

○ REVIEW OF SUSAN ACKERMAN'S *WHEN HEROES LOVE*

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Anthony Heacock reviews Susan Ackerman's *When heroes love: The ambiguity of eros in the stories of Gilgamesh and David* (Columbia University Press, 2005. Gender, Theory and Religion. ISBN: 0-231-13260-3).



I began this book with very few expectations: after all, I thought, who could possibly write anything that exceeds the excellent – if somewhat different in perspective – books by Assyriologist Nissinen (1998) and seminary professor Gagnon (2001) on the topic of same-sex sexual behaviour in the ancient biblical and Near Eastern worlds. Given Ackerman's credentials as a Professor at Dartmouth College, however, I did expect something beyond the scope of the pitiful work by Wold (1998).

The introductory chapter 1 starts with Ackerman setting the scene by stating her concerns about people using the relatively recent notion of homosexuality to discuss the ancient world, but she then enters into a protracted (albeit competent) survey of the constructionist-essentialist debate of sexual identity/sexuality, which only required a passing mention. As a reader I found myself sidetracked from Ackerman's main point that those interested in understanding the homoerotic language and imagery of the relationships between the heroes of the Gilgamesh Epic and the Samuel narrative ought to be aware that ancient and modern sexual categories are different and not necessarily comparable with each other.

The relatively short chapter 2 (13 pages) introduces and outlines the historical and narrative developments of the Gilgamesh Epic from a Sumerian to a Babylonian text as a precursor to Chapter 3, which discusses in detail the eleven texts that Ackerman acknowledges are often interpreted as indicative of a sexual relationship between the two heroes. Ackerman meticulously works her way through the eroticised imagery in the epic, including Gilgamesh's dream about meteors and axes, the wordplay on *kisru* (meteor) and *kezru* (male with curled hair, denoting status of a prostitute) and *hassinnu(m)* (axe) and *assinnu(m)* (another male associated with the Ishtar worship), the (euphemistic) wrestling match between the two men that ends in kissing, Gilgamesh's wife-like mourning over Enkidu's death, and Gilgamesh's vehement rejection of Ishtar's sexual advances and his preference for male companionship over marriage. Surprisingly, the sexualised interpretation of the relationship between two men, as advocated most strongly by Kilmer (1992) and Jacobsen (1930), is criticised by Ackerman for imposing the modern notion

of homosexuality onto the ancient characters; for example, by assuming that Gilgamesh and Enkidu reject sexual relations with women in favour of exclusive sexual relations with each other, Kilmer and Jacobsen are assuming that the either-or choice of contemporary men would be the same as in the ancient world. Ackerman also points out that ancient Near Eastern laws prohibit sexual relations between two males of equal status (because there always has to be an active top and a passive bottom), which makes a sexual aspect to the heroes' egalitarian relationship impossible.

Chapters 4 and 5 outline Ackerman's response to the problem of dealing with the seeming-erotic language of the egalitarian relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, contrary to Mesopotamian cultural norms. By looking toward the works of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, Ackerman argues that their anthropological models of liminality provide a clarifying lens through which readers can interpret the heroic narratives of the Gilgamesh Epic, as well as the biblical account of the friendship between David and Jonathan in 1-2 Samuel. In summary, Ackerman argues that the heroic characters of these two ancient tales are depicted as living on the edge and not subject to everyday norms. She believes that the very fact of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's liminal existence allows the two heroes to break free of cultural norms and be depicted in an anomalous and ambiguous way with eroticised language and imagery that would otherwise refer to sexual relations between a superior and an inferior (122). Ironically, it is not that the works of van Gennep and Turner discuss societies far removed from those of ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Israel that, in my opinion, weaken the validity of her (ahistorical) argument, despite Ackerman's earlier criticisms of anachronistic interpretations. Despite Ackerman's own acknowledgement that Turner is criticized for stretching the parameters of what is liminal so far that, as she herself states, 'the concept begins to lose all meaning' (95), I find that her own argument suffers from a similar weakness by her over-use of the concept: everything is liminal, whether that be the narrative, the main characters, their environments, their relationships, their attitudes, their behaviour...

