Jonathan and David
A Love Story

A Survey of Commentary Interpretation, Textual Evidence, and Historical Background

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**Abbreviations**

- Bibliography, A-D
- Bibliography, E-H
- Bibliography, I-N
- Bibliography, O-Z

**References**

**About the Author**
CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Everyone’s heard of the “friendship” of Jonathan and David, that developed between the older prince and the young hero and that dominates the story of David’s stay in court described in 1 Sam 18–20. Prior to this, Jonathan, King Saul’s eldest son, had gained his father a great victory over the dreaded Philistines, but then was suddenly sidelined by Saul because of his popularity (chaps. 13–14). In fact, Saul’s egotistical behavior and disobedience toward God finally led the Lord to reject his reign and send Samuel the prophet to secretly anoint David, a lad in Bethlehem, to be the next king of Israel (chaps. 15–16). Soon, however, David becomes a national hero after he surprisingly steps forth with only a slingshot (and his faith in God) to face and kill Goliath, the menacing Philistine giant (chap. 17). When the victor brings the great head to the king’s house, Prince Jonathan sees David for the first time and is so drawn to the handsome youth that he immediately makes a “covenant” with him, to express his love (18:1–4). As David’s popularity grows, however, so does Saul’s jealousy; and although Jonathan nurtures and shields David from his hostile father, finally they must part so that David can flee into hiding for his life (18:5–20:42). Later, Jonathan makes a secret trip to see David again (23:15–18), which turns out to be their last meeting, since Saul and Jonathan are soon killed in battle (chap. 31). When David hears of this, in his great grief he writes a public eulogy, which at the end expresses openly his love for Jonathan and his sense of loss (2 Sam 1). The main story of Jonathan and David extends from 1 Sam 13 through 2 Sam 1.

Their friendship viewed as nonromantic. Traditional interpreters have either tiptoed around this relationship in silence or with a few vague words or they have been careful to describe their love in non-erotic terms. David Payne (1970) wrote, “It is interesting that David’s stay at Saul’s court is told almost entirely in terms of his relationship with Jonathan”—yet Jonathan’s feelings are simply an “admiration and respect for David.”1 Rabbi Israel Weisfeld (1983) called it the “classic description of genuine unselfish love,” Robert Pfeiffer (1948) “intense and sincere, but nonetheless virile [i.e. manly, and not homosexual],” and J. A. Thompson (1974) “the kind of attachment people had to a king who could fight their battles for them.”2 Stan Rummel (1976) argued that Jonathan’s giving of his robe and weapons to David in their covenant was simply a political symbol for handing the throne over to him.3 Ralph Klein (1983) writes that “Jonathan felt bound to him [David] both by affection and political loyalty,” but does not explain more specifically what this love meant. (Klein, I Samuel, 1983, p. 182) Jerry Landay (1998) wrote, “The friendship of Jonathan and David was the embodiment of the sheer love of man for man, an intimacy based on shared experiences and dangers, . . . a kind of intuitive trust that transcends the taint of ambition, jealousy or the claim of sex.”4 Antony Campbell in his recent commentary (2003) devotes only seven lines to 1 Sam 18:1–4, mentioning simply Jonathan’s “instant bonding” with David and his gifts as a symbolic handing over of his right to the throne. (Campbell, I Samuel, 2003, p. 183) Many of the nonsexual observations made here are true, of course, but was that the whole of it? That is the $64,000 question.

Their friendship viewed as homoerotic. What can be said confidently at the beginning of such a study as this is that there has been a long-standing suspicion and recently a growing
minority confidence that there is a homoerotic subtext in this story. Chrysostom (4th century bishop of Constantinople) interpreted Saul’s outburst in 1 Sam 20:30–31 as condemning Jonathan as “enervated [weak] and effeminate and having nothing of a man”5—which has the ring of a gay slur about it. On the other hand, Peter Abelard (French theologian, 1079–1142) extended David’s lament (2 Sam 1:25–26) into 110 moving lines, writing that “[T]o outlive you [Jonathan] / Is to die at every moment: Half a soul is not / Enough for life . . . .” John Boswell (1994) wrote that early gay Christians surely found a “hallowed tradition” for same-sex love in the story of Jonathan and David, and notes that the term “brother” (which David applies to Jonathan, 2 Sam 1:26) has long been used in the past with special meaning relating to same-sex relationships.7 One early chronicler of the homosexual love of Edward II (king of England, 1307–1327) wrote, “Upon looking upon him [Piers Gaveston], the son of the king immediately felt such love for him that he entered into a covenant of constancy, and bound himself with him before all other mortals with a bond of indissoluble love, firmly drawn up and fastened with a knot.” Later, the moment Edward set eyes on Piers Gaveston (probably in 1297), says the Cottonian chronicle, ‘he bombarded [?] him with love [amorem] to the extent that he entered into a covenant of brotherhood [fraternitatis fedus] with him. He chose with steadfast determination to tie him to him indissolubly with a chain of loving devotion.’ (Full text given in Davidson, p. 515, p. 586, n. 130) In his Life of Edward II (ca. 1326?), the Monk of Malmesbury further compared Edward’s love for Piers to that of Jonathan for David and of Achilles for Patroclus, only Edward’s love was “incapable of moderate favor.”8

After the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948), some writers began to take a fresh look at the friendship of Jonathan and David. For example, the theologian David Mace (1953) called this friendship a good example of “the comparatively harmless homosexual attachments of adolescence” that sometimes occur,9 while the psychiatrist George Henry (1955) wrote that Jonathan and David definitely had a sexual relationship, in which the love-struck Jonathan was the aggressor and the ambitious David the willing seductee, “unreservedly responsive,” although this would be for David a passing phase.10 Raphael Patai (1960), a Middle East anthropologist, wrote: “The love story between Jonathan the son of King Saul, and David the beautiful young hero, must have been duplicated many times in royal courts in all parts of the Middle East and in all periods”—one example being Amin (in 8th century Baghdad), son of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who fell in love with a page boy named Kautar.11

