

Did Jesus Approve of a Homosexual Couple in the Story of the Centurion at Capernaum?

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The story of the centurion at Capernaum is a favorite of mine (Matt 8:5-13 par. Luke 7:1-10; cf. John 4:46-54). Among my first published articles as a young scholar were three articles on this story that were published in scholarly journals.¹ I hope to finish a monograph on the subject in the not too distant future.

Particularly ill-informed pro-homosex advocates cite it as an example of how Jesus affirmed a homosexual relationship. The argument runs as follows:

- (1) Sex between Gentile masters and slaves was commonplace.
- (2) Jesus did not tell the centurion to stop having sex with his slave.
- (3) Therefore Jesus did not have a problem with homosexual practice.

This misuse of the centurion story is so far-fetched that I did not even bother addressing it in my first book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001). In my second book, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003), I dealt with it in an online footnote. Apparently people don't read online footnotes. So I reproduce a revised and expanded version here.

There are six main arguments against the assumption that Jesus was endorsing homosexual relations in his encounter with the centurion at Capernaum. Individually, they are strong arguments. Collectively they make an airtight case against a pro-homosex reading. Here they are:

(1) ***Sex with male slaves not a universal phenomenon.*** Not every provincial or Roman officer was having sex with his slave so Jesus could hardly have assumed such behavior was going on. This is especially true in Luke's version where the centurion is portrayed as a paradigmatic "God-fearer."

(2) ***Jesus would have had to have been endorsing rape in this case.*** We know that the form which much master-slave homoeroticism took in the Greco-Roman world included not only coerced sexual activity but also forced feminization, up to and including castration. By the reasoning of those who put a pro-homosex spin on the story, we would have to conclude that Jesus had no problem with this particularly exploitative form of same-sex intercourse inasmuch as he did not explicitly tell the centurion to stop doing it.

(3) ***Jesus' fraternization with tax collectors and sexual sinners does not suggest support for their behavior.*** The fact that Jesus healed the centurion's "boy" (*pais*) in Matt 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10 communicates nothing in the way of approval of any potential sexual intercourse that the centurion may have been engaging in, whether with his "boy" or anyone else. Jesus also reached out to tax collectors. Yet he certainly was not commending their well-deserved reputation for collecting more taxes from their own people than they had a right to collect. Jesus reached out to sexual sinners yet, given his clear statements on divorce/remarriage, he certainly was not condoning their sexual activity. Why should we conclude that Jesus' silence about the centurion's sexual life communicates approval?

(4) ***The Jewish elders in Luke 7 could not have supported a homosexual relationship.*** Luke adds the motif that Jewish elders interceded on the centurion's behalf (7:3-5). Should we argue that these Jewish elders had no problem with same-sex intercourse, when every piece of evidence that we have about Jewish views of same-sex intercourse in the Second Temple period and beyond is unremittingly hostile to such behavior (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159-83)?

(5) ***Q, Matthew, and Luke did not interpret Jesus' healing as support for same-sex intercourse.*** There can be no question of Matthew or Luke reading into the story a positive view of same-sex intercourse on the part of Jesus. The same holds for the Q source before them (i.e. the sayings source consistent of sayings of Jesus common to Matthew and Luke but not found

in Mark). If even Paul, the most vigorous Jewish proponent in the Bible of the abrogation of the Mosaic law, was strongly opposed to same-sex intercourse, what chance is there that Matthew, the most vigorous proponent in the New Testament of the retention of the Mosaic law, would have recognized in this story a pro-homosex element? Even less likely would be a positive spin on same-sex intercourse by the Q community—still more conservative on the question of the law than Matthew’s community. Luke’s reference to the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15, with its prohibitions drawn from those enjoined on the resident alien in Lev 17-18, including the one against *porneia* (sexual immorality), could not have read an affirmation of homosexual behavior in the story. So if three of the earliest extant interpreters of the story, those in closest proximity to Jesus’ views and time, did not detect any pro-homosex content in it, it is likely that contemporary interpreters who do are simply reading their own biases into the story.

