

**David Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians*.
Synkrisis: Comparative Approaches to Early Christianity in Greco-Roman Culture,
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Early Christianity, imagined as a sort of amorphous, homogenous community, continues to exert considerable influence on North American social life. While much sociological work points to the decline (though, no one should hastily declare “death”) of evangelical Christianity, it’s political (and therefore social) sway continues to exert force toward what should be considered normative and lawful. The Trump administration has certainly shown this to be the case, with its continual pandering to its evangelical political base. The minority, surely, rules for the moment. And, so, there is an imagined throughline straight from sexual and familial practices of the early Christians directly to the presumptions of evangelical practice. But, of course, the descendance is only a fiction; or, rather, it is indicative of one particular (ideological) reading of Christianity as a wholly unique phenomenon, over against being intertwined with other cultural forces (xv-xvii).

David Wheeler-Reed’s book, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire*, is (at least partially) concerned with complicating those attempts by contemporary Christianity and conservative political leaders to insist that common conservative familial norms are, simply, standing directly on the foundation of not only early Christianity, but also the New Testament texts. Wheeler-Reed attempts to complicate the story in a fairly straight-forward manner. It’s important here to do the review duty of noting the structure and logic of the book, which shows clearly how well Wheeler-Reed complicates the story of contemporary Christianity having some immutable link to “Judeo-Christian family values.” While he uses methods of history, Wheeler-Reed also makes clear that the book is more a “study of ideologies” (though not in a Marxist sense) rather than a “work of history” (xi). He makes a distinction, then, between “total history” and “general history,” with the latter “concentrating on describing differences, transformations, continuities, mutations, and so forth” (105).

The book is comprised of five main chapters, the first four dealing with various ideas regarding family, sex, and procreation in the ancient world, and the final chapter reading contemporary debates about ‘Judeo-Christian’ family values in relation to ideological complications in the ancient world; this falls in line with the author’s goal of “compar[ing] different ideological systems that deal with the same themes” (xi). The first chapter explores attempts at regulating morality (especially tied to familial relations and sexuality) by Augustus, and how broader codifications of sexuality, marriage, and procreation are found in a variety of places. These codifications and moral reforms, also, are not about morality as morality, but serve the purpose of building up the Roman

Empire, a sort of deontological slant of what could be characterised as a biopolitical moulding of the populace for the purpose of maintaining national strength.

The second chapter moves along to Second Temple Judaism, which Wheeler-Reed is interested in precisely because “modern society in the United States—especially in the realm of conservative politics—is convinced that ‘Judeo-Christian’ ethics guide sexual dos and don’ts” (xviii). What may be surprising to some, however, is the similarity between sexual codes of Second Temple Judaism and that of the previously explored post-Augustan reforms in the Roman Empire. However, despite some similarities, Wheeler-Reed importantly shows that sexual codes are certainly not homogenous. He notes, for instance, the Essenes’s celibacy and broader resistance to passions (51-54).

Chapter three points to the multiplicity of ideologies in the New Testament itself, which certainly dampens the insistence that some normative, comprehensive, primitive “Christian” sexual ethic guides contemporary Christianity. Wheeler-Reed notes, for instance, both the explicit and implicit traces of “anti-family” ideology in the genuine Pauline epistles (65-73) (as well as Paul’s disinterest in children and desire in 1 Thess), the pro-family portions of Deutero-Paul, and Jesus’s rather overt anti-family sayings. With regards to Jesus, Wheeler-Reed focuses on Matthew’s augmentation of Mark’s divorce pronouncements, though they both “uphold ideas already present in the antifamily ideologies” present in Paul (75).

After noting the contradictory takes on the family in the New Testament texts, one has to wonder what mutations occur through centuries of early Christian reception. This is perhaps one of the most interesting chapters in the book because Wheeler-Reed notes various niche takes on family life (such as wife-sharing [93]), as well as the drama that occurs when early Christians disagree on what familial ideology is “best.” This chapter is a good reminder that there is no singular take, that ideologies undergo shifts and disputations, and that if one is talking about early Christianity they must admit to the heterogeneity of the movement.

The final chapter focuses on contemporary pro-family ideology, showing that this ideology has more in common with the procreative and sexual codes of the Augustan reforms than, as has been established, the (sometimes wildly) heterogenous ideas about family, sex, and children present in Judaism or Christianity. Further, Wheeler-Reed spends time showing that, despite conservative think-tanks and politicians claiming to make secular arguments for family structures and (hetero-)sexual norms, “modern forms of power use Christianity in the service of policing modern society in the United States” (105).

As noted above, the book does a good job of complicating the common claim that the particular family ideology of conservative Christianity (which is often synonymous with non-religious “conservatism”) has no definitive claim on Christian texts or early movements. Rather there were a diversity of movements and texts, and what appears to be a “majority” was often in flux.

With regards to criticisms, at times the book felt short. Two chapters in particular could have done with more material. The third (“New Testament: Conflicting Ideologies

of the Family”) and fifth chapters (“Then and Now: Reification”), specifically. With regards to the third chapter, I believe that, especially, the anti-familial sentiments of New Testament texts could have been fleshed out more. However, even so, Wheeler-Reed explains well the contours of (genuine) Pauline views on the family, noting that it goes beyond just verses that are as overt as what one finds in 1 Corinthians 7. The case made, as well, exhibits the careful structure of the book. What Paul says in certain places, and what he leaves out, can only be fully understood after noting the backgrounds discussed in the first two chapters. With regards to Jesus, I would have expected to see more regarding the Gospel of John, as well as Luke’s Gospel (in particular, Lk 14:26). However, it may be that Wheeler-Reed recognised that such ground is well-trod, and so put his energies elsewhere. With regards to the fifth chapter, it’s length is comparable to previous ones; however, it may feel less fleshed-out precisely because the “modern” era only gets a single chapter, as opposed to a block of four chapters regarding early Christianity and “backgrounds” related to it. I wonder if more time could have been spent detailing political uses of Christianity to police familial and sexual norms.

Wheeler-Reed’s work is appropriate for students of all levels and scholars. It is an accessible volume that does not require in-depth knowledge of the various periods to which it pays attention. However, it’s accessibility does not mean that it is theoretically simplistic. Wheeler-Reed grounds his work not only in relevant historical works, but also important theoretical sources, such as Foucault, Althusser, and Irigaray. With that being said, it is a welcome and crucial volume for those whose interests are in Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, New Testament, and/or the connections between contemporary American religion and politics.



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