

Rethinking the Gay Centurion

Sexual Exceptionalism, National Exceptionalism in Readings of Matt. 8:5-13//Luke 7:1-10

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Some recent publications suggest that Matt. 8:5-13//Luke 7:1-10 features a couple that engaged in same-sex intercourse: a centurion and his slave. This article examines the subtexts of sexual exceptionalism present in arguments both for and against this reading, as well as their collusions with narratives constitutive of western colonialism. Operative in interpretations both favouring and opposing a homosexual subtext is the assumption that Jesus' Judaism was somehow unique with respect to sexual mores. For opponents of the LGBT interpretation, this exceptionalism manifests in a homogeneous Judaism that was exempt from the practice of same-sex intercourse; in that Jesus' Jewishness is not in doubt, nor should his disdain for male-male intercourse be questioned. For proponents of the LGBT interpretation, Jesus emerges as unique with respect to his repressive Jewish context, evident in his attitude of liberal tolerance. I examine these readings through the optic of Jasbir Puar's work on homonormative nationalism (i.e., "homonationalism") and conclude that the logic of these readings is inseparable from the demands of neoliberal imperialism.¹

Introduction

"What about the war on terrorism, and its attendant assemblages of racism, nationalism, patriotism, and terrorism, is already profoundly queer?"

– Jasbir K. Puar (2005, 121)

During most of the twentieth century, it was a truism among biblical scholars that Jesus never addressed the topic of same-sex intercourse. In 1974, for instance, Tom Horner unequivocally stated, "Jesus Christ never said anything about homosexuality—one way or the other" (Horner 1974, 92).² But this consensus has become contested with the slow introduction of queer theory and LGBT exegetical methods into the study of the NT. Exegetes have proposed that a handful of pericopae in the gospels address same-sex intercourse with varying directness: Matt. 19:12 on eunuchs, homoeroticism in Secret Mark, and so on. Such interpretations originated as efforts by LGBT Christians to excavate favourable

¹ Part of this article was presented at the Reading, Theory, and the Bible session during the 2013 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I would like to thank the attendees for their helpful questions and observations. Thanks also to John Egger for his thorough comments on a draft of this article. Finally, Nathanael Romero must be singled out for his conversations, suggestions, and insights that have impacted this project to an extent difficult to overstate.

² He eventually revised this position (Horner 1990).

readings from a document that had long been associated with hostility toward their sexual practices. The increased presence of queer populations within Christian social life after Stonewall warranted biblical justification, given the widespread denunciation of their sexual practices. Beyond defensive purposes, LGBT Christians desired to find precursors in the bible, especially via models of queer discipleship and biblically sanctioned same-sex relationships. But despite the proliferation of queer readings, few such interpretations have achieved much acceptance outside non-academic LGBT sectors. One particular pericope, however, has found marginal success in penetrating mainstream NT scholarship: a number of scholars contend that the Healing of the Centurion's Slave may suggest Jesus approved of a sexual relationship between two males.

The Healing of the Centurion's Slave is attested in Matt. 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10, with a loose parallel in John 4:46-54. Among scholars accepting the two-source hypothesis, it is agreed that the pericope derives from the Sayings Gospel Q.³ While Matthew and Luke differ on important points, both Gospels narrate a centurion in the Galilean village of Capernaum whose slave became ill. The centurion, seeking aid for his slave boy, requested that Jesus heal him from a distance. Jesus did so with enthusiasm, as the centurion revealed a greater degree of faith than Jesus had encountered in Israel. At first glance, there is little to justify an LGBT reading: there is no explicit language of romance, sex, gender, or anything else of the sort. It may be helpful to walk through standard arguments for the LGBT interpretation.

To start, the centurion's dialogue uses two distinct Greek words for "slave": δούλος is employed in reference to slaves in general (Matt. 8:9//Luke 7:8; cf. Luke 7:2, 3, 10, which are not the centurion's direct discourse), but the word παῖς is found when the centurion refers to the slave boy who is ill (Matt. 8:6, 8//Luke 7:7). The term παῖς not only referred to children and young slaves, but also to junior partners in male-male sexual relationships. This vocabulary in itself does not necessitate one prefer the homosexual sense of the term, but Luke 7:2 further refers to the slave as ἐντιμος, meaning something like "precious" or "honoured." This description could express the usefulness of the slave to his master, but may also imply an emotional bond. Finally, sex between men and slaves is well known in the Roman military. While no one of these points requires contemporary readers to suppose the centurion was involved in same-sex intercourse, LGBT-friendly interpreters contend that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and so cumulatively suggest a sexual relationship between the centurion and his slave. The fact that Jesus says nothing about same-sex intercourse implies his tacit acceptance of the practice. Commentators have consequently celebrated the centurion as an archetype of gay discipleship: the centurion risks humiliation by approaching Jesus—a potentially hostile Jew—on behalf of his lover, only to be commended for the excellence of his faith.

From the 1960s to early 1990s, a number of publications highlighted a possibly paederastic angle to this pericope. The term παῖς not only referred to younger partners in male-male intercourse, but often male youth in sexual relationships more specifically (e.g., Gray-Fow 1986, 457; Mader 1987/1992; Martignac 1974;

³ For an exhaustive overview of efforts to reconstruct the wording of Q's text here, see Johnson (2002).

Mayer 1965; Rossman 1976, 99; cf. Horner 1990, 639).⁴ Many subsequent writers have found this emphasis on the immaturity of the slave distressing, as this might entail a biblical endorsement of sexual abuse.⁵ Recent publications often circumvent implied paedophilia via lexical arguments that the word *παῖς* referred to males of consenting age.

