

Introduction

Why Marriage, Why Now?

In February 2023, as I was wrapping up the revisions for this book, Pope Francis went on record to say that the criminalization of same-sex relations is a sin. Worth noting, of course, is that, as the head of the Roman Catholic Church, he still could not go so far as to say that same-sex sex itself is not a sin. But, at the time of the publication of this book, sixty-six UN member nations were still criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual relations.¹ His declaration still means something, even if it does not go as far as many people would like him to. But what does that have to do with marriage, you may ask? Everything. Who gets to have sex, legally, is directly related to who gets to be married, legally.

At the end of October 2019, the Religion and Public Life segment of the Pew Research Center published a list of thirty countries that have legalized same-sex marriage since 2000, in addition to Mexico, which allows same-sex marriage in some jurisdictions.² This list reflects a mere 15 percent of the countries in the world, which means that in the other 85 percent, there are legal restrictions on, and thus some form of persecution of, unions beyond heterosexual ones.

To be sure, the conversations about what kinds of marriages are legally allowable in the twenty-first century take place in both religious and political contexts, which seemingly makes this a two-pronged conversation. But when I am able to hear the factors and reasoning that people offer for their view on same-sex marriage (whether for or against it), even if posed in a political space, it is clear to me that this conversation is fueled significantly by what people *believe* that the Bible says on the subject.

There are, of course, millions of people who seek to uphold their understanding of biblical standards in every part of their lives. But even within secular and political contexts, people in the United States often stake their claims on a vague reference to what “is biblical” or “how G-d intended things to be,” and even to a wide range of assertions as to what Jesus’s position on the matter would be, should he take on human form again. Interestingly enough, these comments meant to anchor a person’s claim in something “biblical” are made by those in favor of and those against same-sex marriage. What the Bible does and does not say on the topic of marriage is absolutely relevant today, no matter the context.

Thus, it is with all of these national and global movements and debates in mind that I have chosen the task at hand. What you will find in this book is my best effort at making academically informed content about the Bible accessible to a general audience. I am also interested in seeing the public discourse on this issue reflect a more complex understanding of what “the Bible” says about “marriage.”

It is my hope that anyone reading this book will also read the biblical passages mentioned and, better yet, will discuss observations, realizations, or surprises therein with others. It is one thing to read what a scholar thinks a passage is talking about. It is qualitatively different to then go consider the primary material oneself. One step further, then, is to engage your newfound insights with others. An educator at heart, I am interested in helping you learn some content on this topic that you can use, confidently and respectfully, should the need arise.

In the sections that follow, I will note who the intended audience is for this book, offer information about myself regarding my connection to this issue, and address some labels and translation choices that you will encounter. Of course, there is also a brief overview of what to expect from the main content of the book.

Who Is the Intended Audience?

The intended readership for this text is anyone who identifies with *any* of the following commitments: (1) is interested in “protecting marriage”; (2) is invested in whom our society allows to be legally married, regardless of who you think that should include; and/or (3) is comfortable with same-sex marriage but does not know what to do with the Bible in light of this position and would like some help with that.

I hope you noticed that the audience does include people who likely do not agree with each other on this topic. Believe it or not, I am not interested in trying to convince others of my own position. Nor am I interested in trying to find a way to make scripture support my personal convictions on this or any other topic. My intention is to have a conversation with my reader that covers all of the biblical passages that are relevant to this topic. I invite you to sit with these passages and complex issues for more than a few moments, and then I leave it up to you to decide what you will do with the information.

Whereas the video series I have created on this topic is geared toward helping faith communities have productive discussions on these topics,³ in a book I have more space to tease out caveats and thus to invoke a larger framework suitable for a general audience. This means that religious people already well familiar with biblical content, but who might not have been given space to raise questions about it, will likely find this book refreshing. People who identify as religious but are not well versed in the two primary Christian testaments should not feel overwhelmed by not knowing much about the Bible going in. People who claim no religious identity should be able to glean substantial nuggets for conversations with others, as well as a better understanding of why key ideas and beliefs related to this topic are mainstays for so many people. Welcome to “Marriage in the Bible 101.”

Who Am I?

Given how personal and important this topic is, you deserve a bit of disclosure from me and background on who I am. The short version is that I am a white, single, cis-female, mostly heterosexual, sapiosexual biblical scholar, reared in the United Methodist tradition, who began the process of seeking ordination to a teaching position in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I have taught full time and as an adjunct for state schools and religiously affiliated institutions in Texas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Oregon, and Virginia, and I have been the officiant for three weddings: two were for hetero couples and one was for two women.

