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THE 'DAVID AND JONATHAN NARRATIVE' AND THE WRITING OF BIBLICAL HOMOSEXUALITY [SIC]

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The interpretation of the David and Jonathan narrative within 1-2 Samuel has confused many interpreters who do not know what to make of this biblical instance of a close and passionate relationship between two men, particularly when the relationship appears in the same literary tradition that condemns male homogenital behaviour. While conventional interpretations of the narrative have resisted discussions of a sexual aspect to the relationship between David and Jonathan, developments in the recently-minted discipline of the history of sexuality have enabled interpreters to approach biblical eros in new ways. This paper will discuss the contribution of interpretations as offered by Martti Nissinen and Susan Ackerman, in light of the seminal works of Kenneth Dover and Michel Foucault. Although Nissinen and Ackerman claim to be influenced by developments in the history of sexuality (*vis-à-vis* their criticisms of anachronistic impositions of [homo]sexuality onto biblical narrative), I will show that even these sexualised readings – as sophisticated as they are – are inescapably bound by the modern notions of sexuality that the authors originally critique. To conclude, this paper will look to insights offered by Exum and Damrosch about male bonding as an alternative way of reading the David and Jonathan narrative in historical perspective.

The question of the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan as portrayed in what I shall refer to as the 'David and Jonathan narrative' of 1 Sam. 18:1 – 2 Sam. 1:27 is hotly debated among many modern readers.¹ Although we know that the narrative appears in the same literary tradition as outright condemnation of homogenital practices, this biblical tale of a love between two men that 'surpasses the love of a man for a woman' creates confusion for many contemporary interpreters, irrespective of their stance on homosexuality and the Bible, leaving them pondering: 'were David and Jonathan gay'? Few interpreters are as bold as the Reverend Nancy Wilson, who asserts that king David is 'the most clearly bisexual figure in the whole of the Bible' (Wilson 1995, 149) and that Jonathan was 'more truly gay' than David (151). On the contrary, a small number of academic biblical interpreters indebted to theories from the recently-minted discipline of the history of sexuality have begun to advocate the need for caution when talking about the sexual behaviour of ancient biblical figures such as David and Jonathan. Thus, scholars such as Martti Nissinen and Susan Ackerman, among others, have provided a fresh voice to discussions about homoeroticism in biblical narrative, stressing the fact that many readings of 1 Sam. 18:1 – 2 Sam. 1:27 are grounded more in the polemics of today's contemporary society – *vis-à-vis* modern notions of (homo)sexuality – than they are in the historical/ideological milieu of the ancient biblical world. This paper will argue, however, that the sophisticated analyses of the David and Jonathan narrative as advocated by Nissinen and Ackerman, while stemming from the seminal ideas of Kenneth Dover and Michel Foucault insofar as they critique interpretations of biblical narrative that impose anachronistic concepts of (homo)sexuality onto the Bible, fall short of their own intellectual aims in that their interpretations do the very same thing. This paper will first highlight the need for all biblical interpreters to reflect upon the influence of their own

contemporaneous cultural contexts² – what Foucault (1978a, 31) terms a ‘history of the present’³ – as a precursor to reading biblical eros (particularly as it relates to the relationship of David and Jonathan)⁴ and then suggest an alternative way to approach this tale of biblical love.

Before an interpreter can legitimately make assertions about whether the biblical narrative of the relationship between David and Jonathan portrays the relationship as sexual he or she must first deconstruct contemporary presuppositions about sexual behaviour, particularly those concerning sexual identity, as these attitudes inevitably affect the way in which we look back upon the past. Today we live in a highly sexualised world, a world in which a person’s sexuality is seen as their most identifiable feature. Yet prior to the late nineteenth century, male homogenital activity was viewed as an acquired vice and matter of (bad) taste, as either an alternative or extension to vaginal sex: it was never seen as determinative of a person’s being. With the growing popularity of new medico-sexual taxonomies (biological and psychological) in the mid to late nineteenth century,⁵ however, attention shifted away from seeing a person’s sexual behaviour as a matter of personal choice, albeit sinful and debauched, to it being indicative of a person’s essence, their innate psycho-sexual makeup. As Claudia Honegger (1991, 56) notes, the predominant scientific model of the eighteenth century ‘was directly concerned with determining more closely the connection between the bodily disposition and psychological capacity’. The use of the Ulrichsian formula (*‘anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa’* [a female psyche enclosed in a male body]) to describe a man who desired sexual relations with another man typifies the emerging scientific view of interior androgyny that created the morphology that later came to be known as the homosexual type. Christian moralists who had previously governed the discussions of sexual behaviour were superseded by new scientific moral arbiters (sexologists), who rephrased the theological language of the arena of eros with scientific language, categorising homogenital desire as an internal medico-sexual condition aimed at the wrong gender and contrary to the normal purpose of sex.⁶

