

Biblical Sexism

There are few things more comforting than feeling understood- the realization that others struggle similarly. That happened to me once, while sitting on a carpet floor in someone's living room, surrounded by girls who were striving to love God. The pain I felt so silently was described by the lips of another, but my comfort was ended abruptly, because the long description of all my pain was followed by, "No. You've never felt that. You've never struggled with that. *Us girls* just don't work that way."

I went home and pounded the piano with the only four chords I knew. I let the harsh sound waves wash away all I clenched inside and I prayed in frustration and raw sensitivity, "then what the does that make me?"

At every women's conference, small group-sleepover, and fourth grade pool party a small wound was torn at. They gave me a definition of womanhood, and left me scrambling to match up. As I struggled to learn who I was on the most basic level, I was being told that "us girls just don't work that way" by well-intentioned women with soft eyes. What did it mean that I didn't enjoy all the girly activities? What did it mean that I wasn't sociable or graceful? Was there something wrong with me that I struggled more with lust than I ever did with gossip or modesty? Was I selfish to squirm at the idea of submission to a husband? Was I unrealistic to imagine myself a missionary, not the wife of one? Were my dreams of strength, independence, and leadership unattainable? I felt like a freak of nature, for everything natural I experienced- for wanting to be seen as an equal person.



So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.

When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home.

When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel.

I was twelve years old the first time I read this passage in Judges 19. My stomach churned at the concepts packed into this short passage. My imagination filled in the graphic details of gang rape and the mutilation of bodies. Most of all, I was disturbed by the seemingly positive light shined on this man. Even with seventh grade reading skills I noticed the tone of the passage implied heroic sacrifice on the part of a man who was willing to give his own daughter and whore for a violent group to “use them and do to them whatever you wish” in order to preserve the safety of his guest. Its graphic content lends well to the use of this passage to illustrate the brutality, sexism, and inhumanity found in the bible but it is easy to rebuttal.

Most Christians would argue that Judges 19 and other scripture passages like it record events in historical fashion and do not condone the actions presented. But even the most impartial history book is biased. Teams of educated, well-rounded people work hard to ensure equal representation in educational materials, but even things as seemingly meaningless as sentence structure and word choice can affect the way students consume and interpret those facts. So, even if historical events are being presented, tone has a huge effect on how they are understood.

The only problem is that tone, like many qualities of the art forms, is relatively open to interpretation- it cannot be proven and I would struggle to persuade a reader to my view without something along the lines of statistical opinion from literary experts (which I do not have). So, to be honest the argument defending passages like Judges 19 is considerably logically sound. This particular passage is a record of presumably historical events, not a manual for proper living.

Yet, if the Old Testament is purely historical, a collection of events and outdated laws, then what is the point of reading it? What spiritual significance is found in a history textbook? The fact is, the Old Testament is not only a record of historical events, but of a God who interacted historically- a God who according to Malachi 3:6 says, “I the LORD do not change.” We read the Old Testament not to gather insight on the culture and practices of ancient civilizations, but to better understand the changeless God, who inspired these accounts. And the majority of the content recorded in the bible, therefore the main way we learn about God, is how He interacts with human-kind.

~~~~~

Growing up evangelical, I was taught to revere, admire, and emulate King Solomon- the wisest man on earth and a man who, according to 1 Kings 11:3, had three hundred sex slaves and seven

hundred “wives” (who were practically sex slaves). One could make an argument similar to the one presented previously and say that Solomon’s sexual conduct was not condoned by scripture, rather it was historically recorded. However, in light of the entire passage, this argument falls short.

When something to the tune of 10,000 women are taken advantage of and treated like sexual objects by a leading man of God, it is only human nature to wonder why God wouldn’t intervene. Divine intervention is a whole other topic, but what makes Solomon’s whorish story and others like it so appalling is that God *did* intervene- but never on behalf of the women being abused. God rebuked Solomon directly- *twice* and his flaw was recorded clearly in scripture. Solomon’s downfall wasn’t that he owned thousands of sex-slaves, but the fact that some of those slaves were foreigners, who led him “astray”. Little regard is shown for the 10,000 women who were sold or given away by their fathers to act as sex toys and baby-carriers for the rest of their lives.

