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The Wages of Sin - Sex and Disease, Past and Present

THE BOOK

Author	Peter Lewis Allen
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Email Dr. Jain by clicking here

EXCELLENT STUFF

The Wages of Sin - Sex and Disease, Past and Present *by* Peter Lewis Allen. Softcover, 6" x 9". The University of Chicago Press, 1427 East 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637 U.S.A. General ; Marketing/ Editorial ; Marketing & Sales: (773) 702-7748; Email: marketing@press.uchicago.edu Publication Date 26 August, 2002. xxiv+202 pages, 14 halftones, ISBN 0-226-01461-4. Price $17.00, £12.00

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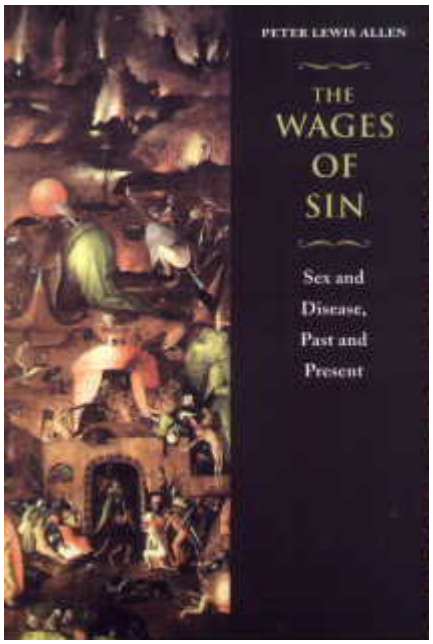
Read an excerpt from Chapter 3 by clicking here.



I had the privilege to read this comprehensive treatise "The Wages of Sin" by Peter Lewis Allen. The beautiful illustration by Hieronymus Bosch titled "Hell" adorns the cover of this book, apropos to the context. The author has boldly ventured into the controversial sea of sex, religion and disease, presenting it through this exhaustively researched 202 page paperback, complete with an extensive index and bibliography.

When I started reading this book I did not know what to expect; what I learned in the end has changed my thinking forever. The intensely personal experience given by the author makes you think about the symbolism of sex with sin and the antediluvian ideology still reminiscent in our society. As the pages turn, the author takes us through a journey into the past, to the origin of our thinking and traces the roots of the sexual taboo. The addition of original photos taken from prominent works of art, history and literature add to the experience.

All this history is lucidly linked with the modern epidemic of AIDS, and the ethical consideration that associated with this disease. The situation makes me wonder that our myths of sex and disease still afflict our society in the same as it did millennia ago. This book is an eye opener.

Chapter 2 of this book deals with the history of leprosy. All chapters are well-illustrated - often with material taken from classic sources. This figure from page 27 (chapter 2) showing a leper with a bell comes from *Wellcome Trust Medical Photographic Library, London.*



