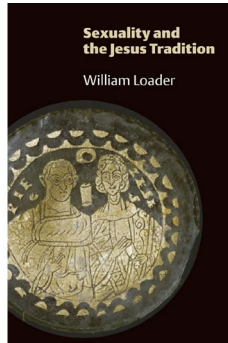


## ○ REVIEW OF WILLIAM LOADER'S *SEXUALITY AND THE JESUS TRADITION*

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Michael Carden reviews William Loader's *Sexuality and the Jesus tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).



As Loader himself observes, exploring issues of sexuality in the early Christian movement 'is like looking out of the window of an aircraft and noting points on a landscape which emerge above the fog which holds all else from view' (231). In this exegetical study, he both identifies some crucial points but is also able to draw them together in such a way that, while not fully exposing some of that hidden terrain, some of its more likely patterns can be inferred. Loader takes as his starting point Jesus or what he terms the Jesus tradition. This Jesus tradition consists primarily of sayings attributed to Jesus in the (synoptic) gospels together with citations of his authority in the Pauline corpus on matters of marriage and sexual (im)morality.

The book's three central chapters identify three important peaks: adulterous desires and sexual responsibility, marriage and divorce, and celibacy/virginity and discipleship. The first peak sheds light on questions of (male) desire and lust, attitudes to women, particularly whether they represent sexual threat, and, finally, attitudes to children and sexuality. From the second peak, Loader can explore understandings of marriage and divorce, allied questions of the nature of sexual union, again addressing the standing and dignity of women and wives. The final peak opens up the landscape of relationships between men and women, how the Jesus movement positioned itself vis-à-vis the family and household structures of the ancient world, its utopian vistas, eschatology and protology. He also addresses the question of whether Jesus himself was married.

The book is primarily an exegetical study. For his first peak, Loader focuses on Matthew 5.27-28, looking on a married woman lustfully, the excision sayings in Matthew 5.29-30, 18.8-9 and Mark 9.43-48 (together with 9.42), and sayings on purity/impurity referring to sexual immorality and adultery in Mark 7.21-23 and Matthew 15.18-20. He also casts his net further to take in a number of references to adultery in the Synoptics together with the various narratives in which Jesus engages with women who are explicitly or implicitly identified with sexual sin (Jn 7.53-8.11, Mk 14.3-9, Mt. 26.6-13, Jn 12.1-8, Lk. 7.36-50 and Jn 4.1-42) as well as Joseph's response to Mary's pregnancy in Matthew 1.19. The second peak consists of the condemnation

of divorce in Matthew 5.31-32 and 19.9, Mark 10.1-12, and Luke 16.18 and associated controversies about divorce and remarriage. To these is linked Paul's citation of Jesus' authority on marriage and divorce in Corinthians 7.10-11 and the accounts of the Baptist's condemnation of Herod's marriage to Herodias. For the final peak, Loader addresses the passages on marriage in the resurrection state, Mark 12.24-27, Matthew 22.30, Luke 20.34-36, the famous statement about being eunuchs of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 19.10-12, as well as a range of sayings on marriage, family and discipleship in Mark 10.29-30, 3.31-35, Matthew 19.29, Luke 18.29-30 and elsewhere. They are linked to Paul's advocacy of celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7 plus the preferential treatment of virginity in the infancy narratives and Revelation 14.4 together with the 'androgynous' advocacy of Galatians 3.26-28 and certain non-canonical texts (Gospel of Thomas 22.1-4, 2 Clement 12.2-6 and the Gospel of the Egyptians in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* 3.92).

What sort of terrain does Loader's book reveal? He argues, I think successfully, that all the evidence indicates 'that Jesus was not married and this was a matter of choice not accident, and reflected what he would have seen as "given" to him' (144). None of the early Christian texts refer to a wife let alone children while celibacy certainly appears to have been an option in many ancient Jewish sects. References to Jesus loving Mary Magdalene are found in much later texts but again do not record marriage or children. Loader gives brief consideration to the possibility that Jesus' unwed state could indicate a radical commitment to free love for himself and his followers but dismisses it. Interestingly, he does consider homoerotic possibilities by including the Secret Gospel of Mark in his purview but relegates it to an account of 'baptismal practice' in which Jesus gives 'catechetical instruction' (147). While I think Loader gives the Secret Gospel too peremptory a treatment, nevertheless, whatever the origins/provenance of this text as a whole, its point is specifically to deny homoerotic possibilities in the account.

Jesus' celibacy is indicative of a utopian vision of radically inclusive community, one that is inclusive or safe for women and children. This vision underpins most of the texts analysed by Loader. Thus, Jesus' condemnation of men looking lustfully on married women as adultery is a demand on men to exercise sexual responsibility and one that expands ethics from a matter of acts to attitudes and intent. Furthermore, nowhere are women portrayed as a sexual threat to men. This is further reinforced by the accounts of Jesus' encounters with vulnerable women – 'nothing suggests Jesus was at all constrained by the potential sexual danger which most hearers would have understood (them) to represent' (40). Not only were women to be welcomed into this community but children too – it was to be a safe place for children. Loader reads Mark 6.9 and Matthew 18.6-7 as condemnations of child abuse, specifically sexual abuse. This position is consistent with ancient Jewish condemnations of pederasty.