The first scholar to present a full-blown case for the Biblical text suggesting a homoerotic relationship was Tom Horner (PhD, Columbia) in Jonathan Loved David (1978). He recalls the “world’s first great love story” between Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, and Enkidu, his inseparable companion, an epic poem that was widely disseminated and admired in the ancient Near East. “No mourner in the history of the world—except perhaps Alexander at the passing of his friend Hephaestion . . . —has ever been more broken up over the loss of his (or her) beloved friend” as was King Gilgamesh over Enkidu’s untimely demise; and David in his expression of love and loss over Jonathan’s death follows in this tradition.12 A crack in biased mainstream commentary occurred in J. P. Fokkelman’s three-volume Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, where he wrote (vol. 2, 1986): “The love of Jonathan does not have to be nailed to the mast of a late capitalist liberation front whose members, after centuries of sinister suppression of homosexuals, wish to designate homosexual love the highest form of humanity. It would be even less sound to assure us in suspiciously strong tones that Jonathan and David were most definitely not gay.”13
Their friendship more fully investigated. It was only in the 1990s, however, that a full stream of new, exciting research began to appear, analyzing the text and story of Jonathan and David in greater openness, more depth and wider scope. Walter Brueggemann, professor of OT at Columbia Theological Seminary (Decatur, GA), in *First and Second Samuel* (1990), wrote that the attention given to David's unusual beauty (1 Sam 16:12) may be noted here “in anticipation of the enormous attraction David is to have in the coming narratives for both men and women. Or perhaps his appearance is noted because those who valued the story most wanted to hear of his loveliness.”

Gary Comstock, in *Gay Theology without Apology* (1993), draws from Joseph Cady’s insights in a literary essay on Walt Whitman (1819-1992), who notes that in 19th century America, when homosexual love was “unspeakable,” how gay writers like Whitman “had to invent protective strategies that would . . . [guard] themselves from certain social exposure and punishment.” Some of these literary techniques included military vocabulary (“soldier-comradeship”), the language of friendship in general (“friend,” “comerado”), and the expression of love in an elegy (after a beloved had died). (Cady, “Drum-Taps,” in Krieg, 1985, pp. 49, 52-56) Comstock suggests, moreover, that at the time of Jonathan and David, such expressions of friendship and comradeship as we read in the 1-2 Samuel story may have been “appropriate terms” that were “conventional to covenant making” in that period, and yet at the same time they served as a vehicle for the expression of their same-sex love. Also, the “sharing of attention between Saul and Jonathan [in David’s elegy] provides a good cover” for David’s special feelings for Jonathan.

Danna Fewell (Perkins School of Theology, Dallas) and David Gunn (Texas Christian University, Fort Worth), in their book *Gender, Power and Promise* (1993), note that, until recently, most writing on the Jonathan and David story has come “out of a strongly homophobic tradition” and they suggest, “On the contrary, far from stretching probability, a homosexual reading . . . finds many anchor points in the text.” Passages that especially call for a new analysis include Jonathan’s covenant of love made with David (1 Sam 18:1-4), Saul’s sexual insult thrown at Jonathan (20:30-31), and David’s lament over the loss of his beloved (2 Sam 1:26).

Francisco García-Treto (1993), in an article on poetry in 1-2 Samuel, notes that in the elegy “David . . . opens his heart to expose to the reader a stunning, sudden glimpse into the intimate feelings of his soul. It is fascinating, and oddly embarrassing at the same time, to hear him cast all reserve or restrain aside and wail for the loss of Jonathan.”

David Jobling in *1 Samuel* (1998) notes that there is more mention of the love these two men had for each other and of them spending time in each other’s company than is ever noted between David and either Michal or Abigail, his first two wives who are described in 1 Samuel. “If these features, along with sex, constitute ‘the love of women’ as David has experienced it, then Jonathan’s love does indeed ‘pass the love of women.’ . . . Nothing in the text rules out, and much encourages the view that David and Jonathan had a consummated gay relationship. The text does not force this conclusion on us; there are obvious cultural reasons why it would not. But it is at least as valid as any other.”

Jonathan Kirsch writes in *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (2000): “David, whose very name means ‘beloved,’ attracts both men and women, inspiring sometimes a pristine love and more often a frankly carnal one.” He adds, “The nature of the love between David and Jonathan is one of the most tantalizing mysteries of the biblical life story of David.” What does “the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David” mean, in 1 Sam 18:1 (KJV)? A more worldly reading suggests that the covenant was not a love pact but a “political arrangement.” But “something more heartfelt and more carnal may have characterized the love of David and Jonathan, even if the Bible dares not speak its
name. . . . Much effort has been expended in explaining away David’s declaration of love for Jonathan, a declaration that suggests an undeniable homoerotic subtext."

