

**BIBLICAL VIEW OF
SEX AND SEXUALITY
FROM
AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**



GENERAL EDITOR
REV. PROF. S. O. ABOGUNRIN

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BIBLICAL VIEW OF SEX AND SEXUALITY FROM AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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.....	vi
.....	1
.....	3
.....	15
.....	28
.....	cus 18 & 20
.....	48
.....	tof
.....	61
.....	80
.....	97
.....	112

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Contributors	vi
Chairman's Keynote Address	1
<i>The Rt. Rev Dr J.A. Oladunjoye</i>	
Introduction	3
<i>S.O. Abogunrin Ph.D</i>	
Chapter One	15
The Old Testament Concept of Sexuality	
<i>J.O. Akao, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Two	28
Biblical Teaching on Marriage and Sex: A Case Study of Leviticus 18 & 20	
<i>Gwamna Dogara Je'Adayibe, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Three	48
Biblical Injunction on Marriage and Sexual Union in the Context of	
Christian Marriage in Nigeria	
<i>C.O. Ogunkunle, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Four	61
A Biblical View on Sexual Differentiation	
<i>Anthony Ojo, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Five	80
An Examination of the Biblical Basis of the Roman Catholic	
Teaching on Human Sexuality	
<i>Dr. Pius Oyeniran Abioje, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Six	97
Sex and Marriage: A Biblical Metaphor	
<i>Martina I. Oguntoyinbo-Atere, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Seven	112
The Concept of Love in the Old Testament	
<i>Mrs. B.G. Ogedegbe</i>	

Chapter Eight	125
Marriage and Divorce: The New Testament View <i>S.O. Omowole, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Nine	138
Marriage and Divorce from Christian Perspective: An Examination of Pauline Corpus <i>Adamolekun, Taiye, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Ten	151
Building a Biblical African Christian View of Sex: An Understanding of 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 <i>Adewale, Olubiyi Adeniyi, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Eleven	167
Paul's Concept of Sexual Union <i>(Mrs.) Hope Amolo, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Twelve	182
Premarital Sex: Implications for Marriage and Morality <i>Efe M. Ehioghae</i>	
Chapter Thirteen	194
Biblical Injunction on Marriage and Sexual Union <i>G. Nwachinemere Nweke</i>	
Chapter Fourteen	204
A Biblical Analysis of Polygamy and Monogamy in African Christianity <i>M.O. Gbadero</i>	
Chapter Fifteen	217
"Sex and Marriage: A Critique of wedding ceremonies in Nigeria" <i>David T. Ejenobo, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Sixteen	233
Masculinity as a Symbol of Oppression: A 21st Century Feminist Challenge of an Effete Tradition <i>Taiye Aluko, Ph.D</i>	

Chapter Seventeen	246
Interpreting Galatians 3:28 in the Light of New Testament	
Teaching on Gender Superiority	
<i>Godwin N. Toryough, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Eighteen	257
Πορνεία in Acts 15 in Contemporary Christian Mission in Nigeria	
<i>Sampson M. Nwaomah, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Nineteen	266
HIV/AIDS: God's Punishment for Sexual Perversion?	
The Nigerian Experience	
<i>Dorcas Akintunde, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Twenty	279
Poverty and Sex Commercialization	
<i>Edward A. Boje</i>	
Chapter Twenty-One	300
Jesus Christ and the Adulterous Woman:	
A Case for Embracing HIV/AIDS Patients in Nigeria	
<i>Rotimi Omotoye, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Twenty-Two	309
Christianity and HIV/AIDS Scourge in Nigeria:	
The Issue of Abstinence and Faithfulness	
<i>Dairo, A. Olalekan, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Twenty-Three	318
Biblical Solutions to the HIV/AIDS Scourge	
<i>Grace Esegbue</i>	
Chapter Twenty-Four	325
The Homosexuality Controversy in the Anglican Church Revisited:	
A Biblical and Contextual Perspective	
<i>Dapo F. Asaju, Ph.D</i>	
Chapter Twenty-Five	340
A Moral Appraisal of Homosexuality in Biblical,	
Western and African Worldviews	
<i>Ig boin, Benson Ohihon</i>	

