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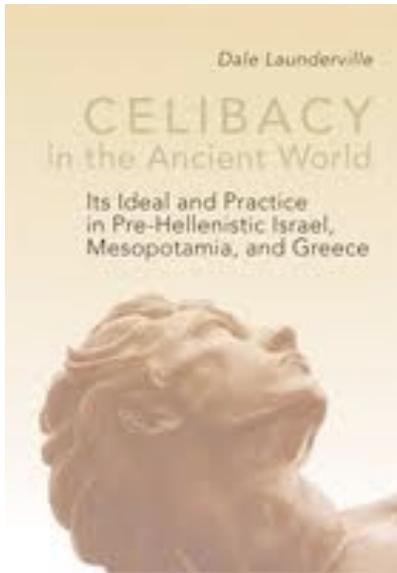
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Launderville, Dale

Celibacy in the Ancient World: Its Ideal and Practice in Pre-Hellenistic Israel, Mesopotamia, and Greece

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010. Pp. xli + 571. Paper. \$69.95. ISBN 9780814656976.

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Dale Launderville, professor of theology at Saint John's University School of Theology-Seminary has no doubt published a substantial monograph relating to the theme of celibacy in the ancient world. In fact, however, this monograph is far more than just a treatise on celibacy in ancient Israel, ancient Mesopotamia, and ancient Greece, since it presents an extensive study relating to marriage, household, intermarriage, adultery, virginity, androgyny, sex, and gender. It assesses the traditions of ancient Israel, Mesopotamia, and Greece according to the form they manifested in the so-called Axial Age (sixth to fourth centuries B.C.E.): the exilic and Persian periods in Israel, the Neo-Babylonian and Late-Babylonian periods in Mesopotamia, and the Archaic and Classical Ages in Greece.

The publication has a well-organized structure that in my view makes it excellent for didactic purposes. First, each chapter addresses a particular theme. Second, the same pattern is followed consistently throughout the book. In each chapter the topics under discussion are presented in the same order: ancient Israel, Mesopotamia, Greece, synthesis. By such a comparative character, "this study aims to bring the voices of these three traditions from the pre-Hellenistic era into conversation on a topic that admits of no definitive solution but demands ongoing engagement" (xxx). Third, the introduction

(xix–xli) and the major part of the final chapter (461–89) construct an envelope structure, introducing the themes and summarizing the results, respectively.

Launderville writes, “A key question in assessing the practice of celibacy is the context in which it occurs” (xxi), for “[i]n the pre-Hellenistic era in these three cultures, the need for the regulation of sexuality was largely unquestioned, and the responsibility rested not only upon the household but also on the city or state” (xxiv). Therefore, before celibacy as such is discussed in chapter 6, several other topics are presented first.

On the basis of Ezek 16, chapter 1, “Sexual Restraint within the Context of a Cosmic Household,” examines how the covenantal relationship with YHWH provided a living cultural web within which the sexual drive was to be negotiated. In Mesopotamia (e.g., Enlil and Ninlil, Atrahasis, Epic of Gilgamesh) and Greece (e.g., *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Bacchae*), however, exclusive commitment to one deity was not the typical practice. Therefore, “[t]he contrasting visions of the structure and expectations of the divine world among the three cultures call forth different strategies for maintaining collective and individual integrity” (xxxvi).

Chapter 2, “Intermarriage: A Threat to the Household as the Enduring Matrix of Personal Identity?” discusses the understanding of marriage and the integrity of relationships of a household within a political community. The main text from Israelite tradition, of course, is Ezra 9–10, where steps are taken to dissolve mixed marriages. Among texts from Mesopotamian tradition are Enuma Elish and the Code of Hammurapi, which reflects the tension between herders and city-dwellers. In Greece, the Athenian predilection for endogamy manifests a similar concern for a closed society and a clear identity.

The place of the erotic in the divine-human relationship is discussed in chapter 3: “Sex and the Holy: Erotic Synergy or Warfare?” Here marital and familial metaphors from Hosea and Gene 2–3 are discussed, whereas texts on same-sex erotic relationships are taken from 2 Sam 1, Lev 19, Gen 19, and Judg 19. In Mesopotamian tradition, texts on erotic relationships among the gods and between gods and humans have been selected from The Descent of Inanna and other hymns. From Greek tradition, the main text drawn upon to illustrate the role of the erotic in the quest for the transcendent is Plato’s *Symposium*.