But for all the enthusiasm the LGBT-friendly reading of the Healing of the Centurion's Slave has generated among sympathetic laity, scholarly support remains marginal.⁶ Tom Hanks attributes academic neglect to "heterosexist male advocacy scholarship" (2000a, 195), but Theodore Jennings and Tat-Siong Benny Liew observe that queer issues have only recently taken hold in cognate fields such as classics (2004, 473 n. 16). Nevertheless, this reading is consistently overlooked in NT scholarship; no serialised commentaries even address the interpretation and Jennings and Liew's article (2004) in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* remains the only work in a major biblical studies journal to advocate the LGBT reading.⁷

Given the prevalence of heteronormative biblical scholarship, it comes as little surprise that the LGBT reading has been the object of some academic scorn. Take, for example, Robert Gagnon, who has devoted most of his academic career to arguing that the bible uniformly condemns same-sex intercourse. Gagnon's most pertinent counter-arguments may be summarised as follows (2007). First, he contends that Jews were entirely hostile to same-sex intercourse, rendering it unlikely that Jesus or the Jewish elders at Capernaum (Luke 7:3-5) would have praised a known practitioner of same-sex intercourse. Second, Gagnon disputes the historicity of the story as narrated by Matthew and Luke. Rather, he contends that the parallel in John 4:46-54, which describes a Jewish official requesting that his son be healed, is an earlier version of the Matt./Luke/Q pericope and consequently more likely to be historical. It is doubtful that Jewish administrators were prone to incest, rendering same-sex intercourse moot at the historical level.⁸ Finally, Gagnon argues that—even if the centurion and his slave had engaged in sexual intercourse—Jesus' silence on the matter does not necessarily imply his acceptance of the centurion's actions. In support of this point, Gagnon observes that Jesus' association with "tax collectors and sexual sinners" elsewhere in the Gospels does not mean that he condoned their activities.

⁴ The full title of the journal where Donald Mader's article was first published is *Paidika: Journal of Paedophilia*; better known is the reprint in an anthology whose title is less evocative of the sexual abuse of children.

⁵ Scholarly writings accepting the possibility of same-sex intercourse, but critical of implied age-related power dynamics include Gowler (2003, 118); Valantasis (2005, 82-83); Velunta (2000). Contrast Jennings (2003, 131-144); Jennings and Liew (2004), which are the only recent academic publications to advocate a paederastic reading.

⁶ Among the few scholarly publications whose primary end is not elaborating a normative vision of contemporary sexuality (i.e., "activist interpretation"), which seriously entertain the LGBT reading are Gowler (2003, 116-118); Jennings and Liew (2004); Theissen (1986, 150; 1987: 106); Valantasis (2005, 80-84).

⁷ But see the critical rejoinder also published in *JBL* (Saddington 2006).

⁸ However, some LGBT interpreters are careful not to prematurely attribute this position to the historical Jesus. For instance, Jennings and Liew (2004) discuss the pericope within the context of Matthean literary devices and Mader (1987/1992) is interested in "early Christian attitudes."

Curiously, interpreters find significance in Jesus' Judaism when assessing his stance toward same-sex intercourse regardless of their conclusions about same-sex intercourse in the pericope. For Gagnon and other heteronormative exegetes, Jesus must have disdained same-sex intercourse simply because he was Jewish. Jews—unlike other cultures in the Roman world—abstained from and vocally rejected same-sex intercourse. LGBT-sympathetic authors conversely see Jesus as more-or-less unique among Jews precisely because he held neutral or positive attitudes toward homoerotic acts. Theodore Jennings, for example, claims that the centurion “knows that religious Jews revile ... the sort of love he knows; yet he goes out into the street to find a Jewish healer and, risking rejection and ridicule, asks help for the boyfriend he loves” (2003, 143). Jesus distinguishes himself from other Jews by accepting the homosexual nature of the relationship without disparagement. In both cases, Jesus' Judaism and its exceptional nature are decisive factors in assessing Jesus' attitude toward same-sex intercourse.

But as William Arnal has been at pains to explain, claims about Jesus' Judaism are inextricably linked to a variety of contemporary socio-political investments (1997; 2005a; 2005b; cf. Crossley 2012, 105-132). Arnal demonstrates that scholarly fixations on Jewishness (e.g., Gagnon's arguments above) are not simply historiographic claims that reject the influence of Gentile culture on Jesus and his peers. Rather, “Judaism” functions as a cipher onto which a number of present-day values are projected, values which are then affixed to the exemplar of Jesus. First and foremost among these projections is the visage of the Eastern European Jew. Affirmation of Jesus' Judaism in such terms serves to partially alleviate Christian responsibility for the horrors of Shoah and demonstrate the incompatibility of anti-Judaism with authentic Christianity. An emphatically Jewish Jesus also offers a stable anchor for identity claims in a late capitalist economy, in that neoliberalism undermines the stability of identity categories by rendering their contingency salient. This process of destabilisation is resisted by fixating upon Jesus' religion and ethnicity, projecting stereotypical snapshots onto biblical texts that affirm the unbroken continuity of categories such as Jewishness throughout history. Historical reconstructions of Jesus' social world thus map onto contentious matters of our own.

It will be argued below that Jesus' Judaism performs a similar type of intellectual labour in interpretations of the Healing of the Centurion's Slave. Both proponents and opponents of the LGBT interpretation argue that Jesus' opinion about same-sex intercourse must be understood via analytic categories also associated with militarism attending to neoliberal economics. More specifically, interpretation of the pericope revolves around an implicit debate about the perversity of Jesus' opponents. Jesus' Jewish background (and either his continuity or discontinuity with this religio-cultural context) is instrumental in the construction of the sexually exceptional nation, a nation whose uniqueness is most visible when contrasted with the implicit referent of Muslim perversity. It will be argued that interpretations of this pericope are implicated in the legitimation of involvement in ongoing conflicts in the Muslim world—“irrespective of, and sometimes in opposition to, the intention of the biblical scholar in question” (Kelley 2002, 5).

Theorising Sexual Exceptionalism

It is no secret that discourse on sexuality is heavily implicated in western imperialism. Edward Said noted the matter in his influential book *Orientalism*: “Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate: it is not the province of my analysis here, alas, despite its frequently noted appearance” (1978, 188). While Said did not theorise this connection between sexuality and imperialism, it was addressed subsequently by a number of postcolonial feminists. For present purposes, Leila Ahmed’s discussion of “the discourse on the veil” is representative, as she demonstrates that the imperial logic of nascent feminist discourse contributed to British policy-making for Egypt during the late Victorian era (1992, 144-168). British colonisers claimed to rescue Muslim women from their culture’s patriarchal oppression which, for the British, manifested visibly with the veil. Beyond the denigration of Islam, Victorian feminism also validated the colonisation of Muslim regions and permitted Britain to overlook patriarchal violence in its own culture, all under the aegis of an ostensibly emancipatory project. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak thus notes that feminist rhetoric often reduced to “white men saving brown women from brown men” (1988, 296).