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CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL INJUNCTION ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN NIGERIA

Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is overwhelmingly positive in its treatment of marriage and sexuality. In the creation account, especially that of man and woman, much emphasis is placed on the goodness of love and sex within the context of marriage. Proverbs 5:18-19 says:

May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

A loving doe, a graceful deer may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

Also, the New Testament writers have a positive attitude towards marriage and sexuality. The apostle Paul is lucidly blunt in condemning those who despise marriage (1 Tim. 4:3) and to him, everything created by God, including marriage, is good (1 Tim. 4:4). Furthermore, the unique place of marriage in the contemporary church is highlighted in the cause for which matrimony was ordained, which is usually being read in every wedding solemnization in the church:

First, it was ordained for companionship, mutual living, help and comfort that the one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and in adversity;

Secondly, it was ordained in order that the natural instincts and affections, implanted by God should be hallowed and directed aright; that those who are called of God to this holy estate, should continue there in pureness of living;

Thirdly, it was ordained for procreation according to the will of God, and

that children might be brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and to the praise of His Holy Name.

The focus of this paper is a careful examination of Biblical injunction on monogamous marriage and sexual union. The historical method is adopted whereby relevant books and articles on the subject are examined. This is corroborated with exegetical study of relevant biblical texts.

MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

The Hebrew word for marriage is *mis'teh*. It is a feminine noun which means "to dwell together as husband and wife; sexual cohabitation; and the duty of marriage"¹. Its Greek equivalent is *γάμος* (*gamos*), which means "marriage or wedding"². Virtually every culture in the world has its customs on marriage which are highly respected by every member of the community. Writing on the importance of marriage to the Jews, William Barclay notes:

No nation has ever had a higher view of marriage than the Jews. Marriage was a sacred duty. To remain unmarried after the age of twenty, except in order to concentrate upon the study of the Law, was to break a positive commandment to be fruitful and multiply³.

Marriage is a significant institution because it arises out of the divine programme for humanity. In other words, monogamous marriage which is the focus of this paper was planned by God from the time of creation to meet the human need for companionship, love, mutual encouragement, practical help and sexual satisfaction⁴. It was the first institution in human society which was established by God before all other human institutions. This means that God is deeply interested in monogamous marriage. Demonstrating how God is pleased with marriage, O'Donovan states "The miracle by which Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast in Canaan (John 2:1-1), shows us that God wants people to enjoy marriage to the full. He wants men and women to experience love and acceptance and to be complete⁵.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE

For a proper understanding of Biblical injunction on Marriage and Sexual Union, it is appropriate to examine various forms of marriage in the Bible as outlined by O.J. Baab⁶.

a. Matriarchal Marriage

This is the form of marriage which assumes the authority of the mother. It is the marriage in which the children remain under the control of the mother and the husband settles in his wife's home for a long time or permanently. An example is Jacob who settled in the house of Laban, his father-in-law for a long period of time (Gen. 29:1-30). Another example is Moses who lived in the home of his wife for a considerable length of time (Exod. 2:21-22).

b. Patriarchal Marriage

This type of marriage has its focus on father as the one who has authority over the entire marriage pattern. This is reflected in the genealogical table in Genesis 5 where no daughter is mentioned (Gen. 10, 36:9-10; Num. 1:1-3:9 etc). The emphasis upon the authority of the father is perhaps suggested in the custom of the father's naming his child (cf. Gen. 4:26, 5:3, 29, 16:15, 38:3; Exod. 2:22). The patriarchal marriage allows the husband to exercise power over his wife. The wife has rights and freedom only within the context of the authority of the husband. In fact, the husband may revoke a vow that his wife has made to God (Num. 30:10-14).

