

The Cedar and Brokeback Mountains

Heroic Passions or “I’m Not No Queer”

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A Review Essay

[1] In two previous articles (Burns 2000, 2002) I have explored the topic and some of the relevant literature on homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible, the ancient Near East and the Judeo-Christian traditions. Since then a few more studies have revisited the subject, notably those of Ackerman and Jennings. It is worthwhile to consider them, to assess their contribution to the ongoing debate and to offer some final thoughts on the *status questionis* and its possible future.¹ To provide a different perspective, the discussion is set in the context of Annie Proulx’s short story, “Brokeback Mountain,” and the film of the same name in 2005.

[2] In that story two youthful cowboys find themselves herding sheep on a Wyoming mountain in what becomes for them the defining summer of 1963. That summer they also discover a powerful and lifelong love for one another, one that transcends marriage and survives long separations. The film of the book immediately became iconic in gay society, but had a wider appeal, garnering the most nominations for the 78th Academy Awards. The gay community conveniently disregarded certain drawbacks, marriage and children for both and, after the first sexual encounter, a significant conversation in which both firmly deny that they are “queer.”² Proulx herself disclaims any significant queer or gay theme for her story, asserting that it was based on a “coalescence of observations over many years.” In a

¹ I had intended to write this in 2006: unfortunately a major health crisis intervened at the end of 2005 that pretty much took care of 2006. The outcome was a good one.

² “Ennis said, ‘I’m not no queer,’ and Jack jumped in with ‘Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody’s business but ours’” (262).

western cowboy bar, she had once observed a “skinny 60-something cowboy” looking at younger cowboys. She dubbed this figure a “country gay.” Her story centers on a two such young cowboys, “a couple of homegrown country kids finding themselves in emotional waters of increasing depth.” The characters themselves are subtly rather than obviously drawn. As noted, after their first sexual encounter, they deny that they are “queer,” a derogatory and probably homophobic term. In terms of their family lives with wives and children, Proulx observes that rural gays “like kids” and that Ennis’ and Jack’s wives, Alma and Lureen, give the story a universal connection. She further notes that among lonesome cowboys a certain expediency rules and no-one needs to talk about it (129-31).³

[3] Proulx’s story reflects the depictions of intense and possibly erotic male friendships in the writers examined by Christopher Packard: James Fenimore Cooper, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Owen Wister among others. He talks about “homoerotic affection in historical discourse that was free from the derogatory meanings associated with post-1900 evaluations of male-male erotic friendships” (3-4).⁴ However, her story also echoes ancient narratives of strong male affections. This is not to suggest that Proulx, consciously or unconsciously, had Gilgamesh or other heroic models in mind, but the parallels are significant: strong young men, flawed in both tales, a passionate and enduring devotion to each other, a task/quest and a mountain, the descent to marriage, the death of one of the pair, grief, acceptance, and long remembering. The ancient and modern tales follow remarkably similar courses. One example suffices: after Jack’s death, Ennis’ visit to Jack’s parents in their remote farm in Lightning Flat is touchingly reminiscent of Gilgamesh’s journey to Utnapishtim and his wife at the world’s end.⁵

Jacob’s Wound

[4] This work expands Jennings’ chapter in Stone (2002) and incorporates insights from his study of homoeroticism in the New Testament. It shares their aims and style, though time and familiarity have dimmed the capacity of his raunchy gay terminology to shock and underscore his unique approach. He emphasizes that he is not adding to the “dreary debate” on homosexuality in the Bible; his strategy is to explore “the astonishing diversity of material in the Hebrew Bible that lends itself to homoerotic interpretation” (x).

[5] After a preface and introduction, there are four parts.⁶ In Part 1, “The Love of Heroes,” he surveys the love between seasoned soldiers and their younger *aides-de-camp* (ch. 1 “Warrior

³ During the writing of this article the tragic death of Heath Ledger occurred. In the movie he had played one of the two cowboys. The media almost uniformly referred to his Oscar nomination for his role of “gay cowboy” (e.g. *Newsweek*, February 4, 2008: 9).

⁴ Packard’s authors – though clearly fascinated by close male bonding on the American frontier were – like Ennis, Jack, David, and Jonathan, husbands and fathers, though Harte did abandon his wife and children.

