

Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature (2013),
William Loader (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 168 pp.). “Attacking ‘Perversion’” (2013:131-140):

“The engagement with Hellenistic culture accounts for Jewish writers giving much greater emphasis to **passions** and to **procreation** as the purpose of sexual intercourse, as they appropriated what they saw as commonly shared concerns” (131). **Note:** Paul refers to “passions” (*pathe*) in Romans 1:26 and to synonyms in 1:24 (*epithumiais*, covetings, strong desires) and 1:27: “burned...in desire (*exekauthesan...oreksei*) toward one another [mutuality].” However, as Loader frequently indicates, procreation as the purpose of sexual intercourse is notably absent in the teaching of both Jesus and Paul, which should warn us against reducing them to faint echoes of the dominant Hellenistic and Jewish sexual ideologies.

“The account in **Genesis 19** of the men of **Sodom** wanting to **rape** Lot’s male guests made the story a prime example of inhospitality [cf. Abraham’s hospitality in Gen 18]. Sometimes authors focus entirely on the inhospitality with no reference to its sexual violence [Luke 19:10-12]....It seems to have been the focus also earlier in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel [Isa 1:10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:48-50]....*Pseudo-Philo* makes a connection between the intended violence at Sodom and the sexual violence against the Levite’s concubine at Gibeah [Judges 19—never taken as a basis for condemning the Levite’s “heterosexuality”!] (133-34).

“**Idolatry** had always been an issue at the interface of cultures. It was frequently associated with sexual wrongdoing. Thus the prohibitions of incest and other acts of sexual wrongdoing in **Leviticus 18** are prefaced by the exhortation to the Israelites: ‘You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt...and...in the land of Canaan’. Such doings include various forms of incest as well as intercourse during menstruation; adultery; sacrificing offspring to Molech; lying ‘with a male as with a woman’, similarly condemned as a capital offense in 20:13; and having sexual relations with an animal (applicable to both men and women)” (131-32). **Note:** also in **Romans 1:18-32** Paul prefaced his references to sexuality with emphatic condemnation of an ancient human option for idolatry (1:18-23, 25), which led to God’s handing over the perpetrators to the domination of sexual passions described as dishonorable and against nature (1:24, 26-27). However, while Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 refer only to male-male same sex acts of anal intercourse, Romans prioritizes females for sexual acts referred to as “against nature” (1:26; which the church fathers until ca. 400 CE interpreted not as homoerotic but as heterosexual anal sex, thus avoiding conception)—again demonstrating the distinctiveness of Paul’s teaching. “[Philo] reads the prohibitions in **Lev 18:22 and 20:13** as targeting both pederasty and adult consensual sex, both male and female” (134). **Note:** Leviticus specifies only male-male anal sex, but explicitly includes females when prohibiting sex with animals; Paul refers to females in sex “against nature” (probably not homoeroticism) and presumably does not refer to sex with animals—see “one another” in 1:27). Philo never would have referred to God’s acting “against nature” as Paul does (Rom 11:20, 24; cf. 1:26-27; review of 2012)

“The mix of reasons for rejecting same-sex intercourse included, therefore, the feminization of men, a matter of great shame; the perversion of the act, producing sperm which could not fulfill its function of procreation; manifest failure to control strong passion, resulting in connections contrary to what is natural; and especially for Jews, flouting of both divine commandments prohibiting such acts, and the divine order which required male to mate with female and not otherwise. These values almost certainly inform the brief reference to same-sex intercourse in Paul’s letter to the **Romans**....his exposition of same-sex intercourse is meant to be taken with utmost seriousness” (137). **Note:** Loader here recognizes Paul’s laying of a rhetorical trap in Rom 1:18-32, but creates a false dichotomy between the trap laying and taking the teaching seriously (see my review of 2012).

“In **1 Corinthians** Paul employs a list of people who are disqualified from entering God’s kingdom, among whom are some, called in Greek *arsenokoitai* (“bedding males”) and *malakoi* (soft) [1 Cor 6:9-10]. The former occurs also in the first letter to Timothy composed in Paul’s name [**1 Tim 1:9-10**]. The terms are best understood as references to people engaged in same-sex intercourse, in their active and passive roles, the latter word used also more widely in disapproval of the effeminate. Paul’s use of the word may indicate that he shared the view of the shamefulness of men acting as women, despite not saying so directly in Romans....” (138). **Note:** as Loader’s reference to the first Greek term clearly specifies, Paul (like Leviticus 18 and 20) limits his same-sex reference to males (“in their active and passive roles”—hence practicing anal sex) and does not refer generally to “people” (*pace* Loader; the context indicates oppressive sexual acts; Hanks 2011:40-54)

“Distance....Proximity....The revision of...assumptions about the inequality of men and women, and the rejection of ...assumptions that slavery was acceptable and slaves inferior or to be kept in their place, has taken many centuries....Both a common sense of justice and an openness to biblical values helped people to make those important transitions. The much more controversial issue...is over same-sex relations and whether people with a same-sex orientation, men or women, who express themselves in sexual intimacy with a person of their own sex, should have places of leadership in the church and community and whether their long term committed relationships should also be understood as marriages.