~~~~~

Solomon wasn’t the first to abuse women. His father, David’s famous escapade with Bathsheba is often softened in Sunday school classes and even Hollywood representation which present Bathsheba as a willing or even enthusiastic sexual partner, but I disagree for a couple of reasons. 2 Samuel 12:4 which says, “David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her” (NASB) employs word choice which implies a lack of consent. Here the word “took” is the Hebrew word “laqach” which can be translated as: to take, to seize, to capture, or to carry off. Also, later in this passage Nathan, a prophet of God, rebukes David with a parable. He describes Bathsheba as a small and helpless lamb torn away from her owner to be eaten. Why would God (through a prophet) choose to describe Bathsheba in such a way if she had been a willing participant? Within the context of the entire passage it is clear to me that Bathsheba was a victim of rape.

Just like in Solomon’s terrible mistreatment of women, God took action, but not on behalf of Bathsheba. God chose to rebuke David through a parable which places emphasis on the wrong done to a poor man whose beloved sheep was stolen by a rich man. The point of the story is not to feel bad for Bathsheba, the rape victim, who was represented by the lamb; but rather to see the injustice done to the man whose property was taken from him. The entire premise of the parable, and basically God’s analysis of the situation, is that Bathsheba’s husband was taken advantage of, that something was stolen from *him*. Yet Bathsheba was the rape victim, not her husband!

The passage describing David's downfall explains how it hurt Bathsheba's husband and God himself, but never Bathsheba-the one who was raped! And as if this woman's quiet suffering was not enough, God himself declares that the child that resulted from this rape will die. Bathsheba was raped, had her husband murdered, and then nurtured and birthed a small human only to watch him slowly die. But on a positive note it really taught her rapist a lesson!

~~~~~

Just like Solomon, David's ancestry contains men who began the legacy of abuse before him, and one of these men was Abram (who would later be known as Abraham)- the Father of God's chosen people. Abraham's wife, Sarah, convinced him to rape a slave named Hagar. After being raped and carrying a baby she never agreed to have, she was being abused by Sarah- something Abraham condoned when he said, "Your servant is in your hands... do with her whatever you think best." The situation became so unbearable that Hagar ran away.

In such a situation one would expect God to intervene, and he does, but not to reprimand his chosen ones who dehumanized someone with rape and mistreatment. Instead God sends an angel to tell Hagar, the runaway slave, to return to her abusers!

Many Christians would argue that God's action was actually on behalf of Hagar- that returning to the ownership of abusive people was for her own good. But this argument doesn't hold up because it anthropomorphizes God. From a human perspective, it would be possibly decent to advise Hagar to return to her owners, because with a baby on the way and slim opportunity for employment, she had no way to take care of herself (of course, if the person was really loving, they would sacrifice part of what they had to care for her, so she wouldn't have to return). We must not ever forget that God is not human! Unlike people he controls everything and has endless possibilities. He's not limited by time, culture, or even our imagination- he could solve the situation any way he wanted- but he told her to go back to her rapist, her abuser, her owners. Whatever God's motive, it certainly wasn't focused on Hagar's well-being.

~~~~~

These three stories were just a few examples of women being mistreated in the bible. The men who committed these crimes were the chosen representatives of God and authors of the bible. If they

had committed these disgusting crimes, realized they were wrong, and sought forgiveness of the women they hurt, it would be an entirely different situation. But there is no record of any of these men asking the women they mistreated for forgiveness. And while Solomon and David did express sorrow, it was never directly for the mistreatment of women.

The bible is not just a collection of historical records, but a book that documents of the actions of an unchanging God, so that we can learn about him through way he interacts with people. Well what can we learn about God from the selection of his leaders, that he chose *unapologetic* rapists and whores who used women as objects? What can we learn about God from the fact that he is completely willing and ready to intervene in situations of abuse, but never on behalf of the victims?



Since I'm sure viewing how God ignored and his people committed violent sexism is not enough for many people to understand my troubles with sexism in the bible, let's examine a few of the many gender prejudice commands directly from God. In Deuteronomy chapter 22, a situation is described where a woman was given to a man, but the husband is claiming that after sex there was no evidence of her virginity. If the woman's family can provide evidence of her virginity, the man is fined for disgracing the family's name. But if no evidence of her virginity is provided, she is stoned to death. Even overlooking the disturbing fact that the woman in this situation was married without choice, that she is held to different standards than a male, and that her sexuality is used as a bargaining tool, this system of "justice" is completely outrageous.