⁵ “The road to Lightning Flat went through desolate country past a dozen abandoned ranches distributed over the plain . . .” (281). The 2004 film, “A Home at the End of the World,” based on the 1990 Pulitzer Prize winning novel of the same name by Michael Cunningham, explored among other themes, homoerotic love in a liminal setting.

⁶ All the authors state their own personal positions on homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, civil unions, etc. With the clear exception of Gagnon, they support civil rights and benefits for the gay, lesbian, and transgender

Love”); a presumed *ménage-à-trois* involving Saul, David and Jonathan (ch. 2 “Love Triangle”);⁷ YHWH as the dominant, divine warrior lover of handsome youths (ch. 3 “YHWH as *Erastēs*); finally, he reflects on the incidents in the narrative on which the discussion of male same-sex relationships is based (ch. 4 “Reflections”). Jennings describes YHWH as a solitary, desert warrior god, outside the local pantheon, who finds his emotional context among the handsome young warriors of Israel. This idiosyncratic reading convinces him that “Homoeroticism is the very fulcrum of biblical religion” (76).

[6] This conviction controls the rest of his study. In Part 2, “YHWH’s Male Groupies,” it is applied to other male relationships in the Hebrew Bible. He begins with the roving bands of ecstatic prophets, the *bēnē nēbī’im* (ch. 5 “Dancing Queens”). Possessed by “Adonai’s erotic potency” (78), they engaged in frenzied dancing, nudity, and infected those they met.⁸ He compares them to the orgiastic votaries of the Greek Dionysos and the emasculated devotees, *galli*, of the goddess Cybele, though the former were women and self-castration is not recommended in the Hebrew Bible. These “homoerotic features of northern prophetic traditions” derive from their focus on a single male deity (98). The “healing” miracles performed on young lads by Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings have strong sexual content (ch. 6 “Boy Lovers”). These “resurrections” were effected by sexual encounters. He titles the section “(Res)Erection” (99), and the seven sneezes (2 Kings 4:35) of the Shunamite woman’s son are multiple orgasms (104). The boy Samuel’s “Night Visitor” at Shiloh (1 Samuel 3) is YHWH himself who comes to the boy “in his naked masculine hyperpotency” (110). Jennings believes that the Ark is both symbol and vessel of YHWH’s phallic potency and that the linen ephod, worn by the priests, is a phallic covering, a loin-cloth, perhaps YHWH’s penis sheath (50).⁹ This section’s final chapter (ch. 6 “Holy Hustlers”) moves to Judah and Jerusalem and to the enigmatic, *qēdēšim*, “sanctuary men.”¹⁰ Much scholarly ink has been spilled over their alleged cultic homosexual activity and Jennings is well informed of the literature. He suggests that the female votaries of the goddess Asherah and the male devotees of YHWH provided various sexual services in the framework of a fertility cult. However, he is forced to observe that, “The evidence in support of our hypothesis is admittedly quite circumstantial” (126).

[7] In Part 3, “Transgendering Israel,” he turns from homoeroticism to the transgendering or feminization of Israel as woman, wife or harlot in the prophetic literature. In the first of two chapters he treads familiar ground (ch. 8 “Transgendered Israel”). Amos prophesied against

communities. Ackerman, for example, has worked on securing domestic partner benefits for gay and lesbian employees of her college and contributed to the public debate on civil unions in Vermont (2-3). These personal feelings enrich their scholarship, though Jennings’ very passionate commitment makes *caveat lector* sound advice.

⁷ The love triangle was proposed earlier by Schroer and Staubli, though Jennings does not note this.

⁸ 1 Samuel 19:20-24 recounts how the ecstatic prophets of Ramah infected three groups of Saul’s messengers and the king himself.

⁹ In the Greco-Roman mysteries of Dionysos there was a basket, *liknon*, that contained the phallus to be revealed to the initiate. Jennings misses this parallel.

