

WE HAVE YOKED A LION: THE 7th COMMANDMENT AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

It is argued that the prohibition against adultery and related extra marital sexual acts in pre and early Biblical times were not aimed at such acts per se, but at stabilizing relations and protecting the their ethical function was enhanced by making these part of cultic purity regulations. In the post-Old Testament period and especially in the early Christian tradition, sexual restraint to the boundaries of marriage became key in denoting the uniqueness of faith commitment. Since the medieval period through the Reformation and especially in its pietistic off-springs, adultery came to be viewed as one of the main 'sins' of humankind. In reaction to this, since the sexual revolution of the mid sixties of the previous century, extra marital sex became a commodity to proportions of idolatry. In traditional African communities there was a very open and relaxed view and practice of extra marital sex. The introduction of Western pietistic missionary teaching on sex on the one hand and the disruption of traditional culture through westernization and lately by mass media, disrupted sexual stability to disastrous proportions in many African communities. In African Christian communities, sexual purity is usually valued highly but seldom practiced. The unrestrained practice of sex and the consequential damage to human dignity of women and children in particular, cannot be redressed by simply preaching the seventh commandment loader. It will have to go hand in hand with redressing of social relations.

Key Words: Seventh Commandment, Sexuality, in Old Testament, Christian History, Africa, Women, Youth, Marriage, Cross Cultural Communication, Human Rights

Introduction

Sexual offences, the issue of the seventh commandment according to conventional interpretation, have reached pandemic proportions in many communities. In many parts of Africa, physical and emotional abuse of women and girls most often result in sexual abuse. Different social and economic ills make women even more vulnerable: conflicts, war, poverty and droughts cause large numbers of people to suffer and even become refugees, the majority of whom are women and children. Furthermore, HIV and Aids and its devastating results, affect women most.

Hilary B Lipka opens her book, *Sexual Transgression in the Hebrew Bible*, by saying: "Each society has established norms... regarding gender roles, sexual knowledge, and sexual behavior. It is the culture of a society that determines what behavior is considered sexual and what is not, what sexual behavior is considered appropriate and what is inappropriate...there is very little in the way of sexual behavior or attitudes that may be

considered universal. The construction of sexuality is the network of social meanings in the form of norms, definitions, practices, interpretations, prohibitions, and representations that members of a particular culture create, maintain, and apply to sexual roles and sexual interactions... it is easy to forget that what is sexually normative in one culture have little in common with what is considered sexually normative in another” (2006:1-3).

Adultery and Sexual Offences in the Old Testament

The Origin of Prohibitions against Sexual Offences in the Old Testament

The historical and sociological roots for the Biblical commandment against adultery and other related pronouncements about sexual conduct must be looked for in the common Semitic¹ *Umwelt*.² Wide ranging laws in different Old Near Eastern legal documents and references in other genres attest to the fact that similar views to what we encounter in the Hebrew Bible were common in the world where Israel originated (Boecker 1976:93-102). For example, the expression used by the Canaanite king Abimeleck with reference to an (almost) sexual offence as “a thing that should not happen” attests to this common understanding of people of the time (Genesis 20:9).

The sexual ethos of Israel should therefore be understood as being shaped as part of the *Sippen ethos* in the patriarchal and pre-monarchic phases of her history (Bosman 1983:68). As such it formed part of the common understanding of the extended family living in close proximity that the marriage of a fellow member of the community must be respected and not be infringed on. An understanding of the physical living conditions, the composition and relations within Iron Age One Israelite communities makes clear why any extra marital sexual relations would upset the stability of the community (Meyers 1997:11-22, 37-38). Incest prohibitions are to be understood in the same context. Simply the wisdom of generations told them that inbreeding has negative results. Both prohibitions against adultery (the violation of the marriage relationship of a fellow) and incest were in effect protecting the social integrity of the group. These were therefore not aimed at prohibiting certain sexual acts *per se*, but at strengthening the proper and normal peaceful co-existence of the clan.

The prohibition against adultery also had another purpose within the *sippen ethos*: that of protecting the lineage of each family (De Vaux 1974:20-23). A number of customs in the Hebrew Bible show the importance of ensuring that the lawful heir of the family comes from the bloodline (Schüngel-Straumann 1973:50). Amongst these are the practice reflected in the patriarchs’ insistence that their sons marry wives from the bloodline (re Genesis 27:46, show that, while there was intermarriage between different nations,³ still then sustaining the lineage within the family remained important. According to some scholars the outrage of the brothers at the defiling of Dinah by the Canaanite boy was at least partly due to the fact that he was a Canaanite (Genesis 34). The original purpose of the *abortus* ritual performed when a married woman was suspected of adultery was probably to ensure

¹ Prohibitions against adultery and incest are common in many cultures and are not a specific Semitic phenomenon.