**Summary.** Everyone has heard of the “friendship” of Jonathan and David,” described in 1-2 Samuel, but what was the nature of this exactly? Although David’s stay at Saul’s court (1 Sam 18-20) is “told almost entirely in terms of his relationship with Jonathan,” traditional interpreters have been careful to describe this relationship as anything but sexual, e.g., as “admiration and respect” (Payne), “unselfish love” (Weisfeld), attachment as given to a king or future king (Thompson), or “an intimacy based on shared experiences and dangers,” but without ambition, jealousy or sex (Landay). Yet, throughout history, others (e.g., Chrysostom, Abelard, and chroniclers of Edward II) have seen homoerotic elements in the story. After the Kinsey male report (1948) brought homosexuality out into the open, some authors described Jonathan and David’s relationship as a harmless homosexual adolescent attachment (Mace), a situation where Jonathan seduced the willing David, although this is a passing phase (Henry), and not unusual historically in royal Middle Eastern courts (Patai). The first real ground breaking study was Horner’s *Jonathan Loved David* (1978), which compared their love to that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and of Alexander and Hesphastion; and Horner also pointed to sexual clues which lie hidden in the Samuel text, especially in Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30) and David’s eulogy (2 Sam 1:26). Fokkelman (1986), the great Samuel scholar, left the door open that Jonathan and David might have been gay. Brueggemann (1990) noted the unusual attention given to David’s beauty (1 Sam 16:12), about which perhaps the male readers of Samuel “wanted to hear”; and Comstock (1993) went further, suggesting that perhaps a gay-sympathetic editor of 1-2 Samuel might have seen in such topics as comradeship, covenant-making, and eulogizing a discrete way to express same-sex erotic feeling in a hostile culture. Fewell and Gunn attacked the homophobic bias that has long colored interpretation of this friendship in the past, noting that instead “a homosexual reading . . . finds many anchor points in the text.” Garcia-Treto (1993) calls David’s wailing for the dead Jonathan (2 Sam 1:26) “oddly embarrassing,” and Halpern notes how the elegy describes the pair’s relationship as between a husband and wife. In fact, Jobling notes that David’s description of Jonathan’s love as “passing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26) “much encourages the view” that they had “a consummated gay relationship.” Kirsch (2000) notes that although many wish to view the love often given to David as “pristine,” something “more carnal [physical]” probably characterized the love between Jonathan and David.

Although a great deal of commentary material, past and present, has touched on various aspects and questions relating to Jonathan and David’s relationship, stretching back a century and much farther, no survey so far has attempted to plumb this rich treasure of exposition, so as to come to a very broad and in depth understanding of the Jonathan and David story and their love. Only two more recent books in English have focused in a major way on this relationship, the first being Susan Ackerman’s *When Heroes Love* (2005), in which she describes how “Jonathan willingly and voluntarily entered into a homoeroticized relationship with David,” also pointing out how David later depicts Jonathan in a “wife like” relationship, in his euology (1 Sam 1:26). (Ackerman, *When Heroes Love*, pp. 223-225) The second book is Jean-Fabrice Nardelli’s *Homosexuality* and Liminality in the Gilgamesh and Samuel* (2007), which offers an evaluation and critique of Ackerman’s book and ideas. (Nardelli, *Homosexuality* and Liminality, passim) This current work seeks to draw much more liberally, however, from commentary exposition in a historical sense, as well as utilize recent findings in ancient history, literary
criticism, art and archaeology, comparative religion, modern GLBT history, modern scholarship, and other useful disciplines, in order to construct a holistic picture of Jonathan and David’s relationship—a neglected story in Scripture that is so interesting and important, because it may be the one place in Scripture that speaks of same-sex love in a physical sense in a non-judgmental, and even accepting, manner. What a shock that would be (!), and then the whole complex of studies on homosexuality and the Bible will have to be reevaluated.

END NOTES, CHAPTER 1

2. In Kirsch, King David, p. 129.
4. Landay, David, p. 36.
7. Boswell, Same-Sex Unions, pp. 159; 21–22, 182.
SUPPLEMENT 1A

Biological Determinants and Homosexuality

An interviewer once asked the social theorist Michel Foucault what he thought about “innate [biological] predispositions,” and he replied: “No comment. . . . I don’t believe in talking about things that go beyond my expertise.” Yet sometimes it is very important, even critical, in the study of a broad topic to read beyond one’s specialty, to deepen and clarify one’s understanding. As early as 1983 Jo Durden-Smith and Diane deSimone published a book titled *Sex and the Brain* in which they wrote: “In humans, monkeys, rats, guinea pigs, birds—practically everywhere we look in nature—the quantities of sex hormones available to the fetus during critical periods of early development stamp onto the developing brain a variety of masculine and feminine sexual and social behaviors—usually, but not always, in accordance with the genetic sex.”

And during the past half century, a flood of scientific research and peer-reviewed articles has appeared, in disciplines as diverse as biology, neurology, endocrinology, genetics, psychology, ethnology and anthropology, exploring sexual orientation. This research has recently been summarized in three books: Stanford University biologist Joan Roughgarden’s *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (2004), British psychologist Glenn Wilson and psychobiologist Qazi Rahman’s *Born Gay: The Psychobiology of Sex Orientation* (2005), and American neuroscientist Simon LeVay’s *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation* (2011)—the last title offering a bibliography of over 600 scholarly sources.

Rahman and Wilson, in an earlier article (2003), noted that any study of homosexual orientation wades into the nurture/nature debate; yet while social constructionists argue that sexuality is fluid and can only be understood in socio-political contexts, biological scientists feel that postmodern philosophy is a poor intellectual framework in which to understand the biology that underlies human sexual development. This does not mean that psychological and sociological factors have no influence (LeVay; Brill and Pepper); yet what roles do biological factors play in determining sexual attraction and gender identity? Not that biological research is easy. Nicholas Kristof (2003) calls for caution because of possible researcher bias, frequent use of small samples, and difficulties in finding good random samples, including both gays and straights. Yet, a more fundamental difficulty here lies in the fact that invasive (modification) research on human fetuses and living brains cannot be done, for obvious ethical reasons; and so most evidence for fetal sexual development and brain/body interaction in humans must be gathered indirectly. Still, vital information has been gleaned in recent years from six areas: animal research which suggests models for human study, human sexual anomalies that appear in nature, gender differences in adults and in gender atypical children, twin and family studies, search for correlative evidence, and examination of psychological causation studies and theories—all of which will be discussed below.

**Animal research and models.** During the past half century some of the most significant findings in biological science relating to homosexual orientation have come from animal laboratories. William C. Young (1959) at the University of Kansas reported that injecting female guinea-pig fetuses with testosterone prevented them as adults from performing lordosis (i.e., raising their rumps to invite sexual mounting by males), the most typical female sexual
behavior. With rats, Young further discovered that when he castrated male babies (who are born at a much earlier stage of development than guinea pigs, and humans), they later failed to act sexually like male rodents, even when given testosterone injections. Therefore Young and his colleagues concluded that a lack of testosterone early in life feminizes the male pup's developing brain.

