

Review of

*Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*

by Richard M. Davidson (Hendrickson, 2007) 844pp

As Davidson says, sexuality is a relatively new subject in Biblical Studies and virtually unexplored when he started his work in the early 80's. This massive work (800 pages plus indexes) is a remarkable synthesis of original work and interaction with recent scholars. It successfully amalgamates technical discussions of vocabulary, historical considerations of ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature and culture, with a pastorally practical concern for the theological implications of the text of the Hebrew Bible (HB). The work is structured partly on the text but mostly by subject matter, so that practical theology is seen as the aim throughout. Careful and well marked subdivisions makes it easy to follow, and to find sections dealing with specific issues.

He jumps straight into controversy (in chapter 1) by dealing with the creation accounts in terms of the subordination of women and the innocence of sexuality. He regards the creation of Eve as emphasising her equality throughout. For example he points out that 'helper' is often used elsewhere of God as the 'helper of Israel', and it is nowhere else used for a subordinate. He also warns against concluding anything from the order of man and then woman in the creation account because the equivalent *Atrahasis Epic* from Mesopotamian (a very patriarchal society) used the reverse order throughout. Adam's affirmation "she is bone of my bone..." is addressed to God as an affirmation of unity and equality. However, he also recognises that the account assigns distinct roles to male and female so he concludes it portrays a theology of "egalitarian complementarity" (p.38).

The curses after the Fall in Genesis 3.16 are dealt with (in chapter 2) in a similarly even-handed way. He rejects any interpretation which regards subordination of women as a creation ideal, but also rejects the view that subordination is merely a consequence of sin, because this does not take seriously the language of divine judgement ("I will..."). However, he points out that "he will rule over you" is in parallel with "you will desire him", so that the subordination should be voluntary, and the word for "rule" is different to that used in 1.26, 28 about ruling over the animals. He concludes that "it is entirely appropriate for marriage partners to seek to return as much as possible to total egalitarianism" (p.77), just as (though he doesn't make this point) we use analgesics and weed killer to overcome the other consequences of the fall.

His survey of the whole HB (in chapter 6) confirms this by showing that individual women had important roles and the law and prophets regarded the man's leadership as protective. Although various laws appear to denigrate women, he argues that they actually protected them; for example Numbers 5 effectively gives a suspected adulteress an appeal to the highest court. The language used regarding the woman who touched male genitals during a fight (Deut.25.11f) probably indicates that her pubic hair was cut off, and not her hand (p.476f). Another intriguing observation is that Psalm 68.11 appears to refer to a female company of preachers (p.283)!

Human sexuality, as portrayed in the creation account, implies innocent enjoyment. The phrase "naked but not ashamed" (2.25) indicates that they experienced more than mere lack of clothes which contrasts with their post-Fall nakedness before God (3.7,

using a different word which usually implies shame). The concept of “one flesh” implies a sexual unification separate from any connotation of childbearing, and linked with the “clinging” it implies a permanence in the relationship. It is therefore wrong to interpret the “knowledge of good and evil” as a sexual awakening.

Contrasts with ANE cultures (in chapter 3) highlight the nature of God and his gift of sexuality. The HB portrays fertility as a gift to the creation and to humans, whereas the gods of surrounding cultures demanded cultic prostitution or priestly reenactments of divine sexual acts in order to maintain this fertility. Mesopotamian and Canaanite religions in particular demanded that the general population take part in cultic prostitution. This backcloth illuminates the defeat of Baal by a drought (which a fertility and storm god should have prevented), the sin of the Golden Calf and of Baal Pe’or, and shows that it was no exaggeration for the prophets to repeat charges like that of Amos: “father and son go in to the same girl... and lay themselves down beside every altar” (Amos 2.7f). The God of Israel, in contrast to surrounding cultures, is never portrayed as having a consort, or even as having genitals. He is variously described as a husband of Israel, a Father, and also as a mother (which is surprisingly frequent), but there appears to be a conscious rejection of sexual imagery for God, probably to create a distance from the surrounding sexual cults. This may also be the reason Israel had a male-only priesthood.

Some laws appear to denigrate sexuality by distancing the cult from any aspect of it. Negative aspects of sexuality (in chapter 7) include prostitution (which is condemned but remained a reality in Israel – Lev.21.7; Gen.38; Deut.23.19; Prov.29.3 etc.), adultery, mixed marriages, and a refusal of access to the altar by anyone with sexual injuries, menstrual flow, or even following normal sexual intercourse. Even soldiers in holy wars had to remain ‘pure’ from their wives. Davidson struggles to suggest that this is merely to “signify a clear separation between sex and cult” (p.329). Protection of the cult is also the reason for forbidding mixed marriages because the notable exceptions (e.g. wives of Abraham and Moses) show that it was permissible to marry women who worshipped Yahweh (as Ruth affirms). Masturbation is included in this chapter as a non-entity. He finds that it is condemned neither in ANE laws nor in the HB (2Sam.3.29 refers to effeminates or cripples; Gen.21.9 implies nothing more than playful mocking; and Gen.38.9 is *coitus interruptus* to avoid levirate responsibilities) though he notes that the seventh commandments forbids sexual fantasies about individuals.