This nineteenth-century scientific modelling of sexuality as inherent to each and every person led to the belief that sexual orientations cut across times and cultures: a homosexual of the twentieth century was believed to have the same psycho-biological makeup as, say, the Roman emperor Hadrian. One of the first scholarly critiques of this essentialist assumption was proffered by the classicist Dover (1978) and his now somewhat ironically named book, *Greek Homosexuality*. Dover’s (1978, 1) analysis of the ‘uninhibited treatment of homosexual subjects [*sic*] in literature and the visual arts’ in Greek culture between the eighth and second centuries BCE, one of the first works in the field of ancient history to discuss the social construction of homogenital sexual desire, demonstrated how contemporary sexual categories cannot describe sufficiently the sexual practices of yesteryear. In the similar manner that sociologists analysing the working classes look at the influence of the wider socio-economic and political framework of class structure, so Dover insisted that special attention be paid to the unique social structures and meanings ascribed to homogenital sex in ancient Greece by participants to, and observers of, the acts, all of which are historically and culturally specific. Dover believed that such judicious analysis revealed highly-nuanced Greek attitudes toward sexual behaviour that are alien to those held by us in the modern world. Thus, while contemporary society views sexual behaviour as a private issue, separate from social, political and economic institutions, Dover showed by examples of poetry, painted vases, art works, philosophical writings and the like that in the ancient Athenian

world sexual behaviour was inextricably fused with the social institutions of the household, the state, social class, and even religion.

Another significant difference between the ancient world of the Greeks and contemporary society is that we in the modern world categorise sexual identities in relation to the gender of the object of a person's desire, while the Athenians' view of sexual behaviour was influenced more by a hierarchy of phallic domination, i.e., control, inequality, and penetration. The ancient Athenians believed that it was as natural for a man to appreciate the beauty of an (unmanly) boy⁷ as it was to sexually desire a female, and thus sexual associations between an adult male citizen (the lover/*erastes*) and an adolescent, free boy (the beloved/*eromenos*) were socially sanctioned. Dover (1978, 91) notes, however, that while boys were considered available sexually, these paederastic relationships were subject to strict rules about self mastery:

acceptance of the teacher's thrusting penis between his thighs or in his anus is the fee which the pupil pays for good teaching, or alternatively, a gift from a younger person to an older person whom he has come to love and admire.

Derision would arise only if the adult deviated from the norm and became the object of sexual desire by adopting the passive role, because doing so undermined his social worth as an adult male, which was measured in terms of phallic power. The image of a man transgressing the rules by submitting to anal penetration ultimately upset the hygienics of ancient Greek socio-sexual power, since such behaviour was tantamount to abdicating one's authoritative position as a dutiful citizen. Moreover, given that the *erastes* was duty-bound to teach the beloved how to be an honourable, male member of civic society, for the older man to take the passive role was believed to have dire consequences for the future of the Greek state insofar as it could inculcate in the younger proto-citizen the non-masculine desire to be (unmanly) passive.

Writing around the same time as classicist Dover, Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978b) was a philosophical challenge to the assumption that sexual desire (the libido) is an unchanging ahistorical fact determined by an individual's biological and psychological mechanisms. Thus, while it is true that throughout history people have had – and acted upon – sexual urges, Foucault believed that the social orchestration of sexual desire depends upon ever-changing social, economic and ideological discourses of particular historical conjunctures (*epistemes*).⁸ For Foucault, cultural discourses of eros that began in the eighteenth century led to the creation of medico-sexual taxonomies of the nineteenth century that we today understand as sexual orientation:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and sub-species of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hemaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity” (Foucault 1978b, 101).

Foucault's location of sexuality as mediated through historical junctures was a seismic epistemological shift insofar as his work provided a new philosophical framework from which to articulate questions around sexual behaviour as an historical phenomenon. That is, Foucault's (1980, 42) exploration of the history of discourses about sexuality is not so much concerned with mapping the historical causes of the emergence of discourses and practices, although part of his

work does this, as he is with understanding the mechanisms of the thoughts and actions of the present. Fundamentally, his arguments challenged the veracity of labelling historical figures with sexual categories such as gay or bisexual because, as Chambers (2002, 165) so eloquently puts it, 'homosexuality is a product of the differential relations that constitute discourse, so that its signification varies historically and in different cultural contexts, and what is now called homosexuality is a purely modern phenomenon'. Foucault's epistemological concerns were not with *who* was homosexual, but *how* was homosexual.