Chapter 4, “Virginity and Chastity: Feminine Ideals Integral to the Patriarchal Household,” is devoted to the integrity or bodily wholeness symbolized by virginity and sexual restraint. The intactness of the woman’s body, a pristine state undefiled by semen, was believed to be an index of the honor of the patriarchal household (Deut 22; Gen 34; Judg 11). In Mesopotamia, celibate *naditum*-women were dedicated by their fathers to

the temples of Shamash and Ninurta to serve as intercessors for their families. As to male virginity, which is rarely evidenced in the literature of the three cultures, Gen 39, Prov 7, and Euripides' *Hippolytus* are explained.

In chapter 5, "Composite Guardian Figures: Tension at the Cosmic Junctures," one of the main issues is how humans can bring together the masculine/feminine and male/female dimensions of human existence so as to symbolize the reality of God who transcends and yet encompasses gender and sexuality. It relates to primal composite figures charged with responsibilities related to cosmic balance. As to Israelite tradition, Ezek 28 and Gen 2 are the main witnesses. As to Mesopotamia, The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and Inanna, Athrahasis, The Descent of Ishtar, and an excerpt from the Middle Assyrian Palace Discipline are among the texts that clarify this topic, just as Euripides' *Bacchae* in the Greek tradition. The topics of androgynous hermaphrodites and eunuchs are discussed as well.

Chapter 6 is entitled "Celibacy as a Proleptic Death and a Quest for Transcendence." Launderville writes, "Celibacy is a form of dying to oneself that runs contrary to the basic family values of the Israelite tradition" (442–43). He adds, "Not having offspring in these ancient cultures meant that one was cutting off a primary form of life after death. This belief that one lived on in one's offspring was of central importance in the Israelite tradition" (480). Jeremiah 16 is chosen as the main Israelite witness, since it is the sole Israelite text enjoining the practice of celibacy for an individual. A handful of other passages from the book of Jeremiah contextualize this call to celibacy. "To exist outside a household in these three ancient cultures was to be virtually nonexistent. The sexual renunciation of the celibate must provide ways for the transcendent to be at work within the earthly household. In other words, the celibate must become a living symbol for connecting the earthly with the cosmic household, which spans the spheres of heaven, earth, and the netherworld" (486). Jeremiah survives the opposition of the Jerusalemites through trust in YHWH and attentiveness to the word of God imparted to him. At this point Launderville links celibacy with the quest for transcendence by means of meditation on the Torah (Jer 17:7–8; 31:31–34; Pss 19; 119). The quest for transcendence via wisdom is illuminated with the help of the Akkadian *Ludlul bel nemeqi* and as a way of overcoming death in Plato's *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Philebus* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Chapter 7, "Communion with the Real: The Goal of Celibacy," underlines that celibacy is suicidal if it includes only dying to carnal sexual expression; it makes sense only if it creates a deep longing for beauty and truth that is fed and sustained on the pathway toward the transcendent. "The goal of celibacy is to come into communion with the divine and human inhabitants of the cosmic household" (445). At this point the Song of

Songs is introduced. Though this unique biblical text does not speak directly about God's presence in the midst of love between the man and the woman, "generations of readers in the Jewish and Christian traditions have interpreted this erotic encounter of the lovers as revealing powerful dimensions of the divine-human relationship" (447). Here I lost my way, as the link with the topic of celibacy becomes quite complicated, if not absent.

The monograph is concluded with a bibliography (493–534) that has several sections: (1) Primary Texts; (2) Theory, Hermeneutics, and General Background; (3) Ancient Israel; (4) Ancient Mesopotamia; (5) Ancient Greece. The substantial subject index quite often has far too many lemmata under a specific heading, which decreases its function. The index of biblical texts, strangely enough, includes Mesopotamian and Greek texts, too.

The author, a scholar of wide reading, is to be rendered thanks for his huge enterprise. He has shown that celibacy should not be considered apart from both patriarchal and the divine cosmic household.

There is one methodological question, however, that puzzles me. In the introduction it is said that this study assesses the three traditions according to the form they manifested in the Axial Age, that is, the sixth to fourth centuries B.C.E. (xxix). A number of times, however, this basis has been construed in an artificial way. The metaphoric of the book of Hosea, for example, is discussed via "the literati of Yehud in the postexilic period" (156) or with the help of "a reader of the Book of Hosea in the Persian period" (176), whereas the book of Hosea is much older. The same criticism is also valid for a substantial number of Mesopotamian texts.