and dismal Old Testament book of Judges? Is it less appropriate in a church than the vivid sexual imagery from Song of Solomon 5–7? Is it more disturbing than Ezekiel 16 and 23, which use the word “whore” nearly 40 times, along with other unsavory talk about breasts, nipples, and the private parts of donkeys? Have these movie-going friends—whose opinions I respect and whose complaints I took seriously—fully grappled with the vast amount of explicit material in the Holy Bible?

In his commentary on Ezekiel, Iain M. Duguid asks a similar question: “If the sermons preached in our churches were movies, what rating would the distributors give them? In many churches, every sermon would rate a ‘G’ (‘General Audiences’). There is nothing in them to offend anyone, young or old, seeker or convert alike.” While the great British preacher C. H. Spurgeon said of Ezekiel 16, “A minister can scarcely read it in public,” Duguid wonders “if contemporary Christians need to be as shielded from unpleasant realities as we tend to think”: “Fire and

brimstone sermons that focus alone on hell and God's wrath may be a serious misrepresentation of the true God, but so also are a continuous diet of polite decorous sermons that only mention heaven and God's love. Sin is ugly, offensive, and depraved, and people need to hear that side of the Christian message too." Pointing out that R-rated content may be necessary to portray the full horror of Nazi concentration camps in a film like *Schindler's List*, Duguid observes, "Sometimes only an 'R' rated sermon does justice to the outrage of sin."¹

But of course, Ezekiel is not the only biblical book that provokes revulsion in its readers. As writer and filmmaker Brian Godawa puts it, the Scriptures contain "detailed accounts and descriptions of every immoral act known to humanity. A cursory perusal of these depictions of vice is enough to make any concerned reader blush. But it only proves that sex and violence are not always literary taboo in Holy Writ. In fact, the acknowledgement of evil is treated as the necessary prerequisite of redemption." Later, Godawa adds, "Shocking metaphor and explicit drama are common means by which God communicates to people when they have become thick-skulled, dull of hearing or wicked of heart. . . . We must face the fact that the Scriptures depict sinful acts that are revolting to our sensibilities. The portrayal of good and the portrayal of evil are two sides of God's revelation to us of his one good and holy truth."²

With passages like this, Godawa provided the initial inspiration for this project; his thoughtful 2002 volume *Hollywood Worldviews* has a dandy little appendix whose title I appropriated for the book you are holding. In a few attention-grabbing pages, Godawa frankly catalogs the principal graphic material in the Old and New Testaments—and I thought to myself, "Why not go whole hog and cover it all?" So I began compiling a list of passages to deal with—Eglon's ghastly murder in Judges 3; Onan's *coitus interruptus* in Genesis 38; Paul's vicious insult in Galatians 5:12—thinking that I might amass 40 or 50 texts.

Yeah, right.

After an entire summer of work and study, I had collected not a few dozen but rather several hundred such passages—giving me plenty

1. Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 215–18.

2. Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 188, 199–200.

of work to do and also yielding a basic thesis: there's a lot of sex and violence in the Bible.

My purpose has been simply to show this, in a rather focused and concentrated form, and thus to demonstrate that Christians needn't be terribly squeamish about explicit content. In conjunction with this, I planned to unpack, clarify, and explain some of these graphic passages, many of which have been obscured by idiom, figurative language, and overly genteel English translations—not to mention the vast geographical and chronological distance between the culture in which the Bible was originally written and that of our own time. I wanted to show, in other words, exactly what the Bible says and means in each case.

Yet as I worked my way through the texts, another equally vital goal emerged. Perhaps there was a reason for so much indirect material, for the Bible's frequent brevity, vagueness, and lack of detail regarding sex and violence—and for the euphemisms found so often even in the original Greek and Hebrew terminology. In our sex-and-violence-obsessed culture, perhaps the Bible is useful as an aesthetic guide not only in what it does say and show, but also in what it *doesn't*. For this reason, my treatment of various passages here sometimes involves much more explanation and detail than the actual text provides—both so we can understand what is actually happening, and so we can see what the Bible writers are choosing *not* to describe.