Even though expressive and intimate romantic friendships between males before the late nineteenth century were often difficult to differentiate from love of men for women, they still remained free of sexual connotation, and were socially celebrated without reserve. Yet with the advent of *scientia sexualis* and the invention of the homosexual species suspicion arose about men's intimate friendships.⁹ The fear of being stigmatised as homosexual reduced the expression of intimacy and emotional support among men, who defined the *innocence* of *normal* friendship against the *deviance* of homosexuality. Thus, the reification of homosexuality and lack of intimacy among men are two sides of the same coin. Foucault (1997, 136) notes that the rise of the homosexual type and its identifiable traits correlates with the rise of anxiety among men to show one another 'affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship'.

Dover and Foucault provided the foundation for subsequent studies of sex as an historical phenomenon.¹⁰ Their primary contribution to the discussion is their emphasis on the way in which sex is inextricably specific to historical junctures and cultural thought. Although the physiological manifestations of sexual activity in the ancient Mediterranean world of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Israelites, Greeks, or Romans might have taken similar *forms* to those of the contemporary world, the *cultural meaning* ascribed to such behaviour differs tremendously. While in the modern world sexual practices are viewed in terms of psychosexual object-choice, whereby psychological processes are assumed to guide the (sexual) body, in ancient cultural contexts the (sexual) body was subsumed under a communal hierarchy of social (including religious) conventions. Thus, stress was placed on an individual's socio-sexual subjectivity vis-à-vis gendered social performance within a stratified sexual continuum, and sexual behaviour was controlled by one's social status as much as one's personal dispositions. There is disagreement about the modelling of this sexual continuum, but many scholars agree that its fundamental bases are gender polarisation, social status, age hierarchies, and an active-passive dichotomy. As such, in much of the ancient world normal, healthy males enjoyed phallic domination over penetrable objects of sexual desire (i.e., inferior females and males [adolescent, slave, captive, and effeminate]) without such behaviour being deemed un-masculine. In the same way that anally penetrating a soldier of a conquered army signified heroic bravado, because to force another man to submit to this ignominy was considered the ultimate in hyper-masculinity, social opprobrium arose only when men abdicated their socio-sexual position of phallic power by choosing to be anally penetrated. In the ancient mind, the image of a man willingly submitting himself to anal penetration upset the hygienics of power and undermined the entire patriarchal fabric of the society.

While there are plenty of sophisticated discussions of biblical historiography within biblical scholarship and the history of sexuality within the general arts and humanities subjects, studies of homoeroticism as an historical phenomenon within the field of Bible is sparse. A number of

more vocal biblical scholars argue that the lack of interest in studying biblical homoeroticism outside of theological discussions of sexual ethics is the result of nothing less than heterosexist and/or homophobic prejudice,¹¹ while others might say that the conservative nature of theological education is to blame. Irrespective of the cause, the fact remains that the first comprehensive historical book about the biblical world and homogenital behaviour – Nissinen’s *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* – was published some twenty years after Dover’s and Foucault’s works (in 1998), with an additional journal paper published a year later (Nissinen 1998; 1999, 250–263). (Earlier scholarly works do exist,¹² but these books are primarily motivated by theological agendas than historical investigation.) Nissinen’s *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* examines homoeroticism in the wider, extra-biblical world of the ancient Mediterranean, while his ‘Die Liebe von David und Jonatan als Frage der modernen Exegese’ specifically focuses on the relationship between the two biblical heroes. Nissinen (1998, 56) acknowledges that the portrayal of the relationship between the two biblical heroes as intense and affectionate is why ‘modern readers probably see homoeroticism in the story of David and Jonathan more easily than did the ancients’. The sympathetic portrayal of intimacy between two men in a literary canon that condemns same-sex sexual expression has been interpreted by some modern readers as a positive biblical portrayal of a homoerotic relationship.¹³ Although the mutual relationship between David and Jonathan appears to be more comparable with that of modern-day homosexual relationships,¹⁴ Nissinen’s cognisance of the massive cultural gap between the ancient text and modern understandings of sexuality leads him to initially caution those who interpret the relationship between the two biblical heroes as homosexual. It is not that he disputes the occurrence of homogenital sexual behaviour in ancient times, but that he recognises that such behaviour would have been understood in terms of socio-sexual roles rather than notions of an inherent, subjective sexual being-ness (i.e., the sexual orientation of homosexuality) as we understand it in the contemporary world:

The image of homosexuality [*sic*] in the Bible and other ancient sources differs basically from modern images in that no distinction is made in the ancient sources between gender roles (man/woman), sexual orientation (homosexual/bisexual/heterosexual), and sexual practice. In those sources, erotic-sexual interaction on the part of people of the same sex is not considered a question of individual identity but a question of social roles and behavior. “Identity,” like “sexuality,” is an abstraction that became conceptualized only in modern times (Nissinen 1998, 128).¹⁵

