

Was Jesus in a Sexual Relationship with the Beloved Disciple?

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Some readers who espouse a homosexualist ideology go to such an extreme that they cite Jesus' relationship with the "beloved disciple" as an example of a loving homosexual bond.¹ I haven't previously dealt with the issue in any detail because I have always regarded the thesis as so far-fetched, even for homosexualist ideology, as to warrant little or no response. Hence in my first book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, I merely allude to the admission of Martti Nissinen, a Finnish Old Testament scholar who has written the best (though still flawed) homosexualist book on Scripture and homosexuality that Jesus did not engage in homoerotic behavior.² According to Nissinen,

Clearly . . . the favorite disciple shows special status. . . . Nevertheless, the homoerotic or pederastic dimension of their relationship could be argued only in a strained way from very limited material. . . . The custom of a student resting against his teacher's chest manifests cultural conventions rather than homoeroticism. . . . Even where the teacher and the student are of different sexes, an erotic relationship is hardly at stake.³

Given such an admission I felt no need to comment further. Recently, however, a scholar friend of mine asked for my thoughts on this so I decided to write something up. Here are seven strong reasons why Jesus could not have been in a sexual relationship with the beloved disciple.

1. *No mention of a sexual relationship in the Gospel of John.* At no time does the Gospel of John mention that Jesus is in a sexual relationship with the beloved disciple. References to the disciple "whom Jesus loved" are limited to five stories or pericopes from the last half of John's Gospel: at the Last Supper (13:23-25); at the foot of the cross alongside the three Mary's (19:25-27); at the empty tomb with Peter (20:2-10); in the boat with the other disciples on the Sea of Galilee after Jesus' death (21:7); and following behind Peter and the resurrected Jesus at the shore of the Sea of Galilee (21:20-

¹ The most notable example is: Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Pilgrim Press, 2003). Jennings is a theologian, not a biblical scholar, who teaches at a small UCC seminary, Chicago Theological Seminary, that is "in partnership with the Metropolitan Community Churches," a denomination for self-avowed homosexual persons.

² *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2001), 188 n. 2.

³ *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 122.

23). This same disciple is then identified as “the disciple who testifies concerning these things and the one who wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24). The following is the grand total of what is said of the beloved disciple in John:

- a. ***The disciple whom Jesus loved.*** He is designated in John’s Gospel not by a name but by the relative clause “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). The verb *agapaō* (*ēgapa*) is used in all occurrences but 20:2 where *phileō* (*ephilei*) is used.
- b. ***Reclining at Jesus’ chest in the Last Supper.*** At the Last Supper he “was reclining [lit. ‘lying up or back,’ *anakeimēnos*] on the chest [*en tōi kolpōi*] of Jesus” (13:23; cf. 13:25: “so falling [i.e. leaning] back [*anapeson*] on the chest [*epi to stethos*] of Jesus”; 21:20: “he reclined [*anepesen*] at the supper on his chest [*epi to stethos*]”). Peter beckoned to this disciple to ask Jesus who his betrayer was.
- c. ***Standing at the foot of the cross where Jesus declares Mary to be his mother and him her son.*** He stood with the three Mary’s (Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister, and Mary Magdalene) by the cross, where Jesus told his mother “Woman, see, your son!” and the beloved disciple “See, your mother!” “And from that hour/time, the disciple took her into his own things [i.e. home, family circle]” (19:25-27).
- d. ***The second person to reach the empty tomb and the first to believe.*** He was the second person, after Mary Magdalene, to reach the empty tomb and look in, outrunning Peter to the tomb, and the first one to have “believed,” namely, that Jesus’ body had not been stolen but that something heavenly had occurred (20:2-10). The Fourth Evangelist’s comment, “for they [i.e. the beloved disciple and Jesus] did not yet know the scripture that he must rise from the dead” (10:9), is ambiguous. It suggests either that the belief of the beloved disciple was in place but only in nascent form (something miraculous had happened but precisely what he did not yet know) or that the beloved disciple “believed” that Jesus as the man from heaven had been raised to return to the Father, in spite of not knowing the scriptural predictions of the Messiah’s resurrection. At any rate the beloved disciple was poised for his next breakthrough.
- e. ***The first to recognize the resurrected Lord on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.*** The beloved disciple was the first to recognize that the man who stood on the beach and told them to cast their net into the Sea of Galilee (upon which the disciples caught an enormous number of fish) was the resurrected Lord (21:7).
- f. ***The one about whom a rumor spread that he would not die before Jesus’ return.*** Peter noticed that the beloved disciple was following him and Jesus after Jesus had thrice asked Peter if he loved him, thrice commanded him “Feed my sheep,” and predicted Peter’s martyrdom. Peter asked Jesus about the duties and fate of the beloved disciple and Jesus responded: “If I want him to remain until I come [back from heaven], what (is that) to you? You, follow me!” The narrator adds that though a rumour then spread among “the brothers” that that disciple would not die before Jesus’ return Jesus did not actually say that he would not die but only, in effect, the beloved disciple’s fate was none of Peter’s business.

