

Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament

REVIEWED BY JAMES D. LORENZ

As a pastor, I find few sermon topics more challenging than human sexuality, so when I heard about Richard Davidson's new book *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, I was curious about this potential resource.

When I opened the box from Amazon.com, I was immediately struck by two things: (1) how big this book is (844 pages!); and (2) it's a book on sex without pictures. I guess I don't have to worry about my adolescent son hiding this tome under his mattress unless he wants to sit up in bed. The sheer scope of this volume makes it both fascinating and not a little controversial. I found myself leafing through *Flame of Yahweh*, amazed at what it includes and wondering how the author would address certain passages.

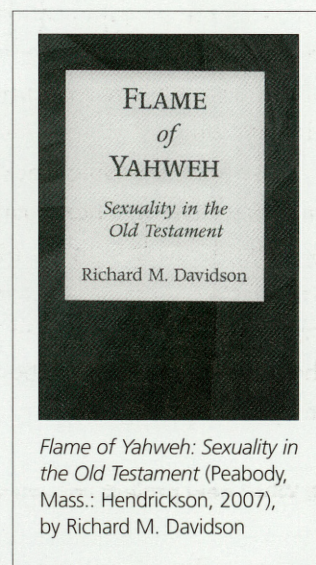
Davidson, professor of Old Testament studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, has written what is sure to be a landmark book on Old Testament sexuality. Davidson states in the Introduction that he is attempting to bring back Edenic sexual wholeness—a worthy aim. (Of note, Davidson's mother-in-law, Alberta Mazat, wrote an Adventist groundbreaking book called *That Friday in Eden: Sharing and Enhancing Sexuality in Marriage*, which came out in 1981—seemingly about the time that Davidson started working on *Flame of Yahweh*.)

Davidson's unblushing approach makes this book the equivalent of everything you wanted to know about Old Testament sexuality but were afraid to ask. One of the real values of the work is Davidson's exhaustive research of sexual practices not only of Israel, but also of the pagan cultures that surrounded it. Readers might be surprised by how pervasive the topic is in the Bible. Trust me, you will never read your Bible the same way again.

Davidson targets three audiences: the Evangelical, Adventist, and scholarly communities. While *Flame of Yahweh* addresses the wider Evangelical community with its more conservative approach to biblical interpretation and references to the community itself, no doubt Davidson also had an eye on his own Adventist community, which is struggling with some of the same issues.

Thankfully, Davidson and his editor have not limited the audience by using academic language. Hebrew and Greek words are transliterated and translated, making this volume accessible to any serious Bible student, even those without a biblical languages background. *Flame of Yahweh* might not be carried by the local Adventist Book Center, but it reads more easily (and definitely more excitingly) than some books sold there.

However, because *Flame of Yahweh* is also a first of its kind to bring together



...for love is as strong

as death,

its jealousy unyielding

as the grave.

It burns like blazing fire,

like a mighty flame.

—Song of Songs 8:6

FLAME
of
YAHWEH

*Sexuality in the
Old Testament*

Richard M. Davidson

Flame of Yahweh
Sexuality in the Old Testament

RICHARD M. DAVIDSON

"This volume represents a most remarkable achievement. With encyclopedic breadth and extraordinary depth the author explores what the Old Testament has to say about every conceivable subject related to human sexuality. His discussions of the ancient Near Eastern cultural contexts, from which Old Testament writings emerged and to which they appear to have responded, are exceptional; and his treatment of specific biblical passages is generally balanced and thorough. Regardless where readers find themselves in debates concerning sexual morality or gender relations, in the future, all who embark on serious study of biblical perspectives on these issues would do well to start with Davidson's work. The bibliography alone takes up 140 pages!"

— DANIEL L. BLOCK, Professor of Old Testament,
Wheaton College

Richard M. Davidson is J. N. Andrews Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Andrews University. He is the author of *In the Footsteps of Joshua* and *A Love Song for the Sabbath* as well as of many encyclopedia and journal articles.

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deep and comprehensive discussion on so many aspects of Old Testament sexuality (it has generous footnotes and almost two hundred pages of documentation in the back), no doubt the scholarly community will be forced to reference this work for years to come.

Flame of Yahweh includes a discussion on Song of Songs, something a reader would expect, from which Davidson derives the book's title and takes what he sees as the Bible's ultimate statement on sexuality (8:6). It also includes discussions about marriage, divorce, and homosexuality. Davidson not only delves into the pertinent Old Testament passages addressing homosexuality, but also frankly discusses related practices and writings of the surrounding pagan cultures. Given Davidson's approach to Scripture and his target Evangelical audience, one is not surprised on which side of the debate he lands. But again, regardless of your views on this topic, the breadth of discussion is one of the work's real values.

Merely reading the table of contents will not tell the whole story of Davidson's approach to various topics. He willingly steps into the ring with both "loyalists" (read traditionalists) and "rejectionists" (those who dismiss certain biblical passages outright), so this book has plenty to attract fire from both sides, quite possibly its greatest recommendation to the reader.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the book is the great length to which Davidson goes to demonstrate what he calls "the high valuation of women" in the Old Testament. Here Davidson leaves his Evangelical base and walks into the no-man's land between the two sides, inviting what will no doubt be withering fire from loyalists and rejectionists.

Although not directly addressed in the book, women's ordination seems to lie just beneath the surface. Davidson encourages "the covenant community to utilize and officially recognize the Spirit-endowed leadership gifts of women in church and synagogue" (295).

Now I am in a quandary: how prominently should I display this impressive reference in my church office? ■

James D. Lorenz pastors the Woodside Seventh-day Adventist Church, in Sacramento, California.