c. Polygamy

Literally, polygamy means 'many marriages'. The term has the concept of more than one marriage alliance existing concurrently in the same family. The practice of polygamy in the Bible was due to several reasons among which include: barrenness, as in the case of Sarah who had no child for Abraham. It was in this context that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a second wife (Gen. 16:3). Love for a particular woman is another reason for polygamy in the Bible. Jacob, for example loved Rachel and he served Laban for seven years. But at the end he was given Leah. He decided to work for another seven years after which Rachel was given to him (Gen. 29, 18, 25, 30). Thus, the reasons for polygamy include "love, lust, desire for children, and diplomacy on the part of the nation's rulers"⁷.

d. Exogamy

This is a marriage outside of a defined kinship circle; that is, the marriage of a foreigner. Examples include Esau, who married Canaanite women (Gen.

36:3); Joseph, who married Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera (Gen. 41:45); and Moses who married Zipporah (Exod. 2:21).

e. Endogamy

This is the marriage that is restricted to members of the same group or clan that is, people of the same culture and custom. It is most likely that this was in the mind of Abraham as he desired to secure a wife for his son from his kindred (Gen. 24:4, 10). Similarly, Jacob was commanded not to marry a Canaanite, but to take one of the daughters of Laban his uncle (Gen. 28:1-2).

f. Levirate Marriage

This type of marriage is defined in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. It involves a deceased husband's brother and his widow. The purpose is to prevent marriage of the Israelite girl to an outsider and to continue the name of the dead husband in Israel. It is to underscore the value of endogamous marriage and the importance of sons⁸. An example of the Levirate marriage is recorded in Gen. 38 in the story of Judah and Tamar.

g. Monogamous Marriage

The justification for the monogamous marriage which is the focus of this paper is that it was mentioned and discussed in the creation account in the book of Genesis. The monogamous marriage which is the union of a male and a female in a life long commitment to one another and which is to be characterized by fidelity is the first marriage ordained by God. It is the marriage whereby a man will cleave to his wife. Genesis 2:24 says: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh"

Incidentally, many of the Hebrew laws support strongly the monogamous type of marriage. Some of them include:

- ♦ You shall not covet your neighbour's wife ... (Exodus 20:17; Deut. 5:21).
- ♦ But if the servant declares, I love my master and my wife ... (Exodus 21:5).
- ♦ Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would

dishonour your father (Lev. 18:8).

- ♦ Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife and defile yourself with brother (Lev. 18:20).
- ♦ If a man commits adultery with another man's wife with the wife of his neighbour's – both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death (Lev. 20:10).
- ♦ The woman he marries must be a virgin (Lev. 21:13).
- ♦ If a man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him (Num. 5:12).
- ♦ If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die (Deut. 22:22).
- ♦ If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married (Deut. 24:5).

In each of the above verses, the emphasis is on the sanctity of marriage. The book of Proverbs, in its various admonitions regarding good life, is silent on polygamous marriage. Rather, emphasis is given to monogamous marriage as noted in the following verses:

- ♦ A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones (Prov. 12:4).
- ♦ He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favour from the Lord (Prov. 18:22).

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes 9:9 admonishes every man to enjoy life with his wife whom he loves. The Psalmist is of the opinion that the extravagant expression of the goodness of the life under the God of Israel includes a description of the fruitful wife in the home of the faithful (Psalm 128). Most importantly, the book of Songs has several expressions of love between a man and a woman, the two lovers who are longing for marriage.

EXEGESIS OF RELEVANT BIBLICAL TEXTS

a. Genesis 2:18-25

This passage is on the creation of the woman. Out of so many 'good' things which God created (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), the only one thing that was not good was the loneliness of man in the garden (Gen. 2:18). Adam himself recognized his solitude (Gen. 2:20). Therefore, God put Adam to sleep (Gen. 2:21) and He created the woman from his flesh and bone (Gen.

2:21-23). The Hebrew word *tardemah* indicates a deep sleep in which all consciousness of the outer world and of one's own existence vanishes⁹.

The phrase *ezer kenegido* means 'a helping being' which indicates that the woman was created as a suitable helper for the man¹⁰. Keil notes that:

The woman was created, not of dust of the earth, but from a rib of Adam because she was formed for an inseparable unity and fellowship of life with the man, and the mode of her creation was to lay the actual foundation for the moral ordinance of marriage¹¹.