Given the large conceptual gap between the ancient biblical text and modern interpreters, Nissinen (1999, 261) insists that the question of a sexual relationship between David and Jonathan is a matter of semantics that cannot be answered adequately with the use of words such as homosexual. He suggests, therefore, that biblical interpreters clarify what would make a relationship homosexual; specifically: would it necessarily include sexual behaviour, undercurrents of desire, or tenderness without sexual expression? (Nissinen 1999, 80, 252). In his own attempt at clarification of this question, Nissinen emphasises the importance of two terms he believes are more appropriate for describing the socio-sexual continuum of ancient Israel, as well as the surrounding cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world. The first, homoeroticism, is

defined by Nissinen as the erotic bonding of men with men (as well as women with women) that manifests itself in various sexual practices. Nissinen believes that the essence of homoeroticism is explicitly sexual, differing from the contemporary notion of homosexuality insofar as the latter presumes an inherent disposition towards members of the same gender, whereas homoeroticism emphasises the ‘mutual erotic interaction’ of men ‘on the level of roles and practices, even without a thought of homosexual orientation’ (Nissinen 1998, 17).¹⁶ The second, homosociability, is defined as the bonding of men with men (as well as women with women) that manifests itself in social institutions such as friendship. Nissinen (1998, 17) sees homosociability as both fluid and ambiguous insofar as homosocial relationships can – but need not – include sexual expression, although the importance of any eroticism lolls in the background, playing a small part in characterising the relationship.¹⁷

Nissinen situates David and Jonathan within the ancient Mediterranean world of segregation of men and women that resulted in strong homosocial ties between men; a process known as male bonding. In his 1998 work Nissinen refutes a sexual interpretation of the relationship between the two biblical heroes, arguing that, while it is conceivable that some modern readers might interpret their close friendship as erotic, the biblical narrative depicts a standard form of male companionship in the ancient Mediterranean world, whereby expressions of intimacy were not viewed with suspicion. He accepts that the relationship between David and Jonathan could be interpreted as ‘homoerotic’ (referring to homogenital behaviour without imposing sexual orientations onto the pair), but prefers to read their relationship as ‘homosocial’ because ‘nothing indicates that they slept together’ and ‘neither of the men are described as having problems in their heterosexual sex life’ (Nissinen 1998, 55–56).¹⁸ Nissinen (1998, 56) sees the love between David and Jonathan as similar to that of the epic love tales between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer’s *Iliad* and Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, whereby ‘intimate feelings’ are expressed, but ‘erotic expressions of love are left in the background... only to be imagined’. A year later, however, and without hesitation, Nissinen (1999, 254–55) takes a bolder stance and asserts that the ‘love-relationship’ between David and Jonathan is indeed portrayed in a sexual light by the biblical redactor of the narrative. Nissinen (1999, 261) concedes that the sexual alliance between the two heroes could be described as homoerotic, but he prefers to describe the relationship as homosocial because this recognises the occurrence of eroticism, but places more emphasis on other aspects of the relationship, such as mutuality, respect, and intimacy.

Nissinen’s (1999 258–59) sexual interpretation of the relationship between David and Jonathan presumes a social context where homogenital relations between men were accepted. In *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* Nissinen (1998, 41) argues that it is ‘unwarranted to restrict the prohibitions [of Leviticus] to a sacred sphere, [but] it is also unrealistic to assume that the Holiness Code would assess other kinds of homoeroticism as more acceptable’. Yet in his response to Zehnder’s (1998, 79, 174) argument that the biblical redactors would not positively depict a sexual relationship between two men in the same literary canon that unanimously condemned homogenital sexual relations, Nissinen is more willing to concede exceptions. First, Nissinen (1999, 254–56) reads the degree of intimacy expressed towards Jonathan in David’s lament of 2 Sam. 1:17–26, and Saul’s outburst towards his son in 1 Sam. 20:30–31, which is reminiscent of the use of nakedness as a euphemism for sexual intercourse in Lev. 18:6–18 and 20:11, 17–21, as indicative of a sexual relationship between the two men. Secondly, he contextu-

alises the biblical references of the Hebrew Bible that are said to refer to homoeroticism (Gen. 19:1-11; Judg. 19; Lev. 18:22, 20:13), demonstrating that they cannot be compared on an equal footing. Nissinen argues that the prohibitions of these four biblical texts refer to acts of abuse, violation and cultic transgression that are not comparable with the loving and intimate sexual relationship between David and Jonathan. For Nissinen (1999, 256–58), the Genesis and Judges passages are about collective male rape that stem from a xenophobic desire of the townsmen of Sodom and Gibeon to sexually subjugate and humiliate the strangers, whereas the Leviticus texts are about purity taboos and bodily boundaries of active-passive (male-female) sex roles. Given that the relationship between David and Jonathan is founded on mutuality and equality (both men are of the same rank, and there is no distinction between the passive and active role), rather than honour and shame or a dominant-submissive sex-role dichotomy, Nissinen (1999, 258–59) concludes that the biblical redactors did not hesitate to celebrate this unique sexual relationship between two heroic men.