The slightly more informed version highlights for you that for seven years, in my early adulthood, I had a fairly literalistic way of reading the Bible. This coincided with my involvement in the para-church organization Young Life, which focuses on “leading kids to Christ.” I cared deeply about knowing what the Bible said so that I could apply it and let it inform every part of my life. When I say “every part of my life,” I mean everything from the words that I used in prayer, throughout the day, to the way I dressed, to the way I toned down my personality and kept quiet, at times, in order to let the men around me shine.

I cared so much about upholding everything in the Bible that, on my mother’s ordination day, I asked her how she could be ordained, since it was “against G-d’s will for women to be ordained.” To be sure, this question was backed by the way I, and most of my friends at the time, read 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man.” My mother’s ordination, in her fifties, was celebrated with laughter, tears, joy, many embraces, and even more delight by everyone around me, but not by me. It was something that my twenty-year-

old self just could not *be okay with*, much less be happy for my mom about.

I have shared this particular anecdote many times because of how well it encapsulates what my beliefs about the Bible, including that it is inspired by G-d, led me to say and do for many years. If you are a person for whom such a story has always seemed ridiculous or just wildly difficult to wrap your mind around, I do understand. Yet, I also invite you to try to get beyond dismissing it as naive or narrow-minded. I offer this story as a glimpse into the power and authority that millions of people do give the Bible, and then how they subsequently behave because of this power that they have agreed that it holds over them. In spite of ordination being the perfect way for my mother to use her many gifts, which even I could affirm, and even in spite of having female pastors as I grew up (let that sink in), a verse or two in the Bible trumped it all, given my way of reading it at the time.

One Important Perspective

If this story or my theological convictions at the time do seem difficult for you to grasp, I wonder if you will take a few minutes to try to grasp them anyway? *This step might just make all the difference in this entire conversation for you.* Can you put yourself in a mental space where, instead of dismissing it as ridiculous, you can sit with the conviction that what we find in the Bible is meant to be taken as *the* primary source of insight and guidance, in *all* matters in life? If a person believes that the Bible is “G-d’s Word,” in this particular way that I did, then they are also keen to trust it as being just as authoritative as G-d Himself. Can you set aside your own framework in order to get there? Then look around: what kinds of beliefs about men, women, nonbinary people, leadership, G-d, and, yes, even marriage might you also then be needing to find a way to be comfortable with and be willing to teach to others?

For many reasons, not the least of which was that lingering issue of women in leadership in the Church, I realized I wanted to study the Bible as much on my own as possible, which meant learning the biblical languages. Though friends at the time were afraid I would “think my way out of my faith,” and I was concerned they might be right, I found my way to Princeton Theological Seminary for a master of divinity, and from there ultimately to Vanderbilt University for a PhD in the New Testament and early Christianity.

There were two convictions that helped me survive seminary, where I was being confronted every week with all kinds of new and challenging perspectives on theology and biblical content. The first is that if G-d gave me my mind, then it must be okay to use it, *especially* in the realm of my faith. The second, if G-d and the Bible could not handle my questions, then I was fairly certain they did not deserve my devotion. If raising questions about what we find in the Bible seems heretical to you, maybe these two convictions will help you as you engage challenging ideas in this book. If this kind of engagement with the Bible seems obvious to you, and is anything but challenging, perhaps you will take to heart how important it is for me to make that gesture, ever so carefully and respectfully. Remember, I am interested in inviting people into conversation; I am interested in facilitating better understanding. I often find that progressives have as much to learn about where conservatives are coming from, for instance, as traditional people of faith might have to learn about seeing these texts differently.

When I was several years into a position at Greensboro College, North Carolina, residents voted on a constitutional amendment, one that effectively defined marriage as between a man and a woman. Wishing to understand where others were coming from, I attended a few

forums on the issue ahead of time. But what I consistently heard was people referring to biblical passages or ideas in surprisingly vague ways. I heard a lot of fear and judgment in the things these people said, though, and this is key: I never doubted their intention to be doing what they believed was right. Standing up for their understanding of G-d's will made many people seem comfortably resolved.

When I saw members of the LGBTQ+ community at those forums speaking their truths, I understood why, in response, some people of faith placed their biblical beliefs above the human rights of the people *standing right in front of them*. From their perspective, G-d's Word is meant to inform our lives, not the other way around. I recall one young woman crying as she stood in front of an older white male pastor, asking him why he would deny her this legal status. The pastor just stood there, looking at her fairly impassively. I surmised this was because he thought that the matter was beyond his control: however painful it might be for this young woman and others, "the Word of G-d speaks for itself." It was heartbreaking to watch, perhaps doubly so for me, as I understood where both sides were coming from, all too well.

