Review of Stuart Macwilliam, *Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield: Equinox 2011, xvi + 247 pp., ISBN 9781845536732

By Hugo Córdova Quero, Graduate Theological Union, USA

In our contemporary world, debates about marriage equality have disseminated to literally every society. Supported by some and opposed by others, the truth is that those debates have sparked ideas and arguments in both flanks to legitimise their positions. To those who oppose equal marriage, one strategy has been to turn to the holy scriptures – especially the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures – in search for arguments to reify an assumed and naturalised notion of 'traditional [modern] marriage.' Purportedly ignoring or naively occluding the fact that the modern notion of the nuclear (heterosexual) family is basically the product of post-first industrial revolution, opponents to equal marriage seem to find allies in some biblical passages. However, the strategy to turn to the holy scriptures proves to be, at least, a difficult task. Specifically, which example in the Hebrew bible does support a notion of 'traditional [modern] marriage'? Certainly neither Jacob and his two wives Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29:1–30) nor King Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3) do exemplify that ideal. Beyond these two obvious non-'traditional [modern] marriage' examples, Stuart Macwilliam directs our attention to the case of the prophetic *marriage metaphor* as portrayed in the books of Jeremiah, Hosea and Ezekiel. To our surprise, it seems that even those 'decent' passages cannot stand their validity of supporting a notion of 'traditional [modern] marriage' after the author has finished analysing them through the lenses of queer theory.

Featured in Jeremiah 2–3, Hosea 1–3, and Ezekiel 16, 23, the *marriage metaphor* – explains Macwillian – '(...) is a conceptual shorthand for the sexual imagery in the description of the relationship between Yhwh and Judah/Israel' (2011: 1). The goal of Macwilliam is to queer the *marriage metaphor* in order to expose the gender performativity at play in the three biblical texts aforementioned.

The book is divided into three sections. Section I, has a theoretical and methodological tone, grounding the analysis in Judith Butler's contributions to queer theory (Chapter 1) and developing a way to apply that theory to the biblical texts (Chapter 2). This section could be cumbersome at times, rendering the reader exhausted. Section II focuses on the process of queering, first the metaphor (Chapter 3), then the notion of 'Israelites as males' (Chapter 4) to finally explore a queer analysis of the text in Jeremiah (Chapter 5), Hosea (Chapter 6) and Ezekiel (Chapter 7). In a more creative way, section III presents an innovative way to use 'camp' as a methodological resource (Chapter 8) in order to queer Ezekiel (Chapter 9) and the final chapter (Chapter 10) summarises the main contributions of the book. The style of the book is inviting to delve into its argument and interesting analysis. Although the book was originally a dissertation, the skillful writing of Macwilliam has transformed it into a valuable and appealing reading.

Throughout the book it is evident that Macwilliam is well versed in both queer theory and biblical studies. As aforementioned, basing the analysis in Butler's notion of gender performativity as well as using 'camp' as a tool for queering the biblical text is ingenious and a refreshing contribution for future biblical studies. The term 'camp' in queer cultures not only defines humour and sarcasm but also a particular sensibility and a theatrical display by gender-bending and gender-variant individuals in order to transgress the boundaries of the dichotomy 'female/male'. Recognised by Susan Sontag in a 1960s essay (p. 168) as a contribution to mainstream popular culture from the gay community, the act of 'camping' and transgressing the dictums of both the gender-role expectations and the sexual division of labour may even preclude Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. The creative tone in Macwilliam's book is the use of 'camp' as a way to address and even to 'hyper-narrate' and – in doing so, to deconstruct – the biblical text. That act of creativity offers important contributions towards future reappropriations of the Sacred Scriptures – Hebrew, Christian, and of other religions – by queer individuals and communities. As a clarification, it should be noted that as Macwilliam is well-trained in hermeneutics and epistemologic methodologies, consequently, his use of 'camp' rests upon a solid academic basement. Thus, throughout the analysis in his book, Macwilliam expertly deploys linguistic and literary criticism as a methodology to deconstruct the *marriage metaphor*.