Ackerman's (2005) recent publication *When Heroes Love* is a further attempt to untangle the web of confusion that surrounds the interpretation of the story of the love between David and Jonathan.¹⁹ Contrary to many other interpreters, Ackerman (2005, xiii–xiv) believes that the ambiguous and potentially erotic language and imagery of the biblical narrative is not as much a hindrance as a key to understanding what the biblical narrator intended to portray. Furthermore, she believes that the only way to appreciate fully the extent of this eroticism is to unravel the rationale underlying acceptable sexual relations and gender roles and relations in the wider world of the ancient Near East (Ackerman 2005, xiv, 162). As with Nissinen, Ackerman argues that it is in analysing the structures of homogenital sex in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world that we can see that modern notions of homosexuality do not adequately describe the relationship between the biblical heroes.

Ackerman begins with an eloquent engagement with the six biblical passages cited most frequently in support of a homoerotic reading of the relationship between the two men: 1 Samuel 18:1-4 (David and Jonathan's first encounter, whereby Jonathan is said to love David; Ackerman 2005, 166–74); 1 Sam. 19:1-7 (the second account of the couple's first meeting, whereby Jonathan is said to delight in David; Ackerman 2005, 174–81); 1 Sam. 20:1-42 (David's fleeing from Saul's court; Ackerman 2005, 181–87); 1 Sam. 20:30-34 (reports of Saul's anger over Jonathan's dealing with David; Ackerman 2005, 187–88); 1 Sam. 23:15-18 (the account of David and Jonathan's last meeting; Ackerman 2005, 188–89); and 2 Sam. 1:19-27 (David's lament over Saul and Jonathan; Ackerman 2005, 189–92). Working through each passage, she discusses the range of possible interpretations, particularly those of a political or (homo)erotic nature. Unlike Nissinen, however, Ackerman (2005, 217) believes that there is little, if any, mutuality between David and Jonathan: 'their status relationship to one another is unclear, so that at some points Jonathan appears the kingly one in relation to David, while at other points David appears sovereign over Jonathan'. Yet she looks toward the dated anthropological works of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner and their notions of liminality to provide a clarifying lens through which readers might interpret the biblical account of the friendship between the two men.²⁰ Like Gilgamesh and Enkidu, so Ackerman asserts, David and Jonathan live life on the edge, and are not subject to everyday norms. Because the two men are not governed by normal cultural conventions, she (Ackerman 2005, 210) is able to argue – unlike others who are left at

an impasse with what to make of a relationship in a tradition that condemns male homogenital relations apparently depicting a sexualized relationship positively – that the Samuel narrator celebrates David and Jonathan’s unconventional (sexual) relationship because the two men exist in unconventional time and space.

Thus, Ackerman believes that Jonathan, although a manly hero in all other regards, is feminised in his friendship with David. That is, Ackerman (2005, 181) believes that the bracketing of ‘David’s and Michal’s marriage (I Sam 18:20-29a) between the two stories that introduce David’s and Jonathan’s marriage-like relationship (I Sam 18:1-4 and 19:1-7)’ is a deliberate ploy by the narrator to show that ‘Jonathan is not only the structural equivalent of a wife to David, but a wife who supplants one of his sisters’.²¹ But Ackerman (2005, 192, 194, 210–11) does not argue that Jonathan is criticised for his rejection of strict gender roles or for adopting the passive role in his relationship with David; on the contrary, she insists that the Samuel narrative portrays this uncommon relationship as wonderful – even commendable. Ackerman (2005, 221–22) then, however, argues that the narrative’s very reason for depicting Jonathan as feminised before David is a strategic apologetic for David’s kingship. Ironically, Jonathan’s willingness for sexual passivity is not criticised because such non-masculine actions affirm David’s right to the throne.²² Likewise, David is not culpable of disobeying the biblical proscriptions of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 because he did not forcibly coerce Jonathan (as is the case in Gen. 19:1-11 and Judg. 19:22-26) (Ackerman 2005, 226).