The "proof" of virginity described in this bible passage was a blood stained sheet, because sometimes, on the first night of sex, a female virgin's hymen (a part of the vulva) is torn, resulting in blood loss- but according to basic biological understanding of the human body, this is not substantial evidence. According to, *Clinical Protocols in Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology* (a collaborated book for medical care providers) the condition of a woman's hymen is not a reliable indicator of whether or not she has been vaginally penetrated. Also, according to the second volume of *Evaluation of the Sexually Abused Child: A Medical Textbook and Photographic Atlas*, some females are born with no hymen at all, so needless to say, evidence of it being broken would be nonexistent. As if these facts were not convincing enough, when sex is done carefully and with consideration for a females comfort, it is extremely unlikely that a woman's vulva be damaged in any way. Educator, youtuber, and activist, Laci

Green as well as Paul Joannides for *Psychology Today* make it clear that a woman's hymen is typically not torn if a female is sexually aroused and communication is ample. In other words, when sex is done properly no damage, bleeding, or "evidence" should happen at all. Clearly the blood loss caused by a torn hymen is not a reliable measure of virginity- something that the God, who designed women, should certainly have been aware of despite the lack of scientific understanding at the time.

Secondly, the woman in the situation presented in Deuteronomy 22:13-21 is completely dependent on her father to take action and somehow, secure the sheets on which the couple consummated their marriage. I am no criminal mastermind, but if I were a "husband" who was somehow displeased with my new wife, it seems more than feasible to simply destroy the bed sheets or hide them from her father- resulting in the death of an innocent woman. A God of infinite wisdom ought to understand that a good legal protocol doesn't allow injustice to happen this easily.

"If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the young woman's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you" (Deuteronomy 20). Death by hurled stones is an extremely harsh punishment for a woman who had sex. Yet the extremity is greatly multiplied when one considers the points aforementioned- that a torn hymen is not ample evidence of sexual activity, that a person ought to be innocent until proven guilty, and that it is nearly impossible for a father to claim a bed sheet if his daughter's accuser is even remotely clever. How could a God-sent legal protocol be so extreme, unjust, and sexist?

~~~~~

This shocking record of discriminatory laws directly from God is not a rare occurrence. In fact, in this same chapter, Deuteronomy 22, the laws about rape are recorded and greatly abuse the basic human rights of women.

"If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you." This law is disturbing to my sense of justice because I believe that people should never be executed for possibly being a rape victim.

According to Campus Assault Resources and Education (CARE) rape is defined as, “A specific form of sexual assault that includes an act of sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral penetration), accomplished against a person who does not consent to the sexual contact, or is *incapable of consenting.*” (emphasis added). The article goes on to define consent:

- It is active, not passive. Silence and passivity do not equal consent.
- Consent is possible only when there is equal power.
- Giving in because of fear is NOT consent.
- Giving in or going along with someone to gain approval or to avoid being hurt is NOT consent.

Similarly, our nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization, RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) specifies that lack of verbal resistance does not mean consent, “If you didn’t say no because you were legitimately scared for your life or safety, then it may be rape. Sometimes it isn’t safe to resist, physically or verbally — for example, when someone has a knife or gun to your head, or threatens you or your family if you say anything.” Clearly, not screaming loud enough does *not* mean consent!

I am no expert on ancient cultures, but it is my understanding that people to whom this law applied to had ample access to weapons, which they could have used to threaten rape victims into silence or make them unconscious. And even if they did not have weaponry, according to RAINN, “In about 8 out of 10 rapes, no weapon is used other than physical force.” I am astounded by the neglect of God’s law to address the fact that a rape victim may be unable to call for help due to threats, unconsciousness, or something as simple as a hand over the her mouth.

It’s most likely that the woman in this situation was simply cheating on her husband and wanted to have sex, but the chance that she was raped is far too great to be ignored, especially when the punishment is death.

