

INTRODUCTION

Today we will be looking at the basic framework for the traditional view on gender, sexuality, and marriage. There are three elements to this view that form the points of contention in the current debates that we will be examining. These are: 1) The basis of our gender, 2) The proper expression of sexuality, and 3) The notion of distinct roles for men and women.

In truth, the concepts we will be covering today are relatively well-worn paths and much of this might feel like review. Regardless, before venturing into an examination of the revisionist views it is important to look at the traditional view. This way we are better able to evaluate the critiques and alternative views that are being put forward.

However, before we outline the traditional view it is beneficial to discuss why the Christian faith places any emphasis on these topics to begin with. Too often we discuss a subject without having any sense why it's important to discuss in the first place. But, as we will see, the Christian faith did not invent its concern over these matters but inherited them from the Old Testament laws. So, to better understand the basis of these concerns we will open by looking at the formative issues that shaped some of the laws found in the book of Leviticus.

WHY ALL THE WEIRD LAWS?

If you've ever read through the Old Testament, certain sections come across to our modern sensibilities as incredibly strange. One book that tends to evoke this response is Leviticus. For our purpose, we are going to be looking at four sections in Leviticus that are relevant for our discussion today. They are Leviticus 12, 15, 18, and 20.

Leviticus 12 – Purification Rites After Childbirth

This chapter lays out the days of purification that are required for the mother and newborn baby following childbirth. There are a differing number of days required, with the days of purification for the mother being twice as long if the child is female. In our contemporary context we are tempted to deduce this is because females were viewed as being of less value or more impure. But this says more about our assumptions about the original hearers than anything else.

We must understand the historical and cultural distance between our contemporary setting and the one in which these laws originate is vast. And while we may not be able to understand the reasoning for differing lengths of time because it is not given to us, the fact that the offering required for both male and female children is exactly the same communicates it is not because the female child was viewed as less valuable or more impure.

As we will see in looking at the next few chapters in view of what we do know about the original context, a more likely explanation is that these regulations served to distinguish the worship of God apart from the dominant religious practices of the region.

Leviticus 15 – Purification Rites Dealing with Bodily Discharges

The first section of the chapter deals with general discharges of the flesh. What seems to be in view here are the sorts of eruption of the skin that are caused by injury, infection, or illness.

However, the second section of this chapter discusses discharges of semen and menstrual blood. It outlines the process and length of time an individual is to go through for purification. Given that these sorts of bodily discharges are ones that occur naturally as men and women go through puberty, it seems strange that God would institute laws saying they make one unclean and in need of purification. If God declared the creation good, why does he seem to be backtracking on that here?

Just as with Leviticus 12, we will see how these laws are likely best understood as being implemented to distinguish God's people and their worship of Him apart from the dominant religious landscape of the region.

Leviticus 18 and 20 – Laws Against Various Types of Sexual Relationships and Penalties (Lev. 20)

The prohibitions in Leviticus 18 are more palatable to our modern sensibilities, which merely reveals how thoroughly these restrictions have shaped our moral sensibilities. In chapter 18 various forms of incestuous relationships, adultery, bestiality, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and polygamy are forbidden. In chapter 20 the penalties, which we tend to find 'harsh' today, are given. We'll revisit the two prohibitions against homosexuality and polygamy in more detail next week, but what is important here is the descriptions or explanations given for these prohibitions.

In the opening of Leviticus 18 we are told:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. ‘You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. ‘You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. ‘So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.” - Leviticus 18:1–5

Then again at the close of Leviticus 18:

“Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. ‘For the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. ‘But as for you, you are to keep My statutes and My judgments and shall not do any of these abominations, neither the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you (for the men of the land who have been before you have done all these abominations, and the land has become defiled); so that the land will not spew you out, should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. ‘For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their people. ‘Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the LORD your God.’ ” - Leviticus 18:24–30

These two sections offer us a key to understanding why these various laws around sex are being given. God wanted to set his people and their worship of Him apart from the beliefs and practices of the various peoples in the regions surrounding them.

