

On Biblical Authority and Human Relationships

Books and Culture

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I start with a very innocent, but I think crucial, question: as scholars of the Bible, and, for some of us, believers in its authority in one way or another, do we glean any special insight from the Bible into our most important, human relationships?¹ As biblical scholars and/or believers, do we have a special responsibility to do so, or are we free, or indeed required, to look elsewhere for such guidance? And if so, where? Our own experience? Psychology? Popular culture? Post-biblical tradition? Other faith traditions outside Judaism or Christianity? Any or all of these?

Let me proceed by first considering an extreme case and working back from there. As an atheist friend of mine can be relied upon to remark: “traditional marriage” based on the Bible is kind of a fantasy or projection; the Hebrew Bible patriarchs were polygamists, and Jesus and his apostles seem to have been celibates. And here’s an excellent example of how scholarship can often end up looking ridiculous and irrelevant: you correctly but ineffectually note that the patriarchs were often polygamous under some duress or special circumstance, and the early Christians’ imminent eschatology often entailed rather extreme ascetic practices, and neither of these situations is particularly relevant today. No, such historical contextualization, no matter how accurate, really misses the point: that on the face of it, the Bible’s portrayals of human relationships (in this case, marriage, but I will try to broaden that to a more general consideration of how humans get along) bear little if any resemblance to most currently preferred options. And if one wishes or longs to abstract some “biblical idea” of love and relationships and then try to apply those ideas to real life situations, one invites the question of relevance in a different way: why bother? If, by examining a contemporary, real life, healthy, and edifying relationship, one could either straightforwardly, or with ingenious exegesis, find some connection or similarity between it and something in the Bible, what would that add? How would it make the current relationship more satisfying, or moral, or fulfilling? By adding biblical authority and approval? And, at the opposite extreme, if one examined a sick, dehumanizing relationship and found the Bible also condemned such, what would that add to our contemporary condemnation of such behaviour? Or, to consider the other thornier scenarios that have repeatedly come up in ethical debates: what if one finds biblical approval of some awful relationship that is condemned by Enlightenment humanism (e.g. master/slave), or one finds biblical condemnation of what most moderns judge moral and healthy relationships (e.g. homosexuality, though yes, of course I acknowledge the biblical ambiguity on this, though I return

¹ This essay is based on my Presidential address given to the Mid-Atlantic Regional Society of Biblical Literature, March 17, 2017, in New Brunswick, NJ.

to my point above about polygamy and celibacy—so what?). Again, all of these examples, and I have participated in all these debates frequently in my professional life, elicit the question of what biblical authority is for, if one is backed into saying that by finding biblical confirmation, then one has the benefit of having biblical authority, but such authority is something with absolutely no convincing force to a rapidly-growing part of the human family; or if, as one frequently does, one lacks biblical authority or even goes against it, then that subtracts nothing from the morality of one's position.

Never mind the political or social dimensions of such a moral debate or investigation. Consider it very personally. For me or any believer from any tradition (at least a text-based one), I think we are faced with two extremes. First, the literalists among us make sense of what scriptures say (or what interpretive communities say they say) and then do it, regardless of whether this makes sense or makes someone (un)happy, or agrees with others' opinions. Scripture trumps reason and will, to be blunt. And one could, in a Christian context, find ample rationalization for this practice by taking a robust view of Original Sin: my will and reason are so sickened and wounded by Original Sin that I had better not rely on them; if following biblical mandates does not make me happy, then I am just not trying hard enough, damn it—or damn me, really. I can imagine admiring a person who makes such a commitment as that, but I do not think I have ever been anywhere near being ready to make such a commitment myself. But that leaves me verging on the other extreme: I decide for myself what is the best course of action, and if the Bible agrees with me, or I can find a congenial interpretation that does so, then that's a nice bonus, sort of like Paul saying he has the approval of Peter and those "pillars," while at the same time insisting such approval adds nothing to his authority or truthfulness (Gal. 2.6-10). If the one extreme degrades my reason and will to diseased members I must amputate, this other option elevates my own choice and freedom to a nearly idolatrous extreme. The former is the anti-modern resignation of literalists fighting a rear-guard action against modernity; the latter tends toward the epitome of the excesses of modernity, the isolated, insulated monad, reliant on and responsible to no one but itself. Again, perhaps I can admire (somewhat fearfully) such a being, but I have never felt myself to be such.