The implication of the narrator's comment, of course, is that by the time that ch. 21 was written the beloved disciple had already died.

- g. ***The chief authority behind the message of John's Gospel.*** The beloved disciple is the chief source and at some level the writer of "these things," presumably the Gospel as a whole since "these things" is contrasted with the "many other things which Jesus did" that were not recorded in the Gospel of John (21:24-25). Since the beloved disciple is referred to in the third person, appears by mention only from the Last Supper on, and obviously did not write everything in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., the denial that Jesus had assured the beloved disciple of remaining alive until Jesus' return), scholars generally distinguish between the beloved disciple and the Fourth Evangelist (if even they view the beloved disciple as a real figure in history).

None of these passages contain any reference to sexual activity between Jesus and the beloved disciple.

2. *The verbs agapaō and phileō and their cognates nowhere in John's Gospel have a sexual connotation.* The verb used to denote a sexual relationship between two males in the Greco-Roman milieu is *eraō* and its cognates, where the active "lover" is an *erastēs* and the more passive/receptive "beloved" is an *erōmenos*. If the Fourth Evangelist had wanted his readers to know that Jesus was in a sexual relationship with this disciple he would have chosen the appropriate words for sexual love between males.

With regard to *agapaō* and cognates in John's Gospel we read of Jesus' sacrificial love for all his disciples (13:1, 34; 15:9, 12-13; defined as those who keep his commandments or word: 14:21, 23; 15:10); Jesus' love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (11:5); Jesus' love for his heavenly Father (14:31); God's love for the world (3:16) or for Jesus' followers (14:21, 23; 17:23-26); God's love as Father for his Son (3:35; 15:9; 17:23-24, 26; because he lays down his life: 10:17; because he has kept his Father's commandments: 15:10); the love that Jesus commands people to have for him which for unbelievers is manifested in believing in him (8:42; cf. love for God in 5:42) and for believers is manifested in keeping his commandments or word (14:15, 21, 23-24; or rejoicing that Jesus is returning to the Father: 14:28), expressed especially in their sacrificial love for "one another" (13:34-35; 15:12-13, 17) and, as regards leaders, in "feeding Jesus' sheep" (21:15-16); and people's tragic love of darkness or praise from other people (3:19; 12:43).

The fact that the verb *phileō*, which refers to friendship love, and the related noun *philos*, "friend," are used interchangeably with *agapaō* and cognates in John's Gospel confirms the non-erotic character of this love: Jesus' love for Lazarus (11:3, 36; called "our friend" [*ho philos hēmon*] in Jesus' conversation with his disciples in 11:11); Jesus' love for the beloved disciple (20:2); God's love for Jesus' followers (16:27); God's love as Father for his Son (5:20); the love of Jesus' followers for Jesus (expressed in their "believing that [Jesus] came from the Father": 16:27; expressed in "feeding [Jesus'] sheep": 21:15-17; called "friends" [*philoī*] if they do what Jesus commands them: 15:13-

15); the world's love for its own (15:19), and the tragic love some people have for their own life in the world (12:25).

