

The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, Legends, Wisdom, and Related Literature

By William Loader.

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Loader's comprehensive volume on sexuality in the pseudepigrapha is the third in his research series on attitudes towards sexuality, which he approaches "in the broad sense of matters pertaining to sexuality rather than in the more defined sense which we find in discussion of sexual orientation and sexual theory," p. 1. Loader takes up diverse texts of Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman era (third century BCE to the end of the first century CE), although several of the texts discussed, such as *Joseph and Aseneth*, could fall outside of this time frame,. His investigation of sexuality in pseudepigraphic texts follows his examinations of sexuality in the Dead Sea Scrolls (*The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009]) and in the early Enoch literature, specifically the Aramaic Levi Document and Jubilees (*Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in the Early Enoch Literature, the Aramaic Levi Document, and the Book of Jubilees* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007]). The fourth volume focuses on the writings of Philo, Josephus and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (*Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on sexuality: attitudes towards sexuality in the writings of Philo and Josephus and in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011]). Loader has also written on sexuality in the Jesus tradition (most recently, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* [London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010]).

Since the volume discusses texts that diverge widely regarding their setting, provenance, date and content, Loader organizes his work into three general sections. Part one, "Attitudes towards Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, and Related Writings," includes later Enoch literature: the Sibylline Oracles, the Jeremiah, Baruch and Ezra literature, Apocalypse of Abraham, and Testaments of Moses, Job, Abraham and Solomon. Part two, "Attitudes towards Sexuality in Histories, Legends, and Related Writings," treats Septuagintal literature such as Tobit, Judith, Susanna, 1 and 2 Maccabees and later works of disputed provenance including the *Book of Biblical Antiquities (LAB)/Pseudo-Philo, Joseph and Aseneth*, and the *Life of Adam and Eve* and the *Apocalypse of Moses*. Part three examines psalms (the *Psalms of Solomon*), wisdom writings (Ben Sira / Sirach, a contribution by

Ibolya Balla, *Wisdom of Solomon* and several other texts) and also goes beyond what is typically designated as “pseudepigraphic” literature by including fragmentary Judeo-Hellenistic works such as Theodotus and Pseudo-Eupolemus. This organization represents a major strength of the work, as it allows Loader to examine each text individually, in context, and on its own terms. Only in his conclusion does Loader bring these varied texts together in order to make a more general assessment of shared issues and themes.

Loader begins each discussion with a brief introduction to the text in question’s dating, provenance, language of composition and transmission history as well as a short summary of the text’s contents and purpose, specifically as the content relates to topics of sex and sexuality. Extensive footnotes are provided for each of these topics, providing the reader with appropriate and up-to-date reference materials for a more detailed and comprehensive study of the text. Loader touches all relevant areas of the historical study of each text in a condensed manner, without compromising or distracting from his main task. He works to direct the reader’s attention to specific issues relating to sexuality; for example, in his discussion of *Joseph and Aseneth*, he reminds the reader that the main concern of the text is intermarriage; other interests relating to sexuality, which often guide interpretation of the text, are drawn from this central issue (see p. 330). The author successfully incorporates rich and dense information into relatively compact discussions while offering his own observations and arguments regarding interpretation of the major issues, providing the reader with an excellent overview of the concerns of the texts (see for example his discussion of gender roles in *Judith*, p. 212).

Loader rightly recognizes an important limitation of this literature: the pseudepigraphic texts should be regarded as representing only one perspective on sexuality, the male perspective: “these writings will mostly reflect the views of the educated male, a fact not without relevance for considering the topic at hand” (490). Our understanding of themes relating to sexuality in the Jewish and Christian literature of the Hellenistic Greco-Roman era is only partial, as our access to women’s voices is mediated through the writings of men. This limitation is clear, for example, in *LAB*’s presentation of “themes of existential relevance especially for women” (p. 297), Ben Sira / Sirach’s focus on marital relations (discussed on pp. 374-91) and 4 Ezra’s use of imagery relating to pregnancy and childbirth (pp. 96-97), as well as in the text of 1 Esdras 3:1-5:6, or “The Tale of the Three Youths,” specifically in the texts’ “speech about women” in 4:13-32 (pp. 142-47). This “speech about women” is not really about women at all, but rather about men, male behavior, and male responsibility. In addition to affirming traditional roles for women in the household, in sexual relations, and in marriage (referencing Genesis 2:24), the text also asserts the dangers of women’s sexuality, as a beautiful woman can cause men to give up gold, silver, and all precious

possessions (4:18-19) In a negative “twisting” of Genesis 2:24, that beauty can cause a man to forget or give no thought to father, mother or country (4:21). Again, the “Tale” contends that a man loves his wife more than his father or mother, and that “[m]any men have lost their minds because of women, and have become slaves because of them. Many have perished, or stumbled, or sinned because of women” (4:26-27). The focus here is on curbing excessive or inappropriate response to women, not on women themselves. Loader remarks that the negative valuing of women’s sexuality relates “in part to seeing women’s sexual attractiveness as potentially dangerous, but primarily to men’s inappropriate and excessive responses to women’s sexuality; in other words, failure to control themselves, and probably by implication, also failure to control women and especially their sexuality” (p. 147). Women’s sexual identity and presentation in these texts is often only relevant as it impacts or reflects upon male identity and behavior.

