

Doing Bible Theology in the Area of Human Sexuality: David and Jonathan

Prepared by Rev. Steve Parelli, June 2012

Case Study #1:

- The Bible Characters - Saul and David; and Saul and Jonathan; and Jonathan and David
- The Author's Thesis –
 - That homoeroticism, at some level or another, may be central to the inter-dynamics of these three relationships
 - Perhaps the first great love triangle in Western literature

Book: *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel (2005)*

Author: **Theodore W. Jennings, Jr.** Jennings is professor of Biblical and Constructive Theology at the Chicago Theological Seminary.

The Objective of the Case Study:

In presenting Jennings' thesis and argument, the objective is not to affirm or disagree with Jennings' views, nor to promote his views necessarily, but to demonstrate that the Bible itself invites us to various, practical and timely topics that may, or may not be fashionable at the time; and that no interpretation of the Bible should be legally censored or forbidden to be addressed or expounded, that it is in the open air of academic scholarship and the exchange of ideas about Bible texts, that the Christian, who reads and loves the Holy Book, grows in his or her faith.

To listen to someone does not mean to agree necessarily. It is by listening to opposite view points around a Bible text that we can better defend or modify our own perspectives. When we do not listen well, especially to those with whom we differ, we become dull in our own arguments. To defend one's own position, he or she must, at times, know well the points of the opposing interpretations. When a free society enters into honest debate, showing respect to all who voice their findings, the public is benefited because knowledge is advanced. New ideas are nothing to fear, for it will fall or stand in the arena of academics and public debate. Only fear those ideas which are not allowed to be challenged.

Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have. Luke 1:18

Jennings' Thesis:

Upon looking at the "evidence in the text" regarding "David and his lovers: Saul, Jonathan, and YHWH" "we can accept and expect the [warrior-and-his-companion] relationship to find sexual expression." p. 6 (last two paragraphs).

Jennings' Argument:

A. Jennings' Reading Strategy (p. xii)

1. The Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) "stories are filled with an unabashed eroticism." p. ix
2. There is "a whole feast of homoerotic material in the Hebrew Bible." p. x
3. We make the mistake of reading the Bible with "the presupposition of heteronormativity."
4. If "we suspend this presupposition, ... then new possibilities of reading and interpreting emerge." p xi

5. The author says he brings to the text certain “interests.” He says, without “the passion of my own interest in contesting homophobia and heteronormativity, the texts would not respond as they do.” p. xi
6. Studies show that in “diverse cultures and eras [there exists] a multiplicity of constructions of same-sex desire and practice.”
 - a. There is an “astonishing variety of ways in which sexual desire and practice are organized, institutionalized, and so on.” p. xii
 - b. “The very categories of homosexuality or heterosexuality are called into question” (as too limiting). p. xii
7. “There is nothing in the heroic saga material of Israel (Judges-II Samuel) that precludes erotic or even sexual readings.” p. 6
8. “The counter coherence produced by this [homoerotic] reading strategy is actually more coherent than that generated by [heteronormative] readings. p. xii

B. Jennings’ Cultural/Societal Setting for the saga of Saul and David and Jonathan: “The Warrior Love” (p. viv): “Male heroes are accompanied by younger or lower-status males.” p. xiii