² Lipka warns that our knowledge of sexuality in ancient cultures is hampered in many ways, mostly being based on “written material produced by males belonging to a dominant social class, and what is written is the reflection of their attitudes, interests and fantasies” (2006:4).

³ These cases were still within the same ethnic pool and no religious prejudice against the Canaanite and Moabite women and men can be detected in these texts.

that the bloodline was kept within the patriarchal lineage (Numbers 5:14-31. Bosman 1983:45-55).

At this early phase prohibitions against adultery and incest were probably not communicated as ‘laws’, carrying legal weight. They rather functioned as taboos: things that are simply not done and which need not be enforced and which are not questioned. Taboos formed part of the wisdom of the generations that were communicated in order to sustain the stability of the community. It is likely that they functioned as basic life instruction within the circle of the extended family. As such they formed part of an integrated family and clan ethos, which included all aspects of communal life, which was aimed at protecting the integrity of the community.

The expression “such a thing is not done (in Israel)” is repeatedly used in connection with sexual offences to describe the attitude of the community towards such offences, amongst other. In 2 Samuel 13:12, in the case of what would today be called rape and incest, and which Lipka⁴ sees as primarily an transgression against personal boundaries, Amnon’s deed is qualified as an act of stupidity (נבלה). In Genesis 34:5-7,13, where the same terminology occur (see also Genesis 20:9), the narrator says that Dinah had been defiled (טמא) and her brothers were ‘furious and very angry’ “because such a folly (נבלה) has been done in Israel”. Although not certain, the latter might have been a case of consensual sex. In any case, the strong reaction may partly be prompted by the fact that the accused was a Hittite (Lipka 2006:184-199). נבלה denotes more than an act of stupidity; it carries a strong sense of evilness (Sáebó 1979:28,31).

Lipka approaches her study of sexual behaviour in the Hebrew Bible from the perspective of ‘transgression’. She identifies three spheres of transgression, namely: against religious boundaries; against communal boundaries and against personal boundaries. These different ‘boundaries’ are reflected in different genres of material, each viewed within particular *Sitz im Leben* (2006:18-23). Of course there are different levels of overlap between the spheres of transgression which she identifies, and which appears within different texts and genres. It should be noted, however, that some cases of what in other places in the Hebrew Bible were called wrong, were not seen transgression of boundaries, for example Genesis 38. Lipka (2006:169) writes: “The conception of sexual transgression against communal boundaries entails the belief that sexual relations with certain people or under certain circumstances result in the violation of the *sexual norms that are established by a society in order to prevent conflict between its members*. Such actions threaten to cause a breach in the social fabric by destroying the bonds that are necessary for mutual cooperation within the community” (my italics).

The Development of Prohibitions against Sexual Offences in the Old Testament

As community life developed and social relations became more complex, certain arrangements needed to be made, such as those found in Exodus 21:7-11. This example, which probably became an exemplary case and was thus in due course included in a legal collection, focuses on the protection of the rights of the woman. Case decisions that were taken, probably by the elders at the city gate, dealt with different situations and in due course became standard penalties for similar cases. Deuteronomy 22:22-30 reflects a

⁴ 2006:203-223. She see Deut 22:13-27; Num 5:13-31; Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18; Ezek. 16 and 23 and ‘strange woman’ texts in Proverbs as examples of transgression against religious and communal boundaries. She discusses Ex 22:15-16; Deut 22:28-29 and Gen 34 as examples dealing exclusively with communal boundaries (2006:169-178).

further expansion of cases of sexual offences. Here a distinction is made between consensual and non-consensual sex and between the case of a betrothed and a non-betrothed girl. In the case of a betrothed girl, consensual sex amounts to adultery. Nonconsensual sex amounts to what we call rape. It is notable that there is no text referring to sex with an un-betrothed girl. It must be remembered that girls usually got married at a very young age, though one has to be cautious in drawing conclusions from this. The issue of virginity in Israel is viewed differently by scholars (Frymer-Kensky 1998:79-96). But the regard for virginity was not so much an issue of sexual activity *per se*, but of shame and honour in community relations (Matthews 1998:108-112).