(6) ***Historical Jesus study does not support a pro-homosex reading.*** The final blow to all pro-homosex theories is that, from a tradition-historical point of view, the earliest recoverable version of the story probably did not contain the requisite elements for a pro-homosex spin.

(a) ***The pais was originally a son of the official.*** In a forthcoming work on the tradition history of the story of Jesus and the Capernaum official, I will argue (*inter alia*) that it is likely that the “boy” (*pais*) originally meant a “child” or “son” of the Capernaum official. The Q and Matthean versions are equivocal. They mention only a *pais*, which could mean “boy” in the sense of “child, son” or in the sense of “slave.” Luke interprets the *pais* to be a “slave” (*doulos*, 7:2-3, 10), but this is a product of later Lukan redaction and cannot tell us what Q or Matthew understood the *pais* to be. John 4:46-54 represents an independent variant version of the same account² and there the *pais* is viewed as a “son” (*huios*) of the official (*pais* in John 4:51 = *huios* in 4:46-47, 50, 53). Probably Matthew (and thus Q) interpreted *pais* in a similar manner, given not only John’s version but also Matthew’s probable insertion of *pais* in the miracle story of the epileptic boy/son in Matt 17:18 (cf. 2:16 where he also uses *pais* of a “boy” or “child”). In 14:2 (Matthean redaction of Mark) and possibly also in the citation of Isa 42:1 in Matt 12:18 Matthew uses *pais* in the sense of “slave”; however, these uses, unlike those in John 4:51 and Matt 17:18, have nothing to do with a person being healed and so are rather remote as parallels. Prof. David Catchpole’s comment is helpful here: “*pais* and *huios* are equivalent in normal Josephus usage. . . . Significant above all is the use of *pais/paidion* with a clear sense of one’s

own child in the related traditions of Jairus and the Syrophoenician woman: Mark 5:39-41/Luke 8:51,54; Mark 7:30. The appeal of the parent, not the master, seems to be a standard feature of this family of traditions.”³ Moreover, as I note below, the version of the Capernaum official story in Q is likely to have come about through contact in oral transmission with the story of the Syrophoenician woman, so that the image of intercession for a distance healing of one’s own child (not slave) in the latter is particularly significant. Needless to say, it is not very likely that Jesus would be commending an incestuous union between a father and his son.

(b) *The petitioner was originally a Jew.* In addition, my own reconstruction of the earliest recoverable version of the story suggests that the meeting involved a non-descript Capernaum official who was probably neither a military officer nor a Gentile but a Galilean Jew in the employ of Herod Antipas. This is what John’s version suggests. Like the Judean Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan woman before him (John 4:1-42), the Galilean official is initially a representative of his region’s shallow sign faith. In the new setting which the Fourth Evangelist gives the story, it is evident that he intends the reader to view the royal official in light of his introduction to the story: as representative of the “Galileans” who “had seen everything that Jesus did in Jerusalem at the [Passover] festival, for they too had gone to the festival” (4:45). At the festival “Jesus would not entrust himself to them (i.e., to the ‘many’ who ‘believed in his name because they were seeing the signs that he was doing’) because of him knowing...what was in humans” (2:23-25). It is this role played by the royal official, the role of a Galilean with shallow ‘sign-faith’, that explains Jesus’ abrupt chastisement of the official in 4:48 (“unless you see signs and wonders...”). This role also suggests that the Fourth Evangelist did not perceive the official as a Gentile but as a Jew (or, at most, a nondescript representative of all Galileans, not Gentiles per se).⁴ The trilogy of ‘Nicodemus - woman at the well - royal official’ is not the ethnic one of ‘Jew - Samaritan - Gentile’ but the regional one of ‘Judean - Samaritan - Galilean.’ John reserves Gentile contact with Jesus until after his glorification in the cross/ascension. When at a later Passover festival the request is made to see Jesus by “Greeks” (Gentiles or at least all non-Palestinians) this signals the “hour” for the Son of Man to be “lifted up from the earth” so that he may “draw all people to” himself (12:20-24, 32-34).