Because of the scope and nature of my task, I have tried to refrain from excessive editorializing about the texts. That is, I want to explain what they say and what they mean, and thus to show which Bible passages are or are not blunt and graphic. However, I have little desire to speculate about the writers' motives for candor or restraint. It would be presumptuous and foolish to concoct some overarching criteria—probably artificial, possibly dangerous—showing “when it's OK” to be explicit and when it isn't. Neither the Bible writers nor the Holy Spirit feel compelled to defend their bluntness or their moderation, and I won't attempt to do so, either.

In the same way, it is not my purpose here to justify God's commands and intentions as expressed in Holy Scripture. The Bible's attitudes toward premarital sex, gender roles, homosexuality, and mass killings are highly controversial in today's culture, and while I feel strongly that God has full prerogative to tell us what is truly right and wrong, it would

radically alter the size and shape of this project if I waded into these controversies instead of focusing on my key topic: the vast number and precise meaning of explicit passages in the Bible. I have made some comments along these lines where appropriate, but defense of God's ways has not been my principal focus here.

I realize that in sticking strictly to the texts at hand, and keeping my own opinions to a minimum, I run the risk of presenting what is essentially a list—and a very long list at that. I have worked hard to maintain a smooth flow and a style that is reasonably casual while also maintaining proper reverence and respect.

A few other notes regarding my methodology are necessary. In order to maintain a reasonable length and pace, I have not dealt with every single Bible passage referencing sex, bloodshed, disease, or other uncomfortable topics. Yet at the same time, in those passages I did choose, I have bolstered my explanations with frequent notes and references to commentaries and other scholarly works. While some readers might prefer fewer of these, I have deliberately "shown my work" in order to demonstrate that my readings of these texts are neither far-fetched nor irresponsible—that I am not, as it were, a loose cannon seeking unsavory implications in all kinds of perfectly innocuous passages.

Along the same lines, I have tried to limit my sources to strictly evangelical scholars who believe that the Bible is God's inerrant Word—which has not generally been the case with other studies like mine. Indeed, several books on "sex in the Bible" already exist, but, as it happens, none of them view Scripture as infallible. Let's not allow those who play fast-and-loose with Holy Writ to have the last word on such important subjects.

And while I am writing for an audience that also believes in the truth of God's Word, I have nonetheless tried not to presume a broad and detailed knowledge of Scripture on the part of every reader. Background on characters, families, locations, and ancient customs—as well as Hebrew and Greek words and expressions—is provided wherever possible.

And finally, my topical arrangement has created yet another sticky issue, namely, the same passage being discussed in several different places. As an example, the shockingly blunt descriptions of Israel's spiritual "whoredom" in Ezekiel 16 and 23 are discussed in numerous chapters, because they include material on the male and female body as well as

prostitution, rape, and adultery. This has necessitated several cross-references (e.g., "see pages 27–28"), not only to avoid repetition but also because I do not assume that every reader will read every chapter in the exact order I have used.

Indeed, for some, *Sex and Violence in the Bible* may serve as a sort of reference book: rather than read the volume cover to cover—which may, after all, get somewhat tiresome—some readers may wish to look at one or two chapters; others may be considering one certain passage and wondering, "Does it *really* say that?" This is why I have also provided an index of Scripture passages covered in the book.

You will no doubt notice that I have quoted an extraordinary number of such verses and passages. It has been my desire to focus on the language, the text, and the details presented in God's Word—to listen, and give it our fullest attention. Just as the Bible can defend itself to an unbelieving world, so also in matters of sex and violence, the Bible clearly speaks for itself.

Let's hear what it has to say.

PART I

“Uncovering Nakedness”—Sex



“Please Give Me Some”

A Few Aphrodisiacs

WHAT BETTER PLACE to start than with those sometimes-obscure substances that are supposed to “put one in the mood”?