And all who rely on a text, whether as a literalist or with more nuance, often seem blithely, insistently, deliberately unaware of their tendency to read their own situation into the Bible or any text. They may raise a sceptical eyebrow at a Mormon exegete who interprets the wedding at Cana as Jesus's own marriage, but our forebears assumed the same posture each time someone interpreted Ruth and Naomi, or Jonathan and David, as positive, validating examples of love and even sex between people of the same gender—an interpretive move now much more widely, but by no means universally, accepted. And the examples I started with—of how supposedly monogamous heterosexuals then go rooting around in a Bible that affirms a lot of other partnerings and does not show much special approval of that kind—lo and behold, the exegetes find enough examples of their own lifestyle that it is regularly dubbed "traditional" and assumed to be both the current norm and the biblical model. Many of us will have been to a wedding where 1 Corinthians 13 was read, some of us even chose it for our own weddings, even though a casual reader could tell it has nothing to do with the love between

spouses. The bigger, overarching problem for many Bible readers is the tendency to project ourselves onto the text, even as we insist the text is governing or guiding us. Again, real engagement with a text or tradition calls for something subtler and more difficult, a dialogue with it, the way we hopefully dialogue with other, living people, a willingness to be challenged and changed by the text, but also a push back and negotiation with the text, and not mere slavish devotion or adherence to it. If the one subject of this essay is how best we can love other people, a related challenge is how we can love a text the way we love a person, by learning from it and arguing with it in a way that elevates and enlightens us both.

One simple way out or around this would be one I have often availed myself of in other contexts: perhaps the Bible simply has nothing to say about this particular issue. So, I can feel right in relying on the Bible for some beliefs or moral injunctions, but on some (or many), I am on my own (or in cooperation with other people in the same boat as I am). This would indeed be the option I was taught frequently by one of the few ministers I ever spoke with extensively, who, in his folksy way, noted that if one has a backed-up toilet, one does not consult the Bible for instructions, nor does one call in a priest, minister, or rabbi to fix the problem. But if the Bible is agnostic as to the workings or value of indoor plumbing, it seems less so about human relationships, insisting many times in many contexts, that some are right, uplifting, sanctifying, and some are demeaning, ugly, and inhumane. Jettisoning the Bible on this fundamental part of my life would not seem like the immediate or obvious way to solve the problem of authority or morality.

How to love other people would also seem like an especially timely and urgent question, because it may be one where modernity has finally failed us (as on so many other matters, large and small), and especially poignantly so, with Romanticism being one early expression of modernity. Modernity has not invented or even exacerbated bad or unhealthy relationships, but, ultimately, it has no answer or cure for them—or really, none better than the nostrums and platitudes people have spouted individually and as a race since first their hearts were broken past healing. But at least, like that ultimate rear-guard fighter against modernity, Blaise Pascal, many moderns realize there is a problem and thus long for some solution, though they must confess, from an entirely unknown source. I was struck by three relatively recent *New York Times* columns that were charmingly and bemusedly candid about this (and the Grey Lady, it hardly needs noting, is not much of an apologist for either religion or traditional values). One of these, by Arthur C. Brooks (2014) noted all the biological imperatives that drive us, the “Selfish Gene” and all its implications we are mapping out, whose workings we increasingly know and can predict or manipulate. But he had to admit we have hit the limits of applying these insights to our lives: along with the apparently built-in urge that we have to pursue pleasure, which we deny at our own peril, we have an equally stubborn intuition that pleasure is not enough, “‘If it feels good, do it’. Unless you share the same existential goals as protozoa, this is often flat-out wrong” (Brooks 2014). We know how to pursue pleasure, and we are driven to do so, but we are equally certain that pleasure is not the same as happiness, and we know we long for happiness, and apparently we neither know how, nor are we capable of finding it on our own.