¹⁰ In lists of personnel from Ugarit the *qdšm* “sanctuary men,” follow the *kbnm*, priests: the word likely denotes non-priestly temple staff, singers, acolytes etc. (KTU 4:29; 4:38; 4:68; 4:126). Translations are mine.

the promiscuous women of Israel and Ephraim (Israel) herself as a fickle consort. The parable of Hosea's faithless wife is well-known. Jeremiah and Ezekiel do the same for the southern kingdom of Judah. In Ezekiel 23 Israel and Judah are satirized as nymphomaniac young women who lust for the massively endowed Assyrian, Chaldean and Egyptian warriors, "Jerusalem is a Size Queen" (154-63). From transgenering in the prophetic writings, he reverts to the previous narrative texts to find any comparable attempts at transgenering. In warrior and cultic circles the masculinity of the partners is not questioned; they remain "'conventionally' masculine" (177). In contrast, Joseph's tale (Genesis 37-50) is an evident example of the transgenering of an Israelite youth who "troubles gender roles" (ch. 9. "Joseph as Sissy Boy"). Jacob's gift "transvests and transgenders" or "sissifies" Joseph, and the brothers' attack on Joseph, forcibly removing and despoiling the tunic is an early occurrence of "queer-bashing" (181-82).¹¹

[8] Part 4, "Questions," looks at the Law (ch. 10), Lesbian Priority (ch. 11), and Israel and Greece (ch. 12). The Law's brief but clear prohibitions of homosexual intercourse (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13) are intended to prevent the feminization of the passive and penetrated partner as, *tó 'ēbāh*, an "abomination." This preoccupation with the passive partner arose from the legal editors' discomfort with David as a "bottom." Unlike Greece and Rome where the active partner was celebrated, the Davidic narrative glorifies the passive (212). Thus, two misunderstood verses from a late legal code become the controlling opinion on male same-sex relations in Judaism and Christianity. This actually defies Israel's God who loves David as his favorite "bottom" (219). In "Lesbian Priority," female same-sex eroticism in Greece and Rome is believed to have somehow given men the same idea. The *Bacchae* in Rome invited males to join them, thereby encouraging their same-sex activity. In Israel the women who mourned Jephthah's daughter and her companions are likened to Bacchic votaresses. Naomi and Ruth are, unsurprisingly, in a deep lesbian relationship in which they "cling," *dābaq*, to one another.¹² However, the themes of Ruth can easily have a more conventional interpretation. The short chapter 12 comments on Israel's relationship to homoeroticism in Greece and the ancient Near East. He claims that the lush profusion of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible predates the limited expression of pederasty in Greece. Apart from a brief

¹¹ It is certainly described in precisely the same way as the robes of the king's daughters, notably Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:18-19, *kītōnet pasīm*, (lit.) "tunic of the palms/soles." Deuteronomy 22:5 does prohibit cross-dressing, but this does not mean that there might not have been a garment common to the noble or wealthy young. The rabbis noted that it was a garment of privileged children of both sexes. Jennings says it symbolizes Joseph's role as domestic overseer, not a real man's work. However, it might just as easily reflect the long fine linen tunics worn by Egyptian noblemen in the New Kingdom and Late Period or prefigure the special robe of the Egyptian vizier that Joseph became. His argument that Joseph was, if not an actual then a figurative eunuch simply cannot be sustained. A much closer parallel can be found in Daniel 1-7, especially ch. 1. Joseph and Daniel are wisdom tales from the Egyptian and Persian diasporas: that the young heroes are compellingly good-looking, pious, and wise is endemic to the genre.

¹² This verb is sometimes used of sexual closeness. However, it can mean "keeping close," as Ruth follows Boaz's female gleaners and also signify male friendship (Proverbs 18:24). It denotes activities as different as fastening the parts of a divine image (Isaiah 41:7) and military pursuit (Botterweck and Ringgren: 80-81).

reference to Gilgamesh and Enkidu and to the supposed homosexuality of Akhenaten, the ancient Near East is ignored.¹³

[9] The epilogue (“Jacob’s Wound”) gathers some stray references: YHWH’s presumed rape of the Philistine deity Dagon; his thwarted attempt to kill Moses; the wrestling match between YHWH and Jacob at Peniel, with its homoerotic connotations, and a final word on Christianity.

Observations

[10] Jennings is right that the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament has many narratives that feature “unabashed eroticism” (ix). These show a robust acceptance of human sexuality, but are overwhelmingly heterosexual. He wants to show a similar acceptance of homoerotic behavior. He tries to do this by applying Bal’s model of “counterculture,” here Queer theory, to selected narrative units to prove that the Hebrew Bible was aware of and condoned varieties of homoerotic expression. Does his idiosyncratic and revolutionary reading succeed?