The collections of legal issues pertaining to sexual conduct in the Hebrew Bible⁵ that developed over time are in no way comprehensive, not even to the extent to what one finds in the Middle Assyrian Law collection (par 9-46). The only references to prostitution in legal text are the condemnation of the practice by Israelite girls (Deut 23:18-19)⁶ and the prohibition that priests may not marry a prostitute (Lev 21:7-14). Proverbs in particular warns against engaging with prostitutes, along with other 'strange' women. Narrative texts do not reflect a negative attitude towards connecting with prostitutes (Gen 38:15; Josh 2:1; Judges 11:1, 16:1). With the prophets prostitution became a metaphor for the breach of covenant between Israel and God. In Hosea, prostitution functions within the same semantic field as adultery. In his age actual prostitution was practiced as part of idol cult; Deuteronomy 23:18-19 probably refers to such practices (Craigie 1976:301). It is within this context that this text also mentions homosexual practices, most likely male prostitution (re 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12).

The logical next phase would then be that different unacceptable sexual practices would be included in prohibition lists in cultic legal material. It is natural for people who live with a sense that every aspect of their lives touches on their relationship with their God, would regard also sexual conduct to also fall under His jurisdiction⁷. In addition, the way in which sex seemingly played an important role in foreign cults⁸ necessitated the inclusion of lists of prohibitions against what was regarded by the Israelite faith community as wrongful sexual conduct (Lev 18:3,24-27). Leviticus 18 is the recasting of tribal taboos in an explicit religious and cultic context.⁹ In this way these prohibitions acquired the function of giving standards for cultic purity. It is not suggested here that these prohibitions received religious backing only at a late stage; they already had that as taboos. Rather it was a matter of drawing these into the cultic sphere over time and eventually incorporating them into the so-called Holiness Code.

In this process the prophets clearly played their part. It is particularly in their struggle against idolatry and Canaanite cultic practices that sexual imagery, specifically adultery, was employed. The fact that they used this imagery shows how serious the community

⁵ Lipka (2006:12-17) points out that studies about sexuality in the Old Testament tend to take the legal material as their point of departure and make it more or less normative in relation to other genres. It is, however, the legal pronouncements that became normative in post-Old Testament understanding of sexuality in almost all traditions over the centuries.

⁶ In Genesis 34:31 Dinah's brothers said that the rape of their sister reduced her to the level of a prostitute.

⁷ David's acknowledgement that his act of adultery is a sin against Yahweh (2 Sam 12:13; Bosman 122-124) and the ending of the otherwise 'secular' wisdom warning against extra-marital sex in Proverbs 5 attests to this.

⁸ Already attested to in Exodus 32:6.

⁹ Bosman 1983:31-34; this is also true of Leviticus 20 where additional aspects are added (Bosman 1983:41-45).

regarded the issue of adultery. This image was intended to shock listeners into realizing how serious idolatry is in the eyes of the Lord.

Wisdom materials collected in the book of Proverbs have a long and diverse pre-history (see Von Rad 1978:87-96). Collections of sayings about sexual conduct clearly show roots in tribal instruction. Proverbs 6:20-35 is a case in point. The fact that this instruction is said to come from both father and mother is telling. These are rather comprehensive instructions, dealing with the bad woman (אשה רע), the strange woman (נכרייה; Yee 2003:149-153), the prostitute (זונה), going to his neighbour's wife (הבא אלי-אשה רעהו) and the adulterous woman (נאף אשה). There is no hint of these acts being regarded as 'sin' (חטאה). That a person involved in such relations 'will not be innocent' (6:29; לא ינקו) does not necessarily imply religious guilt; it simply means that he will be held accountable (Van Leeuwen 1975:105-106). Such an act is described as the shame of the community and the fury of the offended husband that he will face (6:33-35). Of course there are influences from other angles in this text (eg 6:21-23). The parallel instruction in Proverbs 5 reflects a more explicit later wisdom-instruction *Sitz im Leben*.¹⁰ It is also casted in an explicit religious frame (5:21-23). Given the time of its composition and the purpose of the book (Yee 2003:135-146), the fact that similar instructions on sexual conduct for girls and women are not found in the book of Proverbs is not that surprising. It does not necessarily mean that such instructions did not exist; it could simply mean that such instructions did not survive, probably because they functioned on an oral level.