It is interesting that Mary and Martha tell Jesus about their brother Lazarus's serious illness in these terms: "Lord, see, the one whom you love (*phileis*) is sick" (11:3). Two verses later we read that Jesus "loved (*ēgapa*) Martha and her sister and Lazarus." He loves all three but nevertheless Lazarus can be referred to simply as "the one whom you love" (*hon phileis*). This sounds a great deal like the reference in 20:2 to the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (*hon ephilei ho Iēsous*), which singles out a specific disciple even though the broader context makes clear that Jesus loves all his disciples (13:1, 34; 14:21-23; 15:9-13). If Jesus' special love for Lazarus is not understood in a sexual sense--otherwise, Jesus would be having sex with more than one person, contrary to his own teaching about monogamy in Mark 10 and Matthew 19--how can his special love for one disciple be understood in a sexual sense? When "Jews" saw how Jesus wept for Lazarus and said, "See, how he loved (*ephilei*)," they obviously were not drawing the conclusion that Jesus was in a sexual relationship with Lazarus. Rather, Jesus loved Lazarus as though he (Lazarus) were his own brother. The same applies to the references to the beloved disciple.

The fact, too, that the descriptor "the disciple whom Jesus loved" can use for "loved" either *ēgapa* (13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20) or *ephilei* (20:2)--i.e. either the verb *agapaō* or *phileō*--also confirms that friendship love, not sexual intercourse, is intended. To be sure, erotic love is not necessarily exclusive of friendship love.⁴ The point rather is that *phileō* and its cognates most basically refer to the affectionate regard of friends and carry no inherent implication of sexual desire. So the basic meaning of the verb is "love" in the sense of "regard with affection, treat affectionately or kindly" as friends commonly do. As a substantive participle, "those who love" (*hoi philountes*) someone are simply that person's "friends" (a formula found frequently in letters; cf. LSJ, *s.v. phileō*, I.1). The nouns *philos* and *philia* most commonly mean "friend" and "friendship" respectively. Similarly, the verb *agapaō* and the noun *agapē* in ancient Greek seldom refer to sexual love; their original sense is that of non-sexual love (cf. LSJ).

3. The beloved disciple loved not for his sexual attractiveness but for his faith in Jesus and love for fellow believers. The usage of *agapaō* and *phileō* throughout John's Gospel explain *why* the beloved disciple was specially "loved" by Jesus and *what* that love consisted of. For the references above show that those whom Jesus loves and who "abide" in his love are those who (a) believe in Jesus, specifically as the man from heaven who becomes human in order to atone for human sin, and (b) obey his commandments, especially the commandment to love one another. This is confirmed by the portrayal of the beloved disciple as (a) the one who is the first to have insight into the miracle behind the empty tomb ("believed," 20:8) and the first to recognize the

⁴ For example: "lovers (*erōntas*) . . . , they say, have the highest affectionate regard (*malista philein*) for whomever they love sexually (*erōsin*)" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 231C); "there is no lover (*erastēs*) who does not always show affectionate regard (*philei*)" (Euripides, *Trojan Women* 1051); "Erotic desire (*erōs*) has more of friendship (*philia*) than of having sexual intercourse (*to suneinai*)" (Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* 2.22 [68b.4]). The verb *phileō* can also be used of a man's love for his wife (cf. LSJ, *s.v. phileō*, I.3).

resurrected Lord on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (21:7), as well as (b) the one who, unlike Peter, does not need to be told, “If you love me, feed my sheep” (21:15-23). There is no hint anywhere in the Gospel of John that Jesus is sexually attracted to the beauty of the beloved disciple, as is often the case in Greco-Roman discussions, even philosophical discussions, of man-male love. The beloved disciple is specially loved because is a model of the kind of disciple that Jesus loves. This is nothing sexual about this. It is the love of a friend for a friend, as Jesus’ words in 15:14-15 make clear: “You are my friends (*philoï*) if you do what I am commanding you (to do). No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master [or: lord] is doing. But you I have called friends because all the things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