“The findings of my research indicate that in all the literature which I examined the assumption is that such actions and the attitudes, passions, which produce them were abhorrent. Both the prohibition of Leviticus, which authors understood as condemning such acts (some extending this explicitly to such acts between women), and the creation story which reports that God made (only) male and female, underlie that stance. There is no evidence that any of the Jewish writers actually believed that there were people with a natural sexual orientation towards people of their own sex. Philo, who mentions that view, declares it absurd. These writers typified by Paul, believed then that people engaging such passions and doing such things were acting contrary to their nature and to be condemned. In fact, along with idolatry, same sex relations were a major target in Jewish criticism of the depravity of the world in which they lived.

“Many still hold to this view, though some do so with the modification that they acknowledge that some people do seem to be naturally attracted to members of the same sex, i.e. are homosexual, a belief in which they differ from our writers. They have reached this view, as most indicate, by observing contemporary experience. Those for whom for ideological reasons biblical prohibitions must remain intact then counsel that homosexuals are to be respected and understood but to be required not to express their sexual desires in same sex-relations. For others, including myself, this goes halfway in distancing from first century views and produces a cruel conclusion. Why can these people for whom a homosexual orientation is natural not express themselves sexually in the same responsible way we ask of heterosexual people? Informing the stance that calls for cropping such discrimination against homosexuals are values of natural justice but also of the same biblical principles which have revised other forms of discrimination. The fact that in relation to slaves and women one can find hints of a better approach in these writings, but not in relation to homosexuals, is no reason not to follow the path of non discrimination” (Loader 2013:146-47).

Note: For positive biblical texts on sexual minorities, see Hanks 2012; 2013. For the problematic texts on women, Hanks 2011. A comparison of Loader’s own treatment of negative texts on women with those cited against same-sex acts clearly indicates that the “clobber texts” commonly cited against same-sex acts are much more ambiguous and open to alternative interpretation than the “texts of terror” commonly used against women.

“I believe that where people for religious reasons might want to attribute authority to some texts and espouse their views, they will be best served by first hearing what they say. For myself, I sense no obligation, religious or otherwise, to privilege particular ancient texts in a way that shields them from critical investigation. At all times respecting and honouring others, including what they say, entails first and foremost listening to them... on their terms and not doing so selectively or seeing or hearing only what suits us” (Loader 2013 3).

“Almost all such works necessarily derive from the more well-to-do or, at least, the better educated. Information about attitudes of most of the population is irrecoverable” (2013:4; cf. Song of Songs).

Regarding Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Q source: “The material relevant to sexual themes is sparse, but enough to suggest that as a Jew Jesus belongs with those who opted for enhanced strictness” and Jesus’ movement envisaged the world to come “as being of a nature where sex would not matter and apparently would not exist” (2013:7).

“The capstone of a project that has already produced five volumes of detailed research, **this book establishes Loader as the Kinsey of biblical sexuality**. Like Kinsey, he has taken a topic that has often been taboo and demystified it. His patient cataloguing of **the diverse biblical attitudes to sexuality** complicates the issue for anyone who would appeal to biblical authority in a simplistic way. This is a major contribution both to biblical scholarship and to practical theology.” **John J. Collins, Yale Divinity School (book back cover)**.

“The ancient myth of woman’s creation from man [Genesis 2] is one of the very early explanations of sexual desire as the desire to reunite. *In the Beginning according to Aristophanes in Plato’s Symposium*. Writing in the late fourth century B.C.E. Plato, in his *Symposium*, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, has the comic playwright, Aristophanes, tell a similar story to account for sexual drive. According to Aristophanes human beings once existed in three forms: male (with two sets of male genitalia), female (with two sets of female genitalia) and mixed (with one each). One day they annoyed the god Zeus, who in a fit of rage cut them in half from top to bottom. The result of their being cut in half is that ever since the halves have sought their other half: males seeking females; males seeking males; and females seeking females. Aristophanes was making a case for what we call both heterosexual and homosexual union. This is very different from the account in Genesis, but it shares the notion that something happened in the past to account for sexual desire between partners and it belongs to human nature. The differences are telling: the sexual drive in Genesis is not a punishment but an element of God’s [good] creation, something positive. Similarly, Genesis does not contemplate categories beyond simply male and female, and this remains a constant feature in Jewish thought of the time, so that any other than that, such as homosexual desire, is seen as deliberately perverse” (2013:11; cf. Jesus on those “born eunuchs” in Mat 19:12; Paul’s imagined heterosexist reaction to Aristophanes, 2013:139). **Note: Plato’s citation of Aristophanes’ myth may be (intentionally?) humorous, but does show ancient awareness of persistent, stable sexual preferences and curiosity about possible cause/s—not just for male “homosexuality” but for lesbian and heterosexual preferences** (cf. the exclusive modern preoccupation with homosexuality).