Chapter 6 sets the scene for the last two chapters of her book, which focus on the biblical narrative about the friendship between David and Jonathan. Ackerman begins by unnecessarily outlining (8 ½ pages) the problem of putting David in a historical context. She then asks how the homoeroticised language and imagery of the biblical friendship serves the overall narrative agenda. Chapter 7 eloquently engages with the six biblical passages and their interpreters cited most frequently as supporting a homoerotic reading of the relationship between the two men: 1 Samuel 18:1-4 (David and Jonathan's first encounter, whereby Jonathan is said to love David); 1 Samuel 19:1-7 (the second account of the couple's first meeting, whereby Jonathan is said to delight in David); 1 Samuel 20:1-20:42 (David's fleeing from Saul's court); 1 Samuel 20:30-34 (reports of Saul's anger over Jonathan's dealing with David); 1 Samuel 23:15-18 (the account of David and Jonathan's last meeting); and 2 Samuel 1:19-27 (David's lament over Saul and Jonathan). After working through each passage, Ackerman discusses the spectrum of interpretations possible, particularly those of a political or erotic nature. Given that she concludes that Jonathan is feminised in his friendship with David, Ackerman is left at an impasse with what to make of the relationship, namely: how can the same biblical tradition that condemns same-sex sexual relations between men apparently celebrate a (sexualised) relationship between the masculine David and the feminine Jonathan?

Chapter 8, the final chapter, is Ackerman's attempt to answer the quandary of dealing with the biblical portrayal of the relationship between the two heroes. She believes that the Samuel narrative, like the Gilgamesh Epic, depicts David and Jonathan as liminal figures. With regard to the Samuel narrative, Ackerman is more convincing than with the Gilgamesh Epic: David's life from one of a shepherd boy to that of a valiant warrior, an outlaw, and then a king is very much that of an outsider, one in a constant state of flux, a person belonging neither here nor there. Likewise, Jonathan's freely giving over his kingship as part of a friendship with a man who, by all accounts, would be an enemy of his family is hardly 'mainstream' – he, too, is living life on the edge. Yet Ackerman's interpretation of the two men's relationship as sexual is less convincing; she believes that Jonathan's willingness to take the feminine role is used by the Samuel narrator to justify – by means of an 'erotic apologetic' (218–222) – David's becoming king (David is not castigated for the sexual relationship, however, because he did not impose himself upon Jonathan). Such a novel interpretation would be valid if Leviticus did not condemn unambiguously sexual relations between men.

Ackerman jumps from reading the (homo)eroticised language of the Samuel narrative as indicative of sexual relations, with Jonathan being the passive bottom and David the active top in the relationship. Yet this need not be the case. I would suggest that Ackerman's analysis of the Samuel narrative should have focused on the dynamics of male bonding, as Exum (1992: 73, 75; 1993: 52, 54, 72–73) suggests. But Ackerman rejects Exum's analysis on the grounds that Exum does not explain why the language of eroticism is necessary to this tale of male bonding (197). I believe that this is a fundamental misunderstanding on Ackerman's part: as Ackerman states (both Ackerman and Exum cite Damrosch's *The narrative covenant*), Damrosch (1987) argues that the relationship between David and Jonathan is intimate, going beyond the political realm; however, this does not lead him to advocate a sexual reading of their relationship. On the contrary, Damrosch, like Exum, believes that the eroticized language of marriage signifies the depth (and obligations) of male bonding that is otherwise difficult to express (Damrosch 1987: 203–204, 208). This is also the stance adopted by Halperin (1990: 75–87) in *One hundred years of homosexuality*. Jonathan is not so much feminine as subservient before David; in all other respects Jonathan is a 'real' man. We are most definitely not talking a girly man here!

Ackerman originally claims that the ambiguous eroticised and sexualised imagery of both the Gilgamesh Epic and 1-2 Samuel is integral to understanding both of the narratives (xiii–xiv), and yet she then changes her mind and argues that the texts are explicitly sexual, beyond ambiguous, and indicative of sexual relations (at least for David and Jonathan). Ironically, she starts the book by telling us that modernity's notion of homosexuality has no place in biblical scholarship (3), and yet goes on to argue that the feminisation of Jonathan makes him gay. Ackerman herself appears to be bound by the very notion she originally critiques.

Although I am not completely convinced as to the appropriateness of using dated anthropological methods for narrative analysis, Ackerman succeeds in expanding upon the descriptive nature of the excellent books written by Nissinen and Gagnon, adding her own scholarly voice to the debate. Her work is undoubtedly the most comprehensive and coherent argument about the eroticism of the relationships between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and David and Jonathan. Although I do not agree with everything Ackerman argues, the quality of the scholarship in this book is impeccable, and, if I were asked to recommend only one book for an upper-level undergraduate course on homoeroticism in ancient near-eastern literature (whether for Hebrew Bible

studies or the fields of English Studies or Comparative Literature), I would not hesitate in recommending this one.

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