The war on terror, however, has renewed the urgency for examining the interconnection of colonialism and sexual discourses. The abuses at Abu Ghraib, the Mahmudiyah rape and killings, and rhetoric of women’s liberation to generate support for the invasion of Muslim-majority countries have made distressingly clear that the connection remains far from benign. This link is explored by Jasbir Puar, who offers a compelling analysis of the national exceptionalism attendant to the formation of post-9/11 American queer subjectivity in her book *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007). For Puar, “exceptionalism” refers to a variety of narratives of national uniqueness that “paradoxically signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (immanence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress” (2007, 3). Numerous overlapping narratives of American exceptionalism have been active since before the thirteen colonies’ federation, ranging from the religious to the artistic, the economic to the military; Puar is among the first to discuss American exceptionalism with respect to sexual mores. She contends that queer subjects have come to play an integral role in the authorisation of the neoliberal anti-terrorist state, indicating its sexual exceptionalism and aiding the formation of a “homonationalism.”

The uniqueness of the homonational state is found in its secular tolerance of queers inhabiting its borders. Within a narrative of sexual exceptionalism, the homonational state finds its foil in the violently homophobic terrorist and his allies. The terrorist is not only marked racially, but he is also distinguished sexually by his perverse masculinity, religiously by his refusal to comply with liberal democratic norms of cultural pluralism as manifest in his intolerance of queer sexualities, and mortally by his inevitable death. Moreover, queer secularity, in locating transgressiveness as a site of proper agency, finds those who adhere to “religious” sexual norms as deficient in this respect. Valorisations of sexual transgression thus become implicated in American nationalism, as they delimit the parameters of the exceptional and unexceptional. This notion of exceptionalism is

particularly troubling insofar as a) the perceived tolerance of LGBT populations is an increasingly significant component of American foreign policy, b) nations supporting LGBT rights tend to be most supportive of neoliberal economic and military policies, and c) those countries with few measures protecting LGBT populations tend to be already framed as hostile to western political aims, d) thereby driving a wedge between Muslim and LGBT populations in a manner conducive to the colonial formations of neoliberal capitalism.

Puar's work is complex and the foregoing description may be unduly abstract, so an example of homonationalism in practice may clarify matters: the events following the execution of the Iranian teenagers Mahmoud Asgari (aged 16) and Ayaz Marhoni (18) for having sex with another male (13).⁹ It should be acknowledged that the details of the crime are uncertain, particularly whether the intercourse was consensual or rape, though Human Rights Watch identifies the latter as much more probable. Regardless, when photographs of the youth's hanging emerged online, western media quickly identified the young men as prototypical gay teenagers victimised by fundamentalist Muslim homophobia. British LGBT organisation OutRage!, for instance, held an event in protest where they distributed placards highlighting the religious fanaticism of the Islamic state, "Iran: Stop Killing Kids and Queers."¹⁰ Less subtle use of imperial logic is exhibited in a statement by the American LGBT-advocacy group Log Cabin Republicans: "In the wake of news stories and photographs documenting the hanging of two gay Iranian teenagers, Log Cabin Republicans re-affirm their commitment to the global war on terror." Log Cabin Republicans' slide from Iranian sexual politics to the enlightened nation-building of the secular west not only lends credence to the latter's superiority, but also removes from visibility the question of how these teens would have fared had they been convicted as rapists or paedophiles as Muslim men in a western nation. Instead, Asgari and Marhoni emerge as gay, life-worthy subjects whose wrongful execution confirms the inevitable demise of the Muslim terrorist state.

Puar's project should be mistaken neither for advanced techniques in the game of "spot the racist" nor as a screed against LGBT activism. *Terrorist Assemblages* is an attempt to confront the widespread perception that queerness both exists apart from the politics it criticises and is a singularly transgressive discourse. These common perceptions are naïve insofar as they overlook the increasing mobilisation of LGBT populations in service of neoliberal projects (so Duggan 2002), such as that evinced in the aforementioned anti-Iranian protests. Puar investigates the means by which queers have been embraced as a component of the anti-terrorist state and how this acceptance has certified violence against other populations. Her work may be more helpfully read as an attempt to understand the narratives that render various queer complicities with state violence possible and desirable, whether or not their collusion is intentional. To explain this complicity, she argues that authority to kill no longer resides solely in the state, but circulates throughout

⁹ This paragraph draws extensively upon Andriette (2011), though this should not be taken as an endorsement of Andriette's article *in toto*.

¹⁰ This occurred at the one-year anniversary of the executions, on 19 July 2006. In another incident shortly before this, OutRage! distributed placards reading "No Occupation of Iraq. Islamists! Stop killing Iraqi Gays" (18 March 2006). For further analysis of OutRage!'s imperialising rhetoric, see Haritaworn (2008).

society. It is therefore not a question of individual responsibility or guilt, but participation in a ubiquitous logic embedded within the general citizenry.¹¹ That queers—now subjects “hailed by the neoliberal state”—participate in such politics is to be expected, since they inhabit American cultural logic as much as everyone else. Puar consequently holds suspect efforts to demarcate “good queer politics” apart from “bad queer politics,” as such categories themselves express a narrative of exceptionalism (2012).

It is the present contention that sexuality, secularity, colonialism, and Islam are similarly inseparable in NT scholarship. This is especially evident in scholarly commentary on the Healing of the Centurion’s Slave, which often naturalises a configuration of sexually exceptional and perverse social groupings congenial to neoliberal militarism. While it is impossible to demonstrate this without discussing specific commentators, the interest here is not in the ideological proclivities of individual academics, but the widespread assumptions informing scholarly reading habits. Moreover, one cannot assume that each scholar’s construction of Jesus or interpretation of the Gospels bear exact parity with their own posture toward same-sex intercourse.¹² I instead assume that scholars place idealised NT exemplars within frameworks that are comprehensible and identifiable to contemporary readers. Such frameworks structure social relations (here, between sexually exceptional and perverse populations) in ways that aid the formation of subjects by rendering their social position identifiable and means of obtaining that position plausible. This process renders meaningful social relations of the present day and can also cultivate desired politics through the borrowed authority of the bible. These hermeneutical frameworks retain their believability largely because they are formulated preconsciously and because they encourage the misrecognition of arbitrary power relations as a component of the natural/divine order. Since the present study is eminently *social* in its investigation, there is no desire to point fingers or dictate blame; thus, analysis will tend more toward breadth of scholarly examples rather than criticising any individual academic in great depth.