~~~~~

“If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.” (Deuteronomy 22:28-29)

According to this bible passage, if a girl is raped, she has to marry her rapist. Not only is the rapist *not* punished (except for a small fine), now he has legal rights to rape the woman whenever he feels like it. Just put yourself in this girl's shoes, as you are trying to sort through the emotional trauma of being raped you are taken away from your family and home to be put into the house of your rapist and then raped repeatedly for the rest of your life.

What is astounding to me is that many Christians will defend this passage by saying that it was best for her- that in this culture no one wanted to marry a raped woman so at least this way she would be taken care of! As if the notion of a woman having value after sex or an independent woman caring for herself is incomprehensible.

Just like the situation with Abraham's slave Hagar, we cannot forget that God is not under the same restrictions as we are. And neither can we compare the standards He set for Israel to the other cultural practices of the time. God is above and beyond all things. He is all powerful, his options are unlimited, and he is the essence of holiness. His laws ought to be perfect and timeless, because he is. So how can we reconcile with laws like these?

Would you really dare to say that it is justice for a rape victim to be forced to marry their abuser? If so, why not start working toward making it a law today? If not why would a perfect, powerful God command it?

~~~~~

The three laws aforementioned are from just one passage and only a small representation of the sexist laws directly from God. If you manage to understand how it is not sexist to make laws ensuring a woman who does not scream loud enough during rape is stoned, a woman whose father cannot secure evidence of her virginity is stoned, and that a woman who is raped must marry her rapist, please explain to me, because I have tried for many years and cannot.



With such extreme and disturbing laws from God and actions of his chosen people, it can be easy to overlook less shocking sexism in the bible but we mustn't ignore such passages. Just because a

woman is not being raped or murdered, doesn't mean she is not hurt by sexism. Law recorded and culture condoned in the Old and New Testament alike were and are harmful to women.

~~~~~

Passages commanding women to submit to men can be found all through the New Testament especially. The following are just a few quotes directly from the NIV translation of holy scripture:

“Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” Colossians 3:18

“Your desire shall be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” Genesis 3:16

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” 1 Timothy 2:11

“Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands” 1 Peter 3:1

“Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

Ephesians 5:22-24

The bible is abundantly clear that a woman's proper place is in submission to her husband. By the command of this scripture people should not be given authority according to experience, wisdom, or ability but on the basis of their genitals. A woman must be submissive simply because she is a woman. How is this not sexism? It is an epitome of the denial of women as *equal* human beings, straight from the inspired word of God.

Many people continue to defend this teaching and there are two main ways they try to make this sexist doctrine palatable in a culture where women are liberated. The first is well rooted in the format of many of the passages aforementioned, which first command women to submit and then

husbands to love. It is essentially saying that a man is to love his wife and have her best interest in mind so her submission to him would be without problem. Yet even if a husband is completely loving, why is he better suited to lead? What about situations where a husband is selfish? A woman who follows God must not stand up for herself, but rather submit to her selfish husband? Are all Christian women left in submission to men with the mere hope that their husbands will be loving?