[11] “The Love of Heroes” highlights homoeroticism in warrior cultures, plausible enough given the Sacred Band of Thebes (ca. 350 BCE) and Japanese Samurai culture. However, it is not possible to prove that Saul, David, and Jonathan were in a love triangle. Jennings glosses over issues of dynastic succession and the use of “love” to signal alliance and loyalty. Further, a serious flaw here and elsewhere is his willingness to take the biblical narrative at its face value. Saul, David, and Jonathan are literary creations that may at best preserve dim memories of Israel’s past. If he is taking a literary critical approach to the final text, there must be some indication of date, cultural, and social context – none of which is given. As for “YHWH’s Male Groupies,” there is no evidence of homoerotic activity in the peripatetic prophetic bands. The alleged “therapeutic” sexual manipulation of the comatose boys by Elijah and Elisha is novel but highly improbable. In “Transgendering Israel,” the female personifications of Israel are less transgendering than examples of the female personification of nations and cities in the ancient Near East, under circumstances associated with sex or death. In the city lament genre (cf. Lamentations) the fallen city is a grieving widow or a violated daughter. In Ezekiel, it is difficult to see what this has to do with Queer Theory or transgendering, and the suggestion that it is fantasy literature for Ezekiel and his male readers is itself fantastical. Joseph may well be a liminal figure who manifests gender confusion, and is capable of attracting both sexes. However, the idea that the pharaoh’s investing of Joseph with the insignia of the vizier was prompted by “a wave of masculine desire” is totally unconvincing (184).

[12] Jennings pushes his examples and interpretation beyond the bounds of serious scholarly credibility. He undercuts his own arguments by his repeated qualifications: “they are not as

¹³ James Davidson’s recent book questions the long-held view of Greek pederasty set forth in Dover’s classic, *Greek Homosexuality* (1978). Like the biblical essentialists, he tries to provide evidence for mutual same-sex contact in Greek society. His “radical reappraisal,” however, shares their weaknesses. Also, Jennings seems unaware of current scholarship on Akhenaten. If he is referring to the curious feminization of the royal statues and to a statue of Akhenaten kissing a smaller figure on his lap, “the old interpretation of Akhenaten in a homosexual embrace with his mythic male co-regent is today considered very wide of the mark” (Reeves: 168).

clear as one would like” or “all of this is basically speculative” (243). When credible he is not original: homoeroticism was present in the biblical world; maybe the *qedēšîm* did engage in some sexual activity; Ruth and Naomi had a deep and enduring friendship that some have viewed as lesbian. All of this is common knowledge. He claims his work is based on Queer theory, but there is no mention of major scholars in the field like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault, Jonathan Dollimore, or, in biblical studies, Stephen D. Moore. Nissinen’s important study and a more recent one by Boyarin pass unremarked. In his desire to promote an honest and sympathetic understanding of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible, he presents a series of untenable hypotheses depending on very dubious readings. Consequently the energy, scope, and aim of the book are severely compromised. One imagines that were David, Jonathan, Elijah, Elisha and the others to encounter themselves in its pages, they would surely agree with the curt observations of Ennis and Jack on the morning after.

When Heroes Love

[13] Ackerman’s fine study of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and David and Jonathan is equally motivated and sympathetic, but altogether more judicious and scholarly. Her aim is to reconsider the much-debated homoerotic elements in both narratives and to provide a fresh interpretation of them. This interpretation will account for the latent ambiguity in the erotic dimension that has allowed the tales to be read either as examples of strong male bonding or of male same-sex erotic relationships.

[14] After a brief Prologue, an introductory chapter cautions that contemporary social constructions of homosexuality, deriving from 19th and 20th century Europe, cannot be applied to ancient societies. The Bible has no place in current debates about gay and lesbian civil rights. This leads to a helpful summary of the “essentialist” and the “social-constructionist” approaches to homoeroticism in the ancient world. Essentialists argue that heterosexual and homosexual identities are intrinsic/essential to all human societies, past and present, and can be recognized as such. Thus, one can call people straight, gay, or transgendered in the ancient Near East.¹⁴ Ackerman is an articulate exponent of the social constructionist approach that acknowledges homosexual activity in all societies, but rejects modern categorizations.