There are significant differences between the objects of present analysis and those of Puar’s interest, necessitating some theoretical tweaking. First, Puar is interested almost exclusively in American exceptionalism, which complicates the ongoing analysis in that relevant NT scholarship spans a larger area—Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Israel, etc. While Puar occasionally delves into the sexual exceptionalism of other countries, her work is continuously oriented toward the United States. Consequently, the present study will require greater reliance on abstraction and less on localisation of academic expression to address biblical scholarship’s ongoing collusions with state violence. That said, the

¹¹ This point is worth emphasising: condemnations of “the racist” (i.e., the individual, monadic bigot) are often counter-productive in that such censures render invisible structural forms of racial violence through their myopic focus on an easily-dismissed racist individual. By locating racism “over there,” the accuser is implicitly freed of participation in racist norms. Sara Ahmed has discussed this issue with great nuance (2004b; 2011).

¹² E.g., William Loader, despite his terse dismissal of the LGBT interpretation of the pericope, has proffered a submission to the Australian government supporting the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. Less extreme disparities between biblical interpretation and sexual ethics might observe the differing social expectations regarding human reproduction in the first and twenty-first centuries, while nevertheless maintaining their utility. Regardless, a scholar need not identify with the specifics of their historical construct for it to be ideologically expedient.

United States' centrality in NT scholarship in after WWII has rendered complete escape from the influence of American politics impossible, even among those resisting its normativity.

Second, many of the works discussed here preceded 9/11 by a considerable margin and so their authors inhabited a world where "the terrorist" played a much less significant role in the formation of western subjectivity. To account for the divergent historical situations of these scholars, the specificity of Puar's "terrorist" will be exchanged for a broader notion of the fundamentalist Muslim marked for death. This should encompass the Orientalisms produced through the First Persian Gulf War, the Six Day War, longstanding anti-immigrant attitudes throughout Europe, and so on.

Third, Puar is less interested in heteronormative nationalism than its homonormative counterpart. While they may be two sides of the same coin, her discussions nevertheless indicate that their relationship is quite complex (Puar 2007, 47; Puar and Rai 2002). The prevalence of heteronormativity within biblical studies requires a broad discussion of the discipline's rhetoric of sexual exceptionalism that exceeds Puar's aims. For the present purposes, heteronormativity is primarily deployed through the idea of the nation as produced by a moderate and monoracial heterosexuality (i.e., neither oversexed nor undersexed, often *völkisch*). The strength of the nation's identity is closely tied to its constituents' sexual practices, establishing its moral uprightness vis-à-vis other nations. This heteronationalism is usually caught up in middle-class notions of respectability and degeneracy.¹³ We begin with this explicitly heteronormative approach, even though it emerged subsequent to the LGBT interpretation.

Adverse Reactions to LGBT Excavations of Matt. 8:5-13//Luke 7:1-10

Wendy Cotter proffers the longest and most thoughtful criticism of the LGBT interpretation of the Healing of the Centurion's Slave. As with Robert Gagnon above, Cotter's primary counterarguments contest the plausibility of a Jew offering implied support for pederastic and same-sex relationships: "The problem with their research is that it does not present the Jewish abhorrence of sexual aberrations, which certainly included pederasty" (2010, 124-125). The central argument against the LGBT interpretation is that Jews disapproved of homosexual relations; because Jesus' Judaism is not in doubt, he must have also disapproved of the practice. Stephen Voorwinde and others object to LGBT interpretations on a similar basis: "it stretches credulity to the limit to suggest that the centurion, who may have been a God-fearer, would have enjoyed such a good reputation in the Jewish community at Capernaum had he been known as a sexual predator" (Voorwinde 2011, 18; cf. Gagnon 2007; Himbaza, Schenker, and Edart 2007, 107-113; Loader 2010, 33, 123 n. 132, citing an earlier version of Gagnon 2007). Operative is an assumption of Jewish sexual exceptionalism that ultimately denotes their *moral* distinction from Gentiles. That is, "good reputation among

¹³ As theorised in Mosse (1988) and Nagel (1998). See also the discussion of the historical Jesus and constructions of Galilee's national sexual purity in Moxnes (2012, 163-166). While sexuality does not figure into his analysis, the inadvertent use of nationalist discourse in NT studies is central to Kelley (2002).

Jews” is mutually exclusive with the same-sex and paederastic intercourse typifying Romans. Jews allegedly distinguished themselves from outsiders via national abstinence from certain sexual practices that were prevalent throughout the Roman world.

Within this characterisation lies a conception of Judaism that is both homogeneous and sexually exceptional. To be sure, surviving evidence of ancient Jewish writings overwhelmingly criticises same-sex intercourse when the topic arises. Philo of Alexandria (e.g., *Abr.* 135; *Spec.* 3.36), rabbinic literature (e.g., *t.Kid.* 5.9-10), Josephus (e.g., *Ag.Ap.* 2.199), and others offer negative assessments of same-sex intercourse between Jews.¹⁴ There are, however, four major problems with the conclusion that Jews of the early Roman era were sexually exceptional vis-à-vis abstinence from same-sex intercourse.

First, there are the clear indications that ancient Jewish claims of their own sexual exceptionalism cannot be taken at face value. The two scholarly sources Cotter cites are more cautious in distinguishing between the claims of Jewish texts and historical reality.¹⁵ Rather, evidence indicates that at least some Jews did perform same-sex intercourse during the Roman Principate. 1) Josephus reports that Herod the Great (*Ant.* 16.230) and his son Alexander (*Ant.* 16.418; *War* 1.489) both had sexual relations with royal eunuchs (Kasher 2007, 301-302; Loader 2011, 315-316).¹⁶ 2) Rabbinic literature, despite its condemnations of male-male sexual contact, nevertheless indicates that it was still known to occur among Jews, as Rabbi Judah ben Pazzi reportedly witnessed a pair of men midst intercourse (*y.Sanh.* 6.3, 23b-c). 3) Martial accused a Jewish poet of stealing a male youth’s affections from him—a charge laden with sexual wordplay.¹⁷ 4) Finally, there is the Warren Cup, depicting two male pairs midst intercourse. A member of Herod’s court may have owned this item, as it dates to the turn of the era and was probably discovered at Bethar. Beyond these four examples, one could mention other polemics of lesser historical value attesting to Jewish homoeroticism.¹⁸ Claims of Jewish national abstinence from same-sex intercourse are thus plainly contradicted.