As novel as Ackerman’s interpretation might initially appear, it is flawed on a number of grounds. First, nowhere in the prohibitions of Leviticus is force or rape mentioned – it speaks only of a blanket condemnation of a male lying with another male as with a woman, an act of transgression of the clear distinctions between purity and impurity, subject and object, male and female. According to the Priestly writers, any Israelite man who engages in homogenital activity is participating in practices that conflict with the covenantal bond of God and his nation. Wold’s (1998, 105) unusual eloquence encapsulates the matter: the Levitical prohibitions are not about ‘how sexual intercourse should be practiced between males, but that it cannot be practiced between males under any circumstances’.²³

Secondly, Ackerman (2005, 195–96) cites Olyan’s work on the prohibitions of Leviticus to strengthen her interpretation, but in fact it undermines it. Thus, while it is true that Olyan (1997, 398–414) maintains that Lev. 18:22 is earlier than 20:13, and that the earlier text condemns one of the two parties to the sexual act, he notes that the man sentenced to death in the earlier passage is the man who penetrates the other – that would mean David would be condemned, not Jonathan!

Both Nissinen and Ackerman are mistaken in their sexualised interpretations of the relationship between David and Jonathan. As Zehnder notes, the narrators of the Bible would never condone homogenital acts between men under any circumstances. While it is certainly true that some of Israel’s neighbours had a more favourable outlook towards male homogenital sex, legitimising sexual acts according to accepted socio-sexual codes such as age, gender, social status, prestige, and shame and honour, the Hebrew Bible is unequivocally clear in its prohibition and condemnation of all sexual acts between men. Israelite laws do not distinguish the frequency, social status, role (i.e., active and passive), or nature (i.e., voluntary and involuntary) of the parties to homogenital relations – both men, without exception, are sentenced to the death penalty. Israel’s

lone stance in relation to its Mesopotamian neighbours in prohibiting all homogenital sexual relations between men is better understood primarily in relation to inner-biblical thought, with cross cultural analysis of Mesopotamian societies a secondary source of information.²⁴ In the theocratic mindset of Israelite domination and submission,²⁵ sexual relationships reflect divinely-sanctioned social relationships.²⁶ The active and the passive male partners of homogenital acts in Leviticus are condemned because each man is guilty of transgressing God-given boundaries of male subjectivity: penetrating another man treats him as a sexual object, the position natural only to women, while allowing oneself to be penetrated is tantamount to self-emasculatation. In a male-gendered theocratic world, biblical narrative provide clear distinctions of purity and impurity, subject and object, male and female, all of which are necessary to prevent the divine order underpinning God's chosen people from plummeting into chaos.

Although Nissinen rejects anachronistic readings of eros in biblical narrative, insisting that a distinction be made between the ancient biblical world and the modern world of interpreters, his sexual interpretation of the relationship between David and Jonathan is rooted in present-day conceptualisations of male homosexuality. That is, despite his distinguishing of homosexuality, homosocialism and homoeroticism as useful categories of historical analysis, and his adamant belief that homosexuality not be used to describe the relationship between the two men, such semantics are ultimately irrelevant when he deems the relationship erotic on the basis of an unusual degree of intimacy (much to the consternation of Jonathan's father). Nissinen's citing of emotional intimacy between David and Jonathan as the primary justification for his sexual reading is very much a product of contemporary thinking, and does not necessarily reflect the historical milieu of the ancient biblical narrative.

Ackerman (2005, 3–4) begins her book by asserting that the contemporary understanding of homosexuality has no relevance to discussions of homogenital sexual relations in the Bible because each of the two time frames has distinct and incomparable perceptions of what such behaviour means. Yet she then contradicts her own argument that interpreters should not read the biblical narrative through the lens of twentieth-century constructs of homosexuality when she uses the nineteenth-century Ulrichsian formula of interior androgyny to conclude that David and Jonathan are lovers. That is, Ackerman's thesis that a feminised and socially-passive Jonathan (only before David) is the same as a sexually-passive Jonathan (only before David) is founded on the relatively modern medico-sexual notion that Jonathan has the exterior body of a man but the interior psyche of a female. It is true that the hierarchical continuum of sex in the ancient Mesopotamian mindset sanctions the sexual penetration of the submissive/feminine, but Ackerman claims something different than this in her scrutiny of the relationship between David and Jonathan. For Ackerman, Jonathan's non-sexual behaviour predicates his personality as a sexual type that is attracted to men, whereas in the ancient mind it is the act of being sexually penetrated that feminises a man. This difference of nuance highlights a significant divergence in the way homogenital sex is constructed in the ancient Mesopotamian world and modernity.

Nissinen and Ackerman demonstrate sophisticated awareness of developments in the field of the history of sexuality and homogenital practices in the ancient Mesopotamian world, but they both fail to produce persuasive interpretations of the relationship between David and Jonathan because, against their criticisms of readings that impose anachronistic concepts of ho-

mosexuality onto the ancient biblical text, they are guilty of interpreting the relationship between the two men in light of the very notions they criticise.