Both Adam and Eve had the same nature. They were both created to complement each other. In other words, what the man lacked she supplied, and what the woman lacked he supplied.

The design of God in the creation of the woman is perceived by Adam. Thus, as soon as he awakes and Eve is brought to him by God, without any revelation from God, he discovers in Eve, bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. The word *hapa'am* which is translated 'this is now' is an expression of joyous astonishment at the suitable helpmate whom God had made for him¹².

On the issue of the man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife, Ed & Gaye Wheat note:

The man is the one who is responsible for holding the marriage together by 'cleaving' to his wife. Cleaving in this sense means to be welded inseparably, so that each becomes a part of the other. Therefore, the man is to be totally committed to his wife¹³.

Indeed, the leaving of the father and mother which applies to both the man and the woman and their becoming one flesh is a spiritual oneness. It is a vital communion of the heart as well as the body. "Adam and Eve could see each other as they really were without shame, disappointment or frustration"¹⁴. They were at ease with each other without any fear of exploitation¹⁵.

b. Matthew 19:3-6

Matthew 19:3-6 deals with the response of Jesus Christ to the question raised by some Pharisees as to whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Obviously the question was asked in the light of the controversy on marriage and divorce which was the main issue in the then Jewish society. Jesus, in his response to their question, and without getting involved in the

Hillel-Shammai controversy, reminded the people of God's original purpose in establishing the marriage bond¹⁶.

Jesus Christ made reference to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to affirm that in marriage God joins male and female together in an inseparable bond. Louis A. Barbieri notes that "This bond is a higher calling than the parent-child relationship, for a man to leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife in a one-flesh relationship¹⁷."

It is obvious that Jesus was of the opinion that Adam and Eve were created for each other and for no one else. In other words, marriage which is meant for a man and a woman is for life and that divorce is not allowed.

c. 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6

Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 lists 15 requirements for a church leader. He adds 2 in Titus 1:6-9 to make 17. One of the requirements is that the leader must be a "husband of but one wife". The phrase 'husband of but one wife' has been given various interpretations by Biblical scholars¹⁸. The obvious point which all the scholars agree upon is that the phrase 'husband of but one wife' prohibits polygamy, and those who have remarried and divorced, which are unthinkable for spiritual leaders in the church¹⁹. The elder must have an unsullied reputation in the whole area of sex and marriage²⁰. He must have his affections centred exclusively on his wife. Duane Litfin notes that the reason why a divorced and remarried person is prohibited from becoming an overseer is that divorce represents a failure in the home²¹.

THE PLACE OF SEXUAL UNION IN MARRIAGE

God created the man and the woman for the purpose of reproduction (Gen. 1:27-28). Therefore, sex within marriage is not a sin. Rather, it is good (Gen. 1:31) and holy (Heb. 13:4). Ed & Gaye Wheat note that:

The sex relationship in marriage receives such emphasis in the scriptures that we begin to see it was meant not only to be a wonderful, continuing experience for the husband and wife, but it also was intended to show us something even more wonderful about God and His relationship with us²².

They state further while counseling unhappy couples with wrong attitudes and faulty approaches to sex:

You have God's permission to enjoy sex within your marriage. He invented sex; he thought it up to begin with. You can learn to enjoy it, and, husbands, you can develop a thrilling, happy marriage with 'the wife of your youth'. If your marriage has been a civil-war battlefield or a dreary wasteland, instead of a lover's trysting place, all that can change. You see, God has a perfect plan for marriage, which we may choose to step into at any time, and the mistakes of the past can be dealt with and left behind²³.