In the Q/Matthew and Q/Luke the centurion is indeed identified as a Gentile. However, a story exalting Gentile faith is more likely to be a later

creation than a story which leaves ambiguous the ethnic status of the petitioner, precisely because the direction of the church was to maximize in the tradition what little involvement Jesus might have had historically with Gentiles. I will argue in my forthcoming work⁵ that the changes between the version in John 4:46-54 and in Q (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) came about when an early version of the story in John 4:46-54 was interpreted in the light of oral knowledge of the story of the Syrophenician woman which, like the Q version of the centurion at Capernaum, involves a Gentile whose exhibition of faith and acknowledgement of Gentile unworthiness leads to a distance-healing from Jesus for a child. If this reconstruction of the tradition history of the story of the Capernaum official is accurate, then it is certainly improbable that a *Jewish* man would be having sex with a male (indeed, with his son), given the views that prevailed everywhere in Second Temple Judaism about homosexual practice. So if one is concerned with historical Jesus issues—as apparently are those who use the centurion story to say that Jesus supported homosexual practice—this text lends absolutely no support for a pro-homosex view on Jesus’ part. And there is obviously no support for a pro-homosex reading from any of the subsequent trajectories of the story’s tradition history (Johannine Signs Source to John, Q to Matthew, Q to Luke).

Other arguments for Jesus’ opposition to homosexual practice. In addition to all of these arguments one could add about a dozen other arguments, unrelated to the centurion story, showing why Jesus was not supportive of homosexual practice.⁶ Briefly, these include:

1. Jesus’ adoption of a back-to-creation model for sex in which he predicated marital monogamy and indissolubility on the ‘twoness’ of the sexes brought together in a sexual union in Genesis 1-2.
2. Jesus’ retention of the Law of Moses even on relatively minor matters such as tithing, to say nothing of a foundational law in sexual ethics; and his view of the Old Testament as inviolable Scripture, which Scripture was absolutely opposed to man-male intercourse.
3. Jesus’ further intensification of the Law’s sex-ethic in matters involving adultery of the heart and divorce (Matt 5:27-32), suggesting a closing of remaining loopholes in the Law’s sex-ethic rather than a loosening and, in his saying about cutting off body parts, warning that people could be thrown into hell precisely for not repenting of violations of God’s sexual standards (5:29-30).

4. The fact that the man who baptized Jesus, John the Baptist, was beheaded for defending Levitical sex laws in the case of the adult-incestuous union between Herod Antipas and the ex-wife of his half-brother Philip, a woman who was also the daughter of another half-brother.
5. Early Judaism's univocal opposition to all homosexual practice.
6. The early church's united opposition to all homosexual practice (completing the circle and underscoring the absurdity of positing a pro-homosex Jesus without analogue in his historical context: cut off from his Scripture, from the rest of early Judaism, from the man who baptized him, and from the church that emerged from his teachings).
7. Jesus' saying about the defiling effect of desires for various forms of sexual immoralities (Mark 7:21-23), which distinguished matters of relative moral indifference such as food laws from matters of moral significance such as the sexual commands of his Bible and connected Jesus to the general view of what constitutes the worst forms of *porneia* in early Judaism (same-sex intercourse, incest, bestiality, adultery).
8. Jesus on the Decalogue prohibition of adultery, which in its Decalogue context and its subsequent interpretation in early Judaism as a rubric for the major sex laws of the Old Testament presupposed a male-female prerequisite for valid sexual bonds.
9. Jesus' saying about Sodom which, understood in the light of Second Temple interpretations of Sodom (Matt 10:14-15 par. Luke 10:10-12), included an indictment of Sodom for attempting to dishonor the integrity of the visitors' masculinity by treating them as if they were the sexual counterparts to males.
10. Jesus' saying about not giving what is "holy" to the "dogs" (Matt 7:6), an apparent allusion to Deuteronomic law (Deut 23:17-18) and texts in 1-2 Kings that indict the *qedeshim*, self-designated "holy ones" identified as "dogs" for their attempt to erase their masculinity by serving as the passive-receptive partners in man-male intercourse.
11. Jesus' comparison of "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven" with "born eunuchs" (persons who are asexual and/or homosexual), a comparison that presumes that "born eunuchs" are not permitted sexual relationships outside a man-woman bond (Matt 19:10-12).
12. The fact that Jesus developed a sex ethic that had distinctive features not shared by the love commandment (love for everyone does not translate into having sex with everyone), reached out to tax collectors and sexual sinners while simultaneously intensifying God's ethical