Judging from the stereotyped formulation of the 6th to the 8th commandments in both versions of the Decalogue (Ex 20:13-15 and Deut 5:17-17), it seems to have constituted an existing fixed collection by the time they were included in the Decalogue. In essence all three are aimed at the protection of the community: the life of its members; their social relations and harmony, and property (De Vaux 1974:36). They thus logically belong together, as such they reflect the *Sippen ethos* of the early phases of Israelite community, which they shared with their *Umwelt*. But in them being grouped in a more or less standard list, they obtained the status of an ethical rule or standard. In short collections summarizing evildoers, like in Hosea 4:2 and Jeremiah 7:9, these three issues also occur together¹¹. Whether this move was the work of the prophets or whether the prophets simply used what was already an existing and accepted formulations is hard to say. From here, however, it was a short distance from being included in the Decalogue, which was probably a deuteronomic production (Bosman 1983:294, 325-326). This inclusion further strengthened their function as ethical rule. When the Decalogue was included in the book of Deuteronomy, and later even more so in Exodus, whereby it came to serve summarily in relation to all the subsequent laws, this ethical move was simply continued and strengthened.

In this way the 7th commandment became the 'flagship' of all teaching about sexual relations. But in this process the original social function of this prohibition, namely the stabilizing of social relations in the community, was blurred and compromised. When common community wisdom acquires legal status, guilt and penalties come into play and become the focal point. Even worse, when these are included in cultic stipulations, the

¹⁰ See the introductory phrase (5:1) being addressed to 'sons' (5:7) and the 'voice of teachers teaching' (5:13; ירה and דמל often used in Ps 119); also Bosman 1983:177-179.

¹¹ See also Psalm 50:18-20, a psalm which shows prophetic influence (Kraus 1978:527). Though in a later wisdom context, these three issues also occur in a depiction of 'the enemies of light' in Job 24:13-17. Even as late as Matthew 19:18 and Romans 13:9 these served as standard expression of ethical conduct.

focus shifts to whether the individual is cultic fit or not. Social and ethical functions take a backseat.

Marriage and the Position of Women in the Old Testament

Marriage is a fairly universal phenomenon of two people being legally bound in an (ideally) lifelong relationship. The manner of establishing legality of this relationship differs between cultures and over time. In most pre-Cartesian cultures marriage is not simply a matter between individuals. It is a matter between families and sometimes larger social groups. Marriages were mostly arranged by families. Often neither the man or woman in question had much of a say in the choice and in the arrangements.

As reflected in the Hebrew Bible, this was also largely the case in early Israel, (De Vaux 1974:29-30). Marriage formed an integral part of the social fiber of every community. For this reason taboos on adultery and incest were of key importance in the maintenance of social stability. Since these acts threaten the stability of the community, they are characterized as stupid and evil. Wisdom extended undesirable sexual acts and relations to having affairs with loose women and prostitutes.

Another aspect that is to be kept in mind when speaking of adultery and other sexual relations in Israel, is that marriages were usually arranged at an early age, probably already in early puberty for both boys and girls (De Vaux 1974:29). The occasions for becoming involved in pre-marital sex were thus very limited, which may account for the fact that the Bible does not make an issue of this. Under exceptional conditions and when the community became more urbanized and public services developed, marriages took place at a later age. Although it is not always clear whether Proverbs in its final form is addressed to married or un-married men, it is clear that they are warned against engaging married women. Going to a prostitute may destroy one's career but is not regarded as an offence, according to available texts (De Vaux 1974:36-37).

Given the patriarchal nature of Ancient Near Eastern cultures (see, however, De Vaux 1974:19-20), and many other cultures up to modern times, women occupied a secondary place in society.¹² Women in general had no legal status of their own and depended on their husband or larger family to defend their rights. This absence of legal rights rendered women, especially widows, very vulnerable.¹³ In Israel women were certainly never regarded as the property of their husbands. The *mohar* and other gifts that were exchanged were means of establishing good relations between the families involved. Therefore, once an agreement on marriage between families was reached, gifts were exchanged and the couple was regarded as engaged (De Vaux 1974:20, 26-29, 32-33). Sex with a girl in this legal position was therefore regarded as adultery. Committing adultery with another man's wife was a breach of social relations and not a transgression against the property of another.

Adultery and Sexual Offences in Post-Old Testament

The Inter-Testamental Period

Collins (1997:104-162) describes different aspects of 'continuity and change' in "marriage, divorce, and family in the Second Temple period". While views on divorce became more

¹² Meyers (1997:32-37) gives an insightful description of the roles women and girls played in the community which leads her to "question the validity of labeling early Israel as 'patriarchal'" (1997:34).