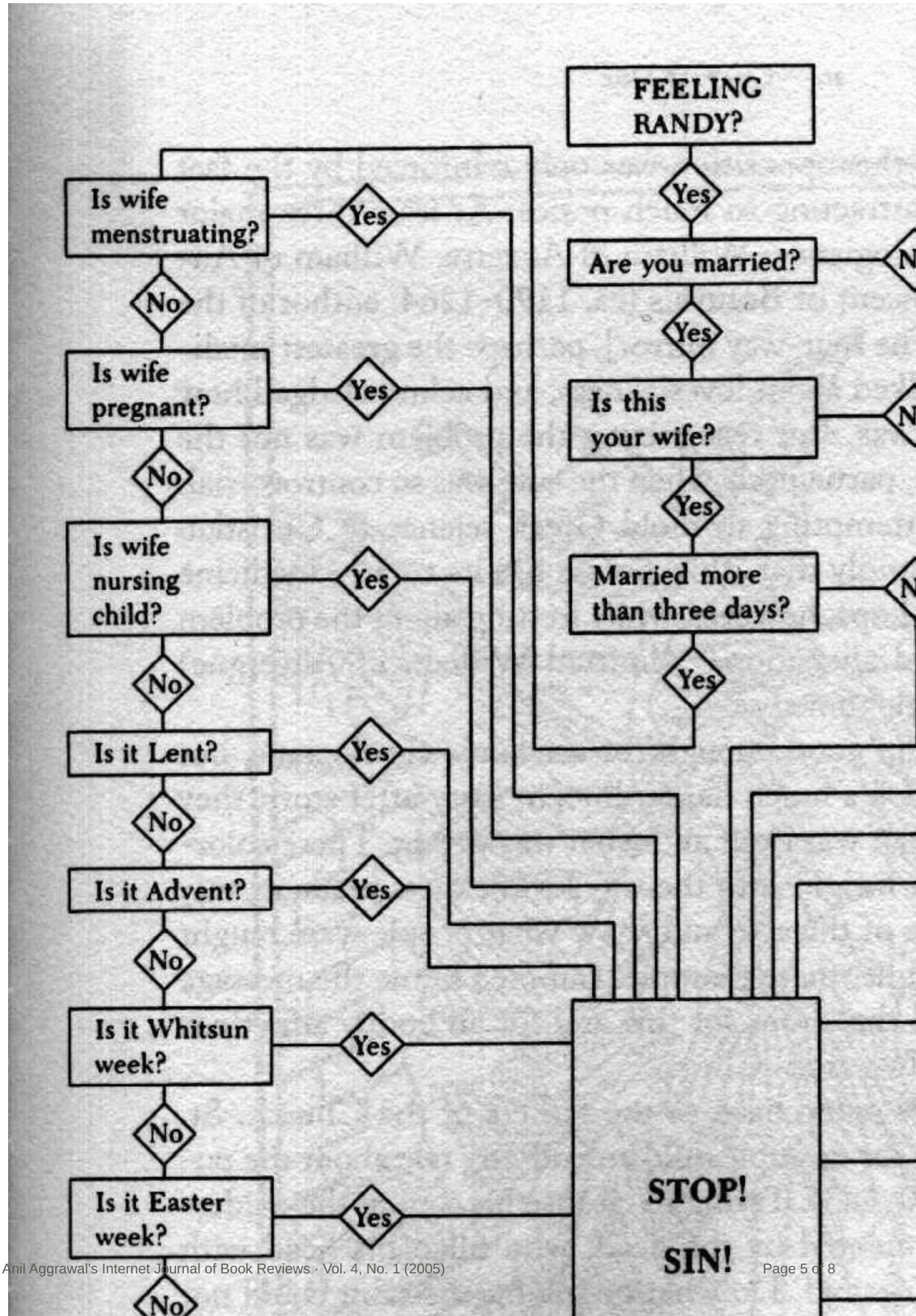
The Introduction is an account of the author's personal experience, the anguish and pain of losing close friends. His brush with AIDS as it spread and ravaged all across the globe. This led Peter Allen to set out and excavate information from old texts and manuscripts to legitimize the behavior of society towards AIDS patients, treating them as outcasts. Surprisingly so, his findings reflect similar patterns exist throughout history. He takes us to the past and presents facts to unveil the truth of human nature. Peter has dedicated entire chapters to eras and the scourge of that age, starting our expedition from the lovesickness that afflicted the middle ages to leprosy in the middle ages to syphilis and plague and finally to the great epidemic of modern times AIDS. A whole chapter has also been dedicated to the myths about masturbation and other sexual fetishes and how these were viewed by the medical fraternity which culminated in pretentious morals of our hollow society.

As we enter the medieval age, lovesickness takes the forefront. Lovesickness affected the mental faculties of those who abstained for long time, or those who had a lost love. The treatment offered was simple enough; abstinence causes the disease so sexual fulfillment should cure it. It did not matter who the woman was. This had very dark bearings for the church which was already caught in a war with the pagans, trying to demonize the pagan goddesses for they preached openly about sex. They had to find a fitting answer to explain this disease whose cause itself was abstinence. The religion had nothing much to say because sex wreaking havoc through this disease. They responded with other treatments, ranging from herbal remedies to outright cruel practices involving beating and psychological abuse to castration. Physical pain had to be a part of the regime, the more the better. Peter Allen has given an excellent array of quotations and excerpts from the books of prominent scholars of that age in support. He ventures out to include the theories put forward by the Islamic, Persian and Roman scholars who were more abreast with medical knowledge at that time. The thinking of the age is surmised in a flowchart of sexual decision making put forward after compilation of the rules laid down by the church; this clearly

demonstrates the taboo associated with coitus and sexual fulfillment. The accounts are truly shocking and the author ingeniously analogizes them to the present times.

The middle ages brought with them the age old adversary, leprosy, the disease that disfigured and brought death ever so slowly that the victim had to endure a lifetime of suffering. Soon its origins were linked to sexual contact and all the affected became sinners who had been punished for their sins by god. Ironically, the church preaching almost made god sound unforgiving, these were sad times. The lepers were thrown out of towns so live in isolation. Places which allowed lepers on their streets made them wear a clapper so that everyone would know about his condition. They became in Peter's words the "living dead".

Masturbation and even sexual intercourse with wife was considered a sin in mediaeval times. If one did not f
a number of diseases! This flow chart (appearing on page 19 of this book) appears to guide people when they
was almost impossible if one followed the advice [click to enlarge.]