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines “aphrodisiac” as a food or drug “that arouses or is held to arouse sexual desire.”¹

Probably the best-known Bible passage featuring these substances is Genesis 30, in which Rachel and Leah, the two wives of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, squabble over some mandrakes found by Leah’s oldest son, Reuben. Rachel, still upset that her husband’s other wife had already borne four sons when she herself had none, urged Leah to “please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” Meeting resistance from her marital rival, Rachel then arranged a trade, offering one more night with Jacob in exchange for the plants—a transaction that resulted in yet another son for Leah (Gen. 30:14–17).

In his commentary on this passage, Gordon J. Wenham tells us that “in ancient times, mandrakes were famed for arousing sexual desire . . . and for helping barren women to conceive.”² The alleged link between these plants and sexual fertility may have been heightened by the fact that the mandrake’s roots “were thought to resemble

1. “Aphrodisiac,” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2004).

2. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 246.

male and female genitalia”³ and by the way the ancient Hebrew word for “mandrakes” (*duda'im*) bears some resemblance to one form of “love” (*dodim*).

Indeed, in Hebrew, “mandrake” also sounds a bit like the phrase “my beloved” (*dodi*),⁴ which appears fairly often in Song of Solomon; and as it happens, Solomon’s Song is the only other book in Scripture where mandrakes make an appearance (Song 7:13). That’s not surprising, since Solomon’s famous love poem is a cornucopia of fruits and spices that were thought to stimulate love and desire.

Nard, for example—mentioned in Song of Solomon 1:12—was “much in demand as a love-potion.” Pomegranates (Song 4:3) were likewise used in some Mesopotamian love potions, and all the spices in 4:14—nard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, and aloes—have erotic overtones in much ancient Middle Eastern love poetry. Indeed, three of these—myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon—also show up in Proverbs 7:17, where a scheming adulteress boasts of their use as she seduces a wayward young man.⁵

In his comments on Proverbs 7, Bruce K. Waltke points out that myrrh was sometimes “pulverized into a fine power and placed in a sachet worn between a woman’s breasts,”⁶ which appears to be the case in Song of Solomon 1:13: “My beloved is to me a pouch of myrrh which lies all night between my breasts” (NASB).

Similarly, the raisin cakes requested by the lovesick woman in Song 2 may have been regarded as possessing aphrodisiac qualities. She also mentions apples, which are associated with love and fertility in 8:5; and so the young woman in 2:5 may be asking for “food that, while strengthening her, will also heighten her experience of love.”⁷

Raisin cakes reappear in Hosea 3:1, where they seem to be used by Hosea’s adulterous wife as “part of her harlot’s hire, and perhaps a sexual

3. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 648.

4. Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, eds., *The Song of Songs: The World’s First Great Love Poem* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 208.

5. G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1984), 85, 117, 126.

6. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 379.

7. Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 286.

stimulant.”⁸ They also show up in Jeremiah 44:19, where it becomes clearer that their use in Solomon and Hosea does indeed carry strong sexual overtones. G. Lloyd Carr tells us that in the Jeremiah passage—where the cakes are offered in pagan worship to a female deity, “the queen of heaven”—these delicacies were almost certainly “made either in the shape of a nude female with exaggerated sexual organs, or frequently in triangular shape representing the female genitalia.”⁹

As an object intended to evoke the private parts, this particular aphrodisiac points directly to our next topic.

8. David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1989), 91.

9. Carr, *Song of Solomon*, 92.

CHRISTIANS needn't be any more squeamish than the Bible itself is—and it contains many things that most Christians shy away from! In this carefully organized catalog of sexual, violent, and other blunt biblical passages, Joseph Smith develops a “Christian aesthetic” to help us process our culture’s daily deluge of such material.

“A work of painstaking research and scholarship. If the concentration of examples makes for uncomfortable reading, it is nonetheless important that we confront the subject. . . . We can assume that the references to sex and violence in the Bible tell us something that God wants us to know.”

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