[15] Her examination of the Epic of Gilgamesh takes up the first of the two main parts of the book. In chapter 2 she reviews the historical Gilgamesh, the development of the epic from five extant Sumerian tales (ca. 2100 BCE) to the Standard (Akkadian) Version (post-1000 BCE), and its contents.¹⁵ Differences between these stories and the epic are noted. For example, in the Sumerian tales Enkidu is described as Gilgamesh’s servant or subordinate; but in the Old Babylonian and Standard versions they are comrades and friends. Chapter 3 explores their relationship, focusing on erotic terms and wordplay, especially those in

¹⁴ The most articulate Biblical essentialist was the late John Boswell; Jennings is certainly one, though he does not identify himself as such.

¹⁵ This Standard Version together with the four surviving tablets of the Old Babylonian recension (ca. 2000-1600 BCE) is routinely used by all scholars.

Gilgamesh's dreams of the meteor and the axe, both of which he loves like a wife.¹⁶ The heroic pair are described as "brothers," which can have erotic overtones. The wrestling match in front of the bridal chamber that ends in their kissing (OB version) signals their loss of interest in women as they become wholly absorbed in one another (69-70).¹⁷ Gilgamesh will even reject the advances of the goddess Ishtar. Coupled with this, Gilgamesh's extravagant grieving for the dead Enkidu points to an unusually close and likely sexual relationship. Many commentators note that actual sexual content is never mentioned and insist on the impossibility of an equal sexual union between two men in ancient Mesopotamian society. Ackerman does admit that "many of the more implicit references that suggest a sexualized relationship are not totally secure" (73). However, all commentators accept the presence of homoerotic imagery and she feels that the evidence on balance favors a sexual relationship. Might there be a situation that admits of this unusual "eroticized and sexualized language and imagery" (87) between two equal males? Chapters 4 and 5 answer this question.

[16] Ackerman's answer depends on the "rites of passage" theories of Arnold van Gennep and their subsequent adoption by Victor Turner. Van Gennep observed that participants in rites of passage were in marginal or liminal states before they were reintroduced to society. Turner applied this to the ritual aspects of social drama in four stages; breach of social normality, crisis, redressive action and reintegration. During the first three stages persons, places, and objects are in an ambiguous, unconventional or liminal state - "betwixt and between" (99). She proposes to read the entire epic as a rite of passage narrative in which liminality and ambiguity abound: two lives lived on the margins of society. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are liminal figures: Gilgamesh is two-thirds divine and one-third human, Enkidu exists between animal and human, male and female (106). Their adventures take place in liminal zones such as the Cedar Mountain. After Enkidu's death Gilgamesh wanders through even more. In these marginal spaces they face testing ordeals and encounter liminal characters: Humbaba, the guardian ogre of the Cedar Mountain; Ishtar, goddess of love and death; Siduri, the proprietress of the harbor tavern on death's shore; Urshanabi the ferryman who crosses death's ocean; and Utnapishtim, granted post-diluvian everlasting life, now neither human nor divine. As in all rites of passage there are guides: the sun-god Shamash plays the principal role, but the others all reveal vital knowledge. Therefore the question, "are or are they not gay?" is quite wrong: the correct question to ask the epic is "are they or are they not liminal?" (122). Her major thesis is that Gilgamesh and Enkidu's highly unconventional and homoerotic relationship is an integral part of the epic's liminal character. Only in this way can it be clearly understood. All liminal communities experience close attachments. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are bonded in a unique and equal relationship that is described in explicitly homoerotic language. However, liminality by its very nature has to end. Enkidu is long dead and Gilgamesh must be reintegrated into society. The Old

¹⁶ The words for meteor and axe also suggest sexually ambivalent males. Damrosch notes that "the two dreams slyly insinuate that they may be outright lovers" and that the "ambiguity of dreams – could be a writer's delight" (205-6).

¹⁷ In "Brokeback Mountain," there is the pivotal moment when Ennis' wife, Alma, sees Ennis and Jack gripping one another, wrestler-like, in a passionate embrace at the foot of the stairs.

Babylonian and Standard version treat this rather differently. In the OB version, the barmaid Siduri urges Gilgamesh to accept mortality, cease mourning, wash himself, and change his clothes, symbols of the end of his liminal state, and, finally, to marry and beget children, thus entering “the normal and normative behaviors of Mesopotamian society” (131). The Standard version lacks Siduri’s famous speech, though the ideas are present elsewhere in the epic, but concentrates rather on the great achievements of Gilgamesh as the partly divine ruler of Uruk. This is the natural end to chapter 5: the discussion of the roles of the liminal women in the epic (138-50) is awkwardly placed here and should have been included earlier in the chapter or as an *excursus*.