Robert Goy (1981, 1986, 1988) and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin in Madison found that when female macaque monkeys were injected with testosterone in the womb, later as juveniles they began to engage in male-like fighting and sex play and as adults they commonly exhibited male-typical sexual behavior. Moreover, these researchers found several critical times when sexual hormones played a decisive role in brain genderization. In the 1980s more research was carried on, with hamsters, ferrets, pigs and zebra finches, which also showed that when female fetuses were injected with androgens (male sex hormones), they matured to prefer female sex partners; and conversely when male fetuses were injected with testosterone blockers, they matured to prefer male sex partners.

As LeVay notes, animal experiments are fundamental to the study of human biology, although this is not to say that animals are the same as humans, since every species is unique. Yet similarities often do exist, which can shed light on probable human physiological processes. Not only do males and females, in animals and humans, have differing genital structures and secondary sex characteristics (i.e., not directly related to reproduction), but also there are differences in male and female brains which have been observed—especially in the hypothalamus, a small region at the base of the brain which regulates sexual and other basic functions. For example, Roger Gorski (1978) and his group at UCLA discovered a region called SDN-POA (sexual dimorphic nucleus of the preoptic area) which was eight times larger in male rats than in female rats. Dimorphic simply means differing in structure between males and females. Later, this same team (1989) found a comparable region in humans called INAH3 (third interstitial nucleus of the anterior hypothalamus), which appears two-to-three times larger in men than in women. Then LeVay (1991) reported from a small autopsy study that gay men had a significantly smaller INAH3 region than straight men, more like straight women. A Netherlands brain study (2008) found that male-to-female transsexuals also had a smaller INAH3 than non-transsexual men.

Now biologist Bruce Bagemihl (1999) has documented that same-sex courtship and sex are not unnatural among vertebrate animals, presenting evidence to show that homosexual behavior and partnerships have been observed by scientists in nearly three hundred species, ranging from birds to primates. Yet, as LeVay notes, in most cases this is not an exclusive preference, since most of these animals also engage in heterosexual acts. Also, some homosexual choices may be “second-best.” For example, Konrad Lorenz (2006) and his Austrian colleagues noted that male-male pairing among greylag geese (Anser anser) took place during years when female numbers were reduced by predators; however, when males and females appeared in more equal proportions, the males tended to mate with females—except for older males whom the females rejected. Still, an exclusive, durable sexual preference for same-gender partners has been found in domesticated sheep (Ovis aries), where about 10 percent of the rams refuse to mate with ewes, but instead seek to mate only with other rams. Furthermore, Charles Roselli’s group at Oregon Health and Science University found differences in the hypothalamus of homosexual rams and heterosexual rams, the former having a SDN-POA about half the size of the latter. Yet, apart from their choice of same-sex partners, these homosexual rams otherwise displayed
typical male sexual behavior. The researchers therefore theorized that these homosexual rams had experienced somewhat lower levels of testosterone at certain times as fetuses in the womb, which had feminized their brain to a certain degree—which then resulted in an intermediate, partial sexual inversion.

**Human anomalies in nature.** Congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) is a genetic condition affecting certain genetic females (with XX chromosomes) which disrupts the synthesis of androgen-inhibiting cortisol in the adrenal glands, so that instead the male hormone androstenedione is produced, which is then converted into testosterone and dihydrotestosterone. While these genetic females have ovaries, excessive androgens (male sex hormones) in the fetus masculinize the genitalia so that they turn out to be ambiguous. Some are born with an enlarged clitoris (with or without a vaginal opening), while others have a micropenis or a full penis with (empty) scrotum. If diagnosed early, corrective surgery and hormone treatment can allow a CAH infant to be raised as a normal girl. Yet numerous studies done on CAH girls have reported elevated rates of homosexual (lesbian) desire. John Money (1984) and colleagues noted in a group of 30 CAH women that 48 percent reported lesbian attraction and 22 percent had engaged in lesbian behavior. German researchers interviewed 34 CAH women, compared to 14 non-affected sisters, and found in the group of CAH women over 21 years of age that 44 percent expressed lesbian interest, much higher than in the control group. A Canadian study of CAH women, aged 18 or older, also found significantly higher rates of lesbian fantasy and less sexual experience with men than in a control group of non-affected sisters or female cousins, although little actual lesbian activity was reported in this CAH group. LeVay notes that now nineteen studies investigating CAH women all have found a number to be “very significant shifted” toward lesbian interest. A recent study of 39 women in the Kinsey studies who had the severe form (called “salt-wasting” CAH) showed that 5 turned out to be exclusively lesbian, 16 displayed from mild to strong bisexual feelings, and 18 turned out to be exclusively heterosexual. The fact that all of these CAH women did not turn out to be lesbian shows that other biological factors come into play here, even if unidentified. Still, the CAH women with even the milder form of CAH showed a modest but significant homosexual shift, compared to women in general.

