

**Were David and Jonathan Lovers?****by Elodie Ballantine Emig (Denver Theological Seminary)**

Pro-gay apologists have suggested that Jesus & John, the beloved disciple; Ruth & Naomi, both widows; and David & Jonathan were lovers. There is no biblical evidence of any sexual relationship between the members of the first two pairs. For at least two reasons, however, the relationship between David and Jonathan is worth some examination. First, David, albeit the apple of God's eye, has certainly a strike against him as a paragon of sexual virtue. Second, pro-gay theology, though often circumspect when it comes to impugning the chastity of our Lord, or labeling Ruth and Naomi as lesbians, is confident in its assessment of David and Jonathan. In fact, the more popular -- that is, less scholarly and exegetically based -- pro-gay proponents take for granted that David and Jonathan had a sexual relationship. Queer theology, self-consciously eisegetical (most reader-response hermeneutics are by definition) and agenda-driven, sees nearly all of David's relationships as sexual, especially those between David and Saul, Jonathan, and even God (T.W. Jennings, "YHWH as Erastes," in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 36-74).

On one hand, I am open to the possibility that they did have a sexual relationship. Clearly David was capable of lust and adultery. If he could arrange for the death of Uriah, whose wife, by the way, David had already impregnated, in order to get Bathsheba as his own wife; presumably, he could go to any lengths for lust. I suppose the story of Abigail and Nabal, too, could, at a stretch, be construed to show David in a poor light. As soon as he heard of her husband's death, David asked Abigail to be his wife. Yet, before he made the proposal, he prayed, "Praise be to the Lord, who has upheld my cause against Nabal for treating me with contempt. He has kept his servant from doing wrong and has brought Nabal's wrongdoing down on his own head" (1 Sam. 25:39). David had eight wives and a demonstrable taste for women. Still, perhaps when battle kept him long from the company of women, David was capable of homosexual lust.

On the other hand, there is nothing concrete to suggest that David had homosexual feelings for Jonathan, or Jonathan for David for that matter. Unless one assumes that the intimate love the two men shared had, by definition, to include sex, there is no compelling reason to view the relationship as sexual. And if one does equate intimacy with sex, while I shudder at his or her concept of love, I also ask why the David-Jonathan stories don't make the equation plainer. If the sort of love the writer of 1 Samuel thought was important enough to describe in some depth, had to include sex, why didn't he say so? Arguments from silence, although generally weak, sometimes cry out to be made. A huge deal was made of David's sexual liaison with Bathsheba -- the sin affected him, his children and the entire nation of Israel. If it was common knowledge that David and Jonathan were lovers, why is no equally big deal made? From the pro-gay perspective, one would expect 1 Samuel's author to champion homosexual relations as superior to the heterosexual variety, maintained only to produce offspring. From the conservative point of view, there should be an impassioned condemnation of the affair as an abomination to God, which would have at least as great consequences as the sin with Bathsheba. We find neither, just two married men who have a deep and abiding love for each other.

Thus, though I imagine that there is nothing David could have done which would surprise me, I come to the text of I Samuel with the presupposition that David was exclusively heterosexual. Behind this belief lies another one -- God condemned homosexual practice in the Levitical Law, of which David, and presumably Jonathan as well, was aware. (Not that David always obeyed the Law, he didn't. The point, rather, is that abhorrence for homosexuality was ingrained in the people of God. If David didn't share that abhorrence - rather incongruent with the fact of his intimate, if stormy, relationship with God - surely the writer of I Samuel would have.) The third conviction I bring to the text is that the burden of proof is on the pro-gay theologians.

The fact that post-modern, Queer theology refuses to shoulder that burden of proof renders it irrelevant to the present investigation. Queer theology side-steps issues of truth and proof; "it simply presupposes that queerness exists, at least in readers, and that this provides a way of illuminating the [biblical] texts" (Jennings, p. 37). That is, when "queering" the story of David, one is not dealing with "a question of what everyone should see, but what may be seen from this [gay] standpoint as one among many standpoints ... (S&M, pederastic, prostititional, promiscuous etc.)" italics mine (Ibid.). However, I am not interested in what may be inferred about David and Jonathan, but rather with what the author of I Samuel intended to report.

Where it would be pointless here to deconstruct Jennings's queer reading of the David (Saul, Jonathan and YHWH) story, because he doesn't care if "YHWH 'really is' a 'homosexual' or a 'pederast' or even a 'warrior chief'" (Jennings, p. 38), it is important to evaluate Tom Horner's claim that David 'really was' gay (bi?). Horner thinks the author of I Samuel intended to report a homoerotic relationship between David and Jonathan. Horner opines, "There can be little doubt, however, except on the part of those who absolutely refuse to believe it, that there existed a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan" (Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 20). Having mentioned "that there is nothing David could have done which would surprise me," I find myself puzzled by this remark. I certainly do not fit into the "absolutely-refuse-to-believe-it" category, but neither do I think that there is little doubt that David and Jonathan were lovers. More troubling still is what lies behind Horner's cursory, even flippant, dismissal of the consensus of conservative scholarship. It is Horner's belief that homosexuality, or more accurately bisexuality, was normative throughout the ancient Near Eastern world.