demand in these areas, insisted that the adulterous woman stop sinning lest something worse happen to her (i.e., loss of eternal life; cf. John 8:3-11; 5:14), appropriated the context of the “love your neighbor” command in Lev 19:17-18 by insisting on reproof as part of a full-orbed view of love (Luke 17:3-4), and defined discipleship to him as taking up one’s cross, denying oneself, and losing one’s life (Mark 8:34-37; Matt 10:38-39; Luke 14:27; 17:33; John 12:25).

In short, there is no reasonable case for supposing that Jesus was supportive of homosexual unions. To the contrary: There is every reason to believe that he was as opposed as anyone else in early Judaism or earliest Christianity.

¹ “Luke’s Motives for Redaction in the Account of the Double Delegation in Luke 7:1-10,” *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994) 122-45; “The Shape of Matthew’s Q Text of the Centurion at Capernaum: Did It Mention Delegations?” *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994) 133-42; and “Statistical Analysis and the Case of the Double Delegation in Luke 7:3-7a,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993) 709-31.

² That John 4:46-54 represents an independent version of the same story is evident from the numerous points of contact between it and the story of the centurion in Matt 8:5-13 par. Luke 7:1-10. A comparison of the two sets of stories reveals an underlying core involving an official of “King” Antipas who “upon hearing” about Jesus’ arrival in Capernaum came to him to request that he heal his *pais* (“boy”) who was sick with fever and “about to die.” Jesus dismisses him and offers a declaration of cure from a distance (something like “Go, your boy lives”) and the official goes home to find his boy healed “in that hour.” There are so many points of contact between the two stories that even an orthodox theologian like Irenaeus could refer to the “son of the centurion” when speaking of John 4:46-54 (*Adv. Haer.* II 22.3), even though the Johannine account mentions only a “royal official,” not a “centurion.”

³ David R. Catchpole, “The Centurion’s Faith and Its Function in Q,” in *The Four Gospels 1992* (eds. F. van Segbroeck et al.; 3 vols.; BETL 100; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 1.517-40, quote from p. 523; article reprinted in: David R. Catchpole, *The Quest for Q* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 280-308.

⁴ Compare Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 58 n. 131: “It is far more likely that in its original form, or at least as known to SG [i.e. the Signs Gospel that the Fourth Evangelist used as a source], the man had not been identified as to nationality but could be presumed to be a Jewish official, living as he does in the Jewish town of Capernaum.”

⁵ In agreement with Stephan Landis, *Das Verhältnis des Johannesevangeliums zu den Synoptikern: Am Beispiel von Mt 8,5-13; Lk 7,1-10; Joh 4,46-54* (BZNT 74; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 39-40, 59.

⁶ In addition to *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 185-228 and *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, 50-52, 68-74, see the array of arguments in pp. 56-62 of my “Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?*” in *Reformed Review* 59 (2005): 19-130; online at: http://wtseminary.gospelcom.net/pdf/reformreview/gagnon_autm05.pdf. To the arguments here see also my discussion of Jesus’ eunuch statement, which likewise supports the view that Jesus was opposed to man-male intercourse, on pp. 5-6 of of my article, “Does Jack Rogers’s New Book ‘Explode the Myths’ about the Bible and Homosexuality and ‘Heal the Church?’: Installment 4,” online at <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/RogersBookReviewed4.pdf>.