What God is prohibiting among His people were considered *normal* among many of the inhabitants of the surrounding regions. For example, the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs were known to marry siblings and Ramesses II even married his own daughters. And the Canaanite practices were despicable; ranging from cultic prostitution, incest, to child sacrifice – which is to say they were *imitating* their god Baal.

“Like all ancient Near East (ANE) pantheons, the Canaanite pantheon was incestuous. The god El (considered the father of the gods) had seventy children by Asherah. From that union came Baal and his sister Anat with whom Baal had sexual relations. After Baal reported to his father El that Asherah had tried to seduce him, El encouraged Baal to have sex with her to humiliate her, which Baal did. Baal also had as a consort his first daughter Pidray. None of these incestuous acts of the gods is presented pejoratively.”¹

The Levitical laws, in this context, were fencing off sex and all things associated with it – including bodily emissions and birth – as not being part of what it meant to worship God. This is because of the predominance how pagan worship melded sex and worship together in the various fertility cults and practices.

Some Examples of Fertility Cults

The Utroba Cave, also known as the Womb Cave, is in modern day Bulgaria. It is a great example of the ways in which sex and religious practice were linked together. Carved into the rock around 1000BC, it was a fertility shrine used by the Thracians. The entrance to the cave was shaped to resemble a woman’s vulva. The light enters through an opening and to create a phallic shape every day at noon, which reaches all the way to the altar at the very back of the cave once a year on the Spring equinox. The symbolism here is about as blunt as one can get and shows the deep connections religious thought, practice, and sex had in the paganism of the larger region.



¹ Clay Jones and Evangelical Philosophical Society, “We Don’t Hate Sin So We Don’t Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to ‘Divine Genocide’ Arguments,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 57, <https://doi.org/10.5840/pc20091115>.

Another example is found from an Egyptian relief found at the *Temple of Hathor* in Dendera, Egypt. In the relief you see a woman giving birth who is being aided by the goddess Hathor, who was the goddess associated with fertility and motherhood. This sort of imagery makes sense of why the Levitical codes make a point to address the bodily emissions and the time of purification following childbirth.



There are also the remnants of the *Temple to Dionysus* located on Delos dating back to around 300BC. Dionysus was the Greek god associated with wine-making, fertility, theatre, madness, and general revelry. The cultic practices associated with him took on obvious sexual rites, as evidenced by the phallic sculptures that decorated his temple.



In Summary...

While we may not understand all the details of the Levitical prohibitions, they were not given for nothing. And while some may remain confusing, it's best to understand them in the light of the backdrop of this depraved perversity of the region, which included sex rites and child sacrifice as part of worship.

THE APOSTOLIC INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT SEX FOLLOWED THE OLD TESTAMENT PATTERN

As we should expect, the Apostles, being Jewish, drew from the Scriptures and the stories and laws that God had given them. Those things which had already shaped their understandings of gender and sex continued to do so and formed the foundation of their instruction for the church which faced similar challenges as the Israelites being addressed by the Levitical laws.

Thus, when we see Paul warning the members of the Corinthian church against having sex with a prostitute, his admonition likely had in view the cultic practices of the *Temple to Aphrodite* that was located in Corinth. The early church was instructed to follow the same pattern of differentiation and separation from the larger cultures views about sex and what was morally acceptable. This of course set the church apart from and at odds with the rest of society, which led to conflict.

This tension between the early church and the surrounding culture over its refusal to participate in the wider sexual norms is expressed sharply in 1Peter 4:3-6, where we are told:

“For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.” - 1 Peter 4:3–6

So, let’s now turn to the sexual ethic the Apostles gave which has been upheld and practiced across all the confessionally orthodox traditions of the church until the last few decades that is known as the Traditional position.

The Traditional Position

In what follows, we are just laying out the positive presentation of this position. We will address objections to this view when we look at the Revisionist arguments next week, as to embrace those positions one must also reject the basic position being described below.