Homosexuality and bestiality (in chapter 4) is also contrasted with surrounding cultures which are shown to punish only homosexual rape or bestiality with small animals. Tales about various gods involve homosexual or bestial activity without any negative connotations and a few named rulers were described or depicted in homosexual partnerships. However, there was an implied inequality because males who are penetrated lose status, and male cultic prostitutes have a very low status as a result (cf. Job.36.13f). In contrast, the Hebrew law codes punish equally both partners in a homosexual or bestial relationships (with death), and even punishes cross-dressing (as performed by male cult prostitutes). In response to those who argue that these laws restricted only cultic activity, Davidson argues that the label “abomination” indicates a general moral condemnation, and the fact that these are among the few laws which apply also to resident foreigners implies a wider condemnation. Similarly, the suggestion that the sin of Sodom was lack of hospitality or that this and Judges 19

condemns rape rather than consensual homosexual activity is rejected – “to know” in Genesis 19.5 must have a sexual connotation because it clearly does in verse 8, and although their intentions were undoubtedly violent, it is not this aspect which set these incidents apart. The language used of David and Jonathan is terminologically identical to that describing the love of Jacob for his son Benjamin (1Sam.18.1; Gen.44.30) so it should not be interpreted as indicating a homosexual relationship.

Regarding polygamy (chapter 5) he makes an unusual claim that the HB consistently teaches monogamy. He interprets “sister” in Leviticus 18:18 as “any other Israelite woman”, and in the light of this interprets “multiply wives” (Deut.17:17) as no more than one at a time – in the same way that both texts were interpreted at Qumran. He notes that all examples of polygamy include some note of disapproval (sometimes subtle) and he finds ways around occasional apparent approval (e.g. 2Chr.24.1-3 where he reads “and” as “but”). The laws which appear to allow polygamy (Ex.21.10f; Dt.21.15) do not commend it, and laws which appear to necessitate occasional polygamy (Ex.22.15f; Dt.22.28f; 25.5-10) do not necessarily do so. For example, the levirate is “living with his brothers” (Deut.25.5) which indicates he is not yet married (p.468f). Most other scholars argue that, in the light of ANE laws allowing polygamy (which Davidson lists), the HB disapproved of polygamy while permitting it.

When dealing with punishment for extra-marital relations (in chapter 8), Davidson allows his theology to somewhat overpower his conclusions from the text. He points out the contrast with ANE laws, where the death penalty for adultery can be commuted by the husband for either partner, and Hebrew law where adultery is regarded as a crime against God and is therefore always punishable by death. But then in the section on grace (with which he ends many of his studies) he says that God allows forgiveness for adultery, as exemplified by David, Hosea and God himself in relation to Israel, and he argues (weakly) that the law of adultery never includes prohibitions of clemency as found in some other laws (e.g. Deut.7.16; 13.8; 19.11).

He attempts to show (in chapter 9) that the HB nowhere legislates for divorce and merely tolerates it. The ideal of lifelong marriage, as found in Eden and confirmed by “I hate divorce” (Mal.2.16, or “he hates, says the Lord” – he discusses the translation at length). He dismisses all divorces in various ways: Samson’s (Jud.15.2) does not indicate God’s will; David’s (implied in 1Sam.25.44) was forced on him and not recognised by him; the returning exiles mixed marriages (Ezra 9-10; Neh.9.2; 13.3, 30) were not valid marriages; Hagar’s marriage (Gen.21.10) was not recognised by God; and God’s divorce from Israel (Jer.3.8) was theological and therefore not normative. Eight previous views for the meaning of Deuteronomy 24.1-4 are dismissed before he argues (persuasively) that the unusual *hotpaal* form of “defile” in v.3 should be translated as “she has been caused to defile herself”. From this he argues (less persuasively) that this indicates her husband should not have divorced her, and that he is being implicitly punished by not being able to remarry her. He says the fault for which she was divorced appears to be sexual but it must have fallen short of adultery because else she would be executed (even though he said at the end of chapter 8 that death could be commuted). He rejects Jewish divorces for neglect (based on Exod. 21.7-11) by translating “he betrothed her *to himself* [Heb. *lo*]” (v.8) as “he does *not* [Heb. *lo*] betroth her”. This means that the neglected wife was never actually married and therefore cannot be divorcing her neglectful husband. Despite all

this, he concludes that women as well as men were able to divorce in ancient Israel, because this right is found in some ANE laws and the HB does not specifically forbid it, and also that, by God's grace, they were allowed to remarry (p.423).

