

Scholar challenges widely-held beliefs about the Bible and sex

by [Cecile S. Holmes](#)

April 12, 2011

(RNS) Is the Bible good for your sex life, but bad for a sex ed class?

A Boston biblical scholar challenges widely held beliefs about the Bible and sex in her new book, arguing Scripture cannot and should not be a guidebook for sexual morality.

The Bible is a complex compendium of human experience including stories of love, prostitution, extramarital sex and more, Boston University religion professor Jennifer Wright Knust argues in "Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire."

Her book goes against most biblical conservatives' view that the Bible specifically prohibits sex outside of marriage and condemns homosexuality. From Genesis to the Gospels, Knust's research turns many traditional interpretations upside down.

She's also unafraid to get a little racy: a full-page ad for her book in the venerable Christian Century magazine asks, "Is it OK to pray for better orgasms?"

Exploring the love poetry of the Song of Songs, for example, she notes the text does not shrink from describing "sexual intimacy and

climax." Its vivid and lurid details worried some church thinkers, including the ancient Christian theologian Origen.

Turning the Bible into a sexual rulebook doesn't work, Knust says, because it can be use to support an almost endless set of "interpretive agendas." Too often, she says, the holy book has been used to silence rebels, repress women and minorities, condemn homosexuals and even justify slavery.

Her intent, Knust says, is to move conversations about sex and the Bible past "polemical and shortsighted" claims using passages to support this or that particular viewpoint.

A good example is "the unfortunate history around biblical interpretation around the slavery issue," she says. "Slavery was natural and even believed to be divinely inspired by some" who used the Bible to support their outlook.

"When the abolitionists began to argue that the Bible was against slavery, they really tied themselves up in knots trying to cite certain passages in a certain way that supported their arguments."

The same can be said for arguments over sexuality, she says.

Equally alarming to Knust are present-day situations in which political opponents on either side of an issue use biblical texts to underscore their outlook.

"I hate to see the Bible being employed as kind of a weapon against women, against girls, against lesbian, gay, and transgendered people,"

she said. "I've seen so many people injured by this kind of biblical interpretation. For example, I was talking with a really wonderful woman recently who was saying she wanted to get a divorce from her husband because he was physically abusive. The message she was getting from her church was that the Bible was against divorce and therefore she had no choice but to stay in the marriage."

As a child, Knust read Bible stories before school most weekday mornings. Seated on her family's big gold couch, she and her mother read from a two-volume illustrated book. Never once did her mother tell her it was "silly or bad" to ask questions about the stories.

Knust grew up to see the Bible as neither a collection of policy statements nor a treatise to enforce a particular point of view. Instead, the Bible offered "an invitation to think about who God might be and what it means to be human."

Knust is an ordained minister in the American Baptist Churches USA, which generally has a more open approach to interpreting Scripture than the more conservative (and larger) Southern Baptist Convention.

As a scholar, Knust is at ease talking about the Bible in both church and academic circles. And as an author, she writes with authority yet keeps the general reader in mind.

Her book demonstrates "the extraordinary range of scriptural attitudes toward the body," says fellow scholar Peter S. Hawkins, Yale University professor of religion and literature. It also shows "the impossibility of using any particular saying as warrant for a monolithic biblical teaching," he says.