Despite the celibate vision, the Jesus movement did not mandate celibacy for all. Indeed the texts show that marriage was taken very seriously, hence the condemnation of divorce. Marriage represents a divinely established order of creation by which 'a man and a woman are to become one and effects this joining' (115). Sexual intercourse 'appears both to entail and to symbolize a joining of being to create in some sense a single entity' (117). Hence, remarriage after divorce is a form of adultery and yet paradoxically adultery itself dissolves this union. Nevertheless, while marriage and sexual union were part of the divine order of creation they were not seen as part of the heavenly resurrection realm of the *basileia*. In the resurrection life, humans are equal to angels, no longer subject to death. Hence sexual union, reproduction and marriage are no

longer necessary. The heavenly resurrection realm is conceived in Temple terms, in which sexuality and marriage are out of place. Thus while marriage is not condemned, indeed it is taken very seriously, disciples are invited to leave it behind, to live the resurrection, necessarily celibate, life in the here and now, as Jesus probably did and as Paul does.

I think Loader's book is well argued and deals well with the material. However, there were some points where I had reservations. I thought he was stretching it to read Mark 10.13-16 as an account of parents presenting their children to Jesus for him to fondle them. As he himself says any such suggestion 'remains... unproven' (60). Likewise his attempt to read the challenge in Matthew 5.30 to cut off and throw away the right hand if it 'causes you to stumble' as a condemnation of masturbation 'is far from secured' (46). Nevertheless it would be interesting to see what a study of the reception of these verses would reveal. I suspect the latter has been regularly deployed to such purpose. He would appear to be on surer ground in reading Mark 9.42 and Matthew 18.5-7 as condemning abuse, including sexual abuse, of children and certainly these verses lend themselves to such readings. But in the context of a preferential option for celibacy, the issue might not be abuse as we understand it but in the encouraging of these little celibate ones into any form of sexuality. Certainly I have heard that position in Catholic sermons years ago, delivered in a cultural context with a very strong emphasis on celibate ideals. Childhood represents a non-sexual state, the goal of the celibate disciples, who could thus also be the referents of these verses.

Loader further states that the texts contain 'nothing about... homosexuality, except only indirectly in relation to pederasty (which takes both homo- and heterosexual forms)' (232). While on one level that is so, at the same time the eunuch sayings in Matthew 19.10-12 have figured prominently in gay and lesbian exegesis deployed in contemporary debates over sexuality. Likewise, with Matthew 5.22, where Jesus condemns calling another 'raca', arguments have been advanced that this Aramaic word has a 'homosexual' referent such that Jesus could be seen to be most strongly condemning what we would call homophobic abuse. Similarly Loader ignores the accounts in which Jesus heals the favored slave/boy of a centurion (Matt. 8.8-15; Luke 7.1-10), which at the very least should be included alongside his encounters with sexually dangerous women, as an indicator of his attitudes to people whose sexual lives differed from the norm. The centurion stories could also have better nuanced his consideration of pederasty, which I think is too conflated with contemporary concerns about pedophilia. Ancient Judaism certainly condemned pederasty but on the basis of Levitical proscriptions of male-male sex. I am also not aware of a heterosexual (or lesbian) equivalent to the institution of male pederastic love in the Hellenistic world. As Loader himself notes (23), male pederasty was very much a focus of ancient philosophy and the pederastic relationship was the model for teacher and disciple. Plato's *Symposium* is a most outstanding example. Indeed, Sjeff van Tilborg has argued that the Beloved Disciple's relationship with Jesus in John (the Johannine Jesus must surely be part of any Jesus tradition) provides a model of discipleship based on those philosophical pederastic models. It is curious that there is a developing option to celibacy in Plato as well as subsequent philosophers.

Nevertheless, these are minor quibbles. One of the great successes of this book is that it highlights the difference or alienness of the world of early Christianity. Loader's discussion of the links between resurrection and celibacy is both rich with insights and highlights that alienness around both Jesus and his early followers. This alienness is crucial for debates around sexuality in Christian churches today. Loader himself comes from the Uniting Church in Australia, within

which these issues are vigorously contested. I strongly concur with Loader that the last thing that should be done in resolving these issues would be to simply adopt the New Testament strictures on marriage, divorce, sexuality and celibacy as binding rules. As he says, ‘the most important statements about sexuality in the Jesus tradition are probably not those which deal with sexuality itself, but portray words and deeds of Jesus which embody an understanding of God as concerned in compassion with making people whole, calling them to life, bringing reconciliation’ (251). The great strength of this book is that in analysing these strictures Loader contextualises them within that broader framework of inclusion, respect for the other and concern for what stems from the heart that is even more compellingly associated with Jesus across all the texts of the Jesus tradition.