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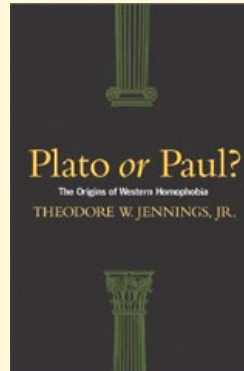
point of view

Re-Turning to the Bible.

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Re-Turning to the Bible: Theodore Jennings, Jr.'s Homoerotic Interpretations of the Western Canonby [Tony Hoshaw](#)

Between 2003 and 2009, Theodore Jennings, Jr. published three works that present plausible and sophisticated counter-heterosexist and counter-homophobic readings of the Old Testament, the writings of Plato and his interpreters, the Gospels, and Paul's letters: *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (2003), *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (2005), and *Plato or Paul? The Origins of Western Homophobia* (2009).



Plato or Paul (2009) by theologian Theodore Jennings.

These three books constitute an orthodox, biblical, and constructive theological questioning of the homophobic tradition of Christianity, a tradition that Jennings argues fundamentally distorts the meaning of influential biblical texts.

Plato or Paul?

In *Plato or Paul? The Origins of Western Homophobia* Jennings reiterates what he argued in his first two books, namely that "the biblical narratives from both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels accept and affirm same-sex relationships of many kinds," but asks, "[I]f the Bible is not the true source of Western and Christian homophobia, what then is the source?"

In this work Jennings argues that "the origin of Western homophobia lies not in the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity but instead in the Greek and Hellenistic sources often assumed to have been accepting of same-sex eroticism." "The effective origin of Western homophobia," Jennings maintains, "is to be found in the very influential texts of Plato."

In fact, Jennings demonstrates that Plato's homophobic project is extended by Plato's interpreters—including Christian interpreters—and imported into or grafted onto Paul's texts and Christian reflection. If this is the case, then it follows that a certain homophobic agenda precedes the interpretation of culturally significant texts, for example, biblical texts, and funds a homophobic hermeneutic.

In *Plato or Paul?* homophobia refers to the social or cultural rejection of same-sex sexual practices rather than to individual attitudes about persons identified, to use modern terminology, as "homosexuals." In antiquity, not excluding Christian antiquity, males generally did desire some form of sexual contact with other, especially young and beautiful, males—not because they were homosexuals, but rather because they were males.

If, as Jennings argues, homophobia is a social construction that results in the outright rejection of same-sex sexual practices, what sources are important for helping us discern this process?

Jennings develops his argument by tracing a trajectory in Plato's works from affirmation (*Charmides*, *Lysis*, *Symposium*) to sublimation (*Phaedrus* and *Symposium*) to outright rejection (*The Laws*). Jennings also identifies other Greeks contemporaneous with Plato and less influential on the development of homophobic polity, but who nonetheless maintained a position similar to that of Plato.

From here Jennings attempts to account for the spreading influence of Plato's thought by attending to the "socio-political landscape" of Greece. Having identified Plato's homophobic project in *The Laws*, Jennings identifies Hellenistic sources from Greece (Plutarch), Italy (Musonius Rufus), and Africa (Philo) that seem indebted to Plato and further consolidate Plato's homophobic project.

Jennings then wonders in what sense Paul may be associated with

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Plato's agenda. Christian interpreters of biblical texts, including Paul's letters, become the focus of the final section; here Jennings demonstrates the importance of Hellenistic sources (roughly contemporaneous with Paul) on the development of early Christianity's homophobic reinterpretation of Paul's letters and other biblical texts. The reader is left with the clear and distinct idea that Hellenistic sources made the homophobic appropriation of Paul's letters, especially Romans, possible.

A few features of Jennings's interpretation of Plato's *Laws* are especially noteworthy. In the *Laws*, the Athenian takes the place of Socrates (who "has been banished from this dialogue"), and the subject of same-sex love is taken up in books 1 and 8 (in greater detail). At issue here (book 1) is the gymnasium, "the privileged site for the incitement of homoerotic desire and attachment." The Athenian argues that these institutions have "corrupted the pleasures of love."

The Athenian maintains that pleasure according to nature (*kata physein*), that is, pleasure between male and female, is for procreation. This same pleasure is contrary to nature (*para physein*) when male and male or female and female attempt to mate, as not even animals attempt to mate in this way.

