

Review of Calum Carmichael, *The Book of Numbers: A Critique of Genesis*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012.

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This is the third monograph in which Carmichael makes the case that what appear to be laws in the Torah are best thought of as corrective commentary in response to problems (mostly of an ethical or cultic kind) in the narratives of Genesis–2 Kings (but Genesis in particular). Whereas the two earlier volumes (Carmichael 1997 and 2006) focus on Leviticus, this one is concerned primarily with Numbers, “the least researched of the books that make up the Pentateuch, [which] presents a puzzling combination of law and narrative” (vii).

Carmichael argues for “the highly integrated character” (2) in terms of content and ordering of narrative, on the one hand, and correctives, on the other, claiming that his discovery and decoding of ancient methods of composition and commentary disclose a “less complicated means of understanding the text” (4). As a consequence, he speaks quite interchangeably of a “narrator” and a “lawgiver.” Carmichael's discovery, moreover, challenges both source criticism and the notion that the sequence of laws in Torah is haphazard. It also refutes the widely made claim that Joseph is essentially forgotten after his story in Genesis is told (2) and accounts for the puzzling ritual of the Red Heifer “proverbial for its obscurity” (106). According to Carmichael, very many prescriptions in Numbers refer back to the Joseph story, and the Red Heifer ritual neither reflects back on an actual incident, nor “was [it] ever intended for institutional realization” (117) but, instead, “retrospectively counteracts the offense” of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25 (113).

I agree with Carmichael that much of the biblical account is “fictional or mythical or pseudohistorical” (13) and also that source criticism proposes “a bewildering process of redaction involving different and even hypothetical documents and inferred time periods” that is ultimately implausible (5). But his own counter-argument for a “literary unity,” where “the narratives and the laws ... [are] written down simultaneously and ... in conversation with each other, rather than one serving as background material to the other” (5) is no more credible. In other words, the notion of a writer splicing together bits from the different source texts he has at hand, retaining and faithfully preserving some bits while heavily redacting others (i.e. a simplification of the JEDP-theory), is as artificial as the notion of the lawmaker setting down “the nation's lore” warts and all (10) alongside his own “reworking and reiteration of key episodes in the Book of Genesis” (19), all the while “imitating in order to oppose [unacceptable tendencies]” of the patriarchs (10-11). It is unclear, for instance, why the lawmaker would sometimes draw sharp attention to the link between a narrative and a corrective (such as by using a distinctive word in both) while at other times the association is achieved in other (considerably less direct and even downright

subliminal) ways, or why correctives applying to one narrative would be scattered in a number of places.

For instance, Carmichael, in associating the ritual of the red heifer (Num. 19:1-22) with the narrative of how Jacob acquired Esau's birthright (Gen. 25:20-34), makes much of the prominent use of the word 'red' in both (Gen. 25:30; Num. 19:2) (103-19). He adds further (and much more tenuously) that both also feature blood (Gen. 25:30; Num. 19:4)—because the “red, red dish” Esau desires is a dish he believes contains the revitalising blood of a domestic animal, possibly a heifer, an animal illusory in the narrative but apparently real in the ritual (110, 119), as well as sacred components (namely, Esau's oath, Gen 25:33 and the priestly supervision of proceedings, Num. 19:3) and fear of death (Gen. 25:32; Num. 19:11-18). Carmichael, therefore, makes much of the verbal echo of redness (which, granted, is somewhat persuasive) and then bulks up his case by adding (in my estimation rather forced) “likenesses.” Ultimately, Carmichael's explanation that the ritual of the Red Heifer “is invented tradition to record the narrator's judgment on a crucial but decidedly questionable event at the nation's beginning” (119) does not bring us any closer to un-shrouding the obscurity of a text that baffled even the rabbinic authorities (106). Carmichael's claim to an allusion to the red heifer ritual also at Ezek. 36:25, in the proximity of which, he points out, there is, again, reference to the enmity between Jacob and Esau (Ezek. 35:5-6), as well as to (red and) profaning blood (Ezek. 36:16-21) (117) also does not persuade. Does Ezekiel like Carmichael's narrator-lawgiver, being “quite familiar with priestly lore” (117), really see connections that all others, including the rabbis, failed to recognise—until Carmichael came along to unearth the authorial intention? It seems odd that the narrator-lawgiver would operate in such casuistic ways—especially if his point and intention is corrective. Why make a didactic point in a way so very obscure? To me at least, this makes little sense.