1. “The social context within which these stories of heroic adventure are told seems to require this (older male/younger male) form of homosociality.” p.5
 - a. The “younger companion ... is a full partner in the adventures of the hero ... and shares in the remembered glory of the hero. If the companion were only incidental either to the action or to the hero, we would expect subsequent retelling to have erased the companion from memory.” p. 5
 - i. Saul and his youth (as “older and younger adolescents”) “serves as a relational paradigm that will be played out in a variety of relationships.” p. 4
 1. “The lad serves the pivotal function in the story” (cf. **I Sam. 9:5. 7. 8. 22. 27; 10:14**), p. 4
 - ii. Jonathan and the “young man who carried his armor” (**I Sam. 14:1**).
 1. The armor-bearer is not simply a servant but a companion in the battle (**I Sam. 14:6-7, 12-14**).
 - iii. Saul and his youth, and Jonathan and his armor bearer “do not thematize the emotional attachment between the hero and his companion. They merely exhibit a structure that appears to have similarities to ... other societies, many of which accept and expect the relationship to find sexual expression.” p. 6
2. This (male heroes with younger males) is one of the “three main styles of same-sex relationships” found in the OT as discussed in Jennings’ book (“none of which may be readily identified with contemporary urban gay male identities” – footnote #4). p. xiii
 - a. “We find that the [warrior-boy] relationships ... bear traces of the importance of homoerotic attachment among the male characters.” p. 1
 - b. The “relationships between warriors and their boy-companions ... far exceed[s] in importance the relationships with women.” p. 33
 - c. “The youth...is selected...to a significant degree because of his beauty, a beauty that awakens the desire and favor of the lover/hero. p. 11
 - d. “[T]he beloved youth may also exercise the functions of a husband to a wife without severing the relationship to his warrior-hero.” p. 11
3. “In these stories of men ... women seldom appear (**I Sam. 21:5**). Instead, the [war leader] men ... always appear with their youthful boy-companions.” p. 3

- a. "This pairing of heroes with boy-companions is a significant feature of this saga material." p. 3
 - b. "The armor-bearer is the constant companion of the hero or warrior...in battle...[and] away from battle." p. 10
 - c. "What [can] we suppose to be the case between older and younger adolescent male adventurers where women are absent[?]" p. 6
 - i. Depends on "one's particular view of psychodynamics" and the likelihood of "an erotic component" that "may include sexual practice[s]." p. 6
 - ii. Depends on "the cultural expectations or potentialities with respect to such relationships." p. 6
 - iii. "Other warrior cultures ... [where i]n most of these cases both lover and beloved are warriors ... [and] [t]he beloved is ... a partner in adventure, distinguished by his beauty, boldness, and loyalty." p. 11
 - 1. Sparta, Greece
 - 2. Thebes, Egypt
 - 3. pre-Christian northern European warriors
 - 4. Early feudal Europe
4. YHWH, as the primary character in the saga, displays an "erotic potency" as a "male lover of human males" (p. 2) albeit Jennings is "not talking about 'God' as such (p. xiv)

C. Jennings' argument: Upon looking at the "evidence in the text" regarding "David and his lovers: Saul, Jonathan, and YHWH" "**we can accept and expect the [warrior-and-his-companion] relationship to find sexual expression.**" p. 6 (last two paragraphs).

- 1. General Overall Comments
 - a. "As we examine both of these relationships [Saul and David, and Jonathan and David] the erotic character [of the saga] comes more into focus." p. 2
 - i. There is an "emotional depth" and a "psychological complexity" to the story of Saul and Jonathan and David. p. 13
 - ii. "It is, perhaps, the first great love triangle in Western literature." p. 13
 - b. It becomes clear "that the prohibition of certain forms of male same-sex relationships and/or practices in Leviticus is anomalous relative to the rather frank portrayal" here between Saul and David, and Jonathan and David. p. xv
- 2. YHWH and Saul. YHWH and David. "The relation of YHWH to his 'armor-bearer' or lower-status companions" gives us "additional evidence in the text for the [homoerotic] relationship between warriors and their companions." p. 6. "The conventions that govern the relationship between warriors and their youthful companions [as homoerotic]" is "furthered clarif[ied] ... by attending to the way in which YHWH is characterized in the saga." p. 7
 - a. "YHWH is the preeminent warrior-chieftain" who is "acting in accordance with the warrior code . . . insisting on blind obedience and utter loyalty, capricious, capable of apparent pettiness and clever strategy." p. 7
 - b. "The structure of the saga depends on the choices that *this* [YHWH] warrior-chief makes concerning who will be his youthful companion and armor-carrier." p. 7
 - i. He chooses Saul first. p. 7
 - ii. He then chooses David "when Saul has displeased him." p. 7
 - c. "How does [YHWH] choose his youthful companions?" p. 7