Androgen-insensitivity syndrome (AIS) is a hereditary condition found in some genetic males (XY) passed on through X chromosomes, which produces receptor cells that respond poorly or not at all to male sex hormones (androgens) in the fetus, so that the body is moved in a feminine direction. In the “complete” state of this condition (CAIS) individuals develop female genitalia, but they have no pubic hair and are infertile. They have internal, undescended testes (which are often removed surgically). A U.S. study of 14 CAIS “women” found that all but one reported sexual attraction, fantasy, and behavior toward men (Wisniewski et al., 2000). A Cambridge University study of 22 CAIS “women,” compared to 22 controls matched for age, race, and sex of rearing, found that the CAIS “women” were as likely to have heterosexual interests as genetic females (XX) and to be married or living with a man (Hines et al., 2003). Wilson and Rahman note that these “CAIS data are powerful evidence supporting the prenatal androgen theory because they show that a lack of androgen action leads to sexual attraction toward men” in these CAIS genetic males. Sometimes the condition does not come to light until puberty, as with Mrs. Went, an English housewife, who having the external appearance of a
female, did not discover that she had CAIS until she visited a gynecologist at age 23 to see why she was not menstruating or growing pubic hair.32

In other cases XY males have displayed a genetic anomaly in which the body is unable to process the male sex hormone dihydrotestosterone, with gender-bending effects. There seemed to be nothing wrong with the life of “Amaranta Ternera,” who lived in the Dominican Republic, but there was something unusual with her genes, extending down through seven generations—for thirty-eight of her descendants were born appearing as girls, but when they reached puberty they became boys. For example, four of the ten children born to Gerineldo and Pilar Babilonia went through this remarkable transformation: they were born with an apparent vagina and were raised as girls, but then at puberty their girlish voice began to deepen and their “clitoris” grew into a penis, and two testicles in a scrotum descended from the lips of their “vagina.” So the children’s names and clothes were changed, and thereafter they were raised as boys. Today they are muscled, sexually potent men. Interestingly, after this sexual change, these children had no difficulty adjusting to their new gender, sexual orientation, and male role—for genetically they were male. What they inherited from Amaranta was not an insensitivity to testosterone, but rather an inability to process it into another male hormone, dihydrotestosterone, which is responsible in the male fetus for shaping the male genitalia. These children were implanted with a masculinized brain before birth, although it lapsed in a feminine phase until puberty; then, however, male hormones surged forth to change the children’s sexual organs and their sense of identity into male (Durden-Smith and deSimone).35

Sometimes other accidents of nature shed light on the formation of sexual orientation. For example, it has been observed that when damage occurs to the BSTc (central subdivision of the bed nucleus of the stria terminalis, in the hypothalamus), altered sexual behavior can occur, including hypersexuality, change in sexual orientation, and fetishism.34 Also, heterosexual men afflicted by Klüver-Bucy syndrome—caused by damage to the temporal lobe (front part) of the brain, including the amygdala (which processes emotions, sexuality and social functions, and is a major source of input to the medial preoptic area of the hypothalamus35)—can experience homosexual feelings.36 Both of these cases show that changes in brain circuitry related to sexual function (in the hypothalamus) can produce feelings of homosexual attraction in previously heterosexual men, although usually in a reduced form.37

Gender differences in general and in gender atypical children. It is clear that boys and girls in general display fairly consistent gender differences. Boys usually prefer rough-and-tumble games and playing with cars, guns, and balls, while girls prefer playing with dolls and dishes. Boys are better with throwing accuracy, and girls better with fine hand movements. Girls are more people-oriented, boys are more thing-oriented. Now while parental encouragement, role modeling, peer pressure, and other social forces may exert a certain effect here, a great deal of evidence now suggests that biological factors play a critical role.38 Not only can such gender (and gender-variant) behaviors be observed in animals (including apes, monkeys and rodents) but these gendered traits appear very early in human life. For example, it has been observed that newborn girls prefer to look at faces, while newborn boys prefer to look at mechanical mobiles (Connellan et al., 2001); and differences in toy preferences are observable at 3–8 months (Alexander et al., 2009).39 Stephanie Brill (Children’s Hospital, Oakland, CA) and Rachel Pepper (Yale University) note that transgender children may also have a sense of
who they are between the ages of 2–4. For example, Alejandro, from the time he could barely talk, tried to tell his parents that he was not a boy but a girl; and soon he was trying on his older sister’s dresses and his mom’s makeup. Therefore, gender-identity difference, as well as homosexual orientation, appear to derive from variations in sex hormone exposure, other biological variables, and brain sexual differentiation during fetal development (LeVay).

Richard Friedman and Jennifer Downey (2002) note how researchers have found that most CAH girls (with increased male hormone activity in the fetal stage) tend to show less interest in doll-play and feminine self-adornment than expected with girls; and when they grow up, they tend to place more emphasis on career than on marriage. As children they display a greater preference for boy playmates and rough-and-tumble activities, which continues into adolescence (Berenbaum, 1999). In fact, Friedman and Downey write, “The influence of prenatal androgen on childhood gender role behavior is robust, has been demonstrated in many independent studies, and occurs when there is virtually no androgen [found later] in the blood.” These effects cannot be explained in psychoanalytic terms, they add. Still, the fact that most CAH women experience menstrual cycles shows that the degree to which the brain was androgenized prenatally was not enough to alter the normal feminization pattern in the hypothalamus that regulates the menstrual cycle. As noted earlier, most (genetically male) CAH girls will grow up to become heterosexual women, although the frequency of lesbian fantasy in this group is “undeniably increased.”

Now one of the strongest findings related to sexual orientation research is that children who will eventually become gay or lesbian (“pre-gay children”) show greater childhood gender nonconformity (CGN), or atypicality, than children who will grow up to be heterosexual adults (Wilson and Rahman). Of course the idea that gay men must be feminine and lesbians masculine in appearance and behavior overlooks considerable diversity in life, as also with heterosexuals. Some gay males appear indistinguishable from the average heterosexual male, or even push their masculinity. In fact, LeVay notes that gay people may arrive at their sexual orientation through quite different pathways. Some male athletes who later come out as gay describe how they always loved sports, defying expectations at this point. Yet, Richard Isay, a psychiatrist who is also gay, has noted that “Each of the several hundred gay men I have seen in consultation or treatment over the past 30 years has described having had one or more gender-discordant traits during childhood. Most frequently they report a lack of interest in ‘rough-and-tumble’ or aggressive sports; many speak of having preferred to play with girls rather than boys. . . . Almost all recall that as children they felt a close bond with their mothers, with whom they shared many interests.” Of course, strongly non-conforming children are likely to experience more anxiety and depression than other children, and so later seek out psychiatric help; yet still there seems to be some truth to the stereotyping here (LeVay).