In addition to the contrary to nature allegation, the Athenian argues (in book 8) that such behavior between males is "unmanly," and he separates friendship from eros. The Athenian, however, is in a position as desirable as one who wants to convince Chicagoans that baseball is "unmanly" (Chicago is home of the White Sox and the Cubs). Thus, the Athenian must suggest ways in which to reform the culture, a culture that, in general, honors same-sex relationships, especially between males.

The Athenian imagines a culture that is self-policing, that understands same-sex sexual practices as being on par with incest. The Athenian recognizes that without "charming" young boys into his position by "tales [*mythoi*] and sentences and songs," same-sex practices will continue to be overwhelmingly attractive.

Jennings identifies the Athenian's project as an attempt to create a "popular culture that will inculcate a loathing of same-sex practices and a positive desire for conquering this (and other) desires." He further observes that we "have striking evidence of this [attitude] in the Platonically informed reinterpretation of Sodom by Philo and others."

Jennings also contends that traces of the Athenian's argument can be discerned in later Christian appropriations of biblical texts other than Sodom, including Paul's letter to the Romans. However, Jennings maintains that Paul hardly reflects the logic of the Athenian's homophobic project.

Jacob's Wound

Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel is the longest and, perhaps, the most seriously playful, of Jennings's three books. In this work, he maintains that "[e]veryone who has attempted to read the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible knows that its stories are filled with an unabashed eroticism. . . . What has been virtually missing from this recognition of the eroticism of Hebrew narrative, however, is an engagement with homoerotic elements of these sagas."

The notion that the Hebrew Bible "promotes heterosexuality and is aghast at the very possibility of homosexuality" has become the "natural" reading of the Hebrew Bible. But Jennings attempts to set aside that notion, and asks "what might appear if we looked at [Hebrew Bible or Prime Testament texts] with fresh eyes?" Is it not the case that "new possibilities of reading and interpreting emerge?"

As in the previous study, Jennings calls our attention to the many "forms of articulation of same-sex desire and practice." He identifies "three main styles of same-sex relationships" that are not "identical with or even closely parallel to what in our culture is generally assumed about 'homosexuality.'" Nor are they identical to the institutions of pederasty as these are becoming clearer to us from the study of Greek or even Roman antiquity."

First, Jennings identifies homoeroticism in a "warrior society." Next, he explores a "shamanistic form of eroticism," that is, the eroticism of holy men (e.g., Samuel, Saul, Elijah, and Elisha). Finally, he elucidates a tradition of transgenerating, "especially males, and their erotic relationships to (other) males."

Particularly important for Jennings is the homoerotic character of YHWH's (God's) relationship to human beings, and the manifold ways in which both characters, human being(s) and YHWH, are transformed by this relationship.

Jennings's homoerotic reading of the Hebrew Bible begins with the saga materials about David. Here he explores warrior love, or the homoeroticism of warrior culture. The "love triangle" between Saul, David, and Jonathan (Saul's son) and, significantly, the homoerotic

relationship between David and YHWH are addressed here.

This material includes certain prophets, whom Jennings playfully calls "YHWH's male groupies." He argues that "[t]he connecting link here is Saul, who has been portrayed as the discarded favorite of YHWH but who is also portrayed in an odd relationship to bands of prophets who roam the hills of premonarchic Israel. By attending to this connection we are led into a strange world of erotically charged behavior, not among warriors but among males who seem to be possessed by YHWH's erotic or phallic power."

In part two Jennings explores the particular eroticism of these "male groupies." He then highlights the transgendering of Israel, a male who is described as an (unfaithful) bride, and he also considers Jacob's (Israel's) transgendering of his son, Joseph, the "sissy boy."

Finally, in part four, Jennings takes up questions raised by his homoerotic reading of the Prime Testament. He poses this question, "[L]et us suppose that the readings I have undertaken suggest that Israel was not anomalously homophobic, that it was as worldly wise about same-sex as it is about cross-sex desire and behavior. What issues would then arise?"

From this perspective, he explores issues relating to the laws (in, for example, Leviticus) that seem to prohibit all or some forms of same-sex behavior, the question of female same-sex eroticism, and the relation between Israel and Greece.