FEELING RANDY?
Yes
Are you married?
Yes
Is this your wife?
Yes
Married more than three days?
Yes
Is wife menstruating?
Yes
No
Is wife pregnant?
Yes
No
Is wife nursing child?
Yes
No
Is it Lent?
Yes
No
Is it Advent?
Yes
No
Is it Whitsun week?
Yes
No
Is it Easter week?
Yes
No
STOP!
SIN!

The author meticulously describes the condition of the lepers, the brutality with which they were treated and the apathy of the church which decreed these lepers as sinners. He clearly links all the pieces of the puzzle, namely the religious, medical, social and economical bearing of the disease. Once again reminding us of the present situation, how similar it is to our tryst with AIDS. This is one of my favorite chapters; I read it again and imagined the condition of these poor beings, full credit to Peter Lewis Allen for writing so lucidly.

As we progress to early modern age, the focus is on Europe, it was the time of Syphilis. Syphilis brought with it a paradigm shift, the era of male domination had reached its zenith, it was the time for women to suffer. Women were blamed for the wounds which reeked with green, foul pus. The prostitutes in many cities were rounded up and thrown out; many towns took the punishment a step further and burned them alive. Both the sexes suffered but women much more. The church openly announced the suffering to be just, it was penitence for the sin of the flesh. As is clearly visible in this picture "The arrows of syphilis", in which Jesus himself is throwing arrows at mortal sinners.

The treatments offered were even more painful and gruesome, and the author goes in great to describe them. The knowledge offered is comprehensive and extremely well substantiated with pictures, quotes and excerpts from the books and journals of that time. The author talks in great detail about the techniques of cauterization, mercury vapor treatment etc. What clearly screams at us is the same panic that AIDS caused in the early 1970's. The chapter is extremely well written, it subtly points to the concept of male domination in that age and the growing influence of the church against carnal pleasures, which were considered the worst kind of sin.

What was to come has been labeled apropos by the author "A Broom in the hands of the Almighty: Bubonic Plague." The great plague ravaged throughout the globe claiming millions of lives. It was a time of utter panic, no one knew the answers, the situation was grim. Church proclaimed plague to be the wrath of god who was angry because of our heinous sins. The description of London sums it up "grass grew in the streets of cities" another chronicle by Vincent "plague over the walls of the city like waters of a flood. Higher and higher rose the piles of the dead: 725 one week, 1089 the next, then 1843, then 2010." As quoted in the book. The evidence is mind boggling and the results are equally shocking. Peter brings this grim time to reality with his erudition and compelling evidence. One has to read to fully understand the extent of the devastation.

The arrow of syphilis. Woodcut from Joseph Grünpeck, *Treatise on the Pestilential Pox or French Disease* (Augsburg, 1496)



"The heinous sin of self pollution: Medicine, Morals and Masturbation." One of the most interesting chapters of the book. It deals with the myths associated with sexual fetishes of masturbation, homosexuality and the lot. Interestingly, even in the 20th century the act of masturbation was considered an immoral act. The author describes at length, the ethical issues associated with masturbation and the extent to which the doctors went to cure this "disease". The common practices of cauterization, clitoridectomy and even castration have been fervently described as they were the usual means of treatment. The author also describes the various trusses and devices which were used to prevent "dark thoughts of the flesh" from entering our minds. These devices are clearly depicted in a picture as well to make the reader fully understand. Peter Allen has gone to great depths to bring forth the moral standards of our society; and how they have changed to the present times.

We have traveled the full circle, and back to the current scenario, AIDS. While reading the book, each chapter brought an emotion of disbelief with regards to the human nature, under pressure we tend to increase the pain and suffering of the diseased; AIDS is no exception. In the early times it was considered to be a divine intervention against homosexuals, to put and end to these sinners. As Peter painfully points out, even our educated society with all of the medical fraternity proved no different than their predecessors. Oppression of the homosexuals is well documented. The author points out the blatant truth of negligence by the government, the blind-eye with which it responded to AIDS. After reading this chapter I almost wanted to question our civility.

The Epilogue, as profound as the book itself. I will not dwell to critique it, they are the best six pages of the book. In conclusion this is not merely a book but an eye opener for all of us. As a medical graduate it offered me with introspect, how I think about patients and how to treat them, with more humility and compassion because we all are reeling under our "Wages of sin".



-Pranav Jain

Dr. Pranav Jain is currently an intern practicing at one of the most reputed hospitals in New Delhi - the Lok Nayak Hospital. He has completed his graduation in medicine and surgery from the prestigious Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi. Dr. Jain likes spending most of his time with his PC. Reading and writing are his main hobbies. His special area of interests include research in leprosy and sexually transmitted diseases. He can be contacted at conky_doc@hotmail.com.

View this book on Amazon

-Editor-in-Chief