

QUEER READINGS OF  
THE CENTURION AT CAPERNAUM

SBL Press

# BIBLE AND ITS RECEPTION

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THE CENTURION AT CAPERNAUM

Their History and Politics

Christopher B. Zeichmann

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were particularly valuable, given how severely the pandemic curtailed my contact with academic colleagues.

While none of the following chapters has been previously published, some sections of the present monograph rework and remix ideas I have articulated elsewhere. Thus, there are instances where a few consecutive paragraphs are very similar to things I have said in an earlier publication. This book includes brief overlaps with the following publications:

- Zeichmann, Christopher B. "Gender in Biblical Studies after the Forgery of The Gospel of Jesus's Wife." *BibInt* 26 (2018): 391–412.
- . "Gender Minorities in and under Roman Power: Respectability Politics in Luke–Acts." Pages 61–73 in *Luke–Acts*. Edited by James Grimshaw. Texts@Contexts. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- . "Same-Sex Intercourse Involving Jewish Men 100 BCE–100 CE: Sources and Significance for Jesus' Sexual Politics." *Religion and Gender* 10 (2020): 13–36.
- . "Rethinking the Gay Centurion: Sexual Exceptionalism, National Exceptionalism in Readings of Matt 8:5–13 // Luke 7:1–10." *BCT* 11.1 (2015): 35–54.
- . "X-Men Films and the Domestication of Dissent: Sexuality, Race, and Respectability." Pages 175–97 in *Supersex: Sexuality, Fantasy, and the Superhero*. Edited by Anna F. Peppard. World Comics and Graphic Nonfiction. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020.

Readers who enjoy the present book may wish to seek them out for further discussion of related issues.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ab urbe cond.</i>	Livy, <i>Ab urbe condita</i>
<i>Abr.</i>	Philo, <i>De Abrahamo</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
Acts Andr.	Acts of Andrew
<i>AE</i>	<i>Année épigraphique</i>
<i>Ages.</i>	Xenophon, <i>Agesilaus</i>
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
<i>Agr.</i>	Cato the Elder, <i>De agricultura</i>
<i>A.J.</i>	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
<i>Anab.</i>	Arrian, <i>Anabasis</i> ; Xenophon, <i>Anabasis</i>
<i>ANF</i>	Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325</i> . 10 vols. Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1885–1887.
<i>Ann.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Annales</i>
<i>Anth. pal.</i>	Palatine Anthology
<i>ASAE</i>	<i>Annales du Service des antiquités de l’Égypte</i>
<i>ASP</i>	American Studies in Papyrology
<i>ASV</i>	American Standard Version
<i>Att.</i>	Cicero, <i>Epistulae ad Atticum</i>
<i>Aug.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Divus Augustus</i>
<i>Autol.</i>	Theophilus, <i>Ad Autolyicum</i>
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud
<i>B. Bat.</i>	Bava Batra
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BBB</i>	Bonner biblische Beiträge
<i>BBE</i>	Bible in Basic English
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BCT</i>	<i>Bible and Critical Theory</i>

BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib hist.</i>	Diodorus Siculus, <i>Bibliotheca historica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>Bell. cat.</i>	Sallust, <i>Bellum catalinae</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>C.Ap.</i>	Josephus, <i>Contra Apionem</i>
<i>C. Gent.</i>	Athanasius, <i>Contra gentes</i>
<i>Carm.</i>	Horace, <i>Carmina</i>
<i>Cat. Maj.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Cato Major</i>
<i>Cels.</i>	Origen, <i>Contra Celsum</i>
<i>Chae.</i>	Chariton, <i>Chaereas and Callirhoe</i>
<i>Chron.</i>	George Hamartolos, <i>Chronicle</i>
<i>CIIP</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>Claud.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Divus Claudius</i>
<i>Cod. Iust.</i>	Codex Iustinianus
<i>Congr.</i>	Philo, <i>De congressu eruditionis gratia</i>
<i>Contempl.</i>	Philo, <i>De vita contemplativa</i>
<i>Contr.</i>	Seneca the Elder, <i>Controversiae</i>
<i>CPJ</i>	Tcherikover, Victor A., ed. <i>Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum</i> . 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957–1964.
<i>CPL</i>	Cavenaile, Robert, ed. <i>Corpus Papyrorum Latinarum</i> . Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1958.
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>CurBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>De gub. Dei</i>	Salvian, <i>De gubernatione Dei</i>
<i>Decal.</i>	Philo, <i>De decalogo</i>
<i>Decl.</i>	Quintilian, <i>Declamationes</i>
<i>Descr.</i>	Pausanias, <i>Graeciae descriptio</i>
<i>Dig.</i>	Digesta
<i>Disc.</i>	Musonius Rufus, <i>Discourses</i>

DMIPERP	Database of Military Inscriptions and Papyri of Early Roman Palestine
<i>Dom.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Domitianus</i>
<i>Ecl.</i>	Vergil, <i>Eclogae</i>
ELH	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Jerome, <i>Epistulae</i> ; Pliny the Elder, <i>Epistulae</i> ; Pseudo-Diogenes, <i>Epistulae</i> ; Seneca, <i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Eph.</i>	Xenophon of Ephesus, <i>Ephesian Tale</i>
<i>Epig.</i>	Martial, <i>Epigrams</i>
<i>Euch.</i>	Paulinus of Pella, <i>Eucharisticus</i>
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex Auditu</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>Fab.</i>	Phaedrus, <i>Fabulae</i>
<i>Fact.</i>	Valerius Maximus, <i>Facta et dicta memorabilia</i>
FHAR	Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire
G&R	<i>Greece and Rome</i>
<i>Galb.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Galba</i>
<i>Git.</i>	Gittin
GLQ	<i>GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies</i>
GNT	Good News Translation
<i>Hell.</i>	Xenophon, <i>Hellenica</i>
Herm. Sim.	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Similitudes</i>
<i>Hipp. Epid.</i>	Galen, <i>Hippocratic Epidemics</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Polybius, <i>Historiae</i> ; Tacitus, <i>Historiae</i>
Hist. Aug. Ael.	Historia Augusta, Aelius
<i>Hist. rom.</i>	Dio Cassius, <i>Historiae romanae</i>
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
<i>Hom. 1 Cor 7:2</i>	John Chrysostom, <i>In illud: Propter fornicationes autem unusquisque suam uxorem habeat</i>
<i>Hom. Matt.</i>	John Chrysostom, <i>Homiliae in Matthaëum</i>
<i>Hom. Tit.</i>	John Chrysostom, <i>Homiliae in epistolam ad Titum</i>
<i>Hypoth.</i>	Philo, <i>Hypothetica</i>
<i>Id.</i>	Theocritus, <i>Idylls</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
IG	Gaertringen, Fridericus Hiller von, et al., eds. <i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> . Editio Minor. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1924–.
IGBulg	Mihailov, Georgi, ed. <i>Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae</i> . 4 vols. Sofia: Academiae litterarum Bulgariae, 1956–1970.

