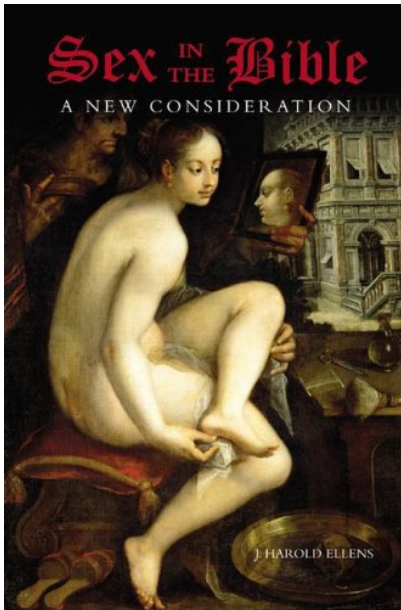


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**Ellens, J. Harold**

***Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration***

Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality

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This work by J. Harold Ellens, currently Research Scholar at the University of Michigan, Department of Near Eastern Studies, and former Professor of Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology, and founding editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, belongs to a series concerned with the interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality, written for the general reader. Ellens, also the series editor, describes his own contribution as “an urgent and timely work, the motivation for which is surely endorsed enthusiastically by the entire world today, as we increasingly witness the progressive unfolding of the horror of sexual abuse and other forms of sexual aberration in all societies on this planet, particularly in religious communities” (x). An enthusiastic foreword by Donald Capps underlines Ellens’s competence not only as a biblical scholar but also as a clinical psychologist with years of experience. A preface by Wayne Rollins assures us that this book will “scotch” the “widespread impression, both within and outside Judeo-Christian tradition, that the Bible is down on sex” (xix).

Ellens begins his account with reference to the human search for meaning, which is less about finding answers than “getting the questions the right way round” (1). He notes the enormous influence that the Bible exercises, not least through its various interpreters. Its misinterpretations have resulted in a situation where research has shown that

“approximately three-fourths of both men and women in America violate the official standards for sexual behavior in society” and where moral issues are often defined only in sexual terms and gross violations of other kinds trivialized. Ellens aims to undermine that “societal and cultural schizophrenia” (5) by examining “all aspects of human sexuality” in the Bible and seeking “to see the Bible in its own right” (5). Chapter 2 deals with what the author views as the overmoralization of sex, a stance out of tune with the biblical writers, who see “sex as a valuable form of human communication and connection, and that that is all there is to it” (7) and reflect the view “that bad sex damages us and good sex is good for us” (7). He attributes the overmoralizing to church leaders such as Augustine and Jerome, who either could not come to terms with their own sexuality or saw sexual guilt as something through which to exercise control (8–9).

The first biblical text encountered is Gen 1:27, where Ellens explores what it might imply in God that in his image we are made male and female. He speculates that it might reflect God’s desire for every aspect of himself, which he sees the plural “let us make” suggesting (17), or God’s “irrepressible need to connect and communicate within himself as well as with us and his created world” (17). It is about more than creation and procreation and includes “cherishing relationships of love and caring kindness” (17). Ellens then takes us into the world of research on “falling in and out of love,” focusing in particular on chemical and psychological changes and returning briefly to claim that the Bible “enjoins us to savor and celebrate the delights of the most exotic experiences of love of which we are capable and then calls us to endure in commitment and caring” (32). Turning to the joys of making love, he notes the positive attitude to sexual union in Matt 19:5–6; Mark 10:8; and Eph 5:21–23, but especially in the Song of Solomon. He then deplores the suppression of its natural meaning under the influence of Jerome and Augustine and the church’s persistence in approving only sexual intercourse where procreation is possible. As other instances affirming the erotic, he cites the stories of Ruth, Rahab, Esther, and Tamar. He lists “eight kinds of forbidden sex”: “promiscuous sex, incest, pedophilia, necrophilia, bestiality, adultery, homosexual behavior by heterosexual persons, and rape” (35).

Chapter 6 turns to the story of Onan, which Ellens explains on the basis of the ancient Near Eastern obligation to perpetuate a brother’s name, provide him an heir, and ensure support for his widow. The issue that warranted God’s wrath was not masturbation or *coitus interruptus* in his spilling his seed but refusal to exercise this obligation. The notion that God would kill someone for *coitus interruptus* he sees as absurd. After engaging in a highly speculative defense of Onan regarding Tamar, namely, that “there was something about her that put men off” (49), Ellens highlights the way the passage has served as the basis for declaring masturbation a capital sin and equating it and *coitus interruptus* and, indeed, any form of birth control with abortion, with seriously damaging consequences

for humanity through to our own time, and focused, in particular, on Roman Catholic teaching. Among his less-convincing speculations, given as asides to this discussion, Ellen suggests that Jesus' response to the Sadducees suggests that heaven would be a place "where we shall enjoy total union with everyone who really delights us" and that the saying about adultery in Matt 5:28 means, in effect, that "he did not forbid divorce in every case, but said that it is generally a bad idea because even adultery can be forgiven, just like any other sin, since it is no worse than lust" (47).

