

## Book review

Reece Retzlaff

*The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible*, by David M. Carr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

**I**n *The Erotic Word*, David Carr explores the interconnections of sexuality, spirituality, scripture, and setting. He focuses on the Song of Songs and other biblical garden texts, especially Genesis 2 and 3 and Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7). Carr argues that in the ancient Near East, vineyards were often associated with female deities, and he uses this context to interpret many images in the Song of Songs.

Carr's main arguments are (1) for reconnecting sexuality and spirituality, which Western society has divided; and (2) for reading

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the Song of Songs as both sexual and spiritual. *Eros* is passion for what is good; it is not so much about genital intercourse as about desire and passion for connectivity and intimacy.

Interpreting Genesis, Carr argues for an understanding of *eros* that involves mutuality. The patriarchal rules about sexuality found in later biblical texts result from the fall and do not reflect God's original intentions for human sexuality. These rules show how

sexuality is used to maintain a patriarchal society, by promoting male-female matches for the purpose of reproduction. Carr stresses that reproduction is not the focal point of intimacy; unlike many of its ancient counterparts, the creation story in Genesis 2 emphasizes the longing for intimacy itself, not the actual joining or the children begotten from the union.

Continuing from this observation, Carr emphasizes the importance of social commentary on the patriarchal system, and he

points to the desire—evident in the Song of Songs—to return to mutuality in intimacy in relationships. He accentuates the Song of Songs’ significance for addressing systemic power differences between women and men.

This book speaks to issues important to today’s church. Carr encourages us to read the Song of Songs as spiritual allegory (about God and the individual and/or about Christ and the church) *and* as an expression of desire between human lovers. Both kinds of desire for intimacy are *eros*, and both are necessary in the church. Carr emphasizes that the Bible has not just one view of sexuality but many. These views arise in pre-fall and in post-fall ideologies, and the perspectives are in dialogue and in tension with each other.

Carr also looks at the portrayals of God as lover and husband arising from the Song of Songs in light of portrayals in other Old Testament books, including Hosea and Ezekiel. The latter provide readings of God as husband and lord that are sometimes destructive or abusive. Carr takes these difficult scriptures seriously as part of the intrabiblical discussion of God as lover and God as husband, and he considers how the Song of Songs may challenge aspects of those texts.

Overall, this book is interesting reading, in its treatment of cultural and canonical locations. It is dense but worth the effort. Of special note are the possible parallels Carr observes between the female and male voices in the Song of Songs and those of Mary and the risen Jesus at the garden tomb. Carr offers an interpretation of the Song of Songs as both spiritual and sexual and invites us to let this song interpret these aspects of our humanity.

### **About the reviewer**

Reece (Charissa) Retzlaff is an MDiv student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. Her area of concentration is theological studies, with a major in Bible. Her home congregation is Foothills Mennonite Church, Calgary, Alberta.