Sex, within marriage serves as a primary means of expressing not only our fundamental sexuality but also the mutual commitment of the marriage partners²⁴. Stanley A. Ellisen further notes that:

Sex is an expression of our existence as sexual beings. The Christian asserts, however, that this act as an expression of human sexuality carried even greater significance. Similar to every action the Christian performs, sex is to be understood within the context of the Christian life as a whole. Like every dimension of life, sexual expression must be placed under the parameters of our fundamental commitment to the lordship of Christ. As a result, the Christian seeks to understand the sex act theologically, that is, in terms of what is being said thereby about the self, the nature of life, and ultimately about God²⁵.

The sexual union must be within the marital bond for it to be meaningful as God designed it to be. However, when the act is engaged in improperly it simply becomes an expression of self-gratification adultery, infidelity, or exploitation²⁶.

The sex act within marital bond is the sacrament of the marriage covenant. It is an outward act which signifies an inward commitment. Sexual intercourse makes every couple to become one flesh and it symbolizes their becoming a unity of persons as Apostle Paul indicates to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:15-16) which is built on Genesis 2:24, sex within marriage context is a reenactment, reaffirmation and symbolic embodiment of the marriage vow. Sex deepens the commitment of partners to each other and to their life together. Stanley Grenz notes that:

In sexual intercourse intimacy is freely given and received. The commitment to give of oneself freely and to receive from the other in freedom is visually and physically enacted through this intimate sexual

relation. As this occurs the sex act points to the various ways in which the partners give to and receive from each other in day-to-day life together. And by this act the partners renew their commitment to the task of giving and receiving freely, which they expressed in their marriage vows²⁷.

The issue of sexuality was discussed by Apostle Paul while writing to the Corinthians who had written, asking him a number of questions which include marriage²⁸. The Apostle spoke strongly in favour of the married state. 1 Corinthians 7 deals with the duty of sexuality within marriage. For Apostle Paul, sex within the marriage context is to be encouraged. The reasons for abstinence from it include mutual consent on the part of both husband and wife; agreement beforehand on a time period at the end of which normal intercourse would be resumed; and refraining for the purpose of devoting themselves to prayer in a concentrated way²⁹. Commenting on the sexual relationship between husband and wife in a monogamous marriage, G.D. Fee illustrates chiastically 1 Corinthians 7:2-4:

- v. 2 Each man should have her own husband A
and
Each woman should have her own husband B
- v. 3 The husband should give his wife her due A
likewise
The wife to her husband B
- v. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does A
likewise
The husband does not have authority over his own body but his wife does B³⁰

MARRIAGE AND SEX IN TRADITIONAL/CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Nigeria is made up of different ethnic groups with each group having its own marriage system. The common systems of marriage in Nigeria include:

- a. **Traditional or customary marriage** – This is marriage entered into according to native laws and customs. It differs from one area to another, thus there are traditional marriage customs for the Igbos, Yorubas,

Hausa, etc. This can be either monogamous, where one man marries one wife or polygamous, where one man marries many wives³¹.

- b. **Marriage under the Ordinance** – This is also called court marriage because it is contracted in the court before a court registrar. It is a monogamous form of marriage which does not allow either of the couples (husband or wife) to enter into a second marriage, unless at the death or official divorce of one³².
- c. **Church marriage** – This is a form of marriage under ordinance and it is contracted in a church. Generally, Christians perform church marriage because it is monogamous³³.
- d. **Moslem or Islamic Marriage** – This is contracted in the ways stipulated by Islam. Moslem men are each allowed to marry more than one wife. It is a polygamous form of marriage³⁴.

Our focus in this section of the paper is to examine marriage in the Yoruba culture with the understanding that it will help us to know and appreciate what obtains in other Nigerian cultures.

Marriage occupies a unique position in the Yoruba society. Both monogamous and polygamous forms of marriage are allowed in the Yoruba culture. A man goes into marriage with his wife or wives so that they can be assistance to one another in every aspect of their lives – family, occupation, religion, etc. Perhaps the most important reason for marriage in the traditional Yoruba society is for procreation. It is commonly said in Yoruba land that “Omo ni iyi, omo ni eye igbeyawo” which literally means, ‘children are the glory and pride’ of marriage’. This explains why some delay in having child(ren) often leads to serious problems which at times lead to divorce.

