

The nude testament



Adam and Eve depicted by Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel. God sets up the Garden of Eden as an ideal, doctoral student Anthony Pyles says. "When Adam sees Eve he says, 'Wow!'" AFP, Getty Images

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Academics gathered this week in Fredericton for the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, presenting papers on everything from subjectivity in ultrasounds to the crisis in public education. Throughout the week, we showcased some of the most interesting research.

For a book of the Bible, the Song of Songs is extremely sexy, even steamy.

F "Draw me after you, let us make haste," the Old Testament book reads. "The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you."

Or this: "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am sick with love. O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!"

That it speaks of love is beyond obvious, but the more interesting question is what kind of love it is. Is it love in the vague sense of emotion, something that neatly fits into the Biblical sexual ethic?

Or is it really about a love between a man and woman, including sex and desire?

Anthony Pyles, a doctoral student at McMaster Divinity College, specializing in the Old Testament, thinks the word "love" as it appears in the Song of Songs lost its most potent meaning over the centuries.

While a Protestant seminary student in Mississippi a few years ago, he found a footnote that suggested the word "love" actually was more accurately translated from the Hebrew as "lovemaking."

His professor at the time was skeptical that the translation would be so sexual and sensual. But Mr. Pyles wondered about the correct translation and what questions it would raise about Biblical notions of sexuality.

If it is lovemaking, then the opening lines of the Song of Songs, sometimes called the Song of Solomon, raises some serious and Biblically sticky questions.

"O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine..."

If it is "love" in the vague, almost asexual, sense, then that fits a classic religious narrative: courting, marriage and then consummation, he explained. But if it means "lovemaking," then it is a bit of a problem.

In a paper presented this week at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Fredericton, Mr. Pyles wrote: "If however, 'lovemaking' is to be preferred, it appears that the bride has full knowledge of her lover's skills long before they are joined in matrimony. Interpreters must wrestle with their dilemma."

The paper was called: Crudity, Prudery, And Treachery: Translating Sex in the Song of Songs.

Despite the dramatic title, Mr. Pyles is not sure the change in meaning was intentional or even about prudery.

It might have been that the early translators thought of love in terms of lovemaking, but over time the meaning became more vague.

"The Hebrew is euphemistic but not ambiguous; the English has become both euphemistic and incredibly ambiguous."

The problem is that people tend to read books as a linear narrative, he said. So in this case, using the Hebrew translation, it sound like the couple has had sex before marriage -which creates a problem in terms of religious sexual ethics.

"I would see it as a preface, or a table of contents, alerting the reader to what the book is about. The Song of Songs is about human love, sex, all of that wrapped up together. It's not speaking to whether it's before or after marriage. Calling it lovemaking does not break any religious morality when you read the book as a whole."

The way to read the book, Mr. Pyles believes, is to imagine a beautiful love story between two people "as God had intended it to be" at the beginning of the world.

He notes that in Genesis, God sets up the Garden of Eden as an ideal.

"When Adam sees Eve he says, 'Wow!' And then it says, 'The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.' That was the way it was supposed to be.

"The Bible deals with the kind of things that people have struggled with for ages. It talks about sex but we don't in our churches. So often we don't address what the Bible does, and then we're left with the impression that the Bible is just irrelevant because at best it's unaware or at worse it doesn't care about the questions we are all asking."

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