<i>IKyme</i>	Engelmann, Helmut, ed. <i>Die Inschriften von Kyme</i> . Bonn: Habelt, 1976.
<i>ILind</i>	Blinkenberg, Christian, ed. <i>Inscriptions</i> . Vol. 2 of <i>Lindos</i> . Berlin: de Gruyter, 1941.
<i>Incomp. nupt. Inst.</i>	Augustine, <i>De incompetentibus nuptiis</i> Lactantius, <i>Divinarum institutionum</i>
<i>Ios.</i>	Philo, <i>De Iosepho</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JGRChJ</i>	<i>Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism</i>
<i>JH</i>	<i>Journal of Homosexuality</i>
<i>JHSex</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Sexuality</i>
<i>JIWE</i>	Noy, David. <i>Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe</i> . 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRE</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>Jub.</i>	Jubilees
<i>Ketub.</i>	Ketubbot
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>Leg.</i>	Plato, <i>Leges</i>
<i>LNTS</i>	The Library of New Testament Studies
<i>LSJ</i>	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah
<i>Mem.</i>	Xenophon, <i>Memorabilia</i>
<i>Metam.</i>	Apuleius, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
<i>Mil. glor.</i>	Plautus, <i>Miles gloriosus</i>
<i>MTSR</i>	<i>Method and Theory in the Study of Religion</i>
<i>NAMBLA</i>	North American Man/Boy Love Association

NKJV	New King James Version
<i>Noc. Att.</i>	Aulus Gellius, <i>Noctes Atticae</i>
<i>NRTh</i>	<i>La Nouvelle revue théologique</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
<i>Or.</i>	Dio Chrysostom, <i>Orationes</i>
<i>Or. Graec.</i>	Tatian, <i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>
P.Oxy.	Grenfell, Bernard P., et al., eds. <i>The Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i> . London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898–.
<i>Paed.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Paedagogus</i>
<i>Phaen.</i>	Aratus, <i>Phaenomena</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	Cicero, <i>Orationes philippicae</i>
<i>Quaest. conv.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Quaestionum convivialium libri IX</i>
<i>Quaest. rom.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Quaestionum romanae et graecae (Aetia romana et graeca)</i>
Qidd.	Qiddushin
Prot. Jas.	Protevangelium of James
<i>Protr.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Protrepticus</i>
<i>P.W.</i>	Thucydides, <i>Peloponnesian War</i>
<i>R&amp;T</i>	<i>Religion and Theology</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	Cicero, <i>De republica</i>
<i>Res gest.</i>	Ammianus Marcellinus, <i>Res Gestae</i>
Rhet. Her.	Rhetorica ad Herennium
RIBLA	<i>Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>Rust.</i>	Columella, <i>De Re Rustica</i>
Sanh.	Sanhedrin
<i>Sat.</i>	Horace, <i>Satirae</i> ; Juvenal, <i>Satirae</i> ; Petronius, <i>Satryicon</i>
SB	Preisigke, Friedrich, et al. <i>Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten</i> . Vols. 1–21. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1915–2002.
SCI	<i>Scripta Classica Israelica</i>
SCJ	Studies in Christianity and Judaism
SEÅ	<i>Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok</i>
SEG	Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SIG	Dittenberger, Wilhelm, ed. <i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> . 4 vols. 3rd ed. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1915–1924.

<i>Silv.</i>	Stattius, <i>Silvae</i>
SJ	Studia Judaica
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SPhiloA</i>	<i>Studia Philonica Annual</i>
<i>Spec.</i>	Philo, <i>De specialibus legibus</i>
SR	<i>Studies in Religion</i>
t.	Tosefta
T. Jos.	Testament of Joseph
T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
Tab. Vindol.	Vindolanda tablets
TAM 4.1	Dörner, Friedrich Karl, ed., with the assistance of Maria-Barbara von Stritzky. <i>Tituli Asiae Minoris, IV: Tituli Bithyniae linguis Graeca et Latina conscripti, 1. Paeninsula Bithynica praeter Chalcedonem; Nicomedia et ager Nicomedensis cum septentrionali meridianoque litore sinus Astaceni et cum lacu Sumonensi</i> . Vienna: Academiam Scientiarum Austriacam, 1978.
<i>TDNT</i>	Kittel, Gerhard, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
Trad. ap.	Traditio apostolica
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
<i>Tusc.</i>	Cicero, <i>Tusculanae disputationes</i>
<i>UTQ</i>	<i>Union Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>Var. hist.</i>	Aelian, <i>Varia historia</i>
<i>Verr.</i>	Cicero, <i>In Verrem</i>
<i>Vit. Const.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Vita Constantini</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WEB	World English Bible
WGRWSup	Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement series
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
y.	Jerusalem Talmud



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## INTRODUCTION

During an episode of the makeover reality show *Queer Eye*, the “Fab Five” refashion the wardrobe and home of a Philadelphia man named Noah Hepler.<sup>1</sup> Hepler, a parish minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (a denomination that affirms the full inclusion of queer people), identifies as gay but grew up attending a homophobic Baptist congregation. When Hepler begins chatting with the Fab Five’s interior designer Bobby Berk during a car ride, the conversation eventually turns toward their childhood experiences of Christian hostility when discovering their own sexuality. Although Berk continues to resent Christianity, Hepler relates the tensions he has negotiated as a gay man and committed Christian:

The faith has been used against us, and it should not have been. There are a lot of stories in the Bible. They’re in there, and they’re not told. For example, there’s one where the centurion goes to Jesus and says, “My slave is ill, and I want you to heal him.” The Greek word that is used there is “beloved.” If you take into account historical distance, it means “boy-friend.” And Jesus doesn’t say anything about that; he just heals the guy.

When Berk responds with a combination of surprise and bewilderment, Hepler offers a concise statement of the pericope’s importance: “It’s a very short story, but it’s very powerful. It’s like, *there we are*. But the story has been told in a way that leaves us out. I would like the rest of the Lutheran world to see that.” Berk’s reaction was undoubtedly shared by many of the *Queer Eye*’s viewers: Why is Jesus’s affirmation of a same-sex couple news to *me*?

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1. Mark Perez, dir., *Queer Eye: More Than a Makeover*, season 5, episode 1, “Preaching Out Loud,” aired 5 June 2020 on Netflix.

Queer bodies are almost intrinsically marginal, but their mistreatment has been particularly egregious within Christian contexts. For most of the twentieth century, the best that queer Christians and their allies could claim was Jesus never broached the topic of same-sex intercourse. In a 1974 monograph on sex in the Bible, gay theologian Tom Horner stated unequivocally, “Jesus Christ never said anything about homosexuality—one way or the other.”<sup>2</sup> There was a sense that although Jesus never directly encouraged acceptance of queer people, neither did he say anything that would authorize harm against them. Although some biblical authors seem to have promoted homophobia, Jesus’s silence rendered him a tentative ally. But more recently, many have come to doubt that Jesus and the evangelists were so neutral, thanks to the slow introduction of queer theory and hermeneutical considerations. Interpreters have identified traces of queer people in the gospels with varying explicitness: the discussion of eunuchs in Matt 19:12 extols the virtues of gender nonconformity, the Secret Gospel of Mark describes Jesus loving a young man who was nude except for a linen cloth, Jesus’s affections toward the beloved disciple invites a homoerotic reading, and so on.

Such interpretations excavate queer-sympathetic readings from the Bible, a corpus that has long authorized hostility toward nonconforming sexual and gender practices. Such readings emerged at a point when the increasingly prominent presence of queer folk within Christian social life warranted biblical justification; understandable, given the widespread sense of incompatibility between homosexuality and Christianity. Indeed, most Christian denominations regarded same-sex intercourse as sinful and did not recognize gay marriage until the early twenty-first century, with many still holding such positions. Beyond such apologetic purposes, these readings provide biblically sanctioned models of queer discipleship and same-sex relationships—what might it mean to be a Christian in a same-sex relationship or to practice Christianity as a queer person more broadly?

Even though such interpretations have proliferated, they rarely gather traction among academics, instead mostly circulating among lay readers who are already invested in queer theology. Few people with a PhD in the New Testament argue, for instance, that Jesus had sex with either the beloved disciple or the young man mentioned in Secret Mark. That said,

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2. Tom M. Horner, *Sex in the Bible* (Rutland: Tuttle, 1974), 92.

a homoerotic reading of one pericope has found modest support among New Testament scholars: the instance discussed by Hepler above, when Jesus healed a centurion's boy.

### The Exegetical Basis

The pericope known as “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 (see appendix 1 for Greek texts and English translations). Scholars supporting the Two-Source Hypothesis agree that the pericope derives from the Sayings Gospel Q. While Matthew and Luke differ on important points in their telling of the story, both depict a scene in the Galilean village of Capernaum featuring a centurion whose young man became ill. The centurion, seeking aid for him, requested Jesus restore him to health, albeit from a distance. Jesus did so with enthusiasm because the centurion revealed a greater degree of faith than Jesus had encountered in Israel.