The second attempt to justify inequality is to compare inequality in relationship to the Trinity. The argument is that Jesus submits to God the Father, and the Holy Spirit submits to Christ, but they are all equal; therefore commanding women to submit to men does not infringe on gender equality. And the fact is, the bible *does* compare the roles of married couples to divinity, but not in the way most Christians prefer to. Ephesians 5:22-24 says, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” Rather than comparing the submission of wives to the equal relationship of Christ and Father-God, the bible relates it to the clearly unequal relationship between Christ and humans. Women are compared to a fickle, weak, and incapable group, and told it is only natural to submit. Christ is obviously superior in intelligence, capability, power, and in every way imaginable- so it makes sense for the church to submit to him. Are men superior to women? If so, this is an epitome of sexism. If not, why does it make sense for women to submit to men.

~~~~~

The movement toward gender equality has always had a focus on changing the way we think about women. Females are equal people- not creatures made for pleasing men. Not every woman is best suited for a life-style of homemaking. Women *can* be in positions of authority, even over men. Women have more to offer to this society than sex, children, and “the woman’s touch” of domestic comfort. Yet the bible directly counters these ideas, thereby contradicting the notion that women are equal to men and deserving of the same rights and opportunities.

Criticism of media with gender equality in mind is primarily focused on whether or not women are presented as humans or more like props for male characters to interact with (the famous “Bechdel Test” is prime example of this). As I began noticing the negative representation of women in the media, I also encountered some of the same troubles in scripture. The bible fails to present women with equality because almost all women in the bible are primarily identified by their roles in relation to male

characters. I challenge you to think of any woman in the bible and it is likely that she is best identified by her sexual, maternal, or daughterly roles.

We have seen how God's commands and the actions of his chosen ones present women as primarily sexual objects, but let's quickly consider another example. Large scale massacres are common throughout the bible (that is an entirely different subject for later), but what makes them sexist as well is the fact that virgins are taken as sex slaves, and that God directly condones it. The following are just a few examples of God-approved rape and sexual slavery:

"So the assembly sent twelve thousand fighting men with instructions to go to Jabesh Gilead and put to the sword those living there, including the women and children. 'This is what you are to do,' they said. 'Kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin.'" (Judges 21:10-11)

"Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man." (Numbers 31:17-18)

"Put to the sword all the men in [the town]. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves."

(Deuteronomy 20:13-14)

"If this happens, you may take her to your home, where she must shave her head, cut her nails, and change the clothes she was wearing when she was captured. She will stay in your home, but let her mourn for her father and mother for a full month. Then you may marry her, and you will be her husband and she will be your wife. But if you marry her and she does not please you, you must let her go free. You may not sell her or treat her as a slave, for you have humiliated her."

(Deuteronomy 21:12-14)

These men are encouraged and sometimes ordered to go ahead and take women as their plunder, right along with the livestock. And when giving instructions on how this is to be done, Deuteronomy 21 specifies that "you have humiliated her." Even this is an understatement, the pain and emotional damage of watching your family and friends be slaughtered and then taken as a slave, stripped of rights, and raped regularly goes far beyond humiliation. In the bible (under God's order) women are not treated as human being but rather sexual objects- to be taken and used.

It is indisputably sexist to presume that all women ought to be house-wives, yet the bible greatly encourages this notion. Titus 2:4-5 says, "...urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God."-essentially saying that a young woman's place and testimony is to be "busy in the home". Proverbs 7 warns about immoral and seductive women and describes her by saying, "She was the brash, rebellious type, never content to stay at home. She is often in the streets and markets, soliciting every corner." The bible's description of a wicked woman is that she doesn't like to stay at home- that she goes out in public too much. 1 Timothy 3 even says that, "women will be saved through childbearing" or as phrased in an alternate translation, "by accepting their role as mothers." The bible explicitly promotes the sexist notion that women belong solely in the home, raising children and pleasing their husbands.

A common illustration of gender inequality in our modern society is to state that in America only 18.5% of the congress is female, yet according to biblical teachings that number should be 0%. The bible literally says that women should not have any authority over men:

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet." (1 Timothy 2:11)

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

(1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Yes, according to the bible, women ought to be quiet, even if they have questions, or have experience worthy of sharing. There should not be female teachers in mixed gender classrooms, or female-led sermons, or women who ask their pastors questions about Christ. No, the law from a perfect God commands that women be silenced.



We have seen how, according to the bible, God not only allows, but ensures that women be treated with inequality. I think the bible's representation of women can be summed up by 1 Peter 3:7 which urges husbands to be considerate to their wives as they are the "weaker partner." The weaker

partner! This is the word of God- I am inherently weaker than any man, not because of my personality or actions, but because I was born with a vagina. How could this possibly *not* be sexism?

It could be argued that, *the bible said it, so who is to argue that sexism is wrong? Why can't we murder women who aren't virgins, buy women as sex slaves, and rape people? After all, the bible did say it.* Well for this argument to have any validity, it must be proven that the bible is completely inherent and true (a topic I hope to elaborate on soon). Secondly, there is a reason why even most bible-believing Christians think that it is wrong to abuse women- it is because they have a sense of morality. Each of us has the ability to discern right from wrong on a basic level and I hope that you would agree it is wrong to treat women with inequality and to abuse them.

So how can you and how can I, reconcile a moral stance for justice and equality with a text that is explicitly and undeniably sexist?