The first chapter in *Jonathan Loved David* is, appropriately, devoted to historical and cultural matters. In the opening paragraph (the second sentence) of this chapter, Horner says of the Old Testament world:

It was a world in which, except for the purpose of begetting children, an act that was incumbent upon almost everyone in the ancient world, homosexuality might well have been as valid an option as heterosexuality that is, in most places and most of the time during that period in which the Bible was produced (Horner, 15).

After cutting through the "might"s and the "most"s, we are left with a starkly utilitarian notion. Heterosexuality, rather than being the lofty state for and in which men and women were created by a loving God, is merely an insurance policy for a fragile species. "Picture a time," urges Horner, "when

there were no paper currencies, no banks, no Social Security or pension funds...the only possible form of social security that one could count on, generally, was children" (Horner, 23-24). One gets the impression here that heterosexuality was a chore, something to be endured. True romance, mutual fulfillment, could only be had in same-sex unions. If Horner is correct, one wonders why heterosexuality has survived the advent of zero-population-growth advocates. Could it be that he has overlooked the One who designed our sexuality and dictates our sexual ethic?

Nowhere in his first chapter does Horner mention God, or His purposes for His chosen people of Israel. This is a more significant oversight than one might at first think. Horner begins on solid enough ground; homosexual behavior was accepted (though we really don't know how widely) in most of the ancient Near East (yet in extant Middle Assyrian laws, wording makes it clear that "no self-respecting man would want to be penetrated by another man" (Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 46)). But it does not necessarily follow that, because Israel's neighbors, most notably the Canaanites, accepted homosexuality, Israel had to as well. Equally problematic for Horner's case is the psychological, not to mention semantic, distance between the verbs accept and prefer; yet Horner makes the leap. He queries, "And how could Israel not have been influenced by these cultures? How could it have adopted an entirely different sexual ethic, living as close as it did to foreign influences?" He fails to point out, presumably because he does not believe it, that our best evidence suggests that Israel, alone among the ancient Near Eastern nations, categorically condemned homosexuality (for a discussion of that evidence, see: Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality" *The Expository Times* 102 (1991): 359-363).

What made Israel different? It was most definitely not the fact that the nation remained uninfluenced by its neighbors. It did not, and did not to the point that it became the only people in military history to chronicle its defeats in graphic detail. The Bible tells us that Israel lost battles, precisely because it allowed itself to be influenced by its neighbors. When the nation ceased to act like the special people of God, it met with disaster. What made Israel unique, then, was God. Israel did, in fact, adopt "an entirely different sexual ethic" from that of its neighbors. It did so, though, not because of any particular innovation -- or even contrariness -- of its own, but because God demanded that His people reflect His moral perfection.

Without God, there is no adequate explanation for Israel's singular place among the peoples of the ancient Near East. Without God, it is easier to magnify the similarities and explain away the differences in the ethical codes of that time and place. Frankly, apart from God, it makes no sense that Israel would have wanted to be ethically distinct from the societies around it. Perhaps this is why Horner devotes four plus pages, in the chapter which makes no mention of God, to the Gilgamesh Epic (a Sumerian myth, the oldest example of such literature we have, which includes both creation and flood accounts as well as a sensitive treatment of love -- sexual according to Horner and many others -- between two men). It serves Horner's purposes to expose the sexual "openness" of the nations which surrounded Israel. To do so is far easier than to reckon with the God who will judge all history and culture. If we reckon with God we might just have to obey Him, or at least defy Him with our eyes wide open.

Having briefly looked at Horner's and my own presuppositions, I am ready to turn to I Samuel. I find there two heterosexual men who love each other with a deep, abiding commitment. Tom Horner finds that same commitment expressed in homosexual terms. I suppose I could say that we both find what we are looking for and leave it at that. I have "hetero-normalized" David and Jonathan, and Horner has "queered" them: 2 lenses, 1 text, 0 problems. But there is a problem if we are pursuing what the text does mean instead of what it could mean. Part of the exegetical task is to require a dialogue between one's presuppositions and what one finds in Scripture. Over time and through dialogue, one finds one's presuppositions being refined, confirmed, or perhaps even rendered obsolete. The moment the interpreter decides there is no further need for refinement, is the moment he or she ceases to be an exegete and becomes instead an eisogete. To facilitate my own internal dialogue, I will consider Dr. Horner's approach to I Samuel.

What strike me first are comments made early on in his treatment of the David and Jonathan stories, "For whatever reason, Jonathan was attracted to David"; and again, "Jonathan was obviously smitten" (Horner, 27). These observations come in response to I Sam. 18:1-4. I will admit it; I just do not see it. Why does the attraction have to be sexual? Apparently I am not the only one asking this question, for Horner brings it up and answers it:

But when the two men come from a society that for two hundred years had lived in the shadow of the Philistine culture, which accepted homosexuality; when they find themselves in a social context that was thoroughly military in the Eastern sense\*; when one of them – who is the social superior\* of the two -- publicly makes a display of his love; when the two of them make a life-time pact openly; when they meet secretly and kiss each other and shed copious tears at parting; when one of them proclaims that his love for the other surpassed his love for women -- and all this is present in the David Jonathan liaison -- we have every reason to believe that a homosexual relationship existed (Horner, 27-28).