But here is the other thing I understood well in those moments: neither "side" was terribly invested in *understanding* the other. Ironically, everyone involved was too deep into the issue for honest conversation about it.

So, here I am, offering what I can to help anyone interested to learn more about what biblical texts actually say about "marriage." I do understand and thus do my best to respect the way that systems of faith work for people. I understand how powerful sacred texts are for so many, in terms of what people will find a way to embrace or even champion in the name of doing G-d's work or will. But I also know the power and the effect on one's thinking of becoming well educated on a given topic. So I invite you to consider some new ideas, maybe not all entirely new but likely pulled together in ways you have not encountered before. I invite you to read some stories—perhaps old familiar ones, maybe some new ones. Regardless of your background or current religious commitments, I hope you will be open to seeing more nuance in this issue than you did before and to having a better understanding of the role that the Bible continues to play in our current religious and political conversations about marriage and marriage equality.

Language Matters

Some of the choices that I make in this book are based upon my own understanding of the way our language affects us. Even the labels that we use for the parts of the Bible carry some weight and meaning. Allow me to explain what I mean.

Names for the Testaments

Since I come to this conversation from a Christian background, it is most natural for me to think of "the Bible" as having two primary testaments: those often called the Old and the New Testaments. For some Christians, the Bible also contains a third section, a collection called the Apocrypha, the contents of which were written more or less chronologically between the other two. My training has been limited to the two primary collections, and I have yet to hear someone refer to a passage from the Apocrypha in these debates. Thus, when I refer to "the Christian Bible," I am thinking of those primary "Old" and "New" Testaments.

The thing is, that first testament is *the Bible* for Jews. It occurred to me in graduate school that my referring to the collection of texts that comprise the Bible for Jews as "Old" scriptures had been a part of my own internalized anti-Judaic thinking. Though Christians

depend upon that first testament in order for their second one to make sense, there has always been a slight denigration of it, in the communities I have spent time in. It has always been treated as still needing that subsequent testament. Thus, I choose to find a way to teach and talk about that first testament in a way that respects that it came first, that it is complete on its own, and that it is the foundation of several layers of commentaries and deliberations over the centuries that also hold near canonical status for Jews, the Mishnahs and Talmuds.

Perhaps you will ask yourself what the label “Old Testament” communicates. For instance, does the “Old” mean a respectful “ancient”? Or do you perhaps take it to mean something outdated? Does it imply the *need* for something new? More to the point, “Old” in contrast to “New” only makes sense from a Christian perspective. I am not trying to start a debate over the Christian tradition’s choice of labels (well, maybe I am); I *am* trying to point out why labels matter and invite you to be thoughtful about the ones you use.

Since graduate school, I have chosen to call that first testament the “Hebrew Bible” and will do so throughout this book (though this label is not entirely accurate either, since several passages were written in Aramaic). The one suggestion that I vote against is calling it the “Jewish Testament.” All of the writings in the Christian Bible were written by people associating with the Jewish tradition at the time that they wrote them. Technically speaking, all of the contents of the Christian Bible are Jewish in origin!⁴

So, if I call the first testament the Hebrew Bible, what does this mean for the second testament’s name? Some suggest the language parallel and that we call it the “Greek Testament.” As it turns out, though, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the mid-third century BCE, a collection known as the Septuagint. The existence of scriptures in Greek that pre-date the time of Jesus by two and a half centuries takes “Greek Testament” out of the running in my mind.

For lack of a better option, I have made a habit of calling that second testament the “Newer Testament.” In short, this label allows room for both testaments—the Hebrew Bible and the Newer Testament—to be respected on their own. Language is one conduit of power; I encourage you to take quite seriously how the labels we use function in the creation of meaning.⁵

If you were thrown my use of “BCE” above, let me clarify. The BC/AD labeling system is Christian centered as well, since BC stands for “before Christ” and AD stands for *anno domini*, “in the year of our Lord.” Since Jesus is only “Lord” for Christians, this naming paradigm presumes a Christian worldview. Thus, I use the replacement labels of BCE/CE, “Before Common Era” and “Common Era.”

Translation Choices

Throughout this book, I will default to quoting from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. However, seemingly small translation choices feature in this book several times. At such points, it will be relevant to quote from several English versions, and even to compare them with my own wooden or formal correspondence translation. All such additional or alternative translations will be noted.