To study childhood gender nonconformity, researchers have conducted retrospective studies, which interview large numbers of gay and straight adults about their childhood. UCLA psychologists interviewed gay men, lesbians, straight men and straight women (198 in each group), recruited from the general population; and they found that those adults who remembered playing baseball between the ages of 5–8 included 57% of the straight men, 49% of the lesbians, 28% of the straight women, and 19% of the gay men (Grellert et al., 1982). A more recent study looked at how consistently pre-gay boys differ from pre-straight boys in Turkey, Brazil,
and Thailand; and researchers here found that pre-gay boys were less likely to be interested in sports and more likely to associate with girls and girls’ activities than pre-straight boys (Cardoso, 2009). More ideal (but harder to do) are prospective studies, which begin with children as children and then follow them into adulthood. The best-known study of this kind was done by UCLA psychiatrist Richard Green (1987) between the late 1960s and early 1980s, which included 66 feminine boys and 56 other boys, matched for other variables. Most of the feminine boys would have preferred to have been girls, some even appearing transsexual, while the control group was generally selected (i.e., not necessarily for being “masculine”). Green interviewed the children and their parents during the boys’ childhood and adolescence periods. At the end, he found in the “other” group (the 35 whom he was able to follow to the end) all turned out heterosexual. However, among the 44 markedly effeminate boys (whom he was able to follow to the end), 33 became homosexual or bisexual, and 11 heterosexual. Although some of the feminine boys did turn out to be heterosexual, still in 75 percent of these boys a marked femininity in childhood was a predictor of homosexual or bisexual interest in adulthood.

**Twin and family studies.** It would be unlikely if the approximately 30,000 genes on the 46 human chromosomes in a fertilized egg (XX pairs in the female and XY pairs in the male) did not have some impact on many of an individual’s personal traits (including physical appearance and gender, as well as innate predispositions and talents), even in subtle and indirect ways (such as predisposing a boy to prefer fashion or the arts instead of rough-and-tumble sports). That a person’s genetic code can also influence a person’s sexual orientation is seen in twin and family studies, although not as an “all-domineering influence” (LeVay). Of special interest are monozygotic (identical) twins, who come from a single fertilized egg and so share essentially all of the same genes, and dizygotic (fraternal) twins, who come from two different eggs in the same mother, fertilized by two different sperm and so they share about one-half of their genes. In twin studies published in the early 1990s, Michael Bailey (Northwestern University), Richard Pillard (Boston University) and other investigators found that homosexuality was shared among 50 percent of identical-twin brothers, with a lower but still significant rate among fraternal-twin brothers. Fred Whitam (1993) and his group at Arizona State University found even higher rates of 65 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Using a larger twin registry, an Australian study found a 30 percent rate for pairs of male twins and a 50–60 percent rate for pairs of female twins (Kirk et al., 2000). Some researchers have suggested that identical twins generally share around 80 percent of the same characteristics, ranging from from height and health to IQ and political views—although upbringing also plays a role. Therefore, of special interest are identical twins who have been raised apart. Psychologist Thomas Bouchard and colleagues at the University of Minnesota tracked sixty such pairs (raised apart), and found that still their behaviors, personalities and social attitudes, displayed in answers to lengthy batteries of tests, were often remarkably alike. The first such pair Bouchard met were James Arthur Springer and James Edward Lewis, who were only reunited at age 39 after having been given up by their mother and separately adopted as one-month-olds. Living in Ohio, both liked mechanical drawing and carpentry, their favorite subject in school was math and their least liked subject was spelling, and they even married and divorced a woman named Linda and then married another woman named Betty. Both had carpentry workshops installed in their homes, loved car-racing and hated baseball, drank the same brand of beer (Miller light) and smoked the same brand of cigarettes (Salem), and had suffered from migraine headaches from their teenage years. Each bit his fingernails, wrote love notes to his wife which were left around the house, and had a
ten-pound weight gain at the same age as the other twin—to name a few similarities. Yet another set of twins, Oskar Stohr and Jack Yufe, separated six months after their birth in Trinidad, seemed to show more the influence of nurture, since Oskar was raised as a Catholic and then joined the Hitler youth, while Jack stayed in the Caribbean, was raised as a Jew, and then lived for a time in Israel. Yet, when the twins were reunited in their fifth decade, they displayed similar speech and thought patterns, similar ways of walking, a taste for spicy food, and common peculiarities like flushing the toilet before using it. Now no one claims that there is a gene for marrying women with the same first name or flushing the toilet before using it; instead researchers view such similarities as “coincidences” and “statistical anomalies.” Still, such studies strengthen the case for the power of nature and genetic influence. As Bouchard notes, “There probably are genetic influences on almost all facets of human behavior.” However, he holds that identical twins raised apart are still probably only about 50 percent similar, because other (social) factors play a role here as well.

But what about cases of identical twins where one of them is gay or lesbian and they are raised apart? Although such pairs are hard to find, Bouchard located six such cases, including two pairs of brothers and four pairs of sisters. One gay twin didn’t know that he had a gay brother until they met by chance in a gay bar. The other male pair included one twin who identified himself as gay, although he had had relationships with women earlier in his life, while his twin brother identified himself as straight, although he had had a homosexual relationship earlier in his life. However, among the women, in each pair one woman was lesbian or bisexual while the other twin was heterosexual (Ekert et al., 1986). Although the sample here is small, considering the larger twin studies LeVay suggests that male homosexuality in some cases may be inherited.