At first glance, there is little to warrant a homoerotic reading: after all, there is no explicit language of romance, sex, gender norms, or anything else of the sort. Homoerotic readings of this pericope are built upon three of the story’s features: the specific Greek word designating the “young man” (i.e., *παῖς*), Luke’s characterization of the young man as “dear” (*ἔντιμος*) to the centurion, and commonplace homoeroticism in the Roman army. The details of these three arguments are worth exploring in depth, being presented here as sympathetically and persuasively as possible.<sup>3</sup>

To start, the centurion’s dialogue features two distinct Greek words for slaves. *δοῦλος* refers to slaves in general (Matt 8:9; Luke 7:8), but the word *παῖς* is reserved for the young man who is ill. *παῖς* is the *only* term that Matthew uses for the young man (8:6, 8, 13), whereas Luke once refers to him as a *παῖς* (7:7) and otherwise indicates he was enslaved (7:2, 3, 10). Even so, whenever Luke refers to the sick young man as a *δοῦλος*, it is either the narrator’s characterization or indirect discourse, since the centurion exclusively refers to the young man as his *παῖς*.

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3. As noted above, this pericope has multiple textual performances, though readers have tended to harmonize them out of interest in a single biblical/historical story. This loose historical/literary method only began to adopt some methodological rigor upon the intervention of academic interpreters into the conversation. This is a topic to which we will return.

The term *παῖς* referred not only to youth and slaves but also junior partners in sexual relationships between two men. Literary evidence of this usage abounds. I quote here from the discussion of Theodore Jennings and Tat-siong Benny Liew to give a sense for how pervasively ancient writers imbued the word with homoerotic connotations.

Marilyn B. Skinner describes the “conventional” *παῖς καλός* (a “fair” or “lovely boy”) as “the toast of the gymnasium, acclaimed by suitors who thronged his doors and decked his house with garlands.”<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, David Fredrick suggests that Callimachus (the chief librarian of the library at Alexandria [third century B.C.E.]) not only writes about the *παῖς* as an object of desire, but presents the *παῖς* as the embodiment of “desired poetic qualities.”<sup>5</sup> We can see this meaning of *παῖς* from Callimachus’s *Epigrams* (an example that will also partly illustrate Skinner’s and Fredrick’s claims): “Fill the cup and say again ‘to Diocles!’ And Achelous knows not of his sacred cups. Fair is the boy, O Achelous, and very fair (*καλὸς ὁ παῖς, Ἀχελῷε, λίην καλός*): and if any denies it, may I alone know how fair he is!” (31). Similar word forms—with or without expressions of beauty and/or desire—are used by Thucydides to refer to the (former) boy-love or boy-favorite of the Spartan king Pausanias (*παιδικά ποτε*, 1.132.5), as well as by Xenophon to talk about the reason behind many “battles” of and among Greek soldiers (“a handsome boy ... that he [a soldier] had set his heart upon” [*παιδὸς ἐπιθυμήσας ... τῶν εὐπρεπῶν*, *Anab.* 4.1.14]; “his son, who was just coming into the prime of youth ... Episthenes, however, fell in love with the boy” [*τοῦ υἱοῦ ἄρτι ἄσκοντος ... Ἐπισθένης δὲ ἠράσθη τοῦ παιδός*, *Anab.* 4.6.1–3]; “Was it in a fight over a boy?” [*ἀλλὰ περὶ παιδικῶν μαχόμενος*, *Anab.* 5.8.4–5]; “Episthenes ... was a lover of boys, and upon seeing a handsome boy, just in the bloom of youth and carrying a light shield ... threw his arms around the boy and said: ‘It is time, Seuthes, for you to fight it out with me for the boy’” [*Ἐπισθένης ... παιδεραστής, ὅς ἰδὼν παῖδα καλὸν ἢ ἄσκοντα ἄρτι πέλτην ἔχοντα ... περιλαβὼν τὸν παῖδα εἶπεν· ὦρα σοι, ἄ Σεύθη, περὶ τοῦ δέ μοι διαμάχεσθαι*, *Anab.* 7.4.7–11]; “there was a boy of Oreus, an extremely fine lad too” [*τινος τῶν Ὀρειτῶν παιδός ... μάλα καλοῦ τε κάγαθοῦ*, *Hell.* 5.4.57]; “he [Agesilaus] loved Megabates, the handsome son of Spith-

4. Marilyn B. Skinner, “*Ego Mulier*: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 136.

5. David Fredrick, “Reading Broken Skin: Violence in Roman Elegy,” in Hallett and Skinner, *Roman Sexualities*, 174–75.

ridates” [Μεγαβάτου τοῦ Σπιθριδάτου παιδὸς ἐρασθέντα, ὡσπερ ἂν τοῦ καλλίστου, Ages. 5.4–5]).<sup>6</sup>

Examples beyond these are innumerable. That the word *παῖς* often referred to younger lovers is not controversial, as it even forms part of the compound word *παιδεραστία* (pederasty). Though the word *pederasty* tends to denote pedophilia today, in Greco-Roman societies it designated sexual relationships between a mature and a younger man. These sexual relationships comprised initiation rituals into political life in Greek contexts, though in Roman contexts they were less socially important, being more concerned with satisfying sexual urges. In both Greek and Roman settings, such interactions were a matter of course.

Homoerotic readings of the pericope interpret the word *παῖς* in one of two ways. Either the centurion’s slave was also his sexual partner or the wording in Matthew is deemed more original than that of Luke, meaning that the young man was not a slave at all but simply the centurion’s *eromenos*—a freed or freeborn sexual partner.<sup>7</sup>

The quotation from Jennings and Liew above gives a sense of how often the term homoerotically referred to freeborn youth, but even if Luke’s phrasing is preferred (i.e., the young man was enslaved), ancient sources are clear that masters and slaves were commonly sexual partners. The character Trimalchio—a Jewish freedman in Petronius’s novel *Satyricon* (75.11)—is forthright about his sexual experiences with his former master: “For fourteen years I pleased him; it is no disgrace to do what a master commands.” The poet Horace is also direct:

When your prick swells, then,

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6. Theodore W. Jennings Jr. and Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5–13,” *JBL* 123 (2004): 473–74. In the original article, Jennings and Liew note the following: “Unless indicated otherwise, all English translations of Greco-Roman texts are taken from the Loeb Classical Library.” All brackets and ellipses are in Jennings and Liew’s publication; footnotes from the original are partially retained but reformatted for consistency.

7. It is generally agreed among Q scholars that Matthew’s phrasing of *παῖς* more likely reflects Q’s phrasing than Luke’s *δοῦλος*. The Greek text of Q and its English translation are found in appendix 1. On Q’s wording here, see Steven R. Johnson, ed., *Q 7:1–10: The Centurion’s Faith in Jesus’ Word*, Documenta Q (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 167–84.

and a young slave girl or boy's nearby you could take  
at that instant, would you rather burst with desire?

Not I: I love the sexual pleasure that's easy to get. (*Sat.* 1.2.116–119)<sup>8</sup>

This is a common theme in Roman literature: the epigrams of Martial, the comedies of Plautus, and many, many other texts indicate that masters and slaves often had intercourse, regardless of the slave's gender.<sup>9</sup> Intercourse with slaves was widespread and discussed in writings that range from the lowbrow (e.g., the graffito *CIL* 4.1863: "Take hold of your slave girl [*servam*] whenever you please, it's your right!") to those at the apex of Roman literature (e.g., Vergil, *Ecl.* 2).

Sex between masters and slaves was sufficiently pervasive that Romans took it for granted without moral judgment. Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, returning to the city of Rome following his post as a magistrate in Sardinia, proudly asserted, "I spent two years in the province; if any [female] prostitute came into my home or if anyone's slave-boy [*servulus*] was accosted for my sake, you can think of me as the basest and most worthless person in the world. Considering that I so chastely kept myself from their slaves, you can reflect on how you think I treated your children" (Aulus Gellius, *Noc. Att.* 15.12.13).<sup>10</sup> Craig Williams detects two important assumptions within Gracchus's speech. First, when Gracchus boasted about his chastity, he was conspicuously silent about intercourse with his own slaves, clearly implying that he had sex with them. Gracchus assumed this was socially acceptable behavior. Second, Gracchus implied that *even*

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8. Translation by A. S. Kline. *tument tibi cum inguina, num, si ancilla aut verna est praesto puer, impetus in quem continuo fiat. malis tentigine rumpi? non ego; namque parabilem amo Venerem facilemque.*

9. This has been discussed extensively, but see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31–40; Beert C. Verstraete, "Slavery and the Social Dynamics of Male Homosexual Relations in Ancient Rome," *JH* 5 (1980): 227–36; Jerzy Kolendo, "Lesclavage et la vie sexuelle des hommes libres à Rome," *Index* 10 (1981): 288–97; Joseph A. Marchal, "The Usefulness of an Onesimus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul's Letter to Philemon," *JBL* 130 (2011): 749–70; Christian Laes, "Desperately Different? *Delicia* Children in the Roman Household," in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 298–324; Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," *Past and Present* 138 (1993): 3–27.