What do I mean by “formal correspondence” translation? All Bible translation committees must decide which way to render in English (or the chosen target language) what the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts say. There are two ends of the translation spectrum, if you will: formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence. The former is an effort to offer as close as possible to a word-for-word translation. The latter is more interested in trying to communicate, to the best of our knowledge, the sense of the passage. Since words change in

meaning over time, sometimes a word-for-word rendering is woefully inadequate. Sometimes our efforts to render the meaning of a word or phrase in current terms hide the roughness or stark nature of the “original” content. As you will see, the way that committees have chosen to handle a few terms, consistently, has had a significant impact on what people of faith think the Bible says about marriage!

Referring to “G-d”

In anticipation of a range of people reading this book—Jewish, Christian, nonreligious—I have chosen to use the designation “G-d” when referring to the Divine Being who is named in various ways in both testaments. I do not mean for this designation to be disruptive, merely respectful to those who prefer to see “G*d” or “G-d” in this context.

Overview

This book is divided into three sections: “Biblical Marriage,” “Marriage in the Bible,” and “That Which Remains.” The first section engages the four short passages that Christians tend to turn to in order to define “biblical marriage.” The second section expands the framework to include what marriages actually looked like and how they functioned in biblical times and texts. The final section engages themes and specific passages that also inform what people think the Bible “says” about marriage, just a bit more tangentially than the others.

“Biblical Marriage”

For those who use the label “biblical marriage,” there are four passages that help to define and support what that looks like: Genesis 1:28, Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4–6, and Ephesians 5:31–32. In addition to the typical scholarly content about these verses and their context, those first two verses invite questions such as, “What do those passages seem to be *interested* in?” and “Does it make sense to apply the *interest* of the passage to conversations about the relationship we call marriage?” It turns out that Jews and Christians over the centuries have given a great deal of weight to Genesis 1 and 2 in this conversation about marriage. What these texts are talking about however, might surprise you!

The Matthew and Ephesians passages also have a great deal of afterlife in Christian communities. If you have heard someone say that divorce is a sin, and I cannot imagine someone living in the United States today who has not, you can assume that Matthew 19:4–6 (or the parallel examples of this exchange) plays a significant role in this belief. The point that Jesus is recorded trying to make in that exchange, however, surprised even me when I sat with it in my research for this book! No spoilers from me; I hope you will read chapter 3 to find out more. The claims made in Ephesians 5:31–32 live on in the Church’s beliefs about its connection to Christ and the level of sacredness that Christians are to believe that marriage holds. It also, indirectly but quite powerfully, nearly solidifies only endorsing heterosexual unions.

Marriage in the Bible

This section has three chapters that offer a more comprehensive representation of “marriage,” as referenced, legislated, and embodied throughout the Christian Bible. Chapter 5, “It’s a Matter of Terminology,” addresses a few terms used in both testaments, such as “husband,” “wife,” “virgin,” and forms of “to marry.” When the English translations do not accurately reflect the Greek or Hebrew, we might want to reflect upon why that is and if the difference matters to us today.

Chapter 6, “Matriarchs, Patriarchs, Laws, and Adultery,” asks you to take an honest look at some of the stories about the matriarchs and patriarchs of ancient Israel, as well as at what is communicated about this kind of relationship through various laws in the **Torah**. The way to get the most out of this chapter is to focus on what is *communicated about* the thing we call “marriage” in the Hebrew Bible. Since these sacred writings are still read and taught, that means they continue to have an effect on systems of belief today.

Chapter 7, “Newer Testament References,” is intended to help you see, with fresh eyes, what is attributed to Jesus and written by Paul on the subject. In a sense, this might be the only chapter that Christians need to read! If the words of Jesus are central to what Christians should be doing and believing, then prepare to welcome with a wide embrace all nonbinary-gendered people and sexual intercourse that cannot be procreative. Unfortunately, it seems that most Christians are unaware of a handful of things that are attributed to Jesus and written by Paul on this topic.

That Which Remains

The final three chapters have content that typically does not get airtime in this conversation but perhaps ought to. They offer insights that remain to be noted. They also have something of an afterlife in faith communities, in terms of helping to define some element of marriages today, but in ways that people typically do not acknowledge.

For instance, in “Makin’ Babies?” what is the impact on any reader of these scriptures that the passages *most often referenced* from the Bible about women’s roles depict them as important primarily because of their uteruses? How do those messages affect the things that all members of those faith communities will expect of women? There are biblical passages that affirm women’s capabilities that go beyond procreation, believe it or not. So why do we not hear more faith communities championing those passages?