Ellens identifies two accounts depicting the origin of evil, the story of the Watchers' seduction of human women in Gen 6, preserved in detail in the Book of the Watchers (1 En. 6–16), and Gen 3, which he sees as introduced to replace it. On the basis of its symbolism and connection with Mesopotamian myth, he takes the serpent's deception of Eve as a sexual seduction and interprets Eve's persuading Adam similarly. He then discusses psychological interpretations of the story as depicting the shift from pre- to postpubescence and the anxiety created in needing to venture out and make oneself independent of parents. Ellens claims that the hearers of this story "connected this condition with the vulnerability and ambivalence they felt about sex" and "set the course for centuries of Bible believers feeling ambivalent and troubled about sexuality." He sees it as "particularly tragic that so much mayhem could be wreaked for centuries upon human sexuality because of a lousy story imported into biblical literature from a pagan Mesopotamian source" (58). The psychological reading seems closer, however, to readings of the text in later centuries, helped not least by the Septuagint translation of "beguile" by a word in Gen 3:13 that could mean "seduce," whereas the original story seems not to be so sexualized. Chapter 8 discusses laws concerning women in Deuteronomy and Leviticus; chapter 9, adultery, with extended discussion of its significance today; and chapter 10, monogamy, noting that the Bible's model was predominantly polygamy.

Turning to homosexuality, Ellens begins by contrasting current understandings with those of the biblical writers, who make "no distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior" (103). The issue in Gen 19:1–29 is not homosexual behavior, though the mob's intent is sexual abuse, but breach of hospitality, as in Judg 19, so that to cite the story as a basis for condemning homosexual orientation or behavior is "thoroughly inappropriate and dishonest" (108). Ellens is less convincing in espousing the interpretation of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 as targeting only practices employed in pagan worship (108). Turning to Rom 1, Ellens argues similarly that Paul sees homosexuality as "part of that idolatrous worship behavior and so it is a liturgical perversion ... special kind of behavior that was involved in pagan worship rituals" and carried out by heterosexuals (122), a reading with little basis in the text. On 1 Cor 6:9–10 he contemplates that here "there is some indication that homosexual behavior is sinful in its own right" (123). We then read: "Finally, 1 Timothy 1:10 includes a Pauline reference to

Sodomites” (124), but this claim, which begins a discussion of interpretations of Sodom, has no basis in the Greek text; “sodomites” appears only in the English translations (RSV and NRSV), as it does in the Corinthian text. In this context Ellens refers also to Jewish writings as sources for New Testament ideas, referring to Josephus and 2 Enoch, where he sees only a reference to pederasty (ignoring 34:2). The claims of Ellens that Paul did not know of such a thing as homosexual orientation (131) is debatable. He sees the women in Rom 1:26 engaging in some form of unnatural heterosexual sex. “In all of these passages Paul speaks of homosexuality in contexts that sound like promiscuous and obsessive behavior and in none does Paul clearly address the possibility of a homosexual relationship with a troth of committed love and ‘marriage’” (132).

In making his hermeneutical assessment Ellens appeals to evidence from the early to mid-1990s that he believes establishes that homosexuality is inborn, a matter as yet inconclusive. He appeals to Jesus’ setting aside principles for the sake of healing and Paul’s concessions of marriage to those who would otherwise burn, to raise the question “whether the homosexual person who finds himself or herself in that state, must be deprived of the full-orbed personhood that is afforded and enhanced by sexual communion and the attendant emotional and spiritual nurture, affection and appreciation” (134) and concludes: “Under the more general rubrics of Christian love, grace, and growth, that would surely seem to be the requirement of the *Holy Bible*” (135).

This is a work of mature reflection, rich in its biblical exposition but especially its psychological insights. I found myself affirming many of its hermeneutical conclusions, while finding the sting of distance and discontinuity too quickly drawn from the biblical passages or posited too insecurely. Does it offer a healthy and positive assessment of sex in the Bible? Certainly, but its psychology is better than its history.