10. Translation and discussion from Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 20–21, brackets in original but Latin added.

if he had slept with another person's slave, it would not have been a serious offense. Rather, Gracchus intended to show that he was particularly well behaved and did not even indulge in slightly less acceptable arenas of sexual intercourse, such that no one need worry about more grievous offenses involving Roman citizens. This outlook was not limited to pagans, as the Hebrew Bible also depicts conjugal slavery as normal and explicitly authorized its practice (e.g., Exod 21:7–11; Lev 19:20–22; Num 31:7–8; Deut 21:10–14; Judg 21:10–24).

A second argument for the homoerotic interpretation is that Luke 7:2 declares that the slave was *ἔντιμος* for the centurion, meaning something like “precious” or “honored.” In this pericope, *ἔντιμος* designates either the usefulness of the slave to the centurion or some other special bond between the two. Between the two options, there is overwhelming support for the latter, since the centurion elsewhere exhibits concern for others (*humanitas*, *φιλανθρωπία*) by supporting the local synagogue. Many translations thus render the word *ἔντιμος* into English as “dear,” including the ASV, GNT, KJV (along with NKJV), RSV, and WEB; the BBE goes a step further and renders it “very dear.” Biblical scholars often agree: commentators who espouse no interest in the homoerotic reading find “dear” to be a compelling translation. Darrell Bock, for instance, prefers “dear” to translations emphasizing the slave's utility, and John Nolland observes that there is “a quite unusual degree of concern shown by this centurion for his slave.”<sup>11</sup> If heteronormative readings recognize that *ἔντιμος* signifies a special relationship between centurion and the young man, it is hardly a stretch to infer a romantic or even sexual subtext. The word *ἔντιμος* thus forms an important part of Donald H. Mader's famous argument for a homoerotic reading of the pericope, as he contends that “Luke, in introducing [the word *ἔντιμος*], was recognizing that the centurion's actions displayed a depth of feeling which was over and above that of an ordinary master-slave relationship.”<sup>12</sup>

11. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, BECNT, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1:636; John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 316–18.

12. Donald H. Mader, “The *Entimos Pais* of Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10,” *Paidika* 1.1 (1987): 33; repr. Mader, in *Homosexuality and Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, *Studies in Homosexuality* 12 (New York: Garland, 1992), 229. In this volume, citations will refer to the reprinted version.

Finally, there is extensive evidence of homoerotic activity involving members of the Roman army.<sup>13</sup> The homosocial environment of the military predictably led to casual homoeroticism, so it is significant that the slave's master is not only gentile but a military officer in particular. Roman legionaries were prohibited from marrying while serving, and same-sex intercourse between two male Roman citizens (and thus between legionaries) was criminal, so soldiers commonly found liaisons among civilians living in or near their garrison. Roman writers often commented on military men's proclivity towards same-sex intercourse in such relationships. Martial, for instance, composed two epigrams about a centurion named Pudens and his beloved slave Encolpus, the first of which concerns the slave's hair and is quoted here.

These locks, all he has from crown down, does Encolpus, the darling of his master the centurion [*centurionis*], vow to you, Phoebus, when Pudens shall attain the rank of chief centurion [*praemia pili*] which he wants and deserves. Cut the long tresses as soon as may be, Phoebus, while no down darkens his soft cheeks and flowing locks grace his milk-white neck. And so that master and lad may long enjoy your bounty, make him soon shorn, but late a man. (*Epig.* 1.31)<sup>14</sup>

Valerius Maximus (*Fact.* 6.1.10) reports that a centurion named Caius Cornelius was executed because he paid a young man for sex—the crime was not homosexual intercourse but sexual penetration of a Roman citizen; had the centurion slept with a noncitizen, their sex would have been unremarkable. Plautus's play *Pseudolus* likewise depicts characters teasing Harpax, an officer's slave, for sleeping with his master: "When the soldier went to keep watch at night and you were going with him, did his sword fit into your scabbard?" (1180–1181).<sup>15</sup> One might also refer to the passages quoted by Jennings and Liew above that discuss Greek and Roman soldiers.

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13. See the discussion in Sara Elise Phang, *The Marriage of Roman Soldiers (13 B.C.–A.D. 235): Law and Family in the Imperial Army*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 24 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 262–95; on legionaries' sexual intercourse with male slaves, see pages 266–75.

14. Translation by Shackleton Bailey (LCL, lightly revised); cf. 5.48, where Pudens's vow is fulfilled.

15. Translation by Wolfgang De Melo (LCL, lightly revised): noctu in vigiliam quando ibat miles, quom tu ibas simul, conveniebatne in vaginam tuam machaera militis?



Beyond literary texts, a number of epitaphs for slaves who acted as sexual partners for soldiers survive. These inscriptions refer to soldiers' slaves as *delicia*, a term usually bearing sexual connotations; if these texts do not use the word *delicium* itself, words within its semantic domain are found in its stead.<sup>16</sup> This is not to mention other evidence of military homoeroticism, such as soldiers being clients of male sex-workers (including a possible male brothel near the Roman fortress at Vindolanda) and contemporaries' jokes about their indiscriminate sexual preferences.<sup>17</sup> Evidence suggests same-sex intercourse was sufficiently widespread that Roman writers *presumed* their audience was aware that soldiers were sexually involved with slaves. Why would the gospels be any different? Moreover, would not Jesus himself presume the same?

While no one of these three arguments *proves* that a sexual or romantic relationship underlies the pericope, many have proposed that the whole is greater than the sum of these parts, cumulatively suggesting a relationship between the centurion and the young man. The fact that Jesus says nothing about same-sex intercourse may imply his tacit acceptance of their relationship.

### Interpreting Interpretations

Many interpreters have celebrated the centurion as an archetype of queer discipleship: he risks humiliation by approaching Jesus on behalf of his lover, only to be commended for the excellence of his faith. Jesus's phrasing ("Among no one in Israel have I found such faith!" in Matt 8:10; cf. Luke 7:9) indicates that even though Jesus had low expectations of the centurion, the Roman officer nevertheless practiced his teachings in an exemplary fashion. Thus, John McNeill: "Here we have the most direct

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16. See, e.g., *AE* 1929.106, 1929.193, 1977.762; *CIL* 6.3221; *CPL* 120.

17. On the Vindolanda brothel, see Carol Van Driel-Murray, "Gender in Question," *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 1992 (1995): 19; Simon James, "Engendering Change in Our Understanding of the Structure of Roman Military Communities," *Archaeological Dialogues* 13 (2006): 34–35, citing Tab. Vindol. 2.255 (referring to a centurion's six *delicia*). On indiscriminate sexual preferences, see, e.g., Plautus, *Mil. glor.* 1102–1114; Sallust, *Bell. cat.* 51.9; Cicero, *Phil.* 3.31. On male sex-workers see, e.g., Cato *apud* Polybius, *Hist.* 31.25.5; Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 31.24, 37.3.6; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 668b–c, *Cat. Maj.* 8.2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.40; cf. much later Salvian, *De gub. Dei* 7.88.

encounter of Jesus Christ with someone who today would be pronounced ‘gay’ and Christ’s reaction is acceptance of the person without judgment and even eagerness to be of assistance to restore the *pais* to health.<sup>18</sup> The gospels seem to invite readers to regard the centurion as a model for Christian living. All of this renders the centurion a particularly appealing figure for authorizing unconditional queer participation in Christianity—if Jesus was okay with it, who are Christian homophobes to disagree?