Chapter three of *Jacob's Wound*, "YHWH as Erastēs," is a version of Jennings's essay of the same name in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (2001), edited by Jennings's colleague, Ken Stone. Here he argues that "[I]n a narrative [the David saga] concerned with homoerotic love, it is scarcely surprising that YHWH should be cast as a lover—this time of men. And it is also here that the theological profundity of the narrative begins to come into view."

In the context of the saga material about David, YHWH is portrayed as a "warrior-chieftain," who, like Saul and David, chooses a younger male to be (in these materials) his "armor-carrier." Jennings then asks on what basis does YHWH choose his "armor-carriers"?

YHWH first chooses Saul, "a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; [and he was taller than] everyone else" (1 Samuel 9:1-2). YHWH becomes displeased with Saul and next chooses David, who was "ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." After this observation, we read, "The Lord said [to Samuel], 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one'" (1 Samuel 16:12).

The biblical texts cited above give us an initial sense of the character of YHWH's interest in David (and other youths), an interest based especially on their beauty. In order to "flesh out" the character of this particular relationship, Jennings attends to David's dance before YHWH's "ark." Jennings calls attention to David's wife Michal's disgust with his "vulgar" dance, especially his "uncovering himself" before the public and the ark. (We must keep in mind that, in this and other periods, having a wife did not preclude, in any way, the enjoyment of young men.)

Jennings also calls attention to David's response. David declares that he "cavorted / danced before the Lord," and he promises to make himself "yet more contemptible than this" (1 Samuel 6:20-23).

Jennings's interpretation begins with the *ephod*, the garment David wore as he danced before YHWH. The ephod was "apparently a short linen apron that [covered] the genitals (while at the same time perhaps calling attention to them . . .)." But it is not David's ephod that interests Jennings so much as YHWH's ephod.

Jennings reviews several biblical texts and notes that YHWH's ephod is more-or-less a "jockstrap," that is, it hides the genitals while calling attention to them. Interestingly, the ark (that which David dances before) is conflated with YHWH's ephod (see 1 Samuel 14:3, 14:18).

Jennings concludes, "What I want to suggest is that the ark and the ephod have the same function. They make physically present the hypermasculine presence of the Lord. They both disguise and disclose the phallic potency of Adonai." The ark and the ephod are both "sheaths" that cover and draw attention to the phallus of God. Jennings continues by citing texts that buttress his interpretation, namely, those texts that portray God as rapist, a gang rapist—a sodomite, if you will.

We have learned that David, chosen by YHWH because of his beauty, exposed himself before God, more specifically, God's phallus. Furthermore, there are indications of a certain "holy union" here.

Later in the story, YHWH, having asserted himself as the lover (using pederastic terminology, an older male who pursues a younger male: YHWH as *erastēs*) and regarding David as the beloved, promises that "he will not take his steadfast love from David as he

has earlier done with Saul. . . . YHWH is promising lifetime faithfulness, binding himself to David always. It is something like a marriage vow, or at least we now say, holy union."

YHWH demonstrates his faithfulness by adopting David's offspring. David similarly demonstrates his faithfulness to Jonathan by adopting Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. Jennings concludes: "Thus the relationship between human males parallels and interacts with the erotics of the relationship between David and YHWH."

Perhaps most boldly, Jennings argues that David changed YHWH. At the beginning of "YHWH as Erastēs," Jennings notes, "Into death and beyond, [David] remains the man who YHWH himself loves. And in the process the ancient desert-warrior God becomes somehow more humane, more trustworthy, more forgiving. YHWH himself is learning to love."

There are several episodes in the David story that represent God as explosive, capricious, and angry. YHWH, however, seems to calm down as the story progresses, and he does this precisely because of his love for David.

Jennings concludes, "Although it may seem strange to say it, it would seem that YHWH had learned to love from David, had learned what it is to love all the way—precisely in relation to David—and had learned steadfastness in love from David. Through being the Lover of precisely this beloved one, YHWH had become a better lover, one who can be trusted, one who can be relied upon, one in whom one can have faith."

I have highlighted this chapter in order to suggest that the homoeroticism of the Hebrew Bible would scarcely be possible were it not for the fact YHWH loved human males, especially David. However, it is important also to note Jennings's argument regarding female-sex relationships such as Ruth and Naomi. He argues not only that "we do have evidence of this sort of relationship depicted in these narratives, but also that it is even possible to identify a certain priority of female same-sex relationships in this material. Indeed, I wonder whether female same-sex relationships do not play an essential role in the transformation of male same-sex relationships."