The biblical narrator does not write openly of Jonathan acting like a woman sexually, as this is not only condemned in Israelite tradition, but, more importantly for us, it would make him unfit to share his trusted companion's world – a woman's role in the male-dominated ancient Near East is for the bearing of sons, not the sharing of a close, egalitarian friendship. I suggest that we look to another explanation of the relationship between the two men as suggested by Cheryl Exum (1992; 1993) and David Damrosch (1987). While Nissinen pays some lip-service to male bonding in his discussion of homosocialism, especially in *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, Ackerman (2005, 197) rejects Exum's argument that the relationship between David and Jonathan typifies male bonding because she believes that Exum does not adequately explain the need for erotic language in the narrative. This is a fundamental misunderstanding on Ackerman's part: Ackerman notes that Damrosch argues (both Ackerman and Exum cite Damrosch's *The Narrative Covenant*) that the relationship between David and Jonathan is intimate, going beyond the political realm,²⁷ and yet she does not mention his rejection of a sexual reading of their relationship.²⁸ On the contrary, Damrosch (1987, 203–4, 208), like Exum, believes that the eroticised language of marriage signifies the depth and obligations of male bonding that is otherwise difficult to express in everyday language. Instead of portraying the couple as enjoying a homoerotic relationship, Damrosch (1987, 208) believes that the biblical narrator of 1-2 Sam. uses the relationship of David and Jonathan to meditate 'on the nature and meaning of the divine covenant in human history'.²⁹

Of particular relevance to Ackerman's emasculation/feminisation of Jonathan, Exum (1992, 73; 1993, 52) critiques Adele Berlin's interpretation of the gender dynamics in the relationship between David and Jonathan: 'to ascribe to Jonathan feminine characteristics... is to look in the wrong direction for the male/female dynamics of the story, as well as to risk reinforcing gender stereotypes' (Exum 1993, 52). For Exum (1993, 72–3), gender and sexual politics do indeed play a part in Jonathan's relationship with David, but the root of these ideologies is in male bonding, not gender inversion. Exum (1993, 52; 1992, 75) contends that the intimacy between David and Jonathan is not indicative of Jonathan's status as David's erotic love-object, but that the intimacy between two equally successful warriors and otherwise virile men is narratologically necessary for the 'uncomplicated transfer' of Saul's throne. Exum (1992, 12) concedes that the process of male bonding between David and Jonathan has adverse effects for Jonathan, who, in doing the right thing, loses his identity, which 'becomes submerged into David's'. Jonathan's self-emptying of his identity into David as a hero-worshipper, and the concomitant closeness it brings, is not an issue of (homo/bi) sexuality as reflective of the gender politics of ancient male bonding. In other words, Jonathan's loyalty and subservience is less a feminine trait signifying homosexual tendencies than a characteristic trait of the dyadic relationships inherent to ancient male bonding between heroic men, whereby there can only be one 'top dog' and, in this instance, that is David.

ENDNOTES

- 1 It is for the sake of ease that I call it such: the ‘David and Jonathan narrative’ is not an independent source, but is part of the larger story of the Primary History (Gen. to 2 Kgs.), the story of a nation’s relationship with its deity. Likewise, Edelman (1991, 14) acknowledges the problem of defining the boundaries of the ‘Saulide narrative’ (1 Sam. 8 – 2 Sam. 1) due to its existence as an ‘intentional subunit within a larger account of Israel’s relationship to its god Yahweh through time’
- 2 Halperin (1993, 426) recommends that historians of sex ‘include as an essential part of their proper enterprise the task of demonstrating the historicity, conditions of emergence, modes of construction, and ideological contingencies of the very categories of analysis that under grid their own practice’.
- 3 Foucault (1978b, 12) believes that such a ‘genealogical analysis’, i.e., a search for ‘instances of discursive production... of the production of power and of the propagation of knowledge’, is the only way to produce an adequate ‘history of the present’.
- 4 Nardi (1999, 25) argues that contemporary erotic interpretations of the intimate relationships between David and Jonathan, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and Patroclus and Achilles suggest ‘more about today’s evolving sexual and relationship taxonomies than it does about the historic societies that produced these stories’.
- 5 Laqueur (1990, 13) argues that, for various social reasons, the one-sex model of medicine, stemming from ancient Greek times, with women viewed as inferior men, began to change from the eighteenth century to a model of two sexes that influences medical and psychological taxonomies of today: ‘sexuality as a singular and all-important attribute with a specific object – the opposite sex – is the product of the late eighteenth century’.
- 6 Richard von Krafft-Ebing, an Austro-German psychiatrist, best known for his encyclopaedic work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), which not only coined words such as sadism and masochism, was one of the first sexological books published in the English language, splattered with Latin for the weak-hearted. Initially, von Krafft-Ebing viewed homosexuality as deviant because such sexual behaviour did not lead to procreation. Freud (1964) followed suit, categorising any sexual impulse that diverted the ‘biologically normal’ goal of the libido (procreation) as perverted.
- 7 Dover (1978, 161) asserts that ‘Response to the stimulus of bodily beauty is a step in the direction of absolute Beauty, an aspect of Good’.
- 8 ‘In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice’ (Foucault 1994, 168).
- 9 ‘The common custom of men casually bedding down together, for example, became uncommon, even suspect, in the consciously eroticised twentieth century after the construction, naming, publicising, and stringent tabooing of “sexual perversion”, “inversion”, and “homosexuality”’ (Katz 2001, 6).
- 10 For a detailed breakdown of such works, see Halperin’s (1990, 213–224) bibliography.
- 11 For example, Fewell and Gunn (1993, 148) believe that many biblical scholars ‘have been writing out of a strongly homophobic tradition’.
- 12 For example, see Bailey (1955), Boswell (1980), Countryman (1989), Scroggs (1983) and Horner (1978).
- 13 Nissinen acknowledges that the positive biblical depiction of this ‘affectionate friendship’ has led some other scholars to interpret it in a homosexual light. See, for example, Horner (1978, 26–39), Gunn (1980, 93) and Terrien (1985, 169).
- 14 Contrary to the belief that one of the two men is using the other man for his own ends, Nissinen (1999, 259 note 36) believes that the relationship is mutual. He accepts that Jonathan is always the