The answer comes down to cultural (and perhaps hormonal) determinism -- David and Jonathan were bound by culture and therefore had to be lovers. Horner fails to mention that kissing, moreover public displays of strong emotion both positive and negative, were and are normal among heterosexual, Middle Eastern men. He also fails to note that the military histories of most cultures document the fact that men who share war share something, something intimate, which their wives can never fully understand much less share themselves. Men can have a love for each other which surpasses their love for their wives without either love needing to be seen as sexual. Not all love is sexual, nor has to be expressed sexually.

When it comes to what lies behind Israel's sexual mores, Horner posits culture and I, a relationship with God. Foundational to his argument regarding I Samuel, then, is the notion that as men of their time and place, David and Jonathan would have expressed their love sexually, "the only thing lacking was for someone who was close to both of them to make an issue of it openly..." (Horner, 28). With this I heartily agree, but am left to wonder why someone would need to make an issue of something perfectly normal in the culture.

\*What Horner is getting at are the notions that ancient Near Eastern warriors used their armor-bearers as catamites and that social superiors (however, most scholars see David and Jonathan as social equals) would take the dominant (penetrating) role to demonstrate that superiority.

Another question regards that which Horner thinks constitutes openness. Continuing the sentence quoted above, he writes, "and this eventually happened too when Jonathan's father rashly implied in an emotional outburst something that under normal circumstances he probably never would have ..." emphasis mine (Horner, 28). First of all, it has never occurred to me to equate a rash implication with an issue made openly. Second, what exactly is meant by the supposition that Saul probably would not have made the implication under normal circumstances? Is this an allusion to Saul's foul temper and dislike of David, or an indication that homosexuality, because it was normal, was not normally discussed? If the latter, we must wonder again why Horner expected an issue to be made of David and Jonathan's relationship. What comes to mind is the idea that Horner needed an issue to be made to prove that homosexuality was not really an issue.

We are not absolutely certain of what Saul did say in his "emotional outburst." The text of I Sam. 20: 30-31 is slightly corrupt. That is, we have Hebrew manuscripts which word the passage differently. The key difference between the two textual traditions lies with the word (bahar – choose) the NIV translates as "sided." Some, so few that most commentators do not mention it, Hebrew manuscripts, as well as the LXX (Septuagint) read "companion" (haber, metochos). So part of Saul's tirade is that David is Jonathan's companion if one follows the LXX tradition. Horner does, and this is problematic. Old Testament scholars are not at all agreed as to whether the LXX translation of the historical books, of which I Samuel is one, is superior to the Massoretic Hebrew texts we have available to us. (The LXX is generally assumed to be inferior with occasional exceptions.)

More problematic still is Horner's appeal to Greek grammar. That Saul called Jonathan David's companion is not much of an addition to an "emotional outburst." If, however, Saul called Jonathan David's intimate companion, or lover, we have a bona fide 'rash implication.' This is what Horner seeks to prove Saul said, "But the word the Greek uses here -- metochos -- as well as meaning 'companion' or 'partner,' more especially means 'sharing' or 'participation in' when followed by the genitive of the person or thing, as is indeed the case here" (Horner, 31-32). The person following is "the son of Jesse," but son is in the dative rather than the genitive case -- an important oversight on Horner's part. Case endings are the stuff of first year Greek; I can but conclude that Horner knows not the language whereof he speaks. And let us not lose sight of the fact that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. It is quite a stretch to say (even if we grant that the Septuagint's is the superior reading of I Samuel) that Greek idiomatic usage in general reflects the Hebrew original. Moreover, just because a Greek word can have a more precise meaning when followed by a noun in a particular case does not mean that its Hebrew counterpart can do the same. In this case, it cannot, hence Horner's appeal to the Greek in the first place.

What we have at this point is a rash implication translated into Greek and at least partially misunderstood by Horner. We have very little, champions of the Massoretic text would say nothing. Still, let us assume for the sake of argument that Horner is correct and Saul did, in fact, accuse Jonathan of having a homosexual affair with David. So what? In the history of fights between fathers and sons, worse accusations have been hurled. Saul was an emotionally volatile man, given to deep depressions, rages, and jealous of David -- why not throw out what may have been the ultimate insult? Even Horner admits "there is possibly here the suggestion of a bedouin aversion to homosexuality" (Horner, 32). That Horner considers Saul a bedouin rather than a landed Hebrew is odd, odder still is the notion that bedouins would have been more opposed to homosexuality than the Hebrews. At this juncture, even his appeals to culture are contradictory. I am left with the impression that Horner "absolutely refuse[s] to believe" that David and Jonathan were not lovers. He has given me no compelling reason to change my position. Even if I put my presupposition of a living God on the shelf, the evidence he cites in favor of his position is either offset by other evidence he marshals or just plain erroneous. Horner assumes that men who love each other must express that love sexually, and he evaluates history, culture and religion in light of that core belief.