¹³ In this regard the extensive rulings which in fact also protected the rights of women, for example in Middle Assyrian, Law tablet A (ANET 180-185), cautions against one sided views about women in ancient times.

liberal, polygamy was regarded by some as adultery. Collins quotes examples of how the creation narratives in Genesis 1-3 were employed to motivate sexual purity within marriage and there are indications that sex was seen as the original sin (1997:127-129). Ellis (2007:18-40) discusses a number of Jewish documents in the centuries before and after the turn of the Common Era which indicate that sexual desire was regarded as sinful (re Job 31:1), even within marriage. Some documents reflect the view that sex as such was a result of the fall. Ellis then also discusses “texts that condemn misdirected or overpowering sexual desire but not sexual desire *per se*”. From this it is clear that in this period sex became an issue in itself and was no longer treated within its social relationship function.

The New Testament

Writing to Jews, Matthew suggests that the pre-marital pregnancy was regarded as shameful, but no indication of guilt is suggested (Matt 1:18-20). The Jewish establishment regarded adultery in a serious light – it as a transgression of ‘the law of Moses’. According to John 8:1-11 they used the case of the woman caught in adultery to test Jesus’ loyalty to the law, with effect that other detail of the case remain unreported, for example the position of the man. Jesus’ forgiveness, however, includes the command to ‘sin no more’.

Jesus’ acceptance of adultery as a reason for divorce is to be understood within the context of the current Jewish controversy on the issue of divorce (Mat 5:27-31, 19:1-9). Jesus’ pronouncement of lust as already constituting adultery forms part of the polemic periscope aimed at showing that a deeper motive than simply doing what the law demands is required (Matt 5:27-28). This may reflect traces of wisdom (Prov 4:23, 7:25) and of rabbinical tradition (Eben ha-‘Ezer). Lists of serious sins include different sexual acts and may be the product of the community of faith’s understanding of common decency (Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21-22; 1 Corinthians 6:10; Galatians 5:19-21).

Paul’s somewhat negative view of sex and marriage may be the result of his own unmarried position, the state of sexual licentiousness in Corinth at the time and his view on the congregation as living in the final days (1 Corinthians 7:1-2, 24-40; Ellis 2007:148-153; 160-161). Monogamy and sexual fidelity became the accepted standard in Christian circles.

The Early Church

Second and third century writers such as Theophilus, Tertullian and Cyprian condemned professions in art and discouraged Christians of attending theatre and partaking in sports, particularly athletics which was practiced in the nude, because of sexual connotations. The strong pronouncements in this regard are to be understood within the context of young Christian communities living within overwhelmingly pagan communities (Fiensy, 2002:556-558). In so doing, these writers continued the tradition of Paul in this regard (Sanders, 2002: 377-379). As the Gnostic dichotomy of spirit and flesh gained influence in Christian thinking, sex was ‘demonised’ as one of the key sins. Gregory the Great (7th century) regarded lust and even sex within marriage as sinful. Others tolerated sex for the purpose of procreation (Banner 2000:200).

Augustine of Hippo’s views on sexuality were more ‘moderate’ than those of his contemporaries and remain influential in many circles to this day. Sex for procreation belongs to marriage; adultery was regarded as much more serious than prostitution. Augustine’s own life experiences seemingly also influenced him thinking, as is evident in this statement: “If a man and woman lived together, not for procreation but for sexual pleasure and agree to be faithful to one another, their relationship might be called marriage”– this

reflected his own relation to his concubine. At another point he concedes that fornication may also be covered by the 7th commandment (Bauerschmidt 1999:10-11).

The Catholic Tradition

The influence of Augustine led to the popularizing of the idea that sex is not only the original sin, but also that sex was the way in which sinfulness is transmitted (Banner 2000:202-203). The emphasis on the virgin birth and the development of Mariology must be understood within this context. In due course marriage was sacralised and became one of the seven sacraments in the Catholic tradition. Alongside this the Pauline ideal of celibacy for clergy developed to the point that it was imposed on all clergy by 1123 AD. The monastic movement and ascetic ideal formed part of this generally negative view of sex. Marriage and sex were for the “common people, those who were not able to follow the more rigorous route to spirituality, (who) could receive forgiveness of their sins of passion through the confession, as they described to the celibate priest the details of their passionate exploits” (Grenz 1997:3-6).