4. ***Reclining on the chest as an asexual place of intimacy.*** In ancient banqueting practice there was nothing necessarily erotic about reclining on a couch slightly to the side of, in front of, and parallel to the host such that conversation required leaning the head back on the host’s chest. The parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus has Lazarus reclining after death on Abraham’s chest without any sexual connotation (Luke 16:22-23). A text in Pliny’s *Epistles* refers to a senator named Veiento who “was reclining [or: leaning back] on the chest” of the emperor Nerva, again without any sexual connotation (4.22.4). The beloved disciple occupies a position of intimacy for the asexual reasons specified above.

I wrote Dr. Katherine Dunbabin, professor of classics at McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario) and author of *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and asked her whether the paragraph above reflected her own understanding of the matter. She responded (reproduced with permission):

I think the Pliny passage shows incontrovertibly that there is no necessary sexual connotation involved in a diner reclining “on the chest” of another; there is no suggestion whatsoever that Fabricius Veiento had any sort of sexual relationship with the emperor Nerva! What the passage does imply is intimacy; here in the sense that Veiento (whose past history was extremely shady) was being received as a favoured associate of the emperor/host. It was not the position of honour, but at least in the traditional Roman triclinium arrangement, it was one reserved for members of the host's family or his close associates. It is true that, if his wife was present, this was the position that she occupied (and there is some discussion whether, for a woman, reclining on the same couch with a man did imply sexual availability); but in an all-male banquet, it would be occupied by an associate of the host. Thus in Horace’s description of the dinner of Nasidienus (Sat.2.8), the host occupies the lowest couch with two friends, giving up his regular position at the top end of the couch to one of them to place him next to the guest of honour, Maecenas, on the end of the middle couch. And in fact, whenever there are two or more people reclining on the same couch, it is inevitable that the one to the right will be reclining “on the chest of” his neighbour -- obviously there cannot always be sexual connotations. Quite how the writer of St John's gospel envisaged the arrangement at the Last Supper, and where he imagined Jesus as lying, is another question, and I am not sure of the answer. Hardly, I think, the traditional Roman pattern of the late Republic and early empire that we know of from Cicero or Horace, and anyway there are 13 guests to be accommodated, not 9. But I don’t think that affects your basic question.

5. ***The impossibility of man-male sex in Jesus’ cultural context.*** Nowhere in the gospel traditions is there any mention of sexual attraction for males on Jesus part. In the context of early Judaism, where homosexual practice of any sort would incur a capital sentence,

how likely is it that Jesus would have had sexual intercourse with a male disciple and have done so *without apparently raising an eyebrow among any of his other disciples*? Even Socrates is said to have renounced for himself sexual intercourse with males and to have urged his followers not to have such relations because such acts were “contrary to nature” (cf. Plato, *Charmides* 155C-D; *Symposium* 216B-219A; *Phaedrus* 227D, 250D, 254A-256B; *Laws* 636B-D, 836C-837C, 838E-839A, 841D-E; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.3.8-14; *Symposium* 4.24-28). Socrates did this in spite of the fact that he, unlike Jesus, was noted for having a strong sexual attraction for beautiful “boys” (i.e. adolescent males and young men); moreover, in spite of the fact that he operated in a cultural milieu that was considerably more permissive about homosexual relations than first-century Palestine.

