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Book Review: Swapping Housewives

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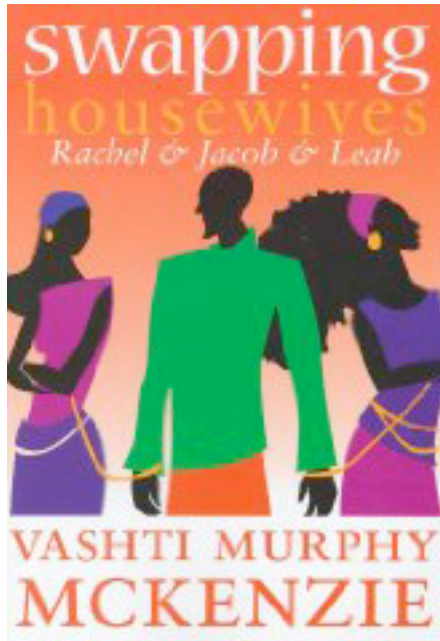
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McKenzie, Vashti Murphy

Swapping Housewives: Rachel and Jacob and Leah

Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007. Pp. xviii + 142. Paper.
\$17.00. ISBN 9780829817737.

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In my haste to respond to the request to review this book, apparently I failed to read the online blurb describing the book. *Swapping Housewives* would best be described as a study on relationships within a twenty-first-century American culture, from primarily a woman's point of view. You can imagine my surprise when I received Bishop McKenzie's book thinking that it would be helpful in my teaching and understanding of the Jacob narrative, particularly as it relates to the story of Rachel and Leah. However, despite the fact that my primary job is to teach the Old Testament within a seminary context, I am also married and minister within the local church. So I attempted to read the text with as open a mind as I could muster, trying to focus on the book's goal and remembering that the book is not an exposition of the Jacob narrative.

The most fitting description of McKenzie's writing style is illustrative, as the book proceeds from one story to another. In this sense, the 140-page book is easily digestible by virtually any reader. As such, the book will benefit those looking for extremely practical advice on navigating the ups and downs of any relationship encountered in life. Such stories often help teaching to be fleshed out more easily than a didactic approach. At the same time, throughout the book stories are told in a somewhat train-of-thought manner,

so that I sometimes had to think carefully about the point being made and how the chapters hung together.

Moreover, in my opinion, narrative teaching such as this tends to repeat a consistent mistake: spiritualization of the text. By this I mean that the stories of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Joseph, Anna, and the like have spiritual meanings within their context. Thus, there is very little reason to force upon them an outside application that at best only touches the story tangentially. While this is not always the case—as, for example, when McKenzie points wisely to the messianic importance of Judah as the son of Leah—there are times when texts are made to say something quite disparate from the spiritual meaning they already possess. For example, I found it interesting that the story of Anna and her longing for the Messiah was made to correlate to our expectations in searching for a spouse. In most of these cases, I did not necessarily disagree with some of the points she was making; I was only uncomfortable with the way the text was being treated. Spiritualization of the text manifests itself particularly when the white spaces between the verses are made part of the story. That is, McKenzie often told the hypothetical parts of the story of Jacob and his wives in order to make a contemporary correlation (e.g., see 40), a process she admits is using her “sanctified imagination” (109).

McKenzie is obviously well-connected to the culture in which she ministers. The reader encounters a consistent use of quotes and quips from movies, contemporary literature, pop culture, and the like, augmented by the teaching of modern psychology. Thus, the text seems to place as much emphasis on what Drs. Laura and Phil say as to what the text about Jacob, Leah, and Rachel teaches. For example, I was enjoying her comments on pages 42–43 about the nature of love ultimately reflected in “the infinite character and nature of God” (43), when the text quickly turned not to a more detailed explanation of God’s demonstrations of love and what we can learn from these teachings but to a more meticulous description of Robert Sternberg’s *The Triangle of Love*. As a result, the biblical authority upon which the writer obviously leans tended to be secularized both in her dependence upon such sources and her laying them so closely to authoritative Scripture. In this way, the book borders on being culturally relevant but biblically anemic.

However, I do not have a completely negative view of the book, for at times I found McKenzie’s statements to be highly profound and insightful. For example, when discussing the tendency of men and women to be overcome with expectations that go unsatisfied, she makes the following perspective-giving comment: “Oftentimes, we ask for more than a person can possibly give. It is only when we yield ourselves to Jesus Christ that real satisfaction comes” (113). Furthermore, she teaches clearly a biblical view of repentance (80–81) and forgiveness (131). She also touches briefly on the roles of those who make up the family (93).

What is more, McKenzie clearly demonstrates a pastoral concern for others. In fact, the book reads in some ways as a journal telling the story of her experiences in ministry. She tells stories of men and women and the work God has done in their lives in the direst of circumstances, situations that I will probably never encounter. That is ministry that I greatly respect. Throughout the text, she describes various ministries, such as her “Circle of Love,” in which she is able to speak into the lives of women young and old and influence them with the truths of Scripture.

As one who serves within a local church, I also appreciated McKenzie’s reminder that the church is not immune to the crises encountered in our world. In her words: “If we are going to serve the present age, we cannot continue to deny the reality of what goes on inside and outside of the household of faith” (139). This is a most welcome remark as the churches in which we minister are filled with those who have been deeply hurt by sin and need loving care.

In conclusion, I believe *Swapping Housewives* will have an important impact upon those it intends to influence. It will be particularly useful for young women within the context of a mentoring relationship with an older, godly lady. Practically, men and women will find helpful strategies—which McKenzie calls “Spiritual Motivation for Action and Real Transformation”—to make relationships more harmonious and mutually beneficial. Spiritually, sin will be confessed, relationships will be reconciled, and marriages will be what they are intended to be: “a sacred covenant blessed by God” (113).