Loader writes in an accessible and thoughtful style, and is always careful to entertain different possibilities of nuance or interpretation both within individual texts, and when considering motifs of or topics relating to sexuality between texts. In his concluding assessment of sexual attractiveness and sexual pleasure in the pseudepigraphic texts, Loader points to a positive valuation of physical attractiveness, especially the beauty of women, which plays a key role in works such as Tobit, Judith, Susanna, Theodotus, and the depiction of Jael in *LAB*. Loader observes, “[r]egistering and affirming a woman’s sexual beauty is sexual response and in this sense such depictions affirm sexual response. The ethical issue is how or whether a man (since these are all couched as male discourse) chooses to act on that sexual response” (p. 495). Each text assumes that sexual response can lead to appropriate or inappropriate sexual engagement, depending upon individual behavior. A woman’s beauty can be celebrated, but it is always somewhat dangerous, if valued to excess or without control; Loader’s attention to these nuances works to maintain the complexity of their relationship within the texts. Loader acknowledges the limitations inherent in trying to compare diverse perspectives not only between but also within texts, but he does still endeavor to offer an evaluative assessment of the texts based on common issues or discussions relating to intermarriage, sex and danger, same-sex relations and sexual mythology, among other topics. This concluding discussion is a helpful starting point for individuals wishing to conduct further research on specific topics, though it would be helpful if the reader could look up references to these issues in an index as well.

In his conclusion to the volume, Loader notes that the diversity of the writings in terms of their dating, provenance and content not only necessitates the text-by-text approach of the volume, but also makes integrative evaluation extremely difficult, particularly when literature discussed in previous volumes needs to be taken into account as well. However, Loader does suggest in his

conclusion that, “[b]eyond mere motifs *the grounds or motives for constructing sexual ethics* in these writings are diverse but generally cohesive” (p. 511). Loader situates this broad cohesiveness in the more generalized context of “universal” law or order, “displayed in creation and its presumed regular orderly patterns, and sometimes expressed as what is assumed therein to be natural order” (p. 511). These “universalizing ethical perspectives,” Loader argues, are more common to contexts of wider cultural engagement and struggles for identity, particularly Jewish encounters with Hellenism; Loader writes that the materials offer “a fascinating glimpse into what happens at the interface of engagement of a strongly ethnic religious and cultural tradition with broader currents within the amalgam know [*sic*] as Hellenistic culture” (p. 513). This engagement leads the readers to recognize both patterns of convergence between the Christian and Jewish Traditions, including norms of marriage and household behavior, and the literary strategy of *Pseudo-Phocylides*, a text in which the ancient Greek philosopher Phocylides gives voice to distinctly Jewish values. Although both techniques are grounded in Torah: “we find at the same time an embracing of shared values and, by the ploy of pseudonymity, a strategy of identity with selective demarcation. Yet in that process we can detect the ongoing “control” of core theological values” (p. 513).

This cohesiveness is established also in part through appeals to Torah, the concrete expression of core theological values, often through specific commands and prohibitions. In many contexts the reading of certain sacred texts grounds the various pseudepigraphic works, in very obvious ways, such as *Joseph and Aseneth*’s basic structuring as a response to Genesis 41:45, but more generally in very specific, focused contexts, such as *4 Ezra*’s reading of creation in Genesis or the author of *4 Maccabees*’ reliance on the familiarity of his readers with Joseph’s resistance to seduction in Genesis 39:7-12 (*4 Maccabees* 2:2-3). The complex relationships of these texts to earlier sacred writings, particularly in their approaches to topics relating to sexuality, remain to be fully explored. Loader includes a brief section in his conclusion on the use of biblical stories as a source for reflection or instruction on sexual behavior, particularly the use of biblical figures as models (noting that most of the more “obvious” figures who might feature in discussions of sexuality such as Noah, Judah and Tamar, and David and Bathsheba play a minimal role or no role at all in the literature, p. 511). This section does not go quite far enough in addressing the intricate relationship between the pseudepigraphic texts and their appeals to Torah.

The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality offers rich reflection on a large and diverse corpus of texts, and its organization and historical treatment of the primary sources makes it an excellent resource for those wishing to engage in this exciting field of study. Loader’s discussion of matters relating to sexuality and sexual identity offers a valuable glimpse into the sexual concerns of the Hellenistic Greco-Roman era. At several points Loader also

extends this discussion to contemporary considerations about sexual behavior and ethics (for example, in his observations on sexual attractiveness and sexual pleasure, p. 496); this extension leaves space for the volume, and this pseudepigraphic literature, to influence contemporary debates relating to sexuality as well.

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