The Reformation and the Pietistic Tradition

Luther and Calvin returned explicitly to the moderate views of Augustine and reacted strongly against Catholic views of marriage and celibacy (Banner 2000:203-204). Calvin's¹⁴ strong approach against social wrongs and his disciplinary measures in moral issues were grounded in his theological position that there is no separation between faith and morality, also in society. This was based on his particular view of the relationship between church and state, particularly with regard to the situation of social decay that he encountered in Geneva.¹⁵

In circles of the ‘Radical Reformation’ adultery was viewed as a grievous sin which was dealt with in a harsh and even un-Christian manner. This attitude went hand in hand with an anti-worldly doctrine of avoidance of social intercourse with unbelievers and a perfectionist attitude (Williams 1962:421, 494, 498). Some shared the Catholic views on celibacy and marriage as a sacrament. In some circles, following a typically literalist interpretation of the Bible, polygamy was practiced ‘to eliminate lust’ (Williams 1962:505-514). The Victorian view of sex with its purist and even ascetic ideals influenced large parts of the Western world in the nineteenth century, not least of which were the Western missionaries of this period (Pretorius 1977:109-113).

Detached from a social context where there is a clear difference between Christian and non-Christian, morality tends to lose its edge and easily becomes moralistic. This was the case in the formative phases of Christianity in America. Marsden (1982:256) in this regard writes: “Calvinism indeed helped to foster such [puritan] traditions, but in their secularized versions the offspring of the Calvinist ethic turn out to be at best the works of righteousness

¹⁴ For example Institutes II.v111.41: The purport of this commandment is that, as God loves chastity and purity, one ought to guard against all uncleanness. The substance of the commandment therefore is that one must not defile oneself with any impurity or libidinous excess. To this corresponds the affirmative, that one must regulate every part of one's conduct chastely and continently. What is expressly forbidden is adultery, to which lust naturally tends, that its filthiness (being of a grosser and more palpable form, in as much as it casts a stain even on the body) may dispose one to abominate every form of lust.

¹⁵ Gamble 1982: 57-58. Douglas (1982:230-233) claims that while Calvin and Knox were not as strict and narrow-minded as is often believed, it was what was made of their doctrine that sparked the puritan reaction in Scotland.

of Pelagianism or even of simple secular morality". The sexual revolution of the 1960s was a popular uprising against and an unmasking of the hypostatic facade of sexual morality in the West. The new ideal of 'sexual freedom' has been popularized (and commercialized) and spread over large parts of the globe by means of mass media, in particular television (Grenz 1997:8-11).

Adultery and Sexual Offences in Africa

With no intention to generalize I will here use the Xhosa speaking tribes of Southern Africa, of which I have long standing first-hand knowledge, as an example of the shift in sexual conduct.¹⁶ Monica Hunter,¹⁷ in a comprehensive study done in the early 1930s, shows that the traditional Xhosa community was very open and relaxed about sex. Boys and girls would 'sweetheart' (*ukumetsha*: practice sexual intimacy without penetration: Kropf 1899:223) from a very young age, even before puberty. Boys would even go to the girl's house to sleep with her and give gifts to her parents. This may result in a longer term relationship while boys and girls may have a number of lovers. *Ukumetsha* was regarded as good and natural for young people. But strict rules applied to ensure that the girl keeps her virginity. The boy's family had to pay damages if the girl lost her virginity and an even bigger amount if she was found to be pregnant. In earlier times, as may still happen in individual cases, girls were physically examined for virginity by older women on a regular basis. Usually *lobola* for a non-virgin would be less than normal (Hunter 1969:180-190; Pretorius 1977:51-55).

Usually marriages were arranged by members of the family, though the boy and girl may express their preferences. Marriage is the norm and every man and woman married at least once, except in exceptional cases. Full sex was ideally only practiced in marriage, and the bearing of children was of great importance (also Buyo 2001:57-58). Women were expected to be faithful to their husbands, but married women often had extra-marital affairs. Adultery was apparently not seen as a disgrace, though some husbands could be quite jealous. Men had more freedom and continued to attend dances with unmarried girls or had relations with *amadikazi*, i.e. women who for some reason live temporarily or permanently with their parents (Hunter 1969:203-210; Pretorius 1977:55-62).

Incest taboos were observed. In this regard Hunter wrote: "It is said that children are not exhorted to observe incest taboos. She quotes sayings: 'they know for themselves, they see what the bigger ones do'. 'A boy asks a girl's clan, and her mother's and her grandmother's clan before he touches her'. Children grow up aware of clan taboos as they are aware of taboos on relations between blood-brother and blood-sister" (1969:185).

Of course this would not be true of all communities, but it at least offers a glimpse of what African societies thought of sexual conduct before they were heavily influenced by Christian and secular Western views.