Beyond apologetics, it may be helpful to think of this reading as a contribution to the queer Christian archive. Alexis Waller describes queer archives as “evidence that might be foundational for alternative narratives of desire, expressions of gender, or queer community.”<sup>19</sup> Within the queer Christian archive, the centurion is placed alongside Ruth and Naomi, Jonathan and David, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and others as biblical characters intelligible as queer. This archive contributes to a reimaged history of Christianity, one that does not envision queer people as later intrusions upon a heteropatriarchal institution but present at the religion’s formative moments. The present book is an effort to understand the emergence and consolidation of this pericope within the queer Christian archive.

But for all the enthusiasm that lay readers express for this interpretation, such zeal is rarely found among academic readers, as scholarly support remains modest. Thomas Hanks attributes this academic neglect to “heterosexist male advocacy scholarship,” while Jennings and Liew more generously observe that queer methods and theories have only recently taken hold in cognate fields such as classics.<sup>20</sup> There is undoubtedly truth to both explanations, as the homoerotic interpretation is consistently

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18. John J. McNeill, *Freedom, Glorious Freedom: The Spiritual Journey of Fullness of Life for Gays, Lesbians, and Everybody Else* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 132.

19. Alexis G. Waller, “The ‘Unspeakable Teachings’ of The Secret Gospel of Mark: Feelings and Fantasies in the Making of Christian Histories,” in *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, ed. Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore, Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 148. On such archives, see the pioneering work of Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Sub-cultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 22–46; Charles E. Morris III, “Archival Queer,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9 (2006): 145–51.

20. Tom Hanks, “Matthew and Mary of Magdala: Good News for Sex Workers,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000), 195; Jennings and Liew, “Mistaken Identities,” 473 n. 16.

disregarded in New Testament scholarship. Only three serialized Bible commentaries even mention it: Mikeal Parsons (Paideia) dismisses it as “unlikely,” with a similar reaction from Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III (New Cambridge), though Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews (Wisdom) regard it more seriously.<sup>21</sup> Jennings and Liew’s article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* remains the only article-length work in a major biblical studies journal to advocate the homoerotic reading, but even so, it received a terse rejoinder in a subsequent issue of that same journal.<sup>22</sup>

The homoerotic interpretation tends to find far more sympathy among popular rather than academic audiences, among theologians than biblical scholars, among MDiv’s rather than PhD’s, and among activists rather than academics priding themselves on disinterest. This disconnect seems to engender even greater suspicion among biblical scholars, who find further reason to disregard it as the eisegesis of wishful thinking: those without proper training merely see what they want to see in the Bible.

Although the history of interpretation has steadily gained importance within biblical studies, the history of queer biblical interpretation remains entirely neglected. Those of us interested in queer hermeneutics remain unfamiliar with the giants upon whose shoulders we stand, not

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21. Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 118: “Despite this semantic ambiguity [of the word *ἐντιμος*], it is unlikely that Luke intends through the use of the word to indicate a sexual dimension (some form of pederasty) in the relationship between the centurion and his slave.” Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 198 discuss at some length and then reject a strawman homoerotic interpretation (see the discussion below). The discussion in Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Luke 1–9*, Wisdom Commentary 43A (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2021), 223–25 is much better attuned to the contours of this interpretation. Occasionally nonserialized commentaries mention the interpretation (e.g., Ronald E. Long, “Introduction: Disarming Biblically Based Queer Bashing,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache [London: SCM, 2006], 16–17; Sean McDowell, *CSB Apologetics Study Bible for Students* [Nashville: Holman, 2017]), 1182), though these tend to be more theological in orientation and do not reflect the *status quaestionis* of academic biblical scholarship.

22. Jennings and Liew, “Mistaken Identities”; Denis B. Saddington, “The Centurion in Matthew 8:5–13: Consideration of the Proposal of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., and Tat-siong Benny Liew,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 140–42. For other endorsements of the homoerotic interpretation in peer-reviewed journals, see below.

to mention changes to the texture of such interpretations before the most recent decades—at best, most of us can perform a literature review that accounts for tectonic academic shifts around issues of gender and sexuality in biblical interpretation. Consequently, there is a pervasive ignorance of nonacademic works that performed groundwork essential for the more scholarly interpretations that we find ourselves regularly citing. Discussion of nonspecialists tends to focus upon big names like Oscar Wilde and Jeremy Bentham, such that one overlooks the obscure individuals who performed the vast majority of this intellectual labor. The names Dinos Christianopoulos, James Kepner, and Michel Mayer may be unknown to most biblical scholars or queer theologians, but it is difficult to overstate their contributions to homoerotic interpretation of the pericope, as their works provided necessary precursors to articles like Jennings and Liew’s or even Hepler’s discussion on a popular television show. That said, these men (and we will see that such interpreters have overwhelmingly been *men*) were largely unfamiliar with each other as well. Shortly after World War II, a time when same-sex desire sat outside the realm of respectability, these interpreters partook in loose networks of intellectual exchange—what I will characterize as “queer shadow scholarship”—communicating with each other via homophile magazines, reading groups, and local conferences. These networks of shadow scholarship tended to be highly regionalized (e.g., Arcadie in France, the ONE Institute in Southern California, Weg in West Germany) but were pivotal in the development of the queer Christian archive.<sup>23</sup>

This localization was hardly incidental. The politics that have animated these exegetical projects are inseparable from the specific legal situation of queer folk within a jurisdiction. These interpretations are often caught up in the legal particulars of the interpreter’s context, as the law forms a key part of how queer recognition has been sought.<sup>24</sup> Even

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23. Indeed, their role in developing the queer archive was sometimes literal: James Kepner founded what is now known as the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles.

24. I use *recognition* here in the sense of Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–74, especially on the quest for “equality of dignity.” See, e.g., the explicit invocation of Taylor’s recognition alongside the homoerotic interpretation of the passage in Theresa Murray and Michael McClure, *Moral Panic: Exposing the Religious Right’s Agenda on Sexuality*, Listen Up! (London: Cassell, 1995), 10–11, 55–56.

within the modest omnibus of homoerotic interpretations of the centurion at Capernaum, one is struck by how much these readings differ in the implications they extrapolate from the pericope. This should be expected; the means by which queer bodies have experienced criminalization and discrimination in, say, Germany differed from how this was experienced in the United Kingdom, Poland, Argentina, Philippines, South Korea, Canada, and other nation-states. We will see that French interpreters were delighted to conclude that the centurion was a pederast, whereas American interpreters preferred to imagine the centurion and his beloved as partaking in a prototype of same-sex marriage. The two interpretations are incompatible, operating with irreconcilable conceptions of sexual consent, same-sex love, legal recognition, social power, and their sanction within the Bible.

Homoerotic interpretations of the pericope not only have political subtexts but carry a specifically *legal* inflection. The link between law and biblical interpretation is vital to the ensuing discussion. One of this book's prevailing themes is that legal systems function as productive forces in both producing subjects and constituting socially acceptable forms of (homo)sexuality.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, the legal regulation of sexuality is not merely epiphenomenal, as though it merely reflects and codifies dominant cultural prejudices. The law often does this, but it also forms the primary rubric through which queer recognition comes to be achieved. Whether through the abolition of sodomy laws, the recognition of same-sex marriages, enlistment in the military, or the introduction of hate-crimes legislation, the state confers legitimacy in a manner that exceeds its strictly legislative bounds of distinguishing the legal from the illegal. Instead, the law produces—even reifies—social difference: whatever prejudices may have existed against gay men, sodomy laws condemned those engaging in same-sex intercourse as criminal subjects; whatever expectations of gender conformity prevail, bathroom bills hail transgender people as predatory subjects; whatever the positive media representation of same-sex couples, marriage equality welcomed queer bodies as family subjects; whatever pronouns loved ones employ for a transgender person, gender-identity legislation recognizes people as socially gendered rather than biologically gendered subjects; and so on.

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25. Paraphrasing Joseph J. Fischel, *Sex Harm in the Age of Consent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 27. See also Carl F. Stychin, *Governing Sexuality: The Changing Politics of Citizenship and Law Reform* (Oxford: Hart, 2003).