Incest (chapter 10) is prohibited in ANE and the HB condemns it at length, perhaps because the gods and royalty in surrounding nations practiced it. In contrast (chapter 11) abortion is unmentioned in the HB and birth outside wedlock is rarely mentioned (the only legislation is Deut.23.3), unlike childlessness which is frequently referred to. Extra-marital childbirth is condemned by implication and by all ANE laws, and abortion was punished by fines in the earlier ANE law codes and by death in the later Middle Assyrian Laws (c. 1400 BCE). The corresponding law in Exodus 21.22-25 fines someone who causes the foetus to "come out" but this terminology refers to premature birth rather than miscarriage, so "any harm which follows" (which is punished by life for life) must refer to injury to the child or mother. By this means he argues that killing a foetus is equivalent to murder in the HB. This implies that abortion was also condemned, though we have no evidence that this was practiced in Canaan or in the world of the HB, though contraceptive devices and chemicals were used in Egypt.

The opposite problem of childlessness, is suffered by all the matriarchs of the nation (Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachael, Leah) as well as others (Hannah, the Shunemite and wife of Manoah), and all are healed by God. This emphasis may reflect a rejection of the fertility cults of surrounding religions. Childlessness is also countered by adoption, as carried out by Mordicai (Esth.2.7, 15) and God (Ezk.16.1-7 -ANE law allowed irrevocable adoption when the parents did not even clean the newborn; Ps.2.7; Exod.4.22 – reflecting adoption formulae such as "you are / he is my son"). Levirate marriage (from Latin 'brother-in-law') enabled a childless widow to continue a family name and her first son would inherit for dead husband. Onan's deception enabled him to keep his dead brother's firstborn inheritance (Gen.38.9f). This caused Tamar to deceive her father-in-law to effectively act as levir, as allowed in Hittite law which had a wider range of possible levirs.

Rape (in chapter 12) is also dealt with in detail in Hebrew as well as ANE legislation which employed similar distinctions between those victims who could have cried out and those who could not. A couple of rapes are investigated in detail – the rape of Dinah (which some have unconvincingly regarded as consensual) and the rape of Bathsheba (where Davidson makes a convincing case that the initial contact was a 'power' rape). He uses these instances to demonstrate a contrast in the HB between its portrayal of the wholesomeness of sexuality while at the same time recognising its ugly face.

The book ends with two chapters (13-14) on the Song of Songs, which Davidson labels as a 'return to Eden' in its playful and almost innocent portrayal of explicitly erotic love which it calls "the flame of Yahweh" (8.6). The allegorical interpretation dominated from Akiba to Wesley who said it "could not with decency be used or meant concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter", so the lovers became Christ and the Church, and her breasts were the Old and New Testaments or the two greatest commandments. The so-called literal interpretation is, however, equally difficult to pin down, and Davidson makes no attempt to judge between the many versions of the story found in this book, except as a very basic outline. He presents historical and

linguistic evidence for the traditional view that it was written by Solomon for his first bride, Pharaoh's daughter, with whom he lived monogamously for some years. He sees a clear progression from courtship to marriage, especially in the sexual imagery, such as the pre-marriage description of the bride from head down to breasts (4.1-6, with the note that she is a virgin in v.12) contrasting with the post-marriage description which moves from foot up to her head and lingers in her groin (7.1-9). The implied restraint is emphasised by the threefold "do not stir up love until it is ready" (2.7; 3.5; 8.4) and the growing relationship is seen in the threefold "my beloved" sayings (2.16; 6.3; 7.10). The language throughout is euphemistic and playful, erotic but not explicit (his list of euphemisms in p.610-14 are eye-opening! – cf. also his analysis of Ps.45 as a marriage song at p.506f). This contrasts with the explicit and pornographic language of ANE cult poetry, whereas Solomon's song shows sexuality to be part of the goodness of God.

A postscript traces some trajectories into the New Testament, and the HB focus of this book perhaps excuses his neglect of pertinent Jewish and GraecoRoman background. Homosexuality is condemned with Old Testament language (the word *arsenokoitai*, 'man lying', 1Cor.6.9 & 1Tim.1.10, is based on the LXX, though it is not an LXX word as he claims). Similarly he reads Jesus' divorce exception for *porneia* as a narrow reference to Old Testament sexual sins which resulted in the death penalty, which Matthew added because the death penalty had been abolished after Jesus' ministry, and he makes no attempt to interact with contrary views. His section on submission or equality of women is, however, detailed and well argued. As in his opening chapters, he steers a middle road: Christian wives and slaves voluntarily submitted to the head of the house, though couples are encouraged to aim for the Christian 'Magna Carta' of Galatians 3.18.

This is a magnificent survey of a relatively new subject area in Biblical Studies. Davidson has succeeded in summarising and fairly representing a full range of other scholarship, as well as presenting a cohesive theology which encompasses the whole Hebrew Bible. The cursory appendix on the New Testament spoils this a little, but it should be regarded as closing remarks to an audience which is primarily Christian.

He is occasionally implausible, especially in his insistence that the HB legislation does not encompass polygamy, and he is occasionally contradictory, such as when he emphasises a compulsory death penalty for adultery and finds no HB grounds for divorce, and yet concludes that adulterers were forgiven and divorcees could remarry. This is inevitable, perhaps, in a work which attempts to find theological uniformity in a body of documents as chronologically and culturally diverse as the Hebrew Bible.