- i. “The astonishing physical beauty of the young men ... is always the first characteristic mentioned in the text.” p. 7
 - 1. (Saul) *“There was a man of Benjamin . . . He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he: he stood head and shoulders above everyone else.” I Sam. 9:1-2.*
 - 2. (David) “In the selection of David . . . YHWH claims that he does not look on outward appearances (I Sam. 16:7). . . However, when the last of Jesse’s sons comes into the room, we are told: *Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said [to Samuel], ‘Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.’ ” I Sam. 16:12.* p. 8
 - 3. (Absalom and Adonijah) The “male beauty” of Absalom and Adonijah “is precisely what makes it plausible to suppose, as Israel does, that YHWH has chosen over his earlier but now aging favorite, David.” p. 10
 - a. (Absalom) **II Sam. 14:25** – *Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.*
 - b. (Adonijah) **I Kgs. 1:6** – *He was also a very handsome man, and he was born next after Absalom.*
 - ii. “The remarking upon the beauty of a male protagonist is something found in biblical literature only in two places outside the saga of David.” p. 7 (In both cases “male beauty is offered to the eroticizing gaze. [T]his gaze is the gaze of women.” p. 7)
 - 1. “Joseph, where it serves as the explanation of Potiphar’s wife’s infatuation with Joseph.” p. 7 (**Gen. 39:6-7**)
 - 2. “[I]n the erotic poems of the **Song of Songs**.” p. 7
 - iii. “In the David saga it [the eroticizing gaze] is the gaze of (male) warrior-chieftains (YHWH, Saul, and Jonathan)” upon the male beauty of their young companions. p. 7
 - 1. The David saga is “written for men. It is a story for warriors and, especially, leaders of warriors.” p. 3
 - 2. [T]he men ... always appear with their youthful boy-companions.” p. 3
 - 3. “[T]he hearers/readers of this saga expect male beauty to be the initial criterion for the selection of youthful companions.” p. 8
 - iv. “To be sure, other attributes are expected to follow [the attribute of beauty]. ... bravery and boldness ... absolute loyalty.” p. 8
3. Saul and David. “[T]he theme of Saul’s jealousy when his own son seems to supplant him as the lover of David provides one of the main driving plots of the narrative.” p. 11
- a. The story of Saul and David is told in four sets of twos. p. 19
 - i. “Two stories deal with how David comes into Saul’s court. p. 19
 - 1. *“Saul loved him [David] greatly, and he became his armor-bearer.” I Sam. 16:21* p. 14
 - ii. “[T]wo explanations of how Saul comes to be enraged with David. p. 19
 - 1. The second explanation: “There is another ground for Saul’s jealousy that is far more plausible. It is that just as the old king is taking David on