Due in part to such shifts, the legal position of queer bodies in the North Atlantic has trended in a specific direction in recent decades. The law increasingly confers rights and responsibilities upon queer subjects, granting admission to progressively deeper levels of social acceptability through its (slow, uneven, and inconsistent) incorporation of queer bodies into the state. Bodies once deemed sinful, pathological, criminal, or perverted are now being produced as provisional citizens. The *provisional* nature of these gestures is important, as it has contributed to significant social differentiation within queer subcultures. Those who were once allies become liabilities, and former enemies become newfound allies. Consider the shifting relationship between the military and queer bodies, how queer people—once banned from service—now proudly identify as patriots on account of their enlistment. Or consider the shifting position of transgender people, how “gender-critical” feminism celebrates lesbianism but actively excludes transgender women. Or consider the shifting position of drag culture, which was once niche and socially marginal but increasingly rewards those positioned to commodify it for widespread consumption. Though queer culture was never monolithic, the provisional acceptance of some queer bodies has led many to leave other queer folk waiting outside in the rain, with the former eager to claim a spot at the table of recognition and respectability at the expense of those others.

The foundational supposition of the present study is that biblical interpretation is a site of social negotiation, that when someone interprets the Bible, they also engage their social world. Discussion of the Bible can figure into the forging of alliances and disrupting of tensions into fragmentation, where good queers can be separated from problematic queers; where some marginalized bodies can be reclaimed as worthy of recognition and respect but others left to continue their struggle; where one biblical figure can be read as emblematic of one social type, to be firmly distinguished from another social type. We will see that interpreters do not read the pericope as offering blanket legitimacy for all queer people but parcel the Bible’s blessings out as the interpreter’s social interests mandate, with differences largely intelligible through the interpreter’s legal situation—Jesus’s acceptance of the centurion legitimizes *this* type of queerness, not *that* type.

These acts of social differentiation are significant because the tensions between various homoerotic interpretations rarely receive comment. Advocates for the homoerotic interpretation tend to downplay internal disagreement in service of a unified front against homophobia; likewise,

those who reject the reading paint it with a broad brush, as though all homoerotic interpretations are saying the same thing. What might we find if, instead of glossing over these differences, we peer into such fissures and inquire as to the distinct politics animating these varied interpretations? What insights might we gain about the developing relationship between same-sex desire and New Testament interpretation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? It will be necessary to engage in some theoretical promiscuity to make sense of how this process has occurred.

A single question governs the present book: how did the sex-life of the centurion at Capernaum become meaningful in different contexts? This question takes up Vincent Wimbush's contention that "the primary focus [of biblical scholarship] should be placed *not upon texts* per se (that is, upon their content-meanings), but upon textures, gestures, and power—namely, the signs, material products, ritual practices and performances, expressivities, orientations, ethics, and politics associated with the phenomenon of the invention and uses of 'scriptures.'"<sup>26</sup> The present study is historiographic, not in the sense that it is propelled foremost by an historical-critical inquiry into the events possibly underlying a biblical episode, but insofar as it traces shifting patterns in the interpretation of Christian Scriptures. It is an effort to describe and theorize the intellectual labor of biblical interpreters interested in the question of the centurion's homosexuality. The present monograph therefore focuses less on biblical characters and more on the meanings that interpreters have creatively extrapolated from such characters' stories.<sup>27</sup>

The supposition that interpreters merely project their own desires onto the text both oversimplifies and mischaracterizes. Interpreters instead deploy a set of complex hermeneutical maneuvers to render the

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26. Vincent L. Wimbush, "TEXTureS, Gestures, Power: Orientation to Radical Excavation," in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush, Signifying (on) Scriptures (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3, emphasis in original.

27. See the similar approach of James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception*, BibleWorld (London: Routledge, 2016), which examines interpretations favoring and opposing a homoerotic subtext in the relationship of Jonathan and David and ascertains the different claims to find meaning in their hetero- or homosexuality. Likewise, Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible*, Biblical Refigurations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) offers an account of Hagar's blackness in the history of interpretation. Numerous other studies could be cited.

historical situation of the centurion comparable to their own: analogous relationships, ancient figures drawn proximate to contemporary ones, evoking sentiments of affinity, among other means. Sara Ahmed observes that feelings often stick to certain bodies (be they modern, ancient, or entirely fictional)—through repeated contact, bodies become associated with one or another disposition.<sup>28</sup> Some bodies are not only read as prejudiced, loving, repressed, giving, or queer, among a host of other possibilities, but even the mere invocation of such bodies can draw to mind an entire network of relations. This notion of stickiness is particularly useful when thinking about the history of interpretation, as roughly 1900 years of biblical interpretation has entailed the ready invocation of distinct affective resonances upon naming various characters. Pharisees, to take a familiar example, have long been read as emblematic of worldly legalism by Christian interpreters, bearing upon then-contemporary analogues—Roman Catholics in various Protestant traditions, institutional religion in anticlerical discourse, fundamentalists in progressive circles, among other bogeymen. While the specific referent varies, there is a shared sense of the values and dispositions that Pharisees represent. Indeed, much Jesus-within-Judaism scholarship is intelligible as an attempt to redirect the disgust and contempt that Pharisees have evoked in light of the Holocaust. As for the present project, one might inquire: What, precisely, is brought to mind when one names the centurion, his boy, the Jewish residents of Capernaum, or Jesus himself? What emotions, discourses, and bodies are proximate to and distant from same-sex intercourse? By what interpretive logic are these figures positioned relative to each other? What histories (both recent and ancient) are summoned to mind when interpreting the pericope?

Those reading the present book hoping for an unadulterated celebration of queer exegesis will find this wish disappointed. The present study is critical in its orientation, which occasionally leads to unflattering portraits of interpreters, interpretations, social movements, and their politics. Whatever noble aims may have guided queer activism, it often did not take long for activists to become sidetracked (some would say coopted) into less worthy political causes, the centurion remaining an ally through the thick and thin. To avoid the game of “spot the problematic interpreter,”

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28. Most famously, Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).



this book will limit focus on individuals and discuss instead interpretive trends (with the exception of two particularly horrendous interpretations discussed in chapter 1); interpretations are the primary focus, not interpreters. Thus, this study will not linger too long on any single interpreter, except insofar as the details of their argument are salient. Hopefully, the reader will recall that despite the sometimes-critical discussion of homoerotic readings, this monograph is anything but a condemnation of queer biblical interpretation.

### Outline of the Book

This book proceeds with a roughly chronological discussion of interpretations, jumping around the globe from chapter to chapter. This geographic scope acts as part of a broader effort at decentering the United States in histories of biblical interpretation following WW II: to the extent that queer history is ever considered in biblical scholarship, there is a tendency to correlate everything with specifically *American* moments (e.g., the Stonewall Riots, Lawrence v. Texas, Defense of Marriage Act). Rather, we will see that not only did this interpretation first emerge elsewhere, but historical events pivotal for the interpretation of the passage often have little relation to what was happening in the United States; for instance, the codification of article 334 of the French penal code in 1942 and its revision in 1982 played a far more significant role in the interpretation of the pericope than did the Stonewall Riots. If the story of queer biblical interpretation is to be told, it is best to do so in a manner that does not simply regurgitate narratives that center on American experiences.<sup>29</sup>

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29. The present project bears some similarities in its geographic reorientation about the study of religion in Canada found in Aaron W. Hughes, *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), quoting here from pages 5–6: “It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the American story was standard, let alone normal. Instead, I would suggest that the American story is precisely that, a story that developed out of a set of idiosyncratic concerns unique to that country. We could similarly argue that how the study of religion came to be—indeed, how it continues to be configured in places such as Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Greece, and so on—is the direct product of those countries’ own distinct and often idiosyncratic legal, theological, denominational, judicial, and social frameworks, all of which have been, and continue to be, forced to deal in some way, shape, or form with religion

The book is far from comprehensive in scope: three exegetical sites have been selected to the exclusion of many others. The selection of these sites was tricky, as they are not neatly divisible in terms of their data. The following chapters discuss overlapping populations and the complex politics of social differentiation that animate their readings of the pericope; a given interpretation might sit at the nexus of multiple contexts. This book presents a simplified typology of intricate historical processes, reducing them to a linear narrative for comparative purposes—what Jonathan Z. Smith called a “disciplined exaggeration in service of knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> There is much more to be said about Spanish, Latin American, Eastern European, and even Roman Catholic interpretation of the pericope, for instance, all of which receive short shrift in the following pages.<sup>31</sup>

By proceeding in a rough chronological sequence, we are positioned to understand how the *status quaestionis* on the topic came to emerge. For readers primarily interested in historical-critical and related issues (e.g., did the centurion have same-sex intercourse? did any biblical authors presume a homoerotic relationship in composing this pericope?), this may feel like an extended detour, but I would insist that it is nonetheless necessary: it is only through the history of interpretation that one can ascertain why these specific historical issues have become pivotal to the pericope’s interpretation. Readers are advised that sexual violence is discussed throughout this book, but at particular length in chapters 1, 3, and 5.