In analysing the *marriage metaphor*, Macwilliam points out the homo-social character of the texts by questioning whether both the Israelites mentioned by the prophets and the audience of their writings are all males, which Macwillian characterizes as 'gender exclusivity' (2011: 79). This is noteworthy as the *marriage metaphor* seems to be framed in heteronormative terms, that is, the joining of female and male. On the contrary, if Israel is male, then we have in fact a proto-notion of same-sex marriage, although Macwilliam does not express this idea in such a quite anachronistic way. However, his analysis in the following chapters are successfully queering the 'naturalised' heteronormative tone of these texts, offering much needed entry-ways to the manifold layered text.

The third section of the book (Chapters 8–10) is arguably the most intriguing and thought-provoking part, promising to render the strongest academic impact. Using 'camp' as a device to interrogate the seemingly heteronormative tone of the *marriage metaphor* in Ezekiel (Chapter 9), Macwilliam opens up a

layer of the text with tremendous implications for future biblical studies. He proves that YHWH – the male narrator of the tale reproduced by Ezekiel – displays an array of sexual fantasies which are projected onto Oholibah, the name given to Israel in the story. Oholibah/Israel is, then, described as a prostituted female with a notorious sex-addiction for the large penises and exceedingly cum-loads of the Egyptians. The pointing of these erotic and graphic descriptions renders us with a shifting of positionalities, traversing the centre of the text from Oholibah/Israel to YHWH itself. As Macwilliam states '... the reader is left with the question, who is the real sex addict, Oholibah or the narrator [YHWH]?' (2011: 198).

The work of Macwilliam definitely deprives arguments about the 'traditional [modern] marriage' of their basement, thus highlighting the importance of his contribution in que(e)r(y)ing the biblical text. In this sense, the *marriage metaphor* in his analysis becomes a multi-layered loci for the destabilisation of mono-directional hermeneutics that have traditionally reified and justified heteronormative religious discourses.

Despite the well-researched and carefully written elements of Macwilliam's work, the book has one weakness worth to be mentioned: most of the time there are no translations for Hebrew terms, which makes the non-specialist reader 'lost in [the lack of] translation.' This may diminish the value of this work to those who are not as well-versed in Hebrew Scriptures as is the author; thus, preventing the reader to embrace fully the deep and solid argument throughout the book.

Undoubtedly, Macwilliam has opened a door for future works on queer(y)ing the biblical text. Without asking the author to write a book tailored differently, it may be worth to highlight that future works may want to imitate Macwilliams analytic creativity and apply it to other contexts. For example, taking into account that the ethnic/racial composite of the original audience for the narratives of Ezekiel, Hosea and Jeremiah may have been other than our contemporary notion of 'Caucasian', the cultural elements used in the book – especially the camp section – are more related to the northern-European/(north)American context. From the use of a back issue of *Gay Times* (whose advertisements are reproduced on pp. 196–7) to Mae West (p. 201), the bridge between the biblical text enlightens the connection to that context. However, readers from other latitudes may be rendered with a thirst for other racial/ethnic/cultural connections that would also enlighten and further reveal the manifold layers of the biblical text. In other words, future analysis would benefit from taking Macwilliam's work as a base although departing from this northern-European/(north)American context in order to explore the pertinence of the biblical texts in dialogue with other ethnic/cultural artifacts (books, films, art) from other geographical locations.

In the same vein, and related to the previous comment, the sources used in the book seem to also point out to northern-European/(north)American context. Latin American liberation theologians as well as scholars from Asia and Africa who are specialised in the Hebrew Bible – many of them also writing and publishing in English – are absent from the bibliographic list. The same could be said for Latina/o, Asian American, African American and Native (north) American scholars, whose work does not make the composite of the bibliography. All these authors bring nuanced perspectives on race/ethnicity, culture and the way queerness is understood in specific contexts, and future exegetical

and hermeneutic analysis of the biblical text would be enriched by taking into account this more 'colored' perspectives.

Rather than these latter aspects being a critique to Macwilliam's work, they are elements to be considered in order to further que(e)r(y)ing the biblical text. In that regard, the work of Macwilliams is a much needed and welcomed contribution as well as a key pivot in the beginning of a new path for biblical studies. It is up to future biblical scholars to take Macwilliams work and 'cruise' new roads engaging in queer hermeneutic adventures.