

Calum Carmichael. *Sex and Religion in the Bible*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 210 pages. \$50.

In *Sex and Religion in the Bible*, Calum Carmichael deciphers sexual metaphor and explores the links between biblical laws that regulate sexual activity and narrative exploits of beloved matriarchs and patriarchs. For preachers, homiletics/teachers and theologians who appreciate better understanding the subtle sexual nuances and symbolism of language and possible ways the laws evolved as a result of lived experiences of biblical actors, they will be intrigued by Carmichael's approach.

Though sex is in the title of the book and the names of several chapters are overtly sexual, "Seduction," "Adultery," "Incest," and "Desexing," Calum Carmichael focuses most of his energy on deciphering sexual metaphor and exploring the links between biblical laws regulating sexual activity and narrative exploits of beloved matriarchs and patriarchs. Carmichael's background in law, comparative literature and historical theology is evident in his underlying assumption that Genesis through 2 Kings is a "single coherent narrative" composed of law codes and stories. He believes that by delving into the minds of biblical authors, we can better understand how they used their imaginations to develop both law and narrative. This view is contrary to the belief of some historians and scholars who contend that biblical texts are products of their host cultures (such as Babylon in the case of Genesis through 2 Kings). Carmichael posits that this is not necessarily the case.

Throughout the book, Carmichael identifies the presence of issues of creation/procreation and marriage in both the Gospels and selected Hebrew bible narratives. In the first three chapters he notes the symbolism at work in Jesus interactions with his disciples and others. For example, Carmichael contends that the wedding at Cana in John 2 that occurs on the third day of Jesus' ministry bears symbolism consistent with the third day of creation in Gen 1:9-13. In the Genesis account, earth and water come together and for the first time yield fruit of the earth. In John's gospel, water is turned into wine; thereby yielding a type of fruit. For Carmichael, the abundance of wine that Jesus produces as the Word of God on that day corresponds to God's creative activity on the third day of creation.

When Carmichael examines the story of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:27), he refers to it as a sexual encounter because of the sexual symbolism of the water. Water, according to Carmichael, is biblically been associated with female sexuality (Prov 5:15, 5:18, 9:17). Therefore, when Jesus invites the woman to partake of living water, he is in effect seducing her. However, rather than pursuing a sexual relationship with her once he seduces her, he recreates her as a well of living water. As a newly recreated being herself, the woman then reproduces by creating other disciples.

When examining narratives in the Hebrew Bible (as he does in chapters four through eight), Carmichael not only highlights the presence of creation/procreation and marriage in the text, he also asserts that the biblical laws were written in response to events that occurred in the texts. In Gen 12 and Gen 20, Abraham told the leaders of the nations he and Sarah were visiting (Pharaoh and Abimelech respectively) that Sarah was his sister. He did this for his own safety, so that the authorities would not harm him in an attempt to take Sarah for themselves. In each case, Carmichael contends that a marriage contract was entered into. However, God intervened to prevent the leader from sexually consummating the marriage. Though consummation never occurred, Carmichael still considers each of these relationships adulterous because a promise of

marriage was made. Therefore, the law of Deut 22:22 was drafted to prevent such an adulterous relationship from happening again. The law reads, “If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel” (Deut 22:22 NRSV).

Though some of the links Carmichael makes between narratives and laws seem somewhat plausible, others are less successful. Asserting that the law against bestiality originates from the Dinah incident of Genesis 34 is a bit of a stretch. In the Dinah narrative, Dinah’s brothers avenge her rape by Shechem by killing all of the males who lived in Shechem’s city. Carmichael contends that when Shechem violated Dinah it was akin to an ass violating an ox. As a result, the rule of bestiality was born.

For preachers, homileticians/teachers and theologians who are looking for a resource to better understand the socio-historical, literary/rhetorical, and political implications of actual sex acts in the bible, they will be disappointed with this work. However, for those who appreciate better understanding the subtle sexual nuances and symbolism of language and possible ways the laws evolved as a result of lived experiences of biblical actors, they will be intrigued by Carmichael’s approach.

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