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broadly conceived.” To be sure, academic and quasi-academic biblical interpretation has largely found its center of gravity in the United States since WW II, but the effects of this position are often overstated.

30. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52.

31. For instance, Catholic and ex-Catholic commentators commonly note the irony of the phrase *Domine, non sum dignis* (“Lord, I am not worthy”; Vulgate Matt 8:8; Luke 7:6), offered by Catholic congregations before receiving the Eucharist, being uttered by a man in a same-sex relationship. E.g., Patrick S. Cheng, “Domine, Non Sum Dignus: Theological Bullying and the Roman Catholic Church,” in *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church. Volume II: Inquiry, Thought, and Expression*, ed. J. Patrick Hornbeck II and Michael A. Norko, Catholic Practice in North America (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 172; Robert E. Goss, “Luke,” in Guest, Goss, West, and Bohache, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 538; John J. McNeill, *Sex as God Intended: Reflection on Human Sexuality as Play* (Maple Shade: Lethe, 2008), 90. For more on the homoerotic interpretation in Spanish, Latin American, and Eastern European contexts, see the brief discussion below.

Chapter 1, “A Homophile Centurion and the Legality of Love: Continental Europe, 1950–1990,” is divided into two parts. The first provides context for early homoerotic readings of the centurion, highlighting especially Dinos Christianopoulos’s poem *Εκατόνταρχος Κορνήλιος* (“The Centurion Cornelius,” 1950). Christianopoulos was the first to assert a romantic relationship between the centurion and his slave, doing so in the form of a poem. Though rarely cited within biblical scholarship, it laid important groundwork for later homoerotic exegesis. The second part of the chapter discusses the first substantial engagement with the homoerotic reading through formal biblical interpretations, France in the 1960s and 1970s, where—in a manner that prompts alarm—homophile activists emphasized the youthfulness of the beloved slave. Several writers used this reading of the pericope to authorize a lower age of majority for same-sex intercourse in France (where same-sex intercourse was partially criminalized through an unusually high age of consent at twenty-one years), a position advocated by many well-known intellectuals, such as Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Michel Foucault. Thus, a homophile writer could claim, without irony or shame, that the centurion was “a pederast officer” (*un officier pédéraste*). The chapter concludes by observing how this pederastic legacy proves a liability, with homophile interpretations resembling recent efforts by ancient historians to destigmatize adult-adolescent intercourse, not to mention the tendency to forgive-and-forget acts of sexual violence within the biblical academy.

Chapter 2, “A Centurion and His Partner at the Altar: United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, 1985–2010,” examines the fallout of the homophile reading and its transition into turn-of-the-millennium interest in gay rights. The constellation of discourses prompting the French homophile reading was so specific to its context—not least of which was the viability of a pederast as a point of identification—that one might wonder how it could be adopted among Anglophone interpreters at all. The first part of this chapter examines how the homophile interpretation was adapted for a different legal context, drawing particular attention to efforts to depict the centurion and his slave as peers. Gay interpretations depict the slave as a consenting adult, emphasizing the couple’s cohabitation and mutual love so as to render their relationship a precursor to same-sex marriage. Over this period, homoerotic exegesis began identification with the state, attending to the shifting position of same-sex desire within Anglophone societies. To use the language of Foucauldian biopolitics, it

was during this period that queers were being left to die with decreasing frequency (the decline of, e.g., the AIDS epidemic, sodomy laws) and increasingly made to live through participation in major institutions of the state (e.g., military inclusion, marriage). This becomes apparent in an emphasis on the military career of the centurion, such that he becomes a figure for contemplating the US armed forces' "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. The second part of the chapter examines writings opposed to homoerotic readings of the pericope. Heteronormative opposition to the reading frequently objected that insofar as Jesus was Jewish, he was unlikely to have a favorable opinion about same-sex relationships. These heteronormative interpretations are sometimes linked to homophobic politics, responding negatively to calls for gay rights. Rather than construing this as a tension between pro-gay and antigay interpretations, we might understand this within a larger mobilization of the sexual in recent politics.

Chapter 3, "Military Occupation and Sexual Abuse in Roman Galilee: Homoerotic Counterreadings, 2000–Present," examines homoerotic interpretations operating with a different approach and thus marking a turning point within the history of interpretation. The readings discussed in previous chapters usually connect the homoerotic interpretation with the rights and recognition of queer folk, along with its inverse: criticism of the homoerotic interpretation often entailed opposition to such political projects. This relationship becomes complicated upon consideration of a counterreading that regards the pericope as tantamount to a text of terror. How might queer-sympathetic readers understand the prospect of sexual violence in this pericope, along with its connection to the enslavement of human beings and state violence? This chapter locates such counterreadings within two traditions. The first places it alongside abolitionist criticism of biblical slavery before the American Civil War. Many abolitionists noticed that biblical texts espouse a positive view of slavery, including the pericope under consideration. Rather than attempting to reconcile or reclaim these texts, many saw fit to jettison them from their own canon. Second, various interpreters situate the homoerotic reading of the pericope alongside American abuses of racial Others in a manner particularly salient after 9/11 and amid the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The counterinterpretation is helpfully read alongside recent historians of the Roman army who draw attention to this same phenomenon over the course of the late Republic and early Empire. Noting that "consent" was not part of Roman slaves' vocabulary, the counterreading drastically reframes the pericope and ponders a provocative question: did Jesus restore an abusive

relationship when he healed a slave whose body served to sexually please his owner?

It is here the history of interpretation ends and consideration of its implications for biblical scholars begins. Chapter 4 asks, “Whose Interpretation Is Legitimate?” When reading the preceding chapters, one may notice a fault-line between credentialed biblical scholars who tend to ignore or deride the homoerotic interpretation and nonspecialists who enthusiastically promote it. Drawing upon Amy Richlin’s work on queer “shadow scholarship,” this chapter pursues the tension between academic and shadow scholarship as adjacent fields in asymmetrical competition for legitimacy. Although queer shadow scholars place considerable weight on academic research to establish the validity of their historiography, credentialed biblical scholars adopt an indifferent stance toward the enterprise, disregarding it as an instance of activist hermeneutics. Academics’ glib dismissals of queer biblical historiography are acts of social differentiation, since the disavowal of direct interest in one’s exegetical/historical conclusions remains integral to the academic field of biblical scholarship.

Chapter 5, “Did the Centurion at Capernaum Have Intercourse with the Pais?,” addresses the historical question lingering over the book and directs our attention to the biblical texts themselves. Does the evidence favor or oppose the homoerotic interpretation of the pericope? The answer to this question is complicated and requires detours through Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian social history before assessing John, Luke, Matthew, and the Sayings Gospel Q individually. The distinctive literary features of the gospels (including their wording and sexual politics) lead to contrasting assessments of homoeroticism in each gospel: though untenable for the pericopes in the Gospels of John and Luke, the stories presented in the Gospel of Matthew and the Sayings Gospel Q are viably read as homoerotic.

Following chapter 5 is a brief conclusion and three appendices. The conclusion offers a tentative reflection on the difficult emotional terrain encountered in this book. It suggests this disappointment might be productively directed toward the reforming of the biblical academy in its capacity to enable sexual violence. Appendix 1 includes the Greek text and my own English translation of the pericope from Matthew, Luke, and John, and the Critical Edition of Q for reader convenience. Appendix 2 attempts a chronological bibliography of all homoerotic interpretations before 1990. When excerpts are sufficiently brief, they are quoted in full—those originally published in another language are translated into English.