Gender

The traditional understanding of sex and gender is not complicated.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” - Genesis 1:27

There are males and there are females. Both made in God’s image and likeness and equally in dignity and value as God’s image bearers. Male and female are not ethereal concepts either. They are created, incarnate, bodily realities that are determined by our biology.

According to God’s providence over His creation we are *born* male or female and this determines our gender.

The Proper Expression of Sexuality

The traditional understanding of the proper expression of sexuality is not complicated.

“Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” ... So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” - Genesis 2:18–25

Based on the creation of our first parents, Adam and Eve, sexuality was understood to be properly expressed between a man and woman who were joined together as husband and wife. This idea can be seen undergirding numerous New Testament commands around marriage and sex.

For example, Jesus’s instruction around divorce and adultery assume this:

“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”” - Matthew 19:3–9

Additionally, Paul’s guidance to the church in Corinth assumes this as a foundational backdrop. There we see him saying that in order to avoid sexual immorality one should marry:

“But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, *each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband*. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” - 1 Corinthians 7:2–5

The Notion of Distinct Roles for Men and Women

This idea, commonly known as *complementarianism*, is the belief that men and women are assigned differing sets of key responsibilities. This is taken from the creation account where Eve is presented to Adam as a helper who, together with Adam, are tasked with multiplying, filling the earth, and subduing it:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”” - Genesis 1:27–28

“Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”” - Genesis 2:18

While there are grievous abuses of this view, it is based on the basic recognition that men and women are different and will serve differing roles as it relates to the life of the family. Our modern age with its various technologies that mitigate against the women’s menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and the necessity of breast feeding obscure this basic reality. These technologies are not inherently bad developments, but we do need to acknowledge how these fundamental biological differences impacted men and women up until modern times.

Beyond these there is also the fact that God tasks the husband or father as the one with primary responsibility over his household and family. This is seen throughout the OT narratives, beginning with God first calling to and addressing Adam after he and Eve fall into sin. It’s also seen in the pattern of God calling and tasking *Abraham* with being faithful to walk before Him.

This idea of husband/father being tasked with primary responsibility for his family or home is picked up in the New Testament and can be seen most clearly in Paul’s commands to husbands, wives, and children in Ephesians:

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” - Ephesians 5:22–6:4

This patterning is also replicated within the church, where the office of elder/pastor/shepherd is reserved for qualified and called men. This is seen in Paul’s guidance to Timothy in establishing elders in the churches in 1Timothy 3:1-7, but for the purposes of this study we will stay focused on the context of the home and marriage.

Anyway, in Ephesians we see the wife being tasked with submitting to her husband as head. The meaning of headship is debated in modern scholarship, but most of the semantic debates over the meaning of the word are frivolous. Looking at how Christ's headship over the church is described, it becomes apparent how headship conveys a sense of *being responsible for* and therefore given *appropriate authority over* to fulfill that responsibility.

For example, Christ being the head of the church conveys He is *responsible for* the church and her well-being and the authority that Christ exercises over the church is in accord with His responsibility over the church. This can be seen in various texts. For example:

“And he is the **head of the body, the church**. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. **And you**, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, **he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,**” - Colossians 1:18–22

“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and **not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.**” - Colossians 2:18–19

“and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and **seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places**, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and **gave him as head over all things to the church**, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. ...by grace you have been saved— and **raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.**” - Ephesians 1:19–2:7

Thus, the headship of the husband over the wife is indicating the husband is *responsible for* and *answerable to God* for the well-being of his wife and family. It would make no sense to say a husband is responsible for something he then has no authority over.

One may not like that the text says this, which we will see in counterarguments, but one is exceptionally hard-pressed to make a case that this is not what the text is saying about the relationships between husbands and wives.

CONCLUSION

As noted earlier, the traditional view has been held and practiced by the church until more recent times. The changes in the last 50-60 years have been largely brought about because of the influence of the philosophical views we looked at last week. As we look at the Revisionist arguments beginning next week, we will see how they adopt aspects of those philosophical perspectives to then argue against one or all of the three traditional positions in order to establish alternative views on gender and sex.