

**REVIEW ARTICLE, II: RICHARD M. DAVIDSON'S *FLAME*
OF YAHWEH: A THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

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Davidson, Richard M. *Flame of Yahweh: A Theology of Sexuality in the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007. 850 pp. Paper, \$29.95.

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Why this book? The author remarks that there has been much written about specific aspects of sexuality of the OT and that the OT is replete with sexuality, yet no one had written a comprehensive and “wholistic” theology of sexuality in the OT. He explains that he uses the word “wholistic” instead of “holistic” in order to avoid New Age connotations of the latter word (I note, however, that in his 1988 essays on sexuality in the OT he used the term “holistic”).

Davidson explains that three leading theologians, namely, Phyllis Tribble, Samuel Terrien, and David M. Carr (1)—have contributed work of some depth and breadth on the issue of sexuality in the OT, but their work did not tackle the whole of the OT. Others, such as Sakae Kubo (1), deal more with sexual ethics and do not provide an in-depth, exegetical examination of OT passages.

Davidson's work is comprehensive, yielding 140 pages of bibliography. The scope of his book is to examine every passage that deals with sexuality in the OT in order to uncover an OT theology of sexuality. He leaves no scholarly stone unturned, accomplishing his task against the background of a continual comparison and contrast between the law codes of the ancient Near East and those of Israel. These ANE texts serve to bring the OT theology of sexuality into sharper focus.

The work is based on the final canonical form of the OT. The author uses previous research, as well as original exegesis as necessary. Although Davidson does not employ a feminist hermeneutic, he continually engages and dialogues with feminist scholars. He presents the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of views before advancing his own argument. The author starts off by saying that he is not presenting *the* definitive theology of sexuality in the OT, but rather *a* theology of sexuality in the OT.

The techniques used are the new literary criticism and new biblical theology. One of the central premises of the work is that the Edenic pattern of sexuality, as depicted in the Creation narrative, is foundational for the rest of the OT perspective on this topic.

The book has three main sections and an afterword that examines ten facets of sexuality. These ten facets are, in a sense, a repeated summary of the book. They constitute, in list form, the theology of sexuality of the OT that the author has uncovered in his study of Gen 1–2, further reinforced

by a detailed survey of the rest of the OT canon. It is thus useful that the contents of this summary be presented here, as it will give an idea of the main tenets of the work. The following constitutes representative renderings of the summary:

1. Sexual distinctions are a creation by God and are not part of the divine realm. Creation does not occur by divine procreation, but by creation. God is beyond the polarity of sexuality. This is in contrast to the ANE myths, where creation was often celebrated as resulting from the union of male and female deities.

2. Heterosexuality is the Edenic marital model. The bipolarity of the sexes was created by God, and heterosexuality is the divine paradigm for humanity right from the beginning.

3. Monogamy is the marital paradigm for humans right from Creation.

4. Egalitarian marital relationship, without hierarchy, is the original marital pattern. Woman and man are fully equal. Both are commanded to take dominion over the rest of God's creation. It is also noted how the ANE creation accounts contain no separate narration of the creation of woman, whereas the Genesis creation narratives give a lengthy, separate account of the creation of woman in Gen 2, placing a high valuation on woman, making woman on an equal par with man.

5. Wholistic "humankind" is only possible when it comprises both the man and the woman. The man and the woman together make "human." Also, both are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:26 and 2:7 present a wholistic view of humans. A human does not have a soul; he or she is a soul. There is no dichotomy of body and soul. There is no "evil" body and "good" soul. Sexuality, therefore, is pure and from God and not something shameful.

6. Exclusivity in sexuality, with absolute freedom from outside interferences, is God's plan. The man leaves his parents and joins with his wife. Together they form a new and exclusive unit.

7. Permanence in sexuality is the ideal. The original intent is that the marriage covenant should be a permanent relationship, except, for example, in cases of infidelity.

8. Intimacy in sexuality means that the two shall cleave together.

9. Procreation in sexuality is an added blessing and not the primary intention of sexuality. It can, to a limited extent, imitate the creative work of God.

10. Wholesome, holy beauty of sexuality means that sexuality is not something shameful.

As a review is limited in scope, I have selected one facet—that of monogamy, which I will look at in each of the three sections and in the afterword.

Section 1 presents the divine design for sexuality as depicted in Gen 1–3. The ten facets already mentioned constitute that design, including the facet of monogamy. One attraction of this book is the way Davidson writes on some topics succinctly and economically in cases where there is obviously no need to say more. For example, on monogamy, in the first section, he uses just one paragraph of 17 lines to say what he has discovered. He states how the grammar in Gen 2:24 clearly speaks of "a man . . . and . . . his wife" in the singular (21).

Section 2 traces the development of the theology of human sexuality “outside the garden”—i.e., after the Fall. Here, the human distortions of human sexuality vis-à-vis God’s Edenic ideal are examined through the pentateuchal narratives, the legal material and the Prophets and Writings, excluding the Song of Solomon, as the latter is dealt with in section 3.

In chapter 5, Davidson contrasts monogamy with polygamy and concubinage. He looks at the examples of plural marriages in the OT, such as those of Lamech, who was the first recorded bigamist in Scripture, the antediluvians, and Abraham. He then examines the pentateuchal legislation and the Prophets and Writings.

In his summary of the chapter, he explains that “although the OT shows the departure from the Edenic model of sexuality in actual practice, this departure is not approved by God, with both narrative and legislation condemning practices that violate the monogamous Edenic norm” (211). Davidson explains how the “narrative theology” of the post-Fall period reinforces the Edenic ideal for human sexuality established by God.