Loader accepts the authenticity of 1 Cor 14:34-35, which imposes silence on women (2013:20). He treats at length *The Myth of the Watchers* (20:13:23-31), interpreting Paul’s concern about angels and unveiled women (1 Cor 11:10; 2013:29) as reflecting the myth, but makes no reference to the use of this myth in Jude 7, a key example of homophobic translation and interpretation in most modern versions (exception: NJB).

Significant miscellaneous comments:

1 Cor 7:36-38 refers to fathers (not husbands) allowing their virgin daughters to marry (2013:33).
“Hatred” a common term for divorce (2013:34); cf Mal 2:15 (2013:72-73).

On women: the “apparently dichotomous view....Women should certainly not try to be like men, but remain faithfully in their place” (2013:37-38; but see exhortation to manly courage in 1 Cor 16:13).
Aristotle vs Hippocrates on conception; Sarah producing sperm (Hebrews 11:11) reflects Hippocrates (58-59).

1 Tim 2:14f: women “saved” through childbearing refers to their security under male protection (Gen 3:16; 61)

Differing ages for m/f marriage may explain why son slept with father’s wife (1 Cor 5:1; 63)

Jesus accepts woman’s anointing (four Gospel versions, 2013:67; **note: no “enhanced strictness” here**)

Herod’s son, Alexander, had sexual relations with Herod’s eunuchs; **note:** Josephus recognizes Herod’s stable sexual homoerotic preference?; 2013:68; cf Herod Antipas’ marriage condemned by John the Baptist in Mk 6:18; Loader 2013:71-72)

Divorce: obligatory for adultery (2013:68-74); diversity of Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10:11-12 and //s in Mt and Lk (70-71); “While Jesus’ response [Mk 10:11-12] could well have protected some women from arbitrary dismissal and have men putting more effort into making marriages work, it was hardly adequate to be treated as a rule for all occasions. Taken as such it would trap people in abusive and destructive marriages. Similarly prohibiting remarriage would in many instances close off the most realistic and compassionate option for those dismissed, especially where family of origin was no longer an available refuge for women” (2013:74)

Sacred Space (2013:75-104; uncleanness, but with no ref. to Rom 1:24 reference). Luke (2:22-24, 27, 29) carefully notes that after Jesus’ birth Mary observed the Leviticus provisions (2013:75). “Men, too, became unclean; thus after ejaculation of semen, whether during sexual intercourse, during sleep, or through masturbation, a topic untouched but an event to be assumed among most men of the time” (Lev 15:16-17; Deut 23:10-11; 2013:76). “Becoming unclean or impure was not a sin in itself, but doing nothing about it or exposing oneself unnecessarily to uncleanness certainly was” (78; see **Countryman** on Rom 1:24).

Against Intermarriage with Foreigners (2013:81-87): “The fear expressed in [the early traditions] is that intermarriage with the Canaanites would lead to idolatry, as Exodus puts it: prostituting oneself to other gods” (34:11-16; Deut 7:1-6; 2013:81); see Phineas (Num 25:6-8; Ps 106:31; Gen 15:6; Moab, Num 25:1-5). “Concern with intermarriage to foreigners was central to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, who demanded dissolution of such marriages” (divorce! 2013:82). “The interpretation of Deut 23 played a significant role in defining who may or may not ‘be admitted to the assembly of the Lord’ and to the Temple” (23:3-8; 2013:85).

For Intermarriage with Foreigners (88-91). “Resistance to the exclusive stance gave birth to some of Israel’s best known tales...Esther, Ruth, and Jonah” (also Joseph’s marriage to Aseneth, daughter of a pagan priest, Gen 41:45; Moses’ marriages, Exod 2:21; Num 12:1; that non-Jews became proselytes is always assumed; 2013:88). “Another holy space was the war camp...a place of God’s promised presence” [Deut 20:1-4]. “The rationale...with regard to the war camp is that God’s holy angels are present” (2013:93). “Nakedness was out of place everywhere except in the intimacy of husband-wife relations” (92).