An equally telling admission was more directly and narrowly related when William Deresiewicz wrote of male/female, non-sexual relationships (2012) and noted our current culture's deficiency in acknowledging or understanding most kinds of human love. He writes, "We have trouble, in our culture, with any love that isn't based on sex or blood. We understand romantic relationships, and we understand family, and that's about all we seem to understand" (2012). I would sharpen his insight: I doubt we *understand* even those two kinds of relationships, but we do talk about them incessantly, I suspect to reassure ourselves that they are as important and as thoroughly understood as we would like to think. Anyone who has experienced the many faceted pains and pleasures of romantic love, or all the various cruelties and ugliness people related by blood can inflict on one another, would hardly claim to fully understand either.

But even if my curmudgeonly, middle-aged cynicism goes too far, Deresiewicz's point stands: we seem uncomfortable with and afraid of most of the loving relationships in our lives. Friends, comrades, mentors, students, partners: we all could come up with long lists of these people we have loved; and their effect on us, especially cumulatively, probably outweighs the importance of romantic and sexual relationships most of us have had or the love and influence we have felt from our parents or for our handful of siblings or children.

Most recently, and most explicitly tying himself to biblical concepts, David Brooks tried to find the "right" kind of love for himself and his readers (2017). His claim, drawing on the same frustrations I do here, is that depicting love as either fate (something that just happens to you), or as just choice (something you choose, maybe not rationally, but completely under your own guidance and control), is both inaccurate (not what actually happens), and unfulfilling (thinking of love that way demeans it and keeps us from experiencing its more edifying moments or qualities). His suggestion implies a biblical background when he describes and advocates for love as covenant, a promise to which one adheres, regardless of feeling. But as sympathetic as I am to his valiant attempt, I am not sure he has added much, except to make some gesture toward the fated (i.e. we find ourselves connected to people we did not choose to be with) but without its madness and passion. It is a very cold, Stoic fate, not the intoxicating "we were meant to be together" that he starts his essay with. And he combines this with choice, but now a choice we go on making forever, to the point where we ignore other choices. In a way, Brooks has proved Deresiewicz's point: to come up with some better version of romantic love, he has smuggled in the idea of commitment most of us feel if we have children, that feeling that we did not choose this but now it is our responsibility, a not wholly satisfying combination.

So if neither the Bible nor modernity offers us much help with how best to love other people, where might we find guidance? I'd like to suggest two places we might find at least suggestions: the medieval idea of courtly love, and contemporary zombie apocalypse fiction. Both are weirdly fantastical, transporting their audiences to settings quite disconnected from and utterly dissimilar to their mundane lives of work and marriage and raising children, but both speculate what love would be like in such worlds—and by doing so, commend to us kinds of love we might have missed in our regular world.

When I think of the Middle Ages, I think of the trajectory we take through medieval texts in my Honours Humanities seminar. We start with 1 Corinthians. Many of the students have heard the thirteenth chapter at weddings, but the overall tenor of the letter communicates vividly that loving rightly was as big a problem for the Corinthians as it has been for anyone since—that there is nothing necessarily selfless or good about what people call “love.” Then we move on to Augustine’s *Confessions*, which perfectly anticipates every complaint I have made in this article, when he starts his lament, confession, and ultimately love letter to God (a Beloved who needs no letter to know what his lover is thinking or feeling) with, “Our heart is restless until it rests in You [God]” (*Confessions of St Augustine* 1.1.1), and where he moves on to poignantly show how painful, damaging, but transformative were his loves for his friends, child, parents, and the mother of his son. A few weeks after that, we are on the top of the Mount of Purgatory with Dante and the woman he has told us so frequently and extravagantly he loves so much, where he now tells us:

And instantly—though many years had passed
since last I stood trembling before her eyes,
captured by adoration, stunned by awe—
my soul, that could not see her perfectly,
still felt, succumbing to her mystery
and power, the strength of its enduring love.
(Dante 1981, 30, 34-9)

The lessons from Corinthians and Augustine I have already hinted at: love, in its inception and usually in its practice, is the most selfish thing imaginable—hungry, grasping, tyrannical, and monstrous. But this hunger can never be satisfied by any earthly love or delight. But neither can it be denied or turned off. And of course, that is where Dante picks up in *Inferno*—love gone horribly wrong by being focused on earthly objects, what Augustine had already anticipated when he connected the dots in such a way that, in the end, there are only two kinds of love: love of self to the exclusion of everything else, including God, or love of God, to the exclusion of self—but a love that thereby includes everything (including the self) in its proper relationship to God.