6. *Everything else that we know about Jesus speaks against the notion that he had intercourse with a male.* There are at least a dozen arguments that collectively demonstrate in convincing fashion that the historical Jesus was not supportive of homosexual practice.⁵ Briefly, these include:

1. Jesus’ adoption of a back-to-creation model for marriage (Mark 10:6-9; Matt 19:4-6) that predicated (a) the ‘twoness’ of the marital bond on the twoness of the sexes in Gen 1:27 (“male and female he made them”) and (b) the *reunion* of man and woman into “one flesh” on a story that posits women’s creation from a part of the one flesh of the ‘*adam*’ (earthling, human) in Gen 2:21-24 (“for this reason a man . . . will be joined to his woman/wife and the two will become one flesh”).
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

⁵ The following is reproduced in slightly amended form from my online article, “Did Jesus Approve of a Homosexual Couple in the Story of the Centurion at Capernaum?” 8 pgs (Apr. 2007). Online: <http://robagnon.net/articles/homosexCenturionStory.pdf>. For a fuller analysis of the witness of Jesus on homosexual practice, see: *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 185-228; *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 50-52, 68-74; “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): 56-62 (online: http://wtseminary.gospelcom.net/pdf/reformreview/gagnon_autm05.pdf). For a critique of attempts to wring support for homosexual behavior from Jesus’ interaction with a centurion see the “Centurion” article mentioned above. On the eunuch text in Matt 19:10-12, which actually supports the view that Jesus was opposed to man-male intercourse, see “Does Jack Rogers’s New Book ‘Explode the Myths’ about the Bible and Homosexuality and ‘Heal the Church?’: Installment 4,” 5-6 (online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/RogersBookReviewed4.pdf>). The story of Jesus’ nighttime initiation of a young naked disciple in the *Secret Gospel of Mark* is of no value, not just because there is no mention of sexual activity but also because recent studies have provided strong evidence that the entire document was a hoax perpetrated by Morton Smith. Cf. Peter Jeffery, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005).

- 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 marriage between Herod Antipas and the wife of his half-brother Philip (Lev 18:16; 20:21), a woman who was also the daughter of another half-brother (Mark 6:17-18; Matt 14:3-4).
 5. Early Judaism's univocal opposition to all homosexual practice.
 6. The early church's united opposition to all homosexual practice. This completes the historical circle and underscoring the absurdity of positing a Jesus favorable to homosexual practice—a Jesus without analogue in his historical context, cut off from his Scripture, cut off from the rest of early Judaism, cut from the man who baptized him, and cut 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 (i.e. bestiality, same-sex intercourse, incest, adultery).
 8. Jesus' acceptance of 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 (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 and that Jesus himself is a "eunuch for God's kingdom" who goes without sexual intimacy (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 sex-ethic, 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).

In short, all the contextual evidence points in the direction of Jesus being as opposed to homosexual practice as anyone else in early Judaism or earliest Christianity. Thus the only thing that differentiates Jesus from Paul—the latter speaking more directly to the issue of homosexual practice in two of his letters—is that Jesus operated in a cultural context where he could presume unanimous agreement on a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations (addressing fellow Jews in first-century Palestine) whereas Paul operated in a cultural context where such a presumption could no longer be made (addressing Gentiles in the Mediterranean basin).

7. The beloved disciple as the symbol of the preeminence of the Johannine tradition.

The portrait of an unnamed “disciple whom Jesus loved” functions as support for the Johannine community’s claim to possessing the preeminent witness to Jesus. The scenes where the beloved disciple outruns Peter (literally and figuratively) are probably symbolic, at least in part, of friendly tension in the author’s day with dominant Petrine Christianity. The Johannine Jesus is a more thoroughgoing fusion of the historical Jesus and risen Christ than one finds already at work in the “Petrine” trajectory of Mark and Matthew. The image of the beloved disciple’s closeness to Jesus is designed to convey the deeper existential truth of the Johannine community’s more spiritualized portrait of Jesus. Had the community out of which the Gospel of John arose wanted to present a sexual relationship between Jesus and their own patron disciple, it would have succeeded only in making themselves outcasts in relation to the rest of Christendom.

In conclusion, there is no credible historical or literary basis for contending that Jesus and the beloved disciple were entwined in some homosexual relationship. Attempts to convert the relationship to such only underscore the desperation on the part of some to find something, anything, remotely helpful in Scripture to support a homosexualist agenda.