The traditional Yoruba society frowns at pre-marital sex. It is usually a thing of pride for the bride and members of her family on the night of wedding if she is found to be a virgin. It is a sign of her faithfulness while with her parents. This act earns her and her parents a deep respect and special gifts from the husband. On the other hand, it is shameful for the bride and her parents if it is discovered that she had known a man prior to the wedding night.

Marriage ceremonies are held in the Yoruba society primarily to pray for the happy union of couples as well as to knit the two families together in marriage. It is assumed that after marriage, sexual relations will take place.

Writing on the importance of sexuality among the Africans, J.O. Kayode notes:

Good sexual relations within marriage help to strengthen the union and even when the union has been slightly weakened, the act of sexual relations can help to restore such a union. Apart from ill-health of either of the couple, the monthly period of the woman and breast feeding, sexual starvation from either of the party would constitute a danger for the peace of the union. In such a situation either party may be tempted to look for solace elsewhere. This may eventually lead to adultery³⁵.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that marriage is God's ordained institution for mutual love and companionship of the man and woman. It is noted that the Nigerian traditional society has so much regard for marriage. But then, its emphasis on polygamous form of marriage should be de-emphasized and the monogamous form be fully promoted in the light of the original intention of God's purpose for marriage.

It is also noted that while pre-marital sex is bad and it should be discouraged, sex within the context of marriage is good and biblical. The traditional Yoruba culture has an important lesson for our contemporary generation on sex ethics as rightly noted by J.O. Kayode:

The consequence of disobeying the law of chastity before marriage or observing the same in relation to one's ritual roles or social placement is quite clear to all. Africans possess very high moral codes of sexual conduct which keep them on the right relationship with God and their fellowmen³⁶.

END NOTES

1. Francis Brown; S.R. Driver & Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, Brigg Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with An Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), p. 773.
2. William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of*

- the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 15.
3. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, the Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, Chapter 11-28. Revised Edition (Burlington, Ontario: G.R. Wellch, 1975), p. 196.
 4. Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), p. 277.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
 6. O.J. Baab "Marriage" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 Volumes, Edited by Goerge Arthur Buttrick et al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 3:278-287.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
 9. C.F. Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament In Ten Volumes: Volume 1: The Pentateuch Three Volume in One* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 88-9.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
 13. Ed. Wheat & Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revel Co., 1981), p. 21.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Allen P. Ross "Genesis" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty: Old Testament*, Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1985), p. 31.
 16. Hillel and his followers felt that a man could divorce his wife for almost any reasons but Shammai and his followers thought that one could not divorce his wife unless she was guilty of sexual offence. For detailed, see Notes on Matthew 19:3 in *The New International Version Study Bible*, p. 1469 and William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Matthew Volume 2, Chapter 11-28*, pp. 198-9.
 17. Louis A. Barbieri, "Matthew" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament*, Edited by John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck (Colorado

Springs: Victor Books, 1983), p. 63.

18. For summary, see John R.W. Stott, *The message of Timothy & Titus* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), pp. 92-94.
19. A. Duane Litfin, "1 Timothy: in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament*, p. 736.
20. Stott, *The Message of Timothy & Titus*, p. 175.
21. A. Duane Litfin, "1 Timothy" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 736.
22. Ed Wheat & Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure*, p. 22.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
24. Stanley A. Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarried in the Church*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 62.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
26. For other forms of sexual perversions, see Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, pp. 284-5.
27. Stanley A. Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarried in the Church*, p. 69.
28. Some other issues: Food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1); spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1), etc.
29. David K. Lowery "1 Corinthians" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scripture by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament*, p. 517.
30. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 277.
31. Elizabeth U. Anyakoha, *Home Economics for Junior Secondary Schools* (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers, 1999), p. 323.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. J.O. Kayode, "African Ethnics on Sex" in *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria* Edited by S.O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1986), p. 53.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 58, cf. Oyebamiji Mustapha et al *Eko Ede Yoruba Titun, Iwe Keji* (Ibadan: University Press, 1987); p. 97.