Second, Jesus did not circulate in the few social spheres where same-sex intercourse was demonstrably denounced. That is, most surviving condemnations of same-sex intercourse from Jews betray the interests and assumptions distinctive of their social formation: educated Jewish élites. The complexity of this issue prevents its complete address here, but Michael Satlow has offered thorough work on the topic. Examining both rabbinic and Roman polemic against homoeroticism, he concludes: “Although the Palestinian rabbis ... discuss homoeroticism with reference to the appropriate biblical verses, their assumptions

¹⁴ Cf. *Sib.Or.* 3.595-600; *Jub.* 20.5-6; Rom 1:26-27; Jude 7.

¹⁵ Cotter cites Scroggs (1983, 66-98) and Stern (1994, 23-26). E.g., Scroggs (1983, 84): “The discussion is conducted *as if* both male and female homosexuality were possible realities within the Jewish community, although it is mostly Gentiles who are specifically accused.” Likewise, Stern notes the assertion that “Israel are not suspected of homosexuality” is contradicted by other rabbinic texts (1994, 26).

¹⁶ Cf. Josephus *Ant.* 17.309; *War* 1.511.

¹⁷ *Epigrams* 11.94; see the analysis in Cohen (1999: 41); cf. *Epigrams* 7.35, 7.55, 7.82.

¹⁸ E.g., Tacitus *Hist.* 5.5; Josephus *War* 4.560-563.

about homoeroticism do not derive from the Bible. ... Many assumptions that generated Palestinian rabbinic rhetoric almost certainly derived from those of the Greeks and Romans” (Satlow 1998, 139, 143). Thus, rather than bearing witness to distinctively *Jewish* discourses on sexuality, Satlow presents a cogent case that Jewish texts denouncing male-male intercourse instead manifest categories and assumptions about masculinity and penetration characterising Roman élites more generally. This calls into question the extent to which Josephus’, Philo’s, and the rabbis’ valuation is representative of Jews outside of their own social spheres—let alone a homogeneous Jewish nation. They were precisely the sort of writers with reason to demonstrate that Torah’s purity concerns were consistent with Roman constructions of gender.¹⁹ Consequently, these authors cannot be assumed to represent the thoughtworld of rural Jewish peasants residing in upper Galilee, such as Jesus and the residents of Capernaum. The sexual exceptionalism of ancient Jews has been assumed rather than demonstrated.

Third, Jewish sexuality is often framed in national-essentialist terms; that it is, for example, “impossible to explain why Matthew would have preserved [the homosexual sense of *παῖς*] in his story for this *very Jewish* Gospel and this *very Jewish* Jesus” (Cotter 2010, 125; emphasis added). The phrase “very Jewish” implies an ascending quantitative scale of Jewishness, one that accepts the identity-parameters delimited by specific Jewish social formations in their own politics of authenticity. That certain Jews were more insistent about sexual components of their identity or contested more vigorously the parameters of Jewish authenticity cannot be taken to indicate their greater ontological enactment of an authentic Judaism.²⁰ This problem is rendered all the more obvious in that many Roman writers condemn same-sex intercourse with equal fervour. Despite the sweeping boldness of Cicero’s and Plutarch’s claims that same-sex penetration was incompatible with Roman identity, no classicist would suggest that this was actually true.²¹ It is thus peculiar that while bold condemnations of homoeroticism occurred throughout the Empire, only Jewish ones are treated as actually illustrative of an entire people. It may be more helpful to think of such Jewish denouncements as another instance of a discourse common among imperial élites. It is thus unhelpful to label the author of Matthew and other writers “very Jewish,” while assuming that Herod the Great, Martial’s rival, or the men witnessed by Judah ben Pazzi would not have claimed the same about themselves.

The fourth objection involves the political stakes of the aforementioned essentialisation of Judaism. As noted above, William Arnal has argued that the insistence upon a “very Jewish Jesus” pertains to the formation of contemporary identities. With this in mind, it appears that “Jewishness” provides a means of preserving the sexual exceptionalism of Jesus, his kinfolk, and their modern-day

¹⁹ Satlow’s discussion of Graceo-Roman assumptions in Jewish discourse on homoeroticism expands to Josephus, Philo, and others in Satlow (1994; cf. von Ehrenkrook 2011).

²⁰ Bruce Lincoln’s thirteenth thesis on method in the study of religion, while needlessly combative in formulation, is pertinent: “When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between ‘truths’, ‘truth-claims’, and ‘regimes of truth’, one has ceased to function as historian or scholar” (1996, 227; cf. Arnal 2005b: 20-38; Crossley 2012, 105-132).

²¹ E.g., Cicero *Rep.* 4.3-4; Plutarch *Quaest.rom.* 274d-e. See many other examples in (Hubbard 2003, 8).

successors. Implied in the notion of a “very Jewish Jesus” is an unbroken continuity between ancient Judaism and contemporary Judaeo-Christianity. This link foregrounds the shared largesse of Christianity and Judaism not only by appealing to an overlapping antiquity, but also by obscuring their historically tenuous relationship by use of a Muslim foil that casts them in a flattering light. One example of the transitive value between ancient Jewish and contemporary Judaeo-Christian sexual morality can be found in Voorwinde’s aforementioned objection that the centurion could not have “enjoyed such a good reputation in the Jewish community at Capernaum had he been known as a sexual predator” (2011, 18). Voorwinde declares that sexual predation renders Jesus’ approval impossible, insofar as his Jewishness precludes otherwise. This objection is asserted without any argument or evidence, apparently drawing upon the self-evident parity of sexual ethics between exceptional people (i.e., Jesus, ancient Jews, early Christians, and modern Judaeo-Christians). In the end, depictions of Gentile perversity draw upon the same discursive tools commonly employed for marking Muslim and LGBT populations as deviant: exceptional nations distinguish themselves via sexual practices, and so reject the perversity constitutive of unexceptional peoples.

