



Review of Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London/New York: T&T International, 2005), vi + 185 pp.

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Books written by authors with a thoughtful opinion are fun to read. Not only is it most enjoyable to profit from the specialist's expertise but one also listens to a voice of an outspoken authority who provides irredeemable testimonies of the state of the art for readers that are less acquainted with the field. *Practicing Safer Texts* offers an example of a fresh and inspiring hermeneutical reflection on the multifaceted interface between food and sexuality in the bible.

Methodologically, Stone understands *Practicing Safer Texts* in analogy of safer sex. He compares the positive and negative effects of texts on particular readers and for particular contexts and thus takes a "pragmatic" approach on the reading of biblical texts. With respect to food and sex, Stone's main intention is to take scripture seriously in contemporary matters and to read it from an informed perspective that understands the religious links between ethics of food and sexual ethics as pointed out by Michel Foucault (p. 17). In order to come to terms with modern conceptions of sexuality relating to biblical texts, the author presents "anthropological insights as a valuable reading lens" of biblical texts (p. 17). This approach is most fruitful when it comes to sexuality. Stone points to numerous, partly misleading attempts in the history of understanding biblical narratives. His core question is how to decide whether a particular biblical text sheds light on our contemporary understanding of sexuality (p. 24). For example, with respect to Gen. 2-3, a story that has often been read as referring to sexuality, Stone points to the diversity of a number of interrelated sets of concerns: mortality and immortality are connected to food, just as they are in the epic of Adapa and in the Gilgamesh-epic. There, notably, Enkidu's transition from beast to human is marked by practices of eating and drinking. Also, agricultural production and the securing of food as well as sexual reproduction are part of the issues of Gen. 2-3 that cannot be neglected (p. 43).

Undoubtedly, Stone's scholarly investigations are of great value in the current field of biblical studies. Scholars continue to misinterpret Gen. 2:23-24 as an etiology for the coupling of women and men, and some can state that the "bodily state as men and women...brings with it the acceptance of our mortality" (23, quoting C. R. Seitz). Here, the complex diversity of interrelated concerns in Gen. 2-3 offers a more adequate interpretation of Gen. 2-3.

Chapter 2 is concerned with food and sex ethics as a means of constructing ethnic and religious boundaries of identity. The argument builds on a dialogue with anthropology (Mary Douglas) and ends with addressing questions of queerness in the story of Tamar, the Canaanite (Gen. 38) in order to challenge boundaries currently used to construct identities. Chapter 3, "Before the eyes of all Israel—

Public sex, marriage and food in the bible,” begins with a queer perspective on the public or private character of sex and confronts biblical passages with this understanding. Stone comments on the spectacular instances of public sex in a number of the David narratives. When Absalom goes to the concubines of his father David “before the eyes of all Israel” (2 Sam. 16:22), his concern is prestige and power vis-à-vis other male, and, notably, royal characters. Here, Stone suggests that Israel’s god must be understood as a cause of public sex, similar to the case of David and Bath-Sheba in 2 Sam. 11-12. These sexual actions send obvious messages of judgment and approval to David, the protagonist. More specifically, Stone understands this as a narrative about the interrelation of sexuality and a male hierarchical system. He concludes that public, non-monogamous sex is not divinely prohibited but is, instead, divinely sanctioned and even involves divine participation (p. 77). This is most plausible on the level of the narratives. One may add, however, a comment on the genre and intention of these narratives within the Hebrew Bible. The assumptions surrounding the public character of sex in these narratives are part of a complicated structure in the royal court and, more specifically, in the Davidic Judean court. As such they are part of a dynastic historiography with a specific mixture of critical and legitimizing intentions. Hence, one may question their direct ethical relevance in a modern discourse about public sexuality. Stone is well aware of such objections and carefully deals with the difference between contemporary presuppositions about sex, gender and marriage when comparing his insights to the ideas of most adherents of Judaism and Christianity (pp. 82-89). One of the numerous strengths of this chapter is Stone’s critical view on these often neglected biblical texts in the books of Samuel. In order to challenge the contemporary readers’ assumption about the biblical view on sexuality, food and gender, Stone presents a well-informed perspective in his close reading. He also deals with the narratives of Gen. 19 and Judges 19. The textual samples with which Stone argues here in the context of modern issues are most inspiring. While the narratives in Samuel are dealt with in numerous scholarly contexts, the idea to relate them to current issues of sex and food fruitfully opens up the view for the variety of possible readings.

Gender-related matters and their possible impact on his own argumentations are dealt with in chapters 4 and 5. “Pleasure and danger in biblical interpretation— Food, sex and women in 2 Samuel 13 and in the Song of Songs” is the fourth chapter which dives into power relations and exploitations, especially of women. Here, Stone holds that in a world of oppression, both food and sex serve as tools of oppression. This is demonstrated in analogies between two very diverse texts: the narrative about Amnon and Tamar and the Song of Songs.

The fifth chapter, “Lovers and raisin cakes. Food, sex and manhood in Hoshea,” moves on to the rhetoric of this complicated and fascinating prophetic text with its overlapping of language about food and sex and language about sex and gender. Here, Stone is interested in reconstructing the biblical notions of “manhood” on the basis of the prophet Hoshea. Attentive to gender theory, Stone points to the tensions and instabilities of the constructions of manhood that need to be pointed out in order to challenge a view of compulsory heterosexuality in biblical text.

The final and sixth chapter considers the role of food and sex in Proverbs and Qohelet. Among the numerous interfaces between food and sex, Stone puts forth his

most thought-provoking idea: to think of Qohelet, with his refrain of “utterly absurdity” in the context of Israelite wisdom literature, as a “queer” text (pp. 142-149). This sociological category may prove helpful for the contemporary reader in order to realize this biblical book’s unique conceptual framework. As a matter of fact, Qohelet’s framework is “queer” within the canon of Israelite wisdom literature and is in many respects in tension with ancient Israelite wisdom literature. Qohelet was, and indeed may currently, be called heterodox (p. 145).

One of the most compelling features of this book is the diversity of textual samples, which cover patriarchal, historical, prophetic and wisdom traditions. Stone applies a sophisticated hermeneutics to these biblical texts. The conceptual and hermeneutical reflections are deeply rooted in current discussions about gender theory and queer theory; they resemble a sophisticated menu of healthy foods that invite readers to come and eat.

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