Pretorius (1977:74-78) offers a perspective on sexuality within African cosmology. Sex, as the natural way of procreation, is shown to be the way by which death is conquered. In this way the lineage is extended to connect with the ancestral world and secures life here-after, particularly for men. Procreation is valid within the bounds of marriage. Unfor-

¹⁶ Similar trends have, however, also been documented in other parts of Africa (Buyo).

¹⁷ Hunter was the child of a missionary couple and an internationally acclaimed anthropologist; she had first-hand access to the community she studied, far more than most researchers from outside. She documented traditional views on sexuality of a primitive African community in Pondoland on the east coast of South Africa.

tunately, Pretorius does not address the issue of how extra-marital sexual relations, which were regarded as normal, fits in this worldview, in which the sharing in and sustaining of life force are core values. Sexual pleasure is valued as an essential aspect of sex to which young people must be exposed and initiated by the community in order to prepare them for responsible sexual life. According to Buyo (2001:59) sexual acts are aimed at strengthening and building up the community, of which the ancestors are part.

Adultery and Sexual Offences in Missionary Traditions in Africa

Biblicist and Legalistic Approach

Missionaries, through the centuries, often came from conservative and even pietistic background. They held strict views and practices regarding sex, and communicated these to new converts as the Biblical norm (Pauw 1975:321).

This often Biblicist approach resulted in “a legalistic emphasis in which moral rules in fact take the form of taboos” (Pauw 1975:322). These clear cut rules of conduct which were given to new converts were more a reflection of the missionaries’ own views than those of the Bible. The Bible was seen, and is often still seen by many involved in cross-cultural communication of the Gospel, as a context-less, eternal ‘Word of God’ which gives rules of conduct for all times and places. The Ten Commandments, of course, play a central role in this. This Biblicist approach was imparted to generations of indigenous teachers, preachers and missionaries and is simply continued to be replicated by them (Pauw 1975:87). The older generation will still uphold the tradition of a ‘pure’ Christian ideal, but know that it is rarely practiced (Pretorius 1977:88-90). Teenage pregnancy and ‘having a child at home’ has become absolutely common, though Christians will officially condemn it.¹⁸

With a few exceptions, the ideal of monogamous marriage is the official Christian norm and extra-marital relations are condemned on direct Biblical grounds. The problem is that practice is miles apart from the ideal (Pretorius 1977:90-96). Living with a partner in a temporary or even a lifelong relationship (*ukuhlasisana*) is a very common phenomenon.¹⁹

Due to the negative attitude towards sex in missionary teaching, sex became a taboo-topic for Christians. As a result no proper sexual information and teaching became possible, over against what happened in traditional culture. This negative view of sex resulted in Christians experiencing guilt feelings about their sexuality, while clandestine sexual conduct abounds.

¹⁸ Full teenage sex has become almost normal in both rural and urban communities. I often discuss this issue with Xhosa Christians of all denominations. Parents and youth see it as ‘wrong’ but have an attitude of accepting it as a matter of fact. So-called ‘evangelical’ denominations with a purist inclination have a almost legalist approach to sex; youth in these groups are more likely to abstain from pre-marital sex, and where it occurs it is regarded as shameful.

¹⁹ Surveys that I have conducted and my own experiences with Christians from a wide range of denominations, show that the majority of committed female church members were never married and have children. Some live in longer or shorter term extra-marital relations with men while a number have been divorced. Because of bad experiences in their youth or in own marriage, many women have a very negative view of marriage. They regard marriage as ‘a license to abuse’. Many women say they do not want to marry, but they want to have children. Male church members, who are in the minority in most African churches, are mostly married. In most churches it is a rule that an unmarried man may not assume a position of leadership. Divorce and extra-marital sexual relations are, however, not uncommon in some churches which I know, even to the highest ranks of leadership.

Lack of Understanding of African Culture

The missionary communication of the Bible in Africa and in other cultures was most often done with little or no understanding of the indigenous cultures. Even worse, it mostly viewed traditional customs and practices negatively and sometimes condemned them outright. Youth parties, particularly *ukumetsha*, initiation and *lobola* were labelled 'heathen' and punishable in the Christian community (Hunter 1969:183-184). However, traditional practices did not disappear. Some groups would Christianize certain practices such as initiation, others would have circumcision done at a clinic, but in most cases Christians simply continued these practices in their traditional form. While white missionaries still had a say in African churches, this would be done in secret. By far the majority of churches that I know today propagate initiation positively.

