

Review of James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.

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In 2005, I published *When Heroes Love*, a book that considered the ancient Mesopotamian story of Gilgamesh and his bosom companion Enkidu and the ancient Israelite story of David and Jonathan. More specifically, *When Heroes Love* focused on the eroticized language and imagery that can be used to describe Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's and David's and Jonathan's relationships. As a result, while I was writing the book, and ever since it has been published, the question that I have most frequently been asked about it is "were they" – and especially, "were David and Jonathan" – "gay?"

A major point of my book was to argue that this question makes no sense, for our society's notion of what it is to be "gay" is just that – *ours* – a historically and culturally contingent product of our particular time and place and thus not something that should be, or even can be, discussed using data that come from the texts and traditions of societies – such as ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Israel – that are far removed from our own. In the book under review here, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception*, James E. Harding provocatively pushes this sort of analysis one step (or even more) further, by responding to the question "were they [David and Jonathan] gay?" with his own question: "Why do you ask?" More specifically, Harding wants to know what it is that has led biblical scholars of our era, as well as other interested parties among our contemporaries, frequently and repeatedly to ask "whether the relationship between David and Jonathan could be understood as homosexual" (p. ix).

Harding's answer is threefold. First, as he outlines in Chapter 2 (following on an introductory chapter that sets out his book's program of research), biblical scholars and other interested parties can be driven by ideological agendas that lead them to promote certain interpretations of the Bible's David and Jonathan accounts (1 Sam 18:1-4; 19:1-7; 20:1-21:1 [in most of the Bible's English versions, 20:1-42]; 23:14-18; and 2 Sam 1:19-27), in order to sustain ethical positions they wish to uphold about same-sex relationships within today's society. Second, as discussed in Chapter 3, interpreters can be driven by a desire to unpack the meaning of the biblical text's often ambiguous language in order to determine what is really meant by the assertion, say, that Jonathan "loved" David. Third and most important, Harding suggest in Chapter 4 that today's interpreters have been profoundly influenced by the modern discourse about sexuality that emerged in, especially, Europe in the nineteenth century and the ways in which, in this discourse's newly developing constructions of hetero- and homosexuality, "'David and Jonathan' became a shorthand for homosexuality" (p. 290).

Indeed, although Harding presents his threefold argument in the order I have just described it, it becomes clear by the end of *The Love of David and Jonathan* that his third proposition, regarding the appropriation of the David and Jonathan story within nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality

(Harding focuses particularly on England and thus on authors such as John Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, and E. M. Forster), is the catalyst that drives Propositions #1 and #2: because not infrequently English students of (homo)sexuality hinted at, rather than “*compel[ed]* us to think of David and Jonathan as lovers in the sexual sense” (p. 363), modern interpreters, such as those Harding cites in Chapter 3, have likewise been prompted to locate ambiguities within the Bible’s portrayal of David’s and Jonathan’s relationship; similarly, because of the reading convention that developed in the nineteenth century that sees “‘David and Jonathan’ as a reference to a gay relationship” (p. 403), biblical interpreters today who want to promote ideologies that are either in support of, or in opposition to, a gay civil rights agenda – for example, those whose work Harding surveys in Chapter 2 – feel obliged to take on the David and Jonathan accounts as iconic texts. In his conclusion, Harding writes, “The question of whether their relationship [David’s and Jonathan’s] was homosexual is, then, a decidedly back-to-front one” (p. 403), given that it was – according to Harding’s account – only the nineteenth-century discourse concerning sexuality that made David and Jonathan homosexual in the first place. The book, in turn, has a rather “a back-to-front” quality, as it emerges by its conclusion that is the nineteenth-century discourse concerning sexuality, as Harding sees it, that has led modern biblical scholars and other interpreters to derive from the David and Jonathan story the ideological and exegetical conclusions that we do.

Yet while it could be argued that the book’s “back-to-front” system of organization is a weakness, it is not at all my intent to suggest this; indeed, the book’s structure, I found, works rather like a Beethoven symphony, where the complexity of the fourth movement re-evokes and even intensifies the complexity of the symphony’s earlier parts in order to bring its multiple themes together in a triumphant finale. By the conclusion of *The Love of David and Jonathan* in addition, the reader cannot help but be impressed by the remarkable display of Harding’s learnedness, given the way his discussion spans not just the work of his colleagues in biblical studies, but also work in the classics, in English literature, in queer theory, and in the history of sexuality, as well as delving – in his introductory chapter – into contemporary film and television. The amount of research required to pull all this off is prodigious. Indeed, Harding’s bibliography runs to twenty-four pages, with (by my count) twenty-two to twenty-three references listed per page. Footnotes are also copious. The one-hundred-and-seven pages of Chapter 3, for example, are supplemented by an additional forty-six pages of footnotes – and footnotes that are printed in very small type, no less!