[17] In the second section Ackerman applies the same analytical techniques and theories to the biblical friendship of David and Jonathan (1 and 2 Samuel). “Introducing David” (ch. 6) first reviews the often acrimonious debate on the historical reliability of the David narratives. She opts for a position to the left of centre: “David” did exist, not the great king of the final edition, merely a successful local chieftain who garnered cross-tribal loyalty and some territory.¹⁸ From a literary perspective, she takes a traditional stance relying on original context and authorial/editorial intent, rather than the literary critical approach to the text’s final form. This is dismissed in a couple of pages (161-62), though it is more relevant to her purpose than the historicity of David. Further, she states that though such history may be unreliable, the mindset and worldview of the Iron Age authors deserves serious consideration and the stories must have made sense in the conceptual world of ancient Israel. There is something of a contradiction here.

[18] In chapter 7, “David and Jonathan,” she distinguishes two accounts: a primary one in which David appears as a tested warrior and skillful lyre-player and a variant with David the shepherd boy who defeats Goliath and is brought to court (175). The latter presents the relationship between David and Jonathan in six passages that closely parallel the primary account’s description of David and his marriage to Saul’s daughter Michal. As in Gilgamesh, Ackerman explores the erotic terminology and situations. At times her readings seem far-fetched. Even though the bow symbolizes masculinity in the ancient Near East, to interpret Jonathan offering his bow, shooting arrows, and David praising his archery as “a sexual proposition, followed by coitus and then a fulfilled lover’s words of gratitude,” is forced (184). The same might be said of comparing David’s refusal of Merab, Saul’s elder daughter, supposedly for Jonathan, with Gilgamesh rejecting Ishtar for Enkidu. Saul does describe Jonathan’s love for David as shaming his mother’s nakedness, but she does not make as much of this sexual innuendo as Jennings. She is on stronger ground with the oft-cited words of David’s lament, “more wonderful to me was your love than the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26). Even commentators who point out that the root *’āhab*, “love,” was also used in diplomatic language for the absolute loyalty between overlord and vassal, have a hard time with this one. Yet while they admit a powerful friendship between David and Jonathan, few allow that the Hebrew Bible would condone its expression in homosexual acts. Following

¹⁸ The positions are well enough known: the “maximalists,” are conservative Christian and Jewish scholars; the “minimalists/revisionists,” are located in Sheffield, England and Copenhagen, Denmark. I share Ackerman’s view. The resemblance of David to the *’apiru*, the outlaw and liminal bands of the Amarna Letters is a scholarly dictum.

Olyan, she argues that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 refer only to anal intercourse that feminizes and degrades the passive partner. However, this only makes the homoerotic element in the stories even more ambiguous since it is not overtly condemned.

[19] For Ackerman the homoerotic component serves a clear purpose. She applies the rites-of-passage analysis, honed on Gilgamesh and Enkidu, to David and Jonathan hoping for a similar resolution (ch. 8 “Liminality and Beyond”). She warns that this application will “not yield as fully satisfactory results” (200). This proves to be the case. She admits that David’s strongest liminal characteristics appear early on, especially in the variant account in which he is the youngest brother, the shepherd boy away from home, whose unlikely slaying of Goliath gains him a place in Saul’s household. Her search for more liminal aspects leads to a comparison of David and Gilgamesh whose end result contradicts her desired conclusion. She is forced to admit that while Gilgamesh is “hyperliminal,” David is “only marginally so” (216).