Yet Ray Blanchard (1996) and colleagues in Toronto found in a review of fourteen studies, including 7,000 male participants, done in several countries and spanning several decades, that in all of these studies gay men tended to be born later in birth sequence than heterosexual men. They also found that gay men have significantly more older brothers (on an average 1.31, compared with 0.96 for straight men), although the number of younger brothers or older or younger sisters showed no effect. This observation, called the “fraternal birth order effect” or “big brother effect,” is backed up by the Kinsey data; and this effect seems even stronger with very effeminate gay men. Blanchard estimated that the odds of being gay increase around 33 percent with each older brother. Therefore, the more sons a woman has, the greater the likelihood that one or more of them will be gay. Wilson and Rahman call this “one of the most reliable correlates of male sexual orientation.” Still, no such correlation was observed with lesbians. Blanchard’s group estimated that one in seven gay men may owe their sexual orientation to this big brother effect. Also, no proof was found in these studies that incestuous sexual play led to homosexual orientation nor that the big brother effect stems from living with older brothers or from family dynamics. Although the precise biological mechanism is still uncertain, Blanchard proposed that a mother’s immune system keeps track of how many male fetuses she has carried, stimulating production of antibodies in the carrying of later male fetuses to protect her balance of sex hormones. With homosexual orientation, genetics cannot account for everything, nor can birth order, nor can varied exposure to prenatal male sex hormones; indeed many biological factors may come into play (Wilson and Rahman). As Stanford University biologist Joan Roughgarden explained, human sexuality and gender
expression are a “rainbow” of diversity. Each individual has his or her unique “gene committee” which fashions what becomes “that individual’s embodiment of gender and sexuality,” and normal people (including those whom some would call ‘abnormal’) appear “as genetically diverse as snowflakes.” Homosexuality does seem to run in families, although a maternal link has not yet been verified; and a single “gay” gene seems unlikely. Roughgarden also believes that since gender identity seems set by the first year of life, sexual orientation may also begin to solidify then. However, why ten percent of males appear to be gay and five percent of women appear to be lesbian (based on Kinsey’s statistics), no one knows.

Search for correlative evidence. Because of the difficulty in tracing direct genetic and hormonal influences, scientists have sought to investigate brain gender differentiation by conducting indirect research on what are called "correlates," which may be found in neuroanatomical brain features, neuropsychological features, and overall body features. More specifically, if a link can be shown to exist between homosexual orientation and certain general dimorphic variations (differences in physical and psychological features between males and females) which are biologically determined, then homosexual orientation probably also shares a biological basis. With regards to brain features, we have already noted significant differences discovered in the hypothalamus between gay men and straight men and between male-to-female transsexuals and straight men, probably due to lower testosterone levels experienced during critical phases of fetal brain development.

Relating to neuropsychological features (cognitive or mental abilities), men typically score better on mental rotation (like turning an object around in their imagination), in perceiving and judging spatial relations, in targeting and intercepting moving objects (like throwing and catching a ball), and in finding their way in unfamiliar environments (by reading maps and relating themselves to compass points). In contrast, women typically score better in verbal fluency (such as recalling many related words quickly), in remembering the location of objects, in social and communicative skills (such as reading people’s faces), and in showing empathy (understanding people’s emotions). Although some researchers have claimed that these aptitudes are learned, this division between the genders has been observed universally; and there is direct evidence relating this to elevated levels of testosterone in the fetuses of CAH women, who later display enhanced skills with male-typical cognitive abilities, like targeted throwing. In terms of personality, men typically are more assertive, competitive, aggressive, independent, and interested in getting things done, while women typically are more expressive, social, empathetic, altruistic, and open to feelings. Now relating to gay men and lesbians, there appears to be a considerable crossover here to the opposite gender. One study of heterosexual and homosexual men and women (60 in each group) showed large differences between straight and gay men, the former doing better on tasks like mental rotation and judgment of line orientation, while the gay men did better on tasks like verbal fluency and object location memory, like women. Such results have been corroborated by numerous studies. These cognitive differences have nothing to do with IQ, and are found (as we have seen) in children as well. Yet the data for lesbians is less consistent and marked. Evidence from many sources, including brain-damage cases, shows that men process language almost entirely using the left hemisphere of the brain, while women use both halves of the brain; and this may explain why men are typically better at spatial tasks, because more of their left brain is available for this. However, gay men, like women, appear more bilaterally organized (using both sides of the brain)
Relating to overall body features (physical characteristics), Rahman and his team found reliable differences between straight men and straight women in pre-pulse inhibitions (PPIs), observed in eye-blinking when a person is startled by a loud sound (like a scratching noise), especially if preceded by a weaker sound. In humans and animals, females have shown a lower PPI response than men. A British study found that lesbians tended to respond like straight men, and gay men like straight women, only not statistically-significant in the latter case (Rahman et al., 2003).

Relating to penis size, data from the Kinsey archives on 935 gay males and 4,187 heterosexual males showed that gay men self-reported an average erection length of 6.32 inches while heterosexual men reported a lower average of 5.99 inches. (Bogaert and Herschberger, 1999). This finding backs up an earlier study where the researchers did the measuring themselves (Nedoma and Freund, 1961), ruling out possible self-reporting exaggeration.

Male rhesus monkeys exposed to higher levels of androgens in the womb tend to develop larger penis sizes (Herman et al., 2000). Since this seems to run counter to the theory that gay men generally experience lower androgen levels during critical points of fetal development, Bogaert and Herschberger suggest that gay men might also have experienced a spike in testosterone levels at another point in fetal development critical for genital development.

Relating to left-handedness, a meta-analysis of twenty studies showed that gay people overall have a greater chance of being left- or both-handed, over straights; and this seems to be more so in lesbians (91 percent) than in gay men (34 percent). It is thought that this is due to a certain masculinization in lesbians and a certain hyper-masculinization in gay males at some point (Lalumère et al., 2000).