In cases such as *ukumetsha*, the traditional restraints simply fell away so that full sexual intercourse is now commonly practiced by Christian and non-Christian youth alike. Teenage pregnancies are very common. The social and financial ramifications for these girls, their families and eventually for the children who grow up without a stable family, perpetuates an already vicious circle. *Lobola*, which is a definite stabilizing factor in marriage relations, remains an ideal but is seldom practiced. Few families can afford to accumulate enough capital to afford the bride's price. This results in couples simply living together or when they do marry, they easily become divorced again because of the lack of the stability offered by the social convention of *lobola*.

Western Influence

Of course, other influences, particularly socio-economic ones, went hand in hand with the introduction and communication of Christianity, and worked as mitigating factors. Formal education, the ideal of Western lifestyle, urbanization and labour, particularly migrant labour, and in South Africa the political system of racial separation et cetera had unforeseen impacts on the society. To mention but a few that impacted directly on sexual conduct is the fact that children were still at school when they became sexually active; men were separated from their wives for long periods of time; normal family relations became unsustainable as families were scattered, which made arrangement of marriages within social structures impossible.

Sexuality as Major Killer of Human dignity in Africa

HIV/Aids, Abuse/Rape, War/Refugee-Crisis

It is a well-known fact that South Africa is one of the countries with the highest incidence of HIV infections and resulting Aids. An estimated 95% transmission of the HI virus occurs through unprotected sex. A major factor in this is the practice of sharing multiple sex partners. High frequency of physical and often sexual abuse occurs where couples are in long term relationships, officially married or not. Women tend to stay in such relationships because they are financially dependent on their partners. Women who are educated and are economically self-sufficient often do not enter into marriage or become divorced, while remaining sexually active. Rape and the sexual abuse of children statistics also seem to be on the increase in South Africa.

In many parts of Africa community-disrupting factors such as civil wars and other socio-political ills are the breeding ground for sexual violence against women and girls in particular. South Africa has become a popular haven for refugees from such situations,

which leave women and children most vulnerable. Without suggesting that refugees and migrants from other parts of Africa are the main culprits, drug abuse and child trafficking have increasingly become problems in local African communities.

Marriage, Single-Parent Families and the Position of Women

Marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and woman has fallen into disrespect to a large extent and is on the decline. Marriage relations are in many cases far from healthy and often the terrain of serious conflict. As has been indicated above, single parent families are at the order of the day, some already into the third and fourth generation. Children grow up with the experience that extra-marital sex is the norm. Girls see the ills of devoting oneself to a long term relationship and opt for what they regard as greater freedom. Boys growing up in such situations lack proper role models of responsible spouses. Girls are exposed to abuse by mothers' boyfriends, with far reaching consequences on their future sexual conduct.

Despite the protection of women's rights by the South African Constitution and widespread measures to empower women politically and economically, women remain most vulnerable in many instances. Rural and township women remain the most disadvantaged and exploited sector of society.

Conclusion

The OAU's "African Charter on Human and People's Rights" (2005) speaks of civil and political, economic, social and cultural, as well as group and individual rights²⁰. What constitutes human dignity and thus human rights in Africa is grounded in its particular understanding of community, expressed in the widely known African proverb "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu" (Xhosa for "a person is a human through other humans"). The concept of 'ubuntu' is only authentically practiced within this context: compassion and care for others forms the very backbone of African ethics. What has been outlined above about the state of sexuality in many African communities militate against this ethic.

Christian churches pay lip service to the need for the restoration of the integrity of society and of marriage, but in practice do very little to offer an alternative to the flood of influences in society that disrupt dignity. Too little is done to restore the dignity of marriage and the social structures that should underpin it. Instead, churches seem to be overrun by and to have capitulated to the current state of affairs. The state of sexual conduct is at the centre and is a symptom of this crisis. Of course, the issue is very complex. The claim of this article is that the socially embedded function of sex within the Old Testament and in Africa, as argued above, needs to guide us as we seek to unyoke the lion²¹ and once more make the seventh commandment relevant and effective in life today. It is not preaching "Thou shall not commit adultery" even louder which is demanded of the Christian church, but taking action in social reconstruction.

²⁰ Except for group rights, this is almost identical to the UN charter; it lacks a true African perspective on human rights.

²¹ The expression 'to yoke a lion' comes from the anecdote of an early explorer trekking through Africa in his ox wagon. Leaving camp early one morning, as it got light, he found that a lion had been yoked instead of one of the oxen. On the question to his driver: "how did we get it in there?" the answer came: "The question rather is: how are we going to get it out!"

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