In “What Are They Modeling?” I invite you to read and consider how a paired-up relationship is used as a vehicle to communicate with members of faith communities. This happens in texts where G-d and his people are spoken of as married, and it happens in directives given in correspondences now contained in the Newer Testament. What kinds of relational dynamics do these scriptures model for people?

If your reaction to the final chapter’s title, “Only Heteros?” is something along the lines of, “Oh yeah, David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi . . . blah, blah, blah—I’ve heard it all,” then you are in for a surprise! If you have never heard of any of these people, however, do not fret. The thing is that people usually turn to those two stories and make a claim about human sexuality in the way they read them. We will look at those two stories and two others, but not with a specific decision or goal in mind. When I sat back and tried to see what is being talked about in key passages, even two involving Jesus and Paul, I was utterly shocked by what I saw. Remember, I am not trying to make the Bible affirm any conviction or belief that I might have; I am simply trying to be honest about what is there. I hope you will join me for that surprising engagement.

Conclusions

In the “Conclusions” chapter, in addition to synthesizing the content of the book, I will also offer some suggestions on how to think through being able to share some of its content. I meant it when I said that I am a teacher at heart; I want you to have learned something useful from the time you put into reading this book!

Postscript

In the writing of this book, I came to a point where I realized that I needed to engage some of Augustine's thoughts on sex and marriage directly, given how influential his writings and theological claims became for Christian tradition. Since this content is somewhat tangential to the focus on what "the Bible says," I have included a postscript in which I engage the rhetorical moves in the most relevant of his writings. Even if you have never heard of Augustine, I would encourage you to take a look at this postscript. You might be surprised to discover where some of the current ideas, in Christian contexts at least, about sex and marriage began.

Setting the Stage

One final piece of insight into how I think about these conversations. I have used the following paraphrased quotation to set the stage for discussions of all kinds, ever since graduate school. I use it in every syllabus and discuss it with my students on the first day or two of class. Thus I offer it at the start of this discussion as well: "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain an idea without accepting it."⁶

Being able to entertain an idea, to me, means that we will listen not just for what we like or how we might refute something that we do not like (as many people do in debates or arguments), but we will read or listen in order to grasp, fully, this other perspective or set of ideas. What this looks like, practically, is that when you come across an idea that stands in direct contrast to what you firmly believe, are you able to set aside your convictions long enough to hear and understand this new perspective? Would you be able to explain to someone else this other way of understanding a passage, and do so respectfully and accurately?

Ironically, when people are unable to set aside their personal beliefs, it is usually because they want to protect them. But not giving another perspective an honest consideration means that you actually think that it might be right or that it might convince you, or that it is so far beneath you that you do not wish to go there. On the former option, beliefs that are worth holding on to will not be ripped asunder by alternative perspectives. You can see the world from an alternative perspective without losing your own. On the latter option, I have witnessed hundreds of progressives and academics take on that stance, and it is also unnecessary. Sitting with how someone else's belief system works for them can be incredibly eye opening and humanizing for us all. These questions and observations are important for people at any point on the ideological spectrum. This level of thoughtfulness and respect is what I ask of my students; perhaps you will find it a useful framework as well.

Personal Inventory

There are some general scholarly backed assumptions about the Bible that inform the starting points for the discussion in each chapter of this book. While I do not assume that everyone reading this book will already be familiar with this basic information, it is also not practical for me to try to address all of it here. In all honesty, this is a fairly troubling conundrum. I will do my best to refer the reader to respected sources for more background information, and I have written elsewhere about some of the most relevant of this content.⁷ In the meantime, it might be useful to get a sense of your own starting point and thus how this process might affect you. There is a "Personal Inventory" at the end of this book for this purpose. Especially for people of faith, whom I do not wish to be upset or caught off guard by this content, I highly recommend that you take a few minutes to respond to the short list of questions in the inventory. You might find it

surprisingly helpful to discuss with a friend or partner, as well.

1. <https://www.reuters.com/world/pope-francis-says-laws-criminalising-lgbt-people-are-sin-an-injustice-2023-02-05/>.
2. <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/gay-marriage-around-the-world/>.
3. <https://www.jennifergracebird.com/mitbdescription>.
4. You might find this five-minute video on this topic helpful.
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1 1094a24–1095a.
7. Jennifer Bird, *Permission Granted: Take the Bible into Your Own Hands* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 1–12.