A Homonormative Interpretation?

As suggested earlier, Judaism plays a similar role in LGBT interpretations of the pericope, though loaded with different associations. The differences are most evident in how Jesus relates to his culture. Whereas Jesus was a Jew *par excellence* with respect to sexual ethics in heteronormative readings, LGBT interpretations treat Jesus’s Judaism in a diametrically opposed manner. J. Martignac’s article in 1974 began an almost uniform trend in framing Jesus as an exceptional individual against the background of a homogeneous and sexually intolerant Judaism. Martignac’s reasoning (1974, 126-127) is worth quoting at length:

Cet officier pédéraste connaît bien le pays qu’il occupe. Il peut, en toute liberté, dans son armée et dans sa patrie, aimer un serviteur ou un esclave sans que personne y trouve à redire. Chez les juifs, il en va tout autrement: l’homophilie est honnie et maudite. Dès lors, quand il s’agit de sauver son jeune amant, n’est-ce pas «toute honte bue» qu’il va s’adresser à Jésus dont il discerne mal tout ce qui sépare celui-ci, quoique juif, de la tradition étroitement légaliste de sa religion? Avec ses mœurs romaines, comment ne redouterait-il pas d’offenser gravement Jésus en recourant à lui, juif, pour guérir son jeune amant? [...] Redoutant que Jésus soit encore enfermé dans le moralisme légaliste et ecclésiastique, il pressent que ce «Seigneur» n’abolit pas la Loi, mais l’accomplit en la transcendant dans l’amour. Il croit Jésus capable de surmonter tous les «tabous» de sa propre religion et d’agir miraculeusement, même à la requête d’un païen, et — scandale — d’un païen de surcroît pédéraste, sans la moindre «acceptation de personne».²²

²² “This pederast officer knows the country he occupies. He can freely love a servant or a slave without anyone finding fault in his army and his country. Among Jews, it is quite different: homophilia is reviled and cursed. Therefore, when he must save his young lover, is it not ‘in all sense of shame’ that he contacts Jesus? The centurion poorly detects everything that distinguishes Jesus, though Jewish, from the narrowly legalistic tradition of his religion. With

The goal of this interpretation is transparent: Martignac seeks to create space for a tolerant form of Christianity distinct from the hostile moral and legal culture of the day. Jesus—unlike his Jewish contemporaries—was capable of looking beyond the centurion’s sexual proclivities and so demonstrated an enlightened stance of tolerance. As with the heteronormative readings, however, Judaism is depicted as inherently inimical to practitioners of same-sex intercourse.

But despite the fact that Jews are once more depicted as collectively opposed to male-male sex, in LGBT interpretations Jesus *alone* is noteworthy for his sexual exceptionalism. While Jesus is the quintessential Jew for heteronormative interpreters, Martignac instead sees him as transcending the limits of his Jewish context in order to point to a theological insight that his contemporaries had missed. Jesus’ supersession of his Jewish context is ubiquitous in subsequent LGBT interpretation. Parker Rossman (1976, 99): “the centurion came to Jesus apologetically, for he knew that the Jews around Jesus would be horrified....” Gerd Theissen similarly imagines a Pharisee named Gamaliel who disparaged Jesus thus:

One day a Gentile centurion living here in Capernaum came to [Jesus]. He asked him to heal his orderly. Of course you have to help Gentiles. But why this one? Everyone knows that most of these Gentile officers are homosexual. Their orderlies are their lovers. But Jesus isn’t interested in that sort of thing. He didn’t ask anything about the orderly. He healed him—and the thought didn’t occur to him that later someone might think of appealing to him in support of the view that homosexuality is permissible. (1987, 106; cf. 1986, 150)

Jewish norms entail a compulsory hostility toward practitioners of same-sex intercourse—albeit with the exception of Jesus and early Christians, whose sexual politics are enlightened.

This depiction of Jewish sexual repression corresponds to two distinct but complimentary identifications in recent politics. First is the obvious connection with ongoing Christian hostility to LGBT populations inside the neoliberal state. Tom Hanks is quite open about this subtext. When describing Jesus’ reaction to the centurion’s request, Hanks observes that “Jesus does not ... dispatch them to a priest for a bit of ‘ex-gay torture,’ but simply heals the youth with a word from a distance” (2000b, 14). Jesus is an open-minded healer who invites a wrongfully maligned soul into the Christian flock.

The second figure evoked is the Muslim fundamentalist. James Crossley (2008; 2009; 2012) has published extensively about scholarly inclinations toward depicting Jesus’ Jewish peers in terms that mirror popular representations of present-day Muslims. Crossley argues that Christian supersessionism was left with no convenient foil after Christian complicity in the horrors of Shoah and the discursive subsumption of present-day Jews into the geopolitical west following the Six Day War of 1967. In order to continue affirming the superiority of

the centurion’s Roman customs, does he not dread seriously offending Jesus by asking him, a Jew, to cure his young lover? [...] Though fearing that Jesus is still trapped in legalistic and ecclesiastical moralism, he senses that ‘the Lord’ does not abolish the Law but fulfills it in a transcendent love. He believes Jesus can overcome any ‘taboos’ of his own religion and act miraculously, even at the request of a pagan, and—scandalously—a pagan pederast, despite no legal guarantee of ‘equality for all.’” Translation is my own.

Christian values, scholars replaced Jewish cultural inferiority with Orientalist tropes of Islam's perpetual premodernity. Orientalism of this sort abounds in NT scholarship, evinced in the clash-of-cultures rhetoric that pits Jesus against his Jewish (read: Muslim) social context, with Jesus consistently emerging as superior and exceptional. This Orientalism extends to sexuality: ancient Jews and contemporary Muslims are depicted as repressed but licentious, homosocial but homophobic, unaware of their own phallic brutality, utilising oppressive gender norms, etc.

In LGBT readings of this pericope, pre-arranged, inter-generational, and contractual marriages found among Jews of Jesus' time (and some modern Muslims) contrast with the quality of devotion between the centurion and his slave—the mark of authentic love. To paraphrase Crossley, Jesus' high regard for love-based relationships allows him to be rescued from his Oriental context through his western decency, insofar as he supports a model relationship based on a notion of courtship that corresponds to secular ideals (Crossley 2008, 104).²³ That love of this sort is found among Gentiles is significant: Gentiles are here marked as western, especially evident in their sexuality's tolerant, enlightened, and transgressive stance in contrast to the provincial perversity of ancient Jews.