subject in his dealings with David, but insists that this is counter-balanced by the fact that David weeps the more at their parting, that they both swear an oath to each other in the name of God, and that David claims that Jonathan is more wonderful to him than women. See also Nissinen (1998, 53–56).

15 See also Nissinen (1999, 251; 1998, 131–32).

16 Some five years earlier than Nissinen, Hardman (1993, v) defines homoeroticism as ‘same-sex activity regardless of sexual orientation. The connotation here includes lust, and not necessarily affection’. Hardman’s differentiation between lustful (homoerotic) and affectionate (homoaffectionate) sexual behaviour among people of the same gender is an unnecessarily nuanced distinction because homoeroticism sufficiently describes homogenital acts, irrespective of their nature.

17 Although Boswell does not explicitly use the term, he acknowledges that the polarising of friendship and love in contemporary society leads to confusion about what is sexual and what is not in the ancient world. Thus, he also recognises the existence of a homosocial continuum, whereby ancient cultures would not necessarily draw a clear line between (platonic) friendship and (sexual) romance; see Boswell (1980, 46–47).

18 However, to simultaneously argue that that homoerotic behaviour does necessitate an exclusive sexual lifestyle (i.e., preclude sexual relations with women) and then deny the possibility of two men being lovers on the grounds of their having satisfying relationships with women is contradictory.

19 In addition to the biblical relationship between David and Jonathan, Ackerman (2005) also discusses the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

20 See, for example, van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1964, 4–20).

21 Ackerman also continues the theme of Jonathan as superseding his sisters is his marriagelike relationship with David on pages 184–85, 189, and 192–94.

22 ‘Jonathan, in short, is fallen so low, the narrative’s homoeroticised innuendo may imply, and has assumed so abjectly subservient a position in relation to David, that neither he nor his descendents can ever rise again to advance a claim to the throne’ (Ackerman 2005, 224).

23 See also Olyan (1997, 406, 413).

24 Israelite notions of legitimate sexual behaviour share similarities with neighbouring societies, insofar as they bring to the fore issues of religious identity and ethnicity, male-female gender relations, male power, and honour and shame, and yet they are also distinctly post-exilic insofar as they contain a strong cultic element that separates Israel from its neighbouring cultures.

25 The use of the verb *’nb* (to subject, humble, or humiliate) is found in biblical references to sexual relations between a man and a woman, e.g., Gen. 34:2, Deut. 22:29 and 2 Sam. 13:14. See Moore (2003, 290 note 30) and Brenner (1997, 142).

26 Di Vito (2001, 112) asserts that ‘the OT locates the self in its social roles and public relations... Without the West’s sense of inwardness... one does *not* find a domain or center in the psychology of the Hebrew corresponding to the modern notion of sexuality’.

27 Damrosch (1987, 202) insists that ‘this relationship has been developed far beyond anything that would have been required simply to assure the audience that David and Jonathan were close friends and that David did not wish to deny the succession to Saul’s heir’.

- 28 See particularly Ackerman (2005, 197–98).
- 29 In contrast, Jobling’s somewhat literalist ‘gay reading’ uses similar arguments to reach a completely different conclusion. Jobling (1998, 161–65) believes that there is support in the David and Jonathan narrative for a sexual interpretation, specifically the fact that Jonathan acts like David’s other women and that the covenants the two men make are analogous to a marriage agreement, but that for ‘obvious cultural reasons’ the text is not explicit in its allusions to their homosexual relationship.

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