

## Using Sex to Sell Religion

This is not exactly a news flash, but advertisers use sex to sell everything. Even a hint of sex attracts our attention. According to Business News Daily, one study found that 20% of magazine ads use sexual imagery to get our attention. Sexual imagery was most likely used by ads selling health and hygiene (38%), beauty (36%), drugs and medicine (29%), clothing (27%), travel (23%), and entertainment (21%).

Step away from the ads into the movies and shows we watch and, hoo boy, the presence of sexual content sharply increases

You could make a snarky comment about how people today seem to worship sex, and that's quite close to the truth. In fact, sex and worship have been closely connected for thousands of years. It's even in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew Scriptures—what Christians call the Old Testament—are the account of God's creation and His plan for our redemption after sin entered the picture. This plan was fully culminated in the New Testament, specifically through Jesus Christ. Through it all, we see God's special relationship with the Jewish people, His chosen people through whom He worked, revealed Himself, and brought salvation through Christ.

Yet we see in the Old Testament that God's chosen people were regularly wandering away from Him. Here was the all-powerful Creator God who had miraculously worked on behalf of the Jewish people, yet they kept stepping away into idolatry. Why?

Sex.

We see references throughout the Old Testament to Baal and Asherah. In Canaanite mythology, Baal was the god of fertility, and Asherah was the

goddess of fertility. She also happened to be his mother—and his mistress! They believed Baal was responsible for abundant crops, fertile animals, and fertile women.



So here come the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

Their main encounters with Yahweh God was in the wilderness wanderings, and it was easy for many of them to see Yahweh as merely the God of the wilderness. When they moved into Canaan—their promised land—they found a fertile land. They also found a people who attributed all this fertile land to their Canaanite god of fertility, Baal.

So how do you appeal to the god of fertility? If you want him to give you fertile crops and fertile livestock, what do you do? The Canaanites believed they could influence the gods' actions by performing the behavior they wanted the gods to demonstrate. They believed the sexual union of Baal and Asherah produced fertility, so their worshipers did the same. They engaged in immoral sex to cause the gods to do the same. Their places of worship included both male and female prostitutes ... er, priests who would help them “worship.”

In Old Testament history, we see references to the “high places” and Asherah poles. These high places were places of such worship—both ritual prostitution and sacrifices. And the Asherah pole was a phallic symbol that was an object of worship related to those fertility rites.

Such sexual immorality appeals to our fallen human nature, so we can see why the Israelites were continually engaging in idolatry. If sexual immorality could be done in the name of religion, it could be rationalized as worship.

This is why the Old Testament prophets were constantly calling the people back to God—and why the prophets were often threatened. Opposition to God's prophets was often couched in religious/spiritual terms, but underneath those threats was a desire to keep their involvement with immorality. *“Elijah, don't be messin' with my sexual practices ... er, worship.”*

The sexual immorality was bad enough, but the worst part of it was the disloyalty to Yahweh, the One who created and the One who truly controls nature—all of nature. They were called to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5). Such devotion leaves no room for other gods. Yahweh is the one true God—the *only* God—and He deserves our love and gratitude.

Let's be clear. God is not opposed to sex. He created it, and as our Creator, He knows the best way for us to enjoy and benefit from what He has given us. To step outside the marriage relationship He designed for our greatest joy and benefit is to trust ourselves. *“I know what's best for me, and this is what I choose.”* Bad call.

Sex is a powerful influence in our lives, and Satan uses that to our harm. Through the pagan worship of Baal, he used sex to draw people into a false religion. And he continues to do it today. We don't call it Baal worship; we call it “personal happiness” or “personal fulfillment.” With that mindset, we chase after sex, materialism, or whatever we deem will make us happy and fulfilled today.

In so doing, we miss the greatest happiness and sense of fulfillment that comes from living a life in Christ. He knows us best, so let's trust Him.

“For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place” (1 Chron. 16:26-27).

“Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires” (Ps. 37:4).

“You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:16).

### What does this have to do with Easter?

Before Christianity made inroads into places like Germany and England, the people worshipped the goddess of Spring, Her name in Old English was Eastre (Easter). Spring is the time when fertility seems to be in full swing and vegetation starts blooming and producing. The worship of Easter, the goddess of Spring, focused on the fertility she provided.

What about Easter eggs and the Easter bunny? Eggs symbolize fertility and life. And what's more fertile than a rabbit?

Thankfully, for most people, these ancient beliefs have been replaced with a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.