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**A Review of William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. 168 pp. \$24.00.**

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Has there ever been a society in history where sex isn't a hot topic? I am not qualified to give a definitive answer, but my gut tells me "no." Today, as we peruse news headlines or watch reality shows or listen to conversations at water coolers and play-dates, it's easy to see how pervasive sexuality has become. It's everywhere. And it is awfully controversial.

What does God say about sexuality? That's another big question. The first step in approaching this delicate subject is to keep one eye on our present culture while putting the other squarely on the biblical world. We need to grasp the ancient setting behind the text and the literary world of the text. If we miss these, we may not accept the validity of Leviticus' restrictions on homosexuality (Lev 18:22) or embrace Jesus' heavy teaching on divorce and remarriage (Matt 19:1–12) or enjoy Solomon's poem on marital sexuality (Song of Solomon).

William Loader helps us see the ancient world more vividly in his work *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*. He says, "This book is about listening to what ancient authors were saying [about sex]. In particular it looks at attitudes towards sex in early Judaism and one of the movements it generated, Christianity" (1).

### **The Flesh and Bones of the Book**

*Making Sense of Sex* is an accessible summary of five scholarly works on ancient sexuality, researched and published by Loader over several years.<sup>1</sup> These books assess attitudes towards sex from a variety of Jewish and Christian sources, written between 300 BC and 100 AD – including Philo, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls,

and the New Testament.

Not surprisingly then, this book is not only thoroughly researched, it is also carefully organized. It's divided into four sections that explore sexuality within creational beliefs, the family structure, the temple system, and the intersection of Hellenistic and Jewish thought. The book also includes a subject index that covers all six works. Thus, the book can be enjoyed on its own or used as a guide for his larger corpus.

### **Sexuality in the Ancient World**

One thing Loader does effectively is paint the ancient world. For example, first century wives were viewed as inferior to their husbands. Typically 10–15 years younger than their husbands, they had less life experience and lower social standing. Some in the Roman world even considered women dangerous because their sexual drives could not be controlled. The Apostle Paul's teaching on sacrificial, Christ-like headship and Jesus' reversal of norms in his interactions with women must have turned many heads.

Loader also locates a tension in first century Judaism between those who adopted Greek culture and those who resisted it. Most rejected the widespread adultery, prostitution, and nakedness in sports. Surprisingly, small pockets of Greco-Roman society actually celebrated marital fidelity. Loader insightfully concludes "The respected and respectable in the best of the Roman world easily became the benchmark for Christian households and enabled them to assert that they were not an oddity but models of virtue" (109). Perhaps the first century Christian marriage witnessed to the gospel in a way that was valued and not quickly dismissed

by the broader culture.

### Hermeneutical Assumptions Matter

My main interest in reading *Making Sense of Sex* is evaluating how Loader handles biblical texts. Does he listen well to the Gospel writers and to the Apostle Paul? Does he consider the Bible as a transcultural text, for all people and times, inspired by God and authoritative for life?

Hermeneutical assumptions matter, and Loader and I come from fundamentally different interpretive paradigms. He assumes the biblical text has no more authority than Philo or *The Book of Jubilees*. He believes the biblical writers were significantly influenced by outside sources in ways that give no credit to a Divine Author who gives authoritative insight.

Loader's faulty assumptions taint his ability to accurately interpret biblical texts. When considering Jesus' teaching on divorce (Matt 19:1–12), he claims that Jesus' restrictions "could trap people in abusive and destructive marriages" (74). Here he misses the heart of Jesus, which is to emphasize the sacredness of the marriage union and discourage flippant divorcing.

When reflecting on Paul's understanding of men's and women's roles, he claims Paul has a "dichotomous view of women" (37)—in one place affirming women's dignity (Gal 3:28) and elsewhere teaching hierarchy in marriage (Eph 5:22–33). He fails to recognize the distinction between role and dignity. Husbands and wives are equally valuable yet play different roles in the marital drama. Unity and diversity is an important motif in the Bible, not only applied to husbands and wives but also to the persons of the Godhead.

Loader also misreads Paul's teaching on Romans 1 as only condemning certain homosexual acts. Paul only denounces unusual acts that are abusive, out-of-control, or stem from stifled heterosexual desires. "This is not about natural orientation into which people might have been born or which they might have developed in the processes of maturation" (137).

Romans 1:18–32 is a treatise on the origin and development of sin, not just a response to ped-

erasty or out-of-control sexual urges. People suppress the truth in unrighteousness and exchange God's glory for idol worship. The result is the moral breakdown of society, which includes homosexual acts (vv. 26–27). Paul calls these acts "dishonorable," "unnatural," and "shameless," which echo Jewish tradition and Old Testament teaching. Natural sexual relationships for Paul were between a man and a woman, as verse 27 clearly indicates: "men likewise gave up natural relationships with women."

In the opening chapter, Loader says that sex is not an optional extra—it's part of what and who we are. Indeed, sexuality is beautiful, powerful, and potentially dangerous. It is vital that we grasp God's heart on this subject. Unfortunately *Making Sense of Sex* is unhelpful in accurately understanding the truth of the biblical authors. For a more careful interpretation of what the New Testament says about sex, I recommend Denny Burk's *What is the Meaning of Sex?*

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Loader's books on sexuality in early Judaism and Christianity include *Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); *Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); and *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).