Relating to finger-length on the right hand, the index finger (second finger) compared to the ring finger (fourth finger) appears to be dimorphic. This 2D:4D ratio is obtained by dividing the length of the index finger by the length of the ring finger. While early studies suggested that gay men and lesbians appeared more like the opposite gender in this regards, results from follow-up studies have been inconsistent. Yet one study suggested that butch lesbians may have 2D:4D ratios more like men, while femme lesbians do not (Brown et al., 2002). At least, CAH women (exposed to higher amounts of testosterone as fetuses) have more male typical 2D:4D ratios in the right hand than other women (Brown et al., 2002). With regards to other suggested correlates, later studies have failed to confirm that gay men have less fingerprint ridges than straight men, i.e., that they appear more like women in this regards. Later studies also have failed to confirm that on the average gay men display less weight and height than straight men, and vice versa for women. Nor have later studies confirmed that gay people reach puberty earlier than straights, nor that the hair on the top of gay men’s heads tends to whirl in a counterclockwise fashion, opposed to the clockwise whirl found more commonly on straight men. Overall, related to correlative research, it must be said that in many cases the ongoing results here have been uneven and even contradictory; and in the end they shed little light on the larger picture of how sexual orientation and gender orientation develop in the fetus.

Psychological causation studies and theories. In a number of cases attempts have been made with infant boys lacking a normal penis to raise them as girls—almost always with disastrous results. The most famous case involved two identical twins named Bruce and Brian Reimer, who were born on August 22, 1965 to a couple living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Seven months later, when the boys’ foreskins appeared to be closing up, their parents, Ron and
Janet, took them to the hospital to be circumcised; however, the attending physician who used an electrocautery needle instead of a scalpel ended up burning off Bruce’s entire penis. (Brian’s condition eventually corrected itself over time.) The Reimers, concerned about Bruce’s future happiness without a penis, took him to see John Money, a famous psychologist at Johns Hopkins University Medical Center in Baltimore, after hearing the charismatic doctor speak in February 1967 on TV about his work with transsexuals and intersex babies, expressing his view that through surgery and hormone treatment a child could be raised happily as either male or female. Money would later view the Reimer twins case as the ultimate experiment that would prove that nurture, not nature, determines gender identity and sexual orientation. So in July 1967 at Johns Hopkins Hospital Bruce had both testicles removed and a rudimentary external vagina formed; he was renamed “Brenda” and was henceforth to be raised as a girl. Probably his parents did not know that this was the first sex reassignment surgery that had ever been done on a developmentally normal child. Later Money published reports, through the 1970s, that his work was an unqualified success: learning and environment were indeed turning Brian into a happy little boy and Brenda into a happy little girl. Yet Brian later recalled that “there was nothing feminine about Brenda . . . She walked like a guy . . . She talked about guy things . . . We both wanted to play with guys, build forts and have snowball fights and play army.” Brenda refused to play with the dolls given to her. When Money was told about this, he replied that Brenda was simply going through a ‘tomboy’ phase. Indeed, when she entered the first grade, she was always fighting with the kids and playing in the dirt.

Money had requested that the Reimers bring both Brenda and Brian to Baltimore once a year to see him, even though the children found these visits bewildering and unsettling. In his office Money showed them nude photos of children and adults (to reinforce each child’s gender identity); and at age 6 he had Brenda get down on all fours, while Brian thrust his crotch against her from the rear. When Brenda was age 7 Money began to urge her to have additional vaginal surgery, which she was determined not to have; instead she dreamed of someday having a mustache and driving a sports car. In the sixth grade (at age 14), one of the many psychiatrists in Winnipeg who saw Brenda urged her parents to tell her the truth about what had happened; and when Ron, her father, told Brenda that a doctor had ‘made a mistake down there,’ she asked, “Did you beat him up?” Actually Brenda felt greatly “relieved,” because, as she would later explain, “Suddenly it all made sense why I felt the way I did. . . . I wasn’t crazy.” Brenda at first refused to take the estrogen pills prescribed for her—she didn’t want breasts—although she finally did because Money warned her that otherwise she would grow disproportionately long limbs. On her last visit to see Money on May 2, 1978, Brenda panicked when Money introduced her to a transsexual—obviously a man dressed like a woman—and she ran out of his office. Later she told her mother that if she was ever forced to see Money again, she would kill herself.

When BBC-TV reporters showed up in Winnipeg one day in 1979 to make a documentary on gender identity, psychiatrist Keith Sigmundson confessed that he doubted Brenda “will ever make an adjustment as a woman.” The film The First Question aired in Britain on May 19, 1980, although out of fear of Money, Sigmundson had forced an agreement that the program would not be sold or shown in Canada nor in the U.S. Meanwhile, in September 1979 Brenda’s parents enrolled her in a vocational school, at age 14, for the ninth grade, where the boys told her, “You’re a fucking gorilla”—because of how she walked and because of her deep
voice, which somehow had changed at puberty like her brother’s. Brenda told one understanding psychiatrist, Mary McKenty, that she wanted to become a boy now and had chosen “David” as her new name, after the giant-slayer in the Bible. McKenty, not afraid of Money, supported this; and suddenly the new “David” appeared much happier. He made his debut as a boy to his extended family in August 1980, a week after his 15th birthday, at a wedding reception. He began taking testosterone injections, endured a painful, double mastectomy (to remove his breasts), and then shortly after his 16th birthday had a rudimentary penis constructed from muscles and skin from one of his thighs—although over the next year he was hospitalized 18 times for blockages and infections. Afraid of meeting Brenda’s old acquaintances, it was two years before David would leave the house, to visit fast-food places and bars. Later he learned of a new type of penis constructed through microsurgery, that would provide sensation, which he had done shortly after his 22nd birthday, which took three surgeons 13 hours to perform. Although he despaired of ever finding a wife, he fell mutually in love with a slightly-overweight but pretty, nurturing women named Jane, who liked and accepted David just as he was; and so they were married on September 22, 1990.

After the BBC-TV documentary David was contacted by another psychologist, Milton Diamond of the University of Hawaii–Manoa, who studied intersexes and who disagreed with Money’s theories and believed that his protocols had done a lot of harm to children. Diamond had earlier done his graduate work under biologist William Young at the University of Kansas, