
Richard Davidson has taken on the challenge of “examining every passage in the HB dealing with human sexuality, in an attempt to lay bare the basic contours of a theology of human sexuality in the final (canonical) form of the OT, building on previous research and engaging in original exegesis where necessary” (2). The volume that results is, not surprisingly, enormous. To his credit, Davidson states many of his assumptions up front. He adopts “synchronic” approaches to literary analysis and biblical theology, eschews “the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion and resistance” in favor of “the hermeneutic of consent” (3), and seeks “a theology (not theologies) of sexuality” in “the final canonical form” of the (Protestant) Old Testament, taken as a whole (5, his emphases). Davidson utilizes insights from many scholars, and frequently acknowledges opposing views. However, he underscores his own “evangelical tradition” (7) while allowing that his study is not “the final or exclusive word on sexual theology in the OT” (5). With that last assessment, readers who do not share Davidson’s presuppositions are likely to agree.

Davidson’s study is divided into three sections. The first section, “Sexuality in Eden: The Divine Design (Genesis 1-3),” is the shortest but possibly most important for understanding Davidson’s overall approach. In keeping with his emphasis on final canonical form, Davidson argues that “Genesis 1-3 provides the interpretive foundation for the rest of scripture” (15). Davidson assumes significant unity of perspective throughout the OT; and since in his view the opening of Genesis is foundational, other ambiguous passages from across the OT are read in the light of basic assumptions about sexuality—“God’s design”—that Davidson elucidates here. In effect, Davidson’s “theology of sexuality” is laid out for readers already in his first section.

What are the main points of that theology? Humans were created for heterosexual, monogamous marriages that are sexually exclusive, permanent, and intimate. The partners in these marriages are differentiated but equal. Procreation is a “blessing,” but does not exhaust the purposes of sexual differentiation and union, which are good in themselves. Although God in Genesis 3:16 decrees some sort of subordination of woman to man, this subordination results from sin and helps to maintain marital harmony after the fall. Gradually, divine grace will lead humans back toward a pre-fall egalitarianism.

The second section of Davidson’s book, by far the longest, examines “Sexuality outside the Garden: Old Testament Development (Torah, Prophets, Writings).” Here Davidson discusses numerous biblical passages in order to show how “divine Edenic norms” have been “distorted—always with disastrous consequences” (83). Thus one finds analyses of biblical references, or possible references, to homosexuality, bestiality, polygamy, concubinage, the denigration and abuse of women, prostitution, mixed marriages, masturbation, adultery, premarital sex, divorce, incest, problems associated with childlessness (e.g., the levirate), rape, and seduction. Throughout this section, Davidson argues that deviation from the ideals of creation is represented negative-
ly across the OT. In some cases, a negative verdict is made clear by prohibition (e.g., homosexuality, bestiality, etc.). However, in cases where explicit prohibition does not occur, Davidson argues that narrative development makes problematic consequences apparent. Thus, male characters may take multiple wives or concubines; but, on Davidson’s reading, the narrative inevitably demonstrates a preference for monogamy by showing the problems that result from other arrangements.

Although Davidson is most interested in the OT, this section of his book also considers numerous texts from the ancient Near East. However, Davidson deploys extra-biblical evidence most often as contrast to the OT. Where sexuality is concerned, the OT is said to stand in a relationship of discontinuity rather than continuity with its environment. Davidson appeals frequently, here, to notions of “cultic sexuality” in “pagan fertility cults,” which Davidson opposes to biblical “creation ordinance.” “Cultic sexuality” entails both representations of divine sexual activity, and forms of ritualized sexual activity among humans, all of which are opposed by the OT.

Davidson’s third section, “Return to Eden,” follows the lead of Phyllis Trible and others in reading the Song of Songs as a kind of restoration of creation ideals for sexuality. The Song, understood as a literary unity, reaffirms the principles laid out in the first section of Davidson’s book. Thus Davidson, like Trible, finds in the Song an affirmation of “equality of the sexes without hierarchy” (569-78). Unlike Trible, however, or most other scholars, Davidson insists that the Song of Songs promotes “a monogamous marital form” (561-69). Solomon himself wrote the book early in his reign, Davidson argues, when he was married only to the daughter of Pharaoh. “The pivotal, central section of the Song,” identified as 4:16-5:1, is considered a “description of the wedding ceremony of Solomon and his virgin bride,” whose “sexual intercourse makes the dramatic statement that sexual union is reserved and preserved for husband and wife after marriage” (594). Against any suggestion that God is absent from the Song of Songs, Davidson not only emphasizes the possible reference to Yhwh in 8:6 (from which Davidson’s title, “Flame of Yahweh,” is taken); he also proposes that, in 5:1, it is God who speaks the words, “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.” The connection between God and the Song of Songs is close indeed: “By beholding the love relationship within the Song and within contemporary godly marriages, one may catch a glimpse of the divine holy love” (631).

An “Afterword” discusses “Some Implications for a New Testament Theology of Sexuality” (633-58). The reader who has gotten this far is not surprised to learn that the New Testament upholds much of the Old Testament message discussed throughout the book. A helpful, comprehensive bibliography and several indices close the volume.

So far as methodologies of literary analysis are concerned, Davidson’s style of close reading and his emphasis on unified meaning share much with formalism. The specific interpretations he proposes, however, are actually useful case studies for a point made more often from other directions in literary criticism: that the meanings readers find “in texts” have much to do with the assumptions and strategies brought to those texts by readers. Assuming one set of norms for sexuality, Davidson finds them everywhere.