[20] While the homoerotic vocabulary highlights some liminal aspects of the story, what is its real purpose? To answer this Ackerman turns to scholars such as Kyle McCarter and Steven McKenzie who treat these stories as royal propaganda intended to legitimize the Davidic dynasty and its founder. Unlike McCarter and McKenzie, she accepts the homosexual overtones as an integral part of this, attempting to vilify Jonathan as the masculine David’s “feminized and passive partner” (194). Jonathan cedes everything to David including his masculinity and this effectively excludes him from monarchy (221-23). The message is that as Jonathan’s sexual submission was unforced and loving, “so should the narrative’s audience willingly submit themselves politically to David and accept him as their king” (226).¹⁹ So the homoerotic references were tolerated. Again, it is not about David and Jonathan’s gayness: the narrative “cannot serve as a model” for modern gay sexual relationships (227). Lastly, the chapter deals with David’s wives; like “Liminal Women” in chapter 5 it does not fit here. A short “Epilogue” ponders the resemblance between Abigail (2 Samuel 25:2-42) and Ishtar in the Epic. This is not really an Epilogue: an appendix on the women in both narratives would have been better.

Observations

[21] This book is very well written and documented. Her debts to scholarship are meticulously acknowledged, but Ackerman has provided fresh and stimulating insights. Admittedly her rites of passage and liminal analysis of David and Jonathan is less persuasive than that of Gilgamesh. Nor is it credible to construe Jonathan as a willing passive partner in anal intercourse. On the contrary Jonathan emerges as masculine as David and certainly more admirable. The most plausible explanation is that a singularly loving friendship is being portrayed, but one that also has a political dimension. Although she has a much more sophisticated approach to the literary history of the David stories than Jennings, she notes that she takes seriously the “mindset and worldview” of the Iron Age Israelite authors and editors and their audience, as she claims to have done for the Epic of Gilgamesh (162). One

¹⁹ Ackerman does not suggest who this audience might be; this may reflect her disinterest in the narrative’s literary history.

wonders how it is possible to establish precisely who these people were and what they thought. She is on firmer ground when she rejects these stories as having any bearing on homosexual issues in contemporary society. Jennings makes them gay, Ackerman plays for the “not no queer” team. The hill-country of Judah is not the Cedar Mountain, let alone Brokeback Mountain. Before offering some absolutely final thoughts on the whole issue, a short but valuable Swiss study merits consideration.²⁰

L’homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible

[22] Like the above, this book aims to provide an historical and contextual analysis of homoeroticism in the biblical world. After an introduction, four chapters cover the ancient Near East, Leviticus 18-20 and Genesis 19, David and Jonathan, and the New Testament: the latter receives only eight pages. The Bible cannot be used as a manual for understanding homosexuality today: in ancient societies sexuality was inseparable from social order and function (5). Mesopotamian sources, including omen texts, indicate different male on male sexual couplings, leading Römer and Bonjour to conclude that homosexuality was neither taboo nor a sin (21). In Ancient Egypt the tomb of Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum at Saqqara (ca. 2400 BCE) shows two high-level officials of the royal household, who planned to spend eternity together. Although husbands and fathers, they are shown in the intimate poses normally reserved for husbands and wives in conventional Egyptian art. In the Offering Chamber they are locked in a close embrace, their noses and the tie-knots of their kilts touching, and in another the hieroglyphs of their names are intertwined.²¹

[23] In chapter 2 the condemnations in Leviticus 18 and 20 are compared to a very similar Zoroastrian text. However, Zoroastrian material is notoriously difficult to date and to ascertain its influence on the Hebrew Bible, or vice versa.²² They believe that the harshness of the Levitical condemnation arose from a post-exilic desire to preserve both a pure and separate nation and the active male sexual role as the norm – the intent of the Holiness Code edited in this period. Römer and Bonjour (chapter 3) describe the David narratives as mainly fictional (67). They wonder if the authors and editors of Samuel knew of the Epic of Gilgamesh, fragments of which were found at Megiddo, and used it as a paradigm. When Jonathan surrendered his royal regalia to “a young and handsome unknown,” he was

²⁰ Published in Geneva in French speaking Switzerland, *Homosexuality in the ancient Near East and the Bible* is intended for non-specialist readers in Swiss and French Protestant churches and other interested parties. While gays and lesbians are usually granted civil unions in Europe, acceptance is not complete (7).

²¹ These paintings of two men more plainly historic than Gilgamesh or David, show a uniquely intimate relationship between two aristocratic functionaries. They share exactly the same titles, “Overseer of the manicurists of the palace, King’s Companion, Privy Counselor.” Official Egyptian scholarly opinion articulated by Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, is that they were brothers, even twins – like Iran, there are no “gays” in Egypt. Or did cosmetology attract men who like men even then? There are good web-sites of this tomb.