The association of ancient Judaism with Muslims is often subtle, but generally relies upon Orientalist tropes that frame sexual tolerance as originating in the historical development of Christianity over and against its Jewish roots. To use the language of Sara Ahmed (2004a), the proximity of discourses on sexual liberality, the war on terror, and Christian supersessionism generates a shared “stickiness” between ancient Judaism and modern Islam entailing an exchange of attributes. Ahmed also notes that intolerance is treated differently with regards to Islam: “When homophobia is attributed to Islam, it becomes a *cultural attribute*. Homophobia would then be viewed as intrinsic to Islam, as a cultural attribute, but homophobia in the West would be viewed as *extrinsic*, as an individual attribute” (2011, 126). A similarly hostile posture toward same-sex intercourse is assumed as *intrinsic* to ancient Jewish culture, itself evincing their discursive proximity. In this vein, Lilly Nortjé-Meyer contemplates whether Jesus failed to confront the homophobia of his opponents, “But was homosexuality the only issue [Jesus] was reluctant to dispute with the Pharisees and scribes?” (Nortjé-Meyer 2002, 126). Scholarly knowledge of the Pharisees before the Judaean War is extremely limited and extant sources indicate nothing of their opinion on same-sex intercourse. For Nortjé-Meyer, Pharisees nevertheless assume the position of the premodern, self-righteous fundamentalist.

Judaism is commonly framed in such terms, including Theissen's depiction of Jesus' fictional opponent, a Pharisee named “Gamaliel” (Theissen 1986, 150; 1987, 106).²⁴ Gamaliel's Judaism is foregrounded, as he is distinguished by his Hebrew name unlike the Hellenised “Jesus” (rather than Yeshua) or the narrator's “Andreas,” not to mention his name recalls that of the renowned rabbi. Gamaliel's Judaism is also loaded with ideological baggage, as he cites Torah obedience as his

²³ Theologically-imbued narratives of western decency almost invariably imagine Jesus and the bible to better represent the norms of liberal democracy than Islam, the Qur'an, and Muhammad; see the excellent discussions in Crossley (2008; 2012, 38-67) and Sherwood (2006).

²⁴ Recall also that rabbis were the primary inheritors of the Pharisees' legacy.

reason for disdaining same-sex intercourse, which situates him within a static culture needing the correction of western enlightenment. Observe also the anachronism of the term “homosexual” as a component of the centurion’s identity, further drawing him and Jesus into modernity.²⁵ The Gentile centurion and the enlightened Jesus stand in stark contrast to the provincial intolerance of the occupied Jewish populace. In short, there is no historical evidence to suggest Jesus was the only Jew who tolerated same-sex intercourse, despite scholarly claims to the contrary.

The identification of ancient Jews with both western homophobes and repressed Muslims is not as incongruous as it may initially appear. The connection between the two is explicit in Jean-Fabrice Nardelli’s revealing characterisation of Robert Gagnon as an “academic turned ayatollah” (2007, vii). That a *Muslim* cleric stands as the reference point for regressive perversity indicates their overlap in the homonational framework, given their shared rejection of liberal tolerance and the looming threat of fundamentalist theocracy. Sexual politics become constitutive of secular modernity’s achievements, achievements from which Muslim-majority nations are *a priori* excluded.

Even beyond the insinuations tacit within the notions of secular Gentile sexuality, the centurion is held up as exemplary in prototypically white, western, middle-to-upper class terms that further distance him from natives. That is, the centurion’s wealth, employment as an imperial ensign, ownership of another human being, sexual dominance of a (non-consenting?)²⁶ youth, and ostensive love for his slave are either deemed worthy of praise or capable of being overlooked by most commentators. Such assumptions are most clear in characterisations of the centurion as an affectionate man, taking no regard for the lack of sexual agency available to soldiers’ slaves.²⁷ This move normalises both neoliberal social hierarchies and the perceived contributions of aristocratic benevolence, evincing a fragmented politics that assumes imperial endeavours—whether ancient or contemporary—are marginal to queer political consciousness.

Sex, Slavery, and Soldiers in Galilee

With the foregoing problems in mind, how might we approach the question of sex in the Healing of the Centurion’s Slave? Denis B. Saddington (2006) has observed some major historical problems in LGBT arguments regarding the military of Galilee, most especially in the tendency to treat the centurion as though he were in the Roman army. In the first century C.E., there were three major types of military forces in the Roman Empire: Roman legions (i.e., citizen legionnaires) stationed in major imperial provinces such as Syria, Roman auxiliary cohorts (i.e., non-citizen auxiliaries) serving in minor imperial provinces like Judaea, and royal armies such

²⁵ German original: “Jeder weiß, daß diese heidnischen Offiziere meist homosexuell sind” (Theissen 1986, 150). Contrary to this, Michel Foucault (1978) demonstrated that “homosexual” only emerged as an identity category in the late nineteenth century.

²⁶ Revelation Velunta (2000, 29-30) notes the scholarly privileging of the centurion’s claim to hold the slave dear and the Gospels’ silence from the slave. Velunta observes that scholars credulously treat this (white) soldier’s description of the relationship as an impartial index of officer-slave sexual relations.

²⁷ E.g., Gray-Fow (1986, 457) describes their relationship as one of “genuine affection”; (Jennings 2003, 131): “The episode may be termed the ‘centurion’s boyfriend’.”

as those in Herodian Galilee of Jesus' time. Even though Galilee was a client kingdom that existed at the whims of Rome, the difference between soldiers in legions and Galilean employ was not simply a matter of which government signed their pay checks. Rather, the social systems crucially structuring the values of these military institutions differed significantly between client kingdoms and imperial provinces. The Roman army was perhaps the single most transparent index of the emperor's might and thus served a considerably different purpose from the small army of a petty Jewish king comprising local recruits. It is consequently important to note that, despite the frequent tendency of scholars to examine Levantine kingdoms' armies in light of legions and auxiliaries, they should not be equivocated.