Carmichael's arguments are certainly clever, and there is no doubt as to his in-depth and highly sophisticated knowledge of the biblical text and his formidable dexterity of thought and imagination. But as his arguments proliferate, reading this book becomes rather like watching a series of clever magic tricks. Thus, the sequence of regulations in Numbers 5:5–6:27 is magically made sense of with reference to the story of Judah and Tamar: Num. 5:5-10 addresses and corrects Judah's failure to keep his promise of giving *Shelah* to Tamar; the *sotah* regulation, of what a husband is to do if he suspects his wife of adultery (Num. 5:11-31), addresses Tamar being accused of sexual misconduct by “the man who effectively is her husband” (27), with the *sotah*'s unbound hair referring back to Tamar's veil (31); while the nazirite regulation (Num. 6), applying also to a woman (v.1), according to Carmichael makes it clear that the lawmaker considers Tamar's act a sacred duty (37). Again, hair allegedly makes the connection: “the identity of the nazirite by her uncut hair—symbolically imitating, I suggest, Tamar's covering of her face” (37). Carmichael argued earlier that events of Genesis 38 shaped certain regulations of Leviticus also (1997, 36–9) and then went on to be reworked in 1 Samuel, with Hannah, like Tamar, only apparently being a loose woman but actually engaged in a sacred act (41).

Such cleverness and such allegedly careful contrivances of networks of connection—due, according to Carmichael, to the process of co-creation,

simultaneously setting down story and corrective—is argued for over and over again: the Levites serving under God (Num. 8) correct Joseph's service under Pharaoh (2012, 57); the Passover celebration inclusive of everyone, Israelite and non-Israelite (Num. 9), corrects the disunity in Jacob's family (57–9); Moses' humility corrects Joseph's boastfulness (62); Joseph's "unquestionably idolatrous" dreams (70) involving sheaves of grain (Gen. 37) are corrected by the laws concerning grain offerings to Yahweh (Num. 15:1-16); Joseph's garment that causes jealousy is corrected by the wearing of coloured fringes—with the colour making a link to Joseph's special garment and the purpose of the fringes (to meditate on God's rules, Num. 15:37-41) correcting the negative effect of arousing favouritism and strife (87) —and so on and so forth.

Carmichael's argument is highly ingenious and certainly promotes close reading and new perspectives. Ultimately, however, ingenuity over-stretches credulity. Yes, Carmichael's key to reading Numbers could explain rather a lot and might give us insight into the practices and values of which ancient lawmakers disapproved, but it requires buying into a method that (not unlike psychoanalytic methods) "works" only on its own terms, which first have to be accepted. Just as in psychoanalysis some symbols are straight-forward and others not (because of processes like sublimation, repression, or projection, for instance), so it is with Carmichael's key: some things are somewhat persuasive (e.g. the prominent use of the word for "red" in Genesis 25 and the Red Heifer ritual, or of the rare word *dibbah* in Joseph's report of Genesis 37 and the account of the spies in Numbers 14, which might well create verbal echoes, links and intertextualities), while others require much twisting and turning (e.g. the association between Tamar's facial veil, the *sotah's* unbound hair and the nazirite's uncut hair). Consequently, the experience of reading this volume becomes rather like a very sophisticated version of Drosnin's bible code (1997)—a key that seems up to a point to illuminate the possibilities of a new world (in this case of insight into authorial intention and ancient interpretive strategies) that is in the end too convoluted and implausible to persuade or satisfy.

Bibliography

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