One might wish, however, that Harding’s individual chapters were as creatively organized as is the book as a whole. Instead, Chapters 3 and 4 are structured in a way that is more list-like in form, as Harding moves systematically through the bodies of material under discussion to hammer his points home. In the second half of Chapter 3, for example (pp. 166-225), Harding moves line by line through the David and Jonathan story to discuss the ways in which its language is ambiguous in terms of the erotic: thus, Section 4.3.1 of Chapter 3 concerns 1 Sam 18:1a; Section 4.3.2 discusses 1 Sam 18:1b; Section 4.3.3 takes up 1 Sam 18:2; Section 4.3.4 is about 1 Sam 18:3; Section 4.3.5 considers 1 Sam 18:4; and so on. But the language of, say, “love,” to which considerable ambiguities attend, is scattered throughout the David and Jonathan accounts (1 Sam 18:1, 3, 16, 20, 22, 28; 19; 20:17; 2 Sam 1:26), and it seems an organizational structure that considered these verses as a whole, and the multivalent ways in which “love” might be construed within them, could have served Harding’s purposes better.

Somewhat similarly, in the second half of Chapter 4 (pp. 329-362), Harding moves through various English writers author by author, in chronological order, to discuss the ways in which the potentially erotic connotations of the David and Jonathan story were evoked in the work of each. Yet a potentially more helpful system of organization is the one Harding hints at in the conclusion of his discussion, on p. 363, which would group authors in terms of the explicitness, or conversely the obliqueness, that each used in his evocations of the David and Jonathan story's erotic elements. Indeed, since obliqueness – that is, the often ambiguous and ambivalent construal of the David and Jonathan accounts in nineteenth-century English literature – is ultimately Harding's point, it seems an organizational structure more geared to that conclusion might have served Harding better.

I also think that in Chapter 2, Harding would have been better served had he expanded his list of ideologically-driven commentators beyond the few on whom he focuses his attention – Robert A. Gagnon, Markus Zehnder, and the jointly authored work of Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli – and the chapter would have been enriched as well if Harding had provided a more in-depth description of these scholars' ideological positions. For example, regarding Schroer and Staubli's work, Harding writes that “there is a pastoral dimension” in their efforts to help “modern ‘religious homosexual persons’ . . . find their roots in scripture” (p. 59), in response to what Schroer and Staubli see as “anti-homosexual ‘taboos’ underlying interpretations of the David and Jonathan narrative in recent German-language commentaries” (p. 58). But unmentioned here is that the pastoral ideology from which Schroer and Staubli speak is Christian and, arguably, given their backgrounds, Roman Catholic; also unmentioned is that both are affiliated with Christian faculties of theology, as are Zehnder and Gagnon. All of this seems germane in a discussion of the ideological agendas that may be driving these scholars' analyses. And what, moreover, of scholars who may be driven by a Jewish theological agenda? Those who identify as secular and/or who teach at secular institutions? Does it matter if the exegete in question is a member of the clergy? It would be good to see the perspectives of some who represent these ideological positions explored. As I have intimated above, Harding's surveys are comprehensive indeed when it comes to Chapters 3 and 4. It is thus curious that he limits his scope in Chapter 2 to so few scholars, one of whom (Gagnon) is, by Harding's own admission (p. 83), “heavily dependent” on Zehnder and so cannot really be said to represent a different ideological stance.

Overall, *The Love of David and Jonathan* is a very impressive book, noteworthy especially because of the compelling nature of its thesis and the author's extensive research. It is impressive, too, in the way it ultimately moves beyond its ostensible topic – the biblical accounts of David and Jonathan and how they have and might be interpreted – to demonstrate to all exegetes, whatever the subject of our inquiry, just how much the questions we bring to the biblical text are conditioned by the affairs of our world and the issues that concern our society today. We are driven, Harding insists, to pursue certain lines of research because of who we are, not because of who the ancient Israelites were. The idea of a neutral, disinterested, dispassionate observer has, of course, come under repeated assault in the last several decades. Harding deals it yet another, very forceful blow.



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