Appendix 3 provides a table outlining the military presence in the village of Capernaum in the early Roman period, 66 BCE—135 CE, as its military history is more complicated than usually acknowledged.

### Notes on Terminology

The gospels disagree on whether the *παῖς* in this pericope was enslaved (so Luke) or free (so John), with his status entirely unclear in both Matthew and Q. Though most assume that the Greek word *παῖς* refers to a slave in this narrative, some interpreters suggest that the young man may have been free, drawing upon Matthew's ambiguity and the lexical range of the word *παῖς*. The meaning of the word *παῖς* is of paramount importance to the homoerotic interpretation, as the present book largely examines how different people have attempted to resolve the ambiguity of this specific word. To avoid mischaracterizing various interpreters' arguments, this unnamed character in Q 7:1–10, Luke 7:1–10, Matt 8:5–13, and John 4:46–54 will henceforth be called “the Pais” with capitalization and no italics. The term is shared by Matthew, Luke, Q, and John and thus will act as a neutral designation that does not prefer any gospel's depiction over another. When referring to the broader phenomenon of ancient homoeroticism, a junior partner will be termed *pais* in lower case and italics—this usage is synonymous with *eromenos* for present purposes. In sum, the Pais was located in Capernaum, but Martial, Hadrian, and others each had one or more *pais* of their own.

Some terms that may appear synonymous operate with important distinctions in the following pages. This book distinguishes between three different homoerotic readings of the pericope: the *homophile* reading discussed in chapter 1, the *gay* reading discussed in chapter 2, and the *counterreading* discussed in chapter 3. This book will argue that there is a reactive relationship between these readings, such that they are productively understood as developing sequentially. These readings are unified in their imagination of a sexual relationship between the centurion and the Pais and thus represent *homoerotic* readings, an umbrella term that includes all three interpretations; that is, the homophile, gay, and counterreadings all agree that there might be something homoerotic going on in the pericope even if they disagree about its significance. These homoerotic readings will sometimes be contrasted with *heteronormative* readings that either presume or explicitly argue that the centurion and the Pais never had intercourse. This is the prevailing interpretation that

one finds in biblical commentaries or academic articles on the pericope. This includes readings that are both explicitly opposed to the homoerotic interpretation and also those more casually assuming without comment that there is nothing sexual going on. These terms are used in a stipulative and heuristic capacity, being afforded greater precision in the relevant chapter. *Queer*, by contrast, is used loosely to designate gender and sexually nonconforming people, politics, interpretations, and so on, generally referring to those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Readers may notice that the word *homosexual* rarely refers to a person's orientation in this book. Though it may seem clinical, phrases like *same-sex intercourse* are preferred with respect to sexual acts, given that sexual orientation and related identities (the "homosexual," "bisexual," or "heterosexual" subject, for instance) are recent historical developments, whereas the wordier phrasing presumes nothing about sexual preferences or subjectivity—this is not to mention that the term *homosexual* is itself becoming antiquated! Given that accusations of anachronism figure prominently into debates about the interpretation, the characterization of homoerotic feelings and practices warrants precision.<sup>32</sup> Romans and Greeks distinguished sharply between penetrator and penetrated in sexual acts. In Roman contexts, the penetrated partner was properly some combination of enslaved, freed, sex-working, *peregrinus*, recently conquered, low social status, of younger age, female, eunuch, or otherwise compromised with regards to gender norms. The act of sexual penetration both replicated and was replicated by Roman social hierarchies: insertion served as a synecdoche for the existing relationship of dominance and was an act of further domination itself. Romans had various words to designate men who were sexually penetrated by other men in transgression of these norms, such as *cinaedus* and *pathicus* for anal intercourse and *fellator* for oral sex. There was no Greek or Latin word for

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32. Here I refer to the well-known argument of Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and further developed by many others: that *the homosexual* only emerged during the late nineteenth century and earlier sexual subjectivities and morphologies are not intelligible under the rubric of *sexual orientation*. See more on this below. Bibliography on the matter is extensive, but the most compelling counterarguments to this thesis vis-à-vis Roman antiquity are to be found in Amy Richlin, "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men," *JHSex* 3 (1993): 523–73.

homosexual for the simple reason that Greco-Roman discourse marked the penetrator-penetrated distinction as crucial, rather than the preferred gender(s) of one's sexual partners.<sup>33</sup> This is not to mention the problem of how exactly one would ascertain the sexual preferences of the centurion and the Pais, who died about two millennia ago (if they existed in the first place). These matters are unknowable. Indeed, how many queer people today misrepresent their sexual preferences to save face, because of personal uncertainty, or due to fear of violence? When *homosexuality*, *homosexual*, or similar words refer to a sexual orientation of someone in antiquity, these are always either another interpreter's characterization or my own understanding of another interpreter's claims; this phrasing does not imply agreement with their supposition that sexual orientation existed in antiquity. Following the prejudices of writers both ancient and modern, the following pages largely operate with a cisnormative understanding of sexual intercourse; the matter deserves far more space than can be allotted in the present volume.

Obvious typos from quotations have been silently corrected throughout the book (e.g., spelling errors, duplicate or missing words). Given that many interpretations were self-published, content for low-budget newsletters, or otherwise distant from the processes of academic publication, I would feel uncomfortable retaining the original typos, since this might impress a sneering tone, with a condescending “[sic]” found whenever there is evidence an author was unable to afford an editor to thoroughly proofread the product of their labor. The exception to this generosity is in appendix 2, which reproduces all excerpts exactly and retains nonstandard formatting to the extent that it is possible.

This book's scope is limited to sexual and romantic readings of the pericope. This entails the exclusion of commentary that treats the centurion or Pais as *analogously* queer: some argue that insofar as Jesus welcomed a pagan gentile, so also should Christians treat the marginalized

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33. One recalls the famous Teratogenic Grid and the related Priapic Protocol: Roman sexual vocabulary did not denote foremost the gender of the person with whom one had sex but the particular orifice penetrated and whether one was penetrating it or penetrated *in* it. It should be noted that the normativity of this framework is sometimes overstated, especially in homoerotic contexts. See Joseph A. Marchal, “Bottoming Out: Rethinking the Reception of Receptivity,” in *Bodies on the Verge: Queering Pauline Epistles and Interpretations*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal, SemeiaSt 93 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 209–38.



of their own society with kindness, including queer people.<sup>34</sup> Such reasoning often operates on a nonerotic understanding of the pericope, such that the centurion's social position is merely analogous to that of queer folk. These readings are omitted from the present book, even if there is some type of queering going on.

Finally, *sexual intercourse* is construed broadly throughout the book. Though current Anglophone usage usually limits the word *intercourse* to penetrative sexual acts, the term will be used in a way that includes other varieties of sexual contact (e.g., intercrural sex, fondling). There are many reasons for this choice, but the most practical is that it is rarely possible to know the specific type of sexual contact between two people in antiquity, and, rather than listing all possibilities, it is expedient to lump them all under the umbrella term intercourse. Beyond convenience, restricting one's understanding of sex to penetrative acts reinscribes particular sexualities as normative (usually, cis-heterogenital): such an understanding of sex, on the one hand, leaves little conceptual space for sexual activities between women or involving transgender people and, on the other hand, can downplay certain types of sexual violence as instances of mere touching. For these reasons, the following pages do not differentiate too much between various sexual activities (e.g., oral, anal, manual stimulation). There is much more to be said on the topic, and I would refer readers to Maia Kotrosits's remarkable article addressing these issues for the study of Christian origins.<sup>35</sup>

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34. See, e.g., Paul Moore, *Take a Bishop Like Me* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 183: "Some feel that the modern revolution in sexuality contains a freer way of living out the Commandment of love, a way more consistent than ever before with the gospel of incarnate love.... Indeed, Jesus was wont to point to a Samaritan or a Roman centurion, who lived in the world outside the Church, as an image bearer for the Kingdom." Many, many other examples could be cited.

35. Maia Kotrosits, "Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and Theorizing Eros without the Wound," *JHSex* 27 (2018): 343–66. Cf. Kotrosits, *The Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity*, Class 200 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 124–44.