Describing love gone wrong—that is a topic humans never tire of, and even if Dante is a virtuoso at it, he is hardly unique. But throughout the *Commedia*, he has set us up for something more—the description of love gone right. But he has also set up that it will have *something* to do with an earthly love, his love for this being who was, at one time, a real, breathing woman, Beatrice. He has also shown us, not just in *Inferno*, but in the description of love in the middle of *Purgatorio*, that even the purest love that draws one to God includes the hunger, desire, and longing of “bad” love: the badness and damnation consist not in the passion or need, because these are intrinsic to any kind of love, hellish or heavenly. And throughout, his love for Beatrice seems full of this kind of attraction—the way she looked, especially her eyes, drew him to her, but only to send him on further, to the real, Divine lover. But, as we see above, Dante focuses on something else, not the desire, at least not the desire to hold and possess her, but the feeling of the power she has over him. Something in this love that starts with attraction, with

wanting to take something from the beloved for oneself, ends with awe at the beloved, with offering everything of oneself to the beloved. Something that starts with only a desire to fill a need in oneself, ends with only desiring that the beloved be happy, that one might do things worthy of her or him.

All well and good, as a distraction for our medieval forebears from the daily grind of survival, disease, famine, plague, and death, but where are the remnants of such fantasy in the modern world? Romances in all their forms seem the most direct descendants, but are just a simple or debased form of this ideal—all satisfaction of the desire, after an appropriately suspenseful plot of obstacles to that satisfaction, with maybe a dash of redemption from some sentimentally sad fate. But unlike courtly love, modern romances are usually deeply conservative and supportive of the status quo: they do not offer some alternative or auxiliary to marriage, but only seek to result in the “right” marriage.

For a real alternative to the marriages many of its audience are immersed in, I would suggest the zombie apocalypse genre might be a place people escape to that in some ways also carries on the tradition of medieval romance. In its hugely popular and in many ways paradigmatic instantiation in *The Walking Dead* (Kirkman, Schofield and Moore, 2003-17; also Darabont 2010-17),² what fans seek as voraciously as zombies seek flesh is to see characters build new social arrangements, whether these are personal or political. Perhaps not surprisingly, these post-apocalyptic survivors are deeply ambivalent about everything pre-apocalypse—equal parts nostalgia and longing, mixed with rejection and loathing. Monogamous marriage is one such institution that is critiqued in this way. On the one hand, the marriage and children of the main protagonist, Rick Grimes, provide Rick his motives and a moral anchor. But they also fill him with guilt and shame—about his wife Lori’s infidelity, and his failure to save her life. And the Governor (the cause of Lori’s death) is an even more outrageous version of the inadequacy of “regular” relationships in the post-apocalyptic world, keeping his zombified niece (his daughter in the television series) locked up, while treating living people with the utmost ruthlessness and brutality. For both Rick and the Governor, loving those they loved before the apocalypse is not the best way to thrive in the new world, leading to either madness for Rick, or paranoid sadism for the Governor. Whether any relationship can really survive in such a world is not clear, but both comics and television series are notable and loved by fans for depictions of friendships that do not just survive the apocalypse, but bring together people who probably would not have cared about each other in the “real” world. The violence of this world forces some people like the Governor to brutalize others in order to protect those they “love,” but many find sacrificing themselves out of love for others easier, and do so more readily than they would have in a world without such extreme choices being forced upon them.

² *The Walking Dead* is a comic book series created by Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Charlie Adlard, which was developed into a television drama by Frank Darabont. The series follows the protagonist Rick Grimes, who wakes up from a coma to discover a post-apocalyptic world that is overrun by zombies, or “walkers.”

And that takes us back to what I have circled around within this article and with which all the texts with which I have dialogued have also struggled—that love is some powerful combination of the most selfish urges we have, something that could drive us to disregard or abuse the well-being of anyone in the name of “love” (either love of them, or someone or anything else), inextricably intertwined with longing to sacrifice ourselves and put the beloved (and others, even beyond the narrow object) ahead of ourselves. That even the most ancient and sacred texts cannot solve this paradox completely is no surprise; that even seemingly escapist or trivial entertainment adds something to this discussion is also to be expected, and welcomed and appreciated, in the growing discussion.

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