The Man Jesus Loved

In his introduction to *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament*, Jennings states his argument clearly: "This book is an attempt to carefully and patiently explore texts from the Gospels that suggest something about Jesus' own erotic attachments and the attitude toward same-sex relationships that may be fairly extrapolated from the traditions about Jesus. What emerges is evidence for the 'dangerous memory' of Jesus as a lover of another man and as one whose attitudes toward such relationships, as well as toward gender and what are called 'marriage and family values,' are incompatible with modern heterosexism and homophobia."

As we have seen in the discussion of the other two books by Jennings, a homophobic agenda precedes a homophobic interpretation of biblical texts. Similarly, a gay-affirmative agenda precedes Jennings's counter-homophobic reading. My point is not that Jennings forces his agenda onto the texts, but that texts cannot appear as homoerotic if one excludes such a reading from the outset, which has been the case with most other commentators.

Jennings is clear: "This book takes the position that the homophobic and heterocentric position of the church (and of Western society generally) is a distortion of the Bible. I propose, as a corollary, that a gay affirmative reading of the Bible will actually respect the integrity of these texts and make their message both more clear and more persuasive."

Jennings aligns his reading of the biblical texts with liberationist readings. We may think of the ways in which the bible was re-read to contest slavery, the oppression of women, and the poor. What is at stake in these re-readings is "greater clarity about the meaning of faithfulness to the God who is attested in Scripture."

From this vantage point, Jennings suggests several approaches to re-reading the bible from a gay-affirmative perspective. First, one may read to contest "the presumed basis in Scripture for cultural and social denigration of and even legislation against persons who engage in same-gender sexual activity." Second, one may read to contest heterosexism or the preoccupation with marriage and family values. A third level of reading may be called "pro-gay." In this case, one reads to find, in the text, "gay" characters (e.g., Ruth and Naomi). Finally, one may read from "the perspective of a contemporary gay or queer sensibility." Each of these strategies is deployed by Jennings, and the result is a thick gay-affirmative reading.

We begin with a legend. It is said "that a book was published entitled *Everything Jesus Said about Homosexuality*. When opened, the book consisted of nothing but blank pages." Jennings notes that the point is well made, but he also believes it is misleading.

Jennings contends "that the Jesus tradition contains a good deal that is relevant to the discussion of same-sex erotic relationships, and that all of it is positive."

In order to frame this conclusion sufficiently, Jennings asks, "Was Jesus gay?"

Rather than simplifying, the question "Was Jesus gay?" actually adds a great deal of complexity to the discussion. The modern understanding of "gayness" or "homosexuality" does not, of course, fit perfectly with first-century thought. Furthermore, we do not know about the "personal" lives of "historical persons from so long ago"; the evidence is only "suggestive rather than explicit." This is especially true of Jesus, "whose life, teachings, and deeds are filtered through a process of reflection and reconstruction that eventuates in the production of the primary documents, the Gospels, upon which we must rely for evidence."

Nonetheless, Jennings contends that the question both "provides a way of definitively breaking with the defensive hermeneutical strategy," and also "allows us to focus attention on texts that have been largely ignored in the discussion."

In *The Man Jesus Loved* Jennings uses the term "gay" to mean "gay men, lesbians, and bisexual and transgendered persons"; he avoids the term "queer" due to the fact that it seems to "block rather than facilitate understanding among readers, both 'gay' and 'straight,' of [his] own generation." Furthermore, he uses terms like "same-sex" (rather than homosexual) and "cross-sex" (rather than heterosexual) in order to avoid certain conceptual baggage.

Finally, Jennings argues that the texts do not lift the ephod covering the sex lives of ancient figures. The question is whether or not, on the basis of the textual evidence, a sexual relationship may be inferred. Jennings uses the term "homoerotic" to describe this reality.

Jennings begins with the Gospel of John; here he traces the instances in which Jesus is said to love anyone. Jennings writes, "Indeed the only text in which [terms for love] occur with any frequency is the Gospel of John. . . . Perhaps even more surprising is that, with a single exception, the only Gospel in which Jesus is said to love someone—even God, let alone another human being—is the Gospel of John."

Particularly important are those passages that indicate Jesus loved another man. We are told that Jesus loved another man in the Gospel of John "no fewer than five times."