Section 3 looks at the Song of Solomon in depth. Here, Davidson looks back to a quote by Rabbi Akiba (ca. 90 C.E.), who, at the council of Yavneh, said: “[T]he Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies,” thereby reconfirming a lofty conception of sexuality (545; editorial note: Akiba may, however, have meant the allegorical sense!).

Davidson explains how, for fifteen centuries, Christian allegorists, starting with Origen of Alexandria (d. 254 C.E.), had wrongly denied the sexual aspect of this book and not accepted its plain and literal sense (551).

The Song of Songs is described by Davidson as the “Holy of Holies of human sexuality” (629) and as the book that points back to the Edenic ideal of sexuality. This ideal includes the facet of monogamy. Davidson first identifies the two main protagonists of Song of Songs as being Solomon and his first wife—Pharaoh’s daughter. Davidson demonstrates by a bit of basic mathematics how this wife was Solomon’s only wife for at least twenty years, as it took seven years to build the temple (6:38) and another thirteen to build the house for her before he brought her to live in Jerusalem (9:24).

By looking at the text in depth, Davidson concludes that the marital relationship that is portrayed in Canticles is a monogamous one. For example, he points to statements such as “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm” (569) and “My lover is mine and I am his” (568) as indicating a one-to-one relationship.

At one point in this section (601-602), the author presents a list of twelve different types of intimacies that have been mentioned by marriage and family counselors Howard and Charlotte Clinebell in a classic study of marital intimacy. This list includes things such as physical, emotional, and intellectual intimacy. Davidson explains how all these types of intimacy are to be found in the Canticles.

In his Afterword, or fourth section, Davidson looks at the implications of his study for a NT theology of human sexuality. Under the topic of monogamy, he quotes a number of texts that indicate that the NT upholds

the Edenic ideal of marital monogamy. He mentions that the grammar of 1 Cor 7:2 (“each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband”) implies a monogamous marriage (638).

The book makes a wonderful read, with terms readily explained to make the going easy for the reader. The comparisons between the OT and the ANE documents are informative and act as a powerful contrast to sustain the main thesis of this work, namely, the idea of the Edenic ideal for sexuality. Although the work is not a book on sexual ethics, Davidson does state that what he has written has implications in that area.

By and large, the author’s arguments are persuasive, as when he demonstrates how the Genesis account of Creation is so radically different from the ANE myths in that there is never any divinization of sexuality as in the ANE myths. God stands beyond the polarity of sexuality.

The issue of gender is at the heart of the book. In a sense, the subtitle of the book should really have the word “gender” in it as the gender issue is so significant. Davidson tries to steer a middle ground whereby he tries to accommodate the complementarian as well as his own egalitarian interpretation of the Genesis account.

One issue that I have is in regard to Davidson’s approach to the gender issue in the OT. There is a lack of OT examples or practical illustrations of what he terms as the “servant leadership” (73) of the husband vis-à-vis the wife. He maintains that this principle of “husband servant leadership” is necessary in a sinful world to preserve harmony in the home. He illustrates this principle: “So the husband, as first among equals in the home gets to be first: first to say, ‘I’m sorry,’ first to offer to take out the garbage and do other disagreeable jobs, first to take responsibility if something goes wrong” (77). One could be tempted to interpret the foregoing words as implying that the husband is to be subservient and subordinate to his wife, thereby contradicting the “egalitarian” postulations made by the author.

Also, as much as the new literary technique is useful, it can also lend itself to misuse. Why does the unique literary placement of the Edenic “wedding” have to imply that a sexual consummation occurred? One has to ask why the Edenic ideal does not include a time of “getting to know each other” first—maybe a few days of delayed gratification to explore each other’s thoughts before engaging in the sexual act. After all, the Song of Songs does say, “Do not awaken love before it is ready” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

Then, there is the narrative theology of the OT that teaches that when a man and a woman get married, there is first a period of betrothal. For there to be consistency, one would have to admit that on that first Friday evening in Eden, Adam and Eve did not engage in a sexual act. Is it likely that Adam and Eve would want to hasten to sexually consummate their marriage as soon as they set eyes on each other? How about a time of longing, waiting, and appreciating as depicted in the Song of Songs?

The ten facets of sexuality employed by the author to explore the OT are a good organizing tool, but it would have been useful to know the author’s reasons for selecting those ten facets and not others. In addition, at the end

of several sections in the work, there is a tendency for the author to don his “pastoral” hat. In some cases, this makes for interesting and refreshing reading, such as the author’s twelve steps to moral integrity (375), which are biblically based and quite useful. At other times, however, this “moralistic” feature may appear unnecessary for some. It is clearly a legitimate genre of writing, but it could belong to a different kind of book, perhaps one on biblical sexual counseling.

The third section on “Song of Songs” could have been shorter. Its disproportionate length, compared to the other sections, creates a bit of an aesthetic imbalance in the work as a whole. It almost feels as if it should have been a book on its own. It is that section that the author seems to be really passionate about, as he remarks that “the theology of sexuality in this Song is the quintessence of profound theology in the OT—the holy of holies” (551).

Overall, Davidson’s *Flame of Yahweh* is thoroughly enjoyable, informative, and stimulating. It displays a great enthusiasm that permeates the whole book and carries the reader along. It is now up to someone else to pick up the challenge and write a theology of sexuality of the whole Bible.