“Sex and the Future. Most expressions of future hope in Jewish literature of the period paint the future as fulfilling the dreams for the present...Visions of the future usually went beyond literal description into fantasy and symbol, or at least the fantastic, including the promise of huge harvests of fruit and wine. Abundance regularly included abundant offspring among animals and, not least, among humans. Some form of resurrection is often assumed and associated with it, ideas of transformed existence...The notion of a transformed bodily existence...derives in part from Daniel and in turn from Zoroastrian notions of a glorified bodily state. The most common understanding of resurrection in that sense, is not of a resuscitated physical body, but of a new or renewed body...This belief [of being clothed in light] is equally evident in early Christian texts where Paul speaks of a spiritual body, not a physical one of flesh and blood [1 Cor 15:35-49]; the transfiguration story in Mark foreshadows the appearance of Jesus’ resurrection body at the parousia as shining [Mark 9:2-3; Matt 17:2]; and Matthew’s interpretation of the parable of the weeds depicts the righteous as going to shine like the sun [Matt 13:43]...There is an exception to this inclusive vision of the future [Mark 12:25, “like the angels in heaven]...The issue is not weddings but sexual intercourse. There will be none, for all shall be as angels, who when properly behaving, unlike the Watchers, do not engage in sexual activity. Luke [20:34-36] interprets the saying along the lines that people will live forever and so not need to produce progeny and so not need to have sex...The Book of Revelation assumes a future garden paradise without a temple” (97-100; but “only divine presence,” p. 103). .

“Celibacy Now and Then. Belief in a future without sex may explain why some believers saw it as their lot to live already now as they would then, and others, that they should seek to persuade all to so live. Paul resists those who were seeking to do the latter [1 Cor 7:1-6]...One of the foundational texts of resurrection belief, Dan 12:3, already points far beyond notions of physical resurrection...When [Revelation] refers to 144,000 who had not ‘defiled themselves with women’, which should not be taken as misogynist disparagement but as cultic language, referring to the usual impurity issues associated with sexual intercourse, it may well have in mind those believers who saw themselves called to live in the present as they would in the age to come. They are joined by thousands of others, no lesser Christians, but people not so called...Some later texts which affirm celibacy...appear to draw on speculation that the end will be a return to the beginning, so that separate male and female will return to one as in Gen 1:26...Jewish and Christian variants...depended on Genesis and so envisaged that return as reincorporation of the female back into the male Adam. Thus people acclaimed the good news that women would be elevated to male status. The Gospel of Thomas speaks of Mary [Magdalene] being made male [Gos. Thom. 114]” (100-104).

Conclusion. I would agree with John Collins’ comment cited above both regarding Loader as “the Kinsey of biblical sexuality” and that this, his sixth volume of studies in this area, is a significant contribution both to biblical scholarship and to practical theology. Perhaps this work will prove especially helpful for those who work mainly with the 2012 *Magnum Opus* but need a concise map to guide them in consulting the earlier four volumes covering the literary-cultural background of the Biblical materials. One may occasionally disagree with Loader, as I have done regarding a few points in my review of his 2012 volume, but almost always he presents the alternative viewpoints under consideration accurately and fairly and with extensive bibliographical references. I would only hope that in future writings he can expand the attention he gives to the “minority propaganda” queer perspectives, with more critique of the “majority propaganda” (as in Robert Gagnon).

Excursus: James Brownson concludes that “The ancient world had no notion of sexual orientation” (2013:255) However, William Loader writes:

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Bernadette Brooten (1996:8-9, 115-41, 242-43) pointed out other ancient evidence for such awareness attributed to astrological causes, which make clear that such ancient awareness is not equivalent to modern scientific explanations (see Chandler Burr’s article in Hanks 2013:70-79). In my review (*More Light Update* March-April 1997, p. 17) I warned: “Particularly our often-repeated affirmation that sexual orientation was unknown in antiquity requires careful attention. Brooten cites ancient astrological materials that attributed same-sex attraction to the stars, and thus showed some awareness of lifelong same-sex erotic preference. However, we should not equate this astrological superstition with modern biological and psychological understandings of sexual ‘orientation’ (a term Brooten uses, but which does not occur literally in her sources)

William Loader summarizes well the case for ancient awareness of stable, enduring same-sex preferences [2010:20-23]. If Paul was a repressed homosexual, as Gerd Theissen and Bishop John Spong conclude (Hanks: Excursus in my review of Loader 2010), we would expect him to know that he did not “choose” such a preference and that no amount of praying would change it; 2 Cor 12:7-10]. “On sexual impurity, [Brownson] sums: For Paul, ‘impurity focuses on internal attitudes and dispositions, particularly lust (excessive desire) and licentiousness (lack of restraint)’ and strongly questions whether ‘committed gay and lesbian unions, which seek [the] discipline...of lifelong commitment, should still be characterized as “impurity”’ (Blair review).