In part one of his book Jennings explores the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the man he loved. Jennings also considers whether or not the Gospel of John as a whole is hospitable to his homoerotic reading of Jesus' relationship with his disciple.

In part two Jennings considers whether or not the Gospel of John stands alone in its assertion that Jesus loved another man. While "Secret Mark" seems to show signs of the "dangerous memory" of Jesus as a lover of another man, Matthew and Luke portray Jesus as, at least, supportive of homoerotic relationships.

If this is the case, how are we to account for Jesus' supposed support of "marriage and family values"? In part three Jennings demonstrates that the Jesus tradition is actually resolutely opposed to "marriage and family values." He also addresses the tension between the Jesus tradition and Pauline and later expressions of Christianity here.

In chapter 2, "The Lover and His Beloved," Jennings aims to "see what sense it makes of these texts to read them as suggestive of what we might today label a homosexual or gay relationship." The disciple (masculine in Greek) Jesus loved appears for the first time in John 13. The context is Jesus' last meal with his disciples.

Jennings writes, "The context in which the man Jesus loved is introduced is striking. As we have seen, this whole section of the Gospel is devoted to the love of Jesus for his disciples and the way Jesus' love serves as a model of their love for one another. . . . That one disciple is singled out in *this* context as *the* disciple loved by Jesus is striking. Jesus loved all the disciples in the most intimate friendship and in sacrificial solidarity. The singling out of the one who is loved by Jesus makes clear that some kind of love is at stake other than the love that unites Jesus to the rest of his disciples."

What concerns us here is in what sense Jesus' love for this one disciple is homoerotic.

Jennings's homoerotic reading is strengthened by the text: "one of the disciples—the one Jesus loved—was reclining in Jesus' lap Falling back thus upon the chest of Jesus, he said to him . . ." (John 13:23-25). Jennings observes, "The text thus depicts the relationship of love in terms of physical closeness and bodily intimacy. This feature is expressed twice here (lap, chest) and is reiterated in the final scene of the Gospel when the beloved is pointed out as the one

who had lain on Jesus' chest"

It is the physical closeness expressed in this text that differentiates Jesus' love for this disciple from the other disciples. While the disciple Jesus loved is not given special privileges or a particularly significant leadership role in the community, he is set apart as the one Jesus loved—the one Jesus loved in a particular way.

As Jennings acknowledges, he is not the first to recognize the homoerotic character of the relationship between Jesus and his beloved disciple. Jennings is not attempting to be innovative. Nonetheless, *The Man Jesus Loved* represents the first serious and sustained attempt to call attention to the theological significance of the homoerotic nature of this relationship.

Conclusion

While this brief survey of over 700 pages of material has necessarily been partial and fragmentary, I hope we have seen something of Jennings's careful, patient, and sophisticated homoerotic interpretations of canonical literature.

It is important to emphasize that there is nothing fanciful about Jennings's homoerotic interpretations. He uses standard historical critical methods in conjunction with other standard reading strategies to interpret canonical texts. In fact, his hermeneutic is quite orthodox.

It is true that Jennings's books bring together and consolidate fragmentary observations, arguments, and speculations found in a wide variety of scholarly literature dealing with the same texts and issues. Nevertheless, Jennings's well-developed arguments are certainly his own, and many of his theological and exegetical observations are unique and emerge quite naturally from the texts. Jennings's scholarship represents the best of biblical and constructive theology.

If it is true, as Cornel West argues in *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, that "any radical movement without a Christian counterpart in American society is doomed," Jennings's homoerotic interpretations will help the queer movement by opening a way for the movement to re-imagine itself as an expression of the messianic politics of Jesus and Paul. A queer movement informed by messianic politics will certainly be more radical, humane, and successful, at least in the Christianized United States.

Finally, Jennings's work clearly demonstrates that Christianity is not inherently homophobic or heterosexist. In fact, just the opposite is true.

In *Plato or Paul?* Jennings writes, "[T]his unnatural joining of Christianity and homophobia must be undone if Christianity is not to continue to be guilty of the true crime of Sodom: the violation of the vulnerable. Too many lives have already been lost or incurably damaged by this unholy alliance. There was a time before homophobia insinuated itself into Christianity. It is long past time that we entered a new era, the era after homophobia."

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