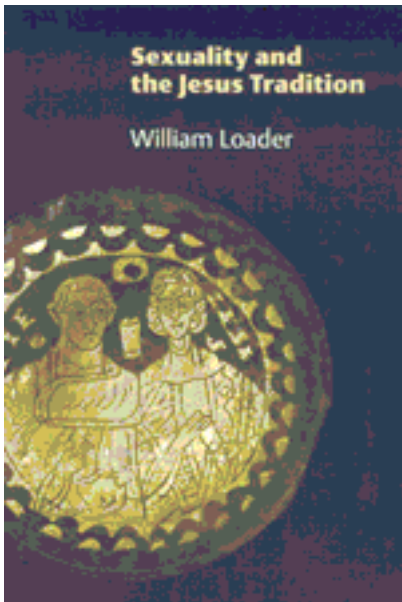


RBL 09/2005



Loader, William

Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. viii + 288. Paper.
\$30.00. ISBN 0802828620.

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This book is about sex, but not the biology of sex. It focuses on values that people associate with sex and sexual activity. Loader wants to explore the earliest layers of Christianity recoverable from its earliest writings and surrounding artifacts. He examines what the Gospels tell us and what Paul reports in his letters. Loader calls this material “the Jesus tradition.” He includes sections from Paul because they probably also reflect the Jesus tradition. Loader has grouped the material into three main sections: (1) sex and danger: passion and responsibility; (2) order and chaos: marriage and divorce; and (3) celibacy and hope: interim choices.

In each of these groups, Loader examines the key texts in a refreshing way. He evaluates traditional interpretations and then sheds new light on the exegesis of these texts. Loader’s treatment of the texts is responsible, and in most cases it is very difficult not to agree with his conclusions. At the end of each of the three sections, he draws together the threads from the discussion of the key texts. These summaries are extremely important and enlightening. It is above all his employment of social values in his interpretation of these texts that is praiseworthy.

In the first section (sex and danger: passion and responsibility) Loader shows that all the texts come from a world in which women and their sexuality were perceived as a

problem. Jesus, however, acted contrary to normal expectations: He allowed a woman to anoint him and conversed with a woman at a well. Loader also points out that the texts do not attack sexuality itself, that is, sexual arousal. The issue is rather what one does with it.

In modern times the primary concern in the case of adultery is the betrayal of intimacy. In the biblical world family property and family honor were at stake, and honor and shame were fundamental values. Subverting a marriage by adultery had the potential to undermine the wider family or clan and its interests.

There was an assumption in the ancient world that women were unable to control themselves sexually and that they were therefore a danger to men. Women featured relatively frequently in stories about Jesus, and in none of these is there any sign that women presented a danger as women. Loader shows that Jesus was able to relate to women as women, not as sexual dangers nor as sexual objects.

In the second group (order and chaos: marriage and divorce) Loader points out that earlier research assumed that only the husband could divorce in Jewish Palestine. He then shows that recent research indicates that this is not correct. Women were also able to initiate divorce. Loader also shows that Mark 10:11–12 presents an additional ground against adultery that is not evident elsewhere among the divorce and remarriage sayings. According to this verse, the act of remarriage wrongs a person, explicitly a man's wife, when he remarries another woman. Loader emphasizes that this reflects a development in the understanding of adultery, which was originally seen as an offense against another male.

In the third group (celibacy and hope: interim choices) Loader argues that there is a strong tradition of celibacy within the Jesus tradition. But Loader adds that celibacy was seen as an option, or a calling or a gift. He does not want to ascribe celibacy to a single background but rather thinks that there were various influences at different stages that promoted celibacy. Loader also emphasizes that one should never confuse celibacy with asceticism.

Loader also gives a very interesting explanation for Luke's statement that in the age to come people will not marry: the assumption is that the function of sexual relations is procreation. If no one dies, sexual activities are superfluous. Loader says that it is also possible that a sexless utopia is related to the idea of a restored order of creation, namely, a return to paradise.

Another very interesting remark is that there was a widespread view that heaven was a temple or a holy place. Holiness values would mean that sexuality is appropriate in the

present time, but not in resurrection time. Loader also says that a utopian vision of life without sexuality in the presence of the holy angels is bound to have had an impact on value systems and preferences in the present. This could, for example, lead to visions to live now like angels and to be sexually inactive. Some could see it as their calling to live now in that state of holiness that would characterize them in life hereafter.

The only shortcoming in the book is that Loader does not tell us what the practical implications of his study are for the sexual behavior of people in society today. He says, for example, that

the focus on attitude, not only on action, has rich potential for exploring ethical aspects of sexuality. In shifting the attention to attitude such teaching leads us away from approaches bent on measuring whether acts are right or wrong. Partners may wrong each other or feel wronged even without engaging in acts of adultery.... Sexual ethics then become an aspect of that attitude of love and care for others where all that demeans the other is antithetical to God's will, whether it has a label among forbidden acts or not, and where labelled and forbidden acts are to be examined for their legitimacy or illegitimacy solely by that criterion.... This has been particularly difficult to achieve in the area of sexual ethics, because sexual taboos have been by definition absolute rules and have by nature discouraged exploration of what might legitimately or otherwise lie behind them.
(46)

Thus, the hermeneutical implications of Loader's study need to be explored. But in all fairness to Loader, I should also add that the hermeneutical implications of his work do not fall within the scope of this study. Moreover, on page 232 Loader gives guidelines for such an exploration of ethics. He says that "the issue for the modern interpreter who wants to engage the biblical heritage as a source of life and faith is to seek first to understand what is being said and why, and then to appropriate what is life giving and faith building for today."

Loader also shows that there are many aspects of sexuality that are not addressed in the Jesus tradition. There is, for example, nothing about premarital sex, except by implication, and there are only hints of the issue of sexuality and power.

Loader's concluding remarks are challenging. He says that while we grapple with contemporary issues of sexuality and hear the strong words of the Jesus tradition, we should not merely assemble the texts of prohibition. These texts should rather be engaged, not passed by in some notional superiority with which we too often treat ancient cultures and times. We should always remember that although these texts speak from

within their cultural context, they still address issues fundamental to our condition before God. Loader then says that the goal of his study was just this, namely, to enable these texts to be heard and creatively engaged. Loader has masterly achieved his goal. No one will hereafter be able to speak on this issue without having read Loader's work.