²² “Ahura Mazda answered: ‘The man that lies with mankind as man lies with womankind, or as woman lies with mankind, is the man that is a Daeva’” (8: 32; <http://www.avesta.org/vendidad/vd8sbe.htm>); “About the baseness (*garash*) and grievous sinfulness of the decree (*vijirih*) of death, unnatural intercourse [sodomy]” (Denkard 8:44; <http://www.avesta.org/denkard/dk8sbe44.html>). The latter comes from the Sassanian period (ca. 225-650 CE), long after the Hebrew Bible’s canonization.

prompted by a feeling “without doubt erotic” (69-70). Maybe earlier versions of the David stories had an even stronger homoerotic element that was pruned (101). In Gilgamesh the love interest is primary; in Samuel it is only one of several motifs. They leave the reader to decide for themselves whether the undoubted love of Jonathan and David had a physical aspect. It must be left to painters, poets, and novelists to develop the erotic relationship (102).

[24] This is an excellent little book that presents much information, perceptive analysis, and one or two fresh insights in small compass and elegant French. Like Ackerman, their analysis and conclusions are fully social-constructionist. In the ancient Near East forms of same-sex relationships existed, but these were not comparable to gay relationships in our society, nor can they be mutually hermeneutic. The best they hope for is that these narratives may ameliorate the few verses of strict condemnation of homoeroticism found in the Bible.

Concluding Reflections

[25] Ackerman’s application of liminal analysis throws a new light on homoerotic themes prevalent in culture and literature, from the Cedar Mountain, across the Plains of Troy, and all the way to Brokeback. Her study confirms Proulx’s assertion that the story and movie, like Gilgamesh, are not about gays, but about liminal figures, Ennis and Jack, whose love and sexuality defy glib categorization. Though David and Jonathan do not really fit Ackerman’s pattern, there are homoerotic and liminal allusions in the story. Further, in this type of literature many characters never reintegrate successfully and remain liminal. Enkidu’s becoming “civilized” never resolves his liminality, while Gilgamesh’s reintegration is hardly conventional. Any liminality in David and Jonathan is temporary and, in David’s case, defined by a ruthless quest for reintegration. In “Brokeback” neither reintegrates and Ennis remains quintessentially liminal, following the horses and living in trailers, the postcard of Brokeback Mountain and Jack’s two shirts his only constants.

[26] Then how do these three studies affect the *status questionis*? Diversity of sexual expression exists in all human societies and social norms evolve for standard or acceptable behavior, but also for dealing with perceived liminal sexuality. In the world of the Bible the controlling factor was the preservation of the masculinity of the freeborn male and his responsibility for family and property. However, there is clear evidence of intense friendships between men that defined their lives, but did not detract from their essential male obligations. Liminal homoerotic behavior was more or less tolerated depending on the society. The post-exilic exclusivist “true Israel” that the Hebrew Bible presents, with few exceptions, ultimately opted for intolerance and transmitted it as the Judeo-Christian norm.²³ Jennings braves the outer limits of essentialism: contemporary gay, lesbian, and transgendered people can encounter themselves and feel affirmed in the Hebrew Bible. His book will attract those who want to believe this; but its speculative content does them a disservice. Moreover, the essentialist approach inevitably invalidates other historical and

²³ Christianity bucked the trend of Greco-Roman cultural tolerance for wide varieties of sexual and religious expression.

contemporary cultural and social attitudes to homoeroticism.²⁴ Ackerman, Römer and Bonjour side with those liberal scholars who accept the cultural disassociation of the biblical world. Their views on the irrelevance of the Bible for contemporary debates will not convince essentialists like Jennings, nor conservative evangelicals who find only condemnation of homoeroticism in scripture. The *status questionis* has definitely been further informed and clarified, but a united approach to find common ground or even a resolution is unlikely for the foreseeable future.

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²⁴ Seabrook's book points to the sexual culture of the Indian subcontinent that is much more like the biblical world than contemporary essentialist readings suggest. Relentless globalization is bringing western models of sexual identity to other cultures, sometimes with disruptive and repressive results. Often there is "a reluctance to accept uncritically all the promptings that come from the West" (123). However, globalization will prompt interesting alliances and disagreements among different religious traditions on social and cultural issues like homosexuality. But that is beyond the scope of this article, which is definitely my last word on the subject.

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