When discussing Matthew's version of the Healing of the Centurion's Slave, Jennings and Liew draw upon a variety of poetic and historical writings in seeking to demonstrate that the word *παῖς* could denote a male youth engaged in a sexual relationship with a military officer (2004, 474-477). Indeed, they establish that sexual congress commonly occurred between soldiers and male adolescents during Roman times. Saddington (2006), however, has observed that the examples marshalled by Jennings and Liew describe Greek and Roman soldiers' sexual acts, never those of Eastern client kings—let alone Herodian forces in particular.

Saddington's objection might initially appear to special pleading: we are expected to believe that the forces of client kings were, for some unstated reason, excepted from an otherwise prevalent practice of same-sex intercourse. However, a close reading of Jennings' and Liew's primary sources reveals that the asymmetrical relationship between Rome on the one hand and the inhabitants of the regions conquered on the other played a large role in generating the conditions necessary for sex with male adolescents—typically involving rape. Particularly vivid is an example they quote from Tacitus: "Whenever a young woman or a handsome youth fell into their hands, they were torn to pieces by the violent struggles of those who tried to secure them..."²⁸ This violence bears little resemblance to the sort of loving relationship that purportedly underlies the gospel episode.

The frequency of sexual violence by legionaries is corroborated by observations from other experts on the Roman military. David Mattingly has demonstrated that the relationship between Rome and its colonised is replicated in soldiers' sexual abuse of youth in conquered lands; resistance to Roman military aggression was demonstrably futile and resulted in humiliation (Mattingly 2011, 94-121).²⁹ Benjamin Isaac similarly points to telling evidence from rabbinic literature: Jewish women held captive by Roman soldiers were assumed to have been raped, whereas those held by local bandits were not (Isaac 1992, 85-86).³⁰ Likewise, literary accounts of paedophilia in the Roman military emphasise soldiers' active domination of the youth. Soldierly mores of sex among legionaries were

²⁸ Tacitus *Hist.* 3.33; Jennings and Liew (2004, 475).

²⁹ This is acknowledged by Jennings and Liew (2004, 475 n. 24), but they do not see it to its implications. Cf. Halperin (1986, 40): "what was fundamental to [the Graeco-Roman] experience of sex ... was not anything we would regard as essentially sexual; it was rather the modality of power-relations that informed and structured the act."

³⁰ Citing *t.Ketub.* 4.5; *b.Ketub.* 51b; *y.Ketub.* 2.26d.

essentially lopsided in their power dynamics, therein precluding consent as a marker of intercourse with slaves or colonised natives (Marchal 2011). There is thus little redeeming about the sexual habits associated with military slavery.

In sum, these sexual relationships were inextricably caught up in the norms into which Roman soldiers were socialised. The instances of sexual contact cited by Jennings and Liew were obviously structured by the military's production of warrior identities: maximising the Empire's maintainable dominion, preparing frontier regions for economic integration, minimising violence from potentially hostile subjects, affording of legal privileges to Roman citizens, etc. Such sexual acts would be unlikely to occur in Herodian Palestine, since none of these components were constitutive of the military order—however salient they may have been for other apparatuses of Antipas' Galilean state. Galilean officers were unlikely to have taken native slaves as sexual property not because of Jewish sexual norms, but because the mode of masculinity that its military cultivated did not predispose its soldiers to such practices. Rather, the fact that Herodian soldiers rarely left their homeland made it desirable to pursue sexual outlets in ways less apt to instigate riots among their neighbours and countrymen, a supposition confirmed in their employ of sex workers and use of animal livestock for this purpose.³¹ It is therefore little surprise that evidence of non-commissioned soldiers (i.e., centurion or lesser rank) having sex with male slaves in Herodian Palestine or other eastern client states is functionally non-existent.

Conclusion

Ward Blanton writes: “As if through a reflective play of mirrors, the ‘truth’ of any given depiction of ancient Christianity emerges only in that same moment in which an audience recognises this depiction to be an exemplary embodiment of those distinctions in terms of which it desires to identify itself” (2007, 6). I have suggested that among interpreters of the Healing of the Centurion's Slave these “desired distinctions” consistently include the sexual exceptionalism of the geopolitical west, a distinction that tacitly flatters colonial ambitions through its implied counterpart of Islamic degeneracy. This distinction is routinely espoused under the aegis of cultural differences between ancient Jews, Gentiles, and Christians. This is not a novel suggestion; Jonathan Z. Smith argues that NT scholars deploy Judaism both to insulate Christianity from pagan influence and also as a foil for Christianity to supersede (1990). While the functions Smith observes are both operative in interpretations of the Healing of the Centurion's Slave, they only work to their fullest when certain connections between nationality, premodernity, and sexuality can be taken for granted.

The isolation of political issues in contemporary LGBT activism (and academic production attending to these concerns) often results in campaigns for what is

³¹ Josephus *Ant.* 19.357. A graffito found at Herodium reads: καινοικήσας τὸ γυναικεῖον. [ἔχων] νοσοῦ χάριν συλετοῦ [...] (Testa 1972, no. 2). I suggest this be translated, “He recently dwelled in the brothel. He went crazy for the pleasure of the one he took [...].” Another graffito from Herodium reads: Μαθαῖω ὕει[α] οὗ κύντατα ἦει. (Testa 1972, no. 29). I suggest this be translated, “Matthew has a swine that he did the nastiest thing with!” Contrast Josephus' discussion of the failure of a Judaeon governor to take his soldiers' sexual crimes seriously (*Ant.* 20.105-112; *War* 2.223-227) and an incident when a rather extreme punishment was threatened for sexual misconduct (*Ant.* 19.357-366), both of which indicate severe consequences.

“good for gays” that overlook their normalisation of neoliberal militarism. But the preceding focus on LGBT interpretation of the pericope does not imply that its advocates bear an unusual predilection for compliance with western imperialism. Rather, queer narratives of sexual exceptionalism might be more productively understood as symptomatic of the neoliberal anti-terror state and the available strategies of LGBT advocacy; this manifests in a purview that heterosexism must be combatted in any way possible. That is, the fragmentation of political issues often leads to single-issue focus, manifested above in the overriding concern over what policies are “good for gays” and a pernicious myopia in discussions of overlapping issues—evinced also in the aforementioned Iranian executions. This move unfortunately acts as a double-edged sword, combatting discrimination while simultaneously normalising state violence. This is not a uniquely (or even especially) queer shortcoming, but rather a cultural logic in which we are all implicated.

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