- as his boy-companion, there appears a rival for the affections of this pretty youth: Saul's own young-adult son, Jonathan!" p. 16
- iii. "[T]wo stories that have as their theme David's refusal to assassinate his tormentor." p. 19
 - iv. "First Samuel ends with one account of these (Saul and Jonathan) deaths; 2 Samuel begins with a somewhat different account." p. 30
- b. How "Saul's jealousy ... betrays itself as having an erotic ground." p. 16
- I Sam. 20:30-31, 34.*** "Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him . . . 'Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the same of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established'...Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger ... because his father had disgraced him."
- i. "Jonathan is so smitten with David that he could refuse him nothing, even preeminence in the kingdom." p. 17
 - ii. "The exposure of someone's nakedness is regularly an expression that designates the consequence of a sexual act" (Cf. Lev. 18:7-8.)
 1. "Intimacy with David exposes the nakedness of David's first lover (Saul) and thus of that sexual partner of Saul's who is also Jonathan's mother." p. 17.
 - a. "[T]he relationship between Saul and David must also have been sexual if this chain of exposing nakedness is to work." p. 18
 2. "The disgrace of Jonathan lies not only in the public dressing-down he has received but in the way in which the private sexuality of two persons has been exposed to public view and made to seem both tawdry and somehow treasonous." p. 18
4. Jonathan and David. "It is no innovation to detect the outline of a remarkable love story between two men, David and Jonathan." p. xiii
- a. This is "one of the most striking love stories of ancient literature." p. 25
 - b. "[T]he attraction of Jonathan to David begins almost immediately as Saul is delighting in his new companion." p. 25
 - c. Jonathan's attraction to David "is given extravagant expression." p. 25
 - i. "[I]t appears to be love at first sight." I Sam. 18:1 p. 25
 - ii. Jonathan loves David "as his own soul." I Sam. 18:1 p. 25
 - iii. The word 'soul' (nephesh) "means that by virtue of which we take in air, water, and food. It is the principle of need and desire that is life itself. It is the expression of fundamental yearning." p. 25
 - iv. "This yearning for the beautiful beloved is given extravagant expression:"
I Sam. 18:4 *Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.*
 - d. "It will be Michal's brother Jonathan who supplants her as the lover and protector of David." p. 26
 - e. The "entire chapter (20) [is] devoted to Jonathan's love for David ... expressed [around] a plan on how to find out if "Saul really is planning to assassinate David." p. 26. Three key passages are found in this chapter:
 - i. ***I Sam. 20:17*** *Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life.*

- ii. **I Sam. 20:30** *Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the same of your mother?*
 - 1. “This outburst on the part of Saul demonstrates that the relationship between Saul and David as well as that between Jonathan and David may be construed as involving sexual intimacy.” p. 27
 - 2. “If Saul has sought to expose Jonathan’s sexual relationship with David, he has done so only by exposing the sexual character of his own relationship with David.” p. 27
- iii. **I Sam. 20:41-41** *... and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. ...*
- iv. “David’s love is in the process of being transferred from Saul to Jonathan.”
- v. “[I]n Saul’s view it is Jonathan who has seduced David from Saul”
- f. “David’s lament...for Saul and Jonathan.” p. 30
- g. **II Sam. 1:25-26** *Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.*
 - i. “The love of women is the sphere of the erotic, and the love of Jonathan is placed here in this sphere.” p. 30
 - ii. “David’s loyalty to Jonathan is demonstrated by taking [Jonathan’s son] Mephibosheth as virtually his own son. (p. 31) ... in fulfillment of the covenant with Jonathan [which] has nothing to do with political advantage. It is a covenant of mutual love that David fulfills ... Forever he remains the man who was loved by and who loved Jonathan.” p. 31. 32.

Summary

It is very important to identify the “grid” through which we read the Bible. In the case of the story of David and Jonathan and Saul, Jennings identifies his reading strategy as being passionate about “contesting homophobia and heteronormativity.” The Hebrew Bible is filled with eroticism.

Jennings supports his argument for, at the very least, a homoerotic aspect within the David and Jonathan and Saul relationships showing that (1) the social setting is a form of homosociality; (2) there is found, it would seem, a homoerotic element between warriors and their boy-companions; (3) women seldom appear with the warrior; (4) there is an “emotional depth” and a “psychological complexity” to the story; (5) there is a component of the homoerotic in way YHWE (the warrior-chieftain) chooses his youthful companions; (6) Saul’s jealousy has an erotic grounding (I Sam. 20:30-31,34); (7) Jonathan’s attraction to David appears to be love at first sight; (8) a whole chapter is devoted to Jonathan’s love for David (I Sam. 20:17); (9) David laments for both Saul and Jonathan; and (9) the love David expressed for Jonathan is in the sphere of the erotic: “the love of women” (II Sam. 1:25-26).

Conclusion

Upon looking at the “evidence in the text” regarding “David and his lovers: Saul, Jonathan, and YHWH” “we can accept and expect the [warrior-and-his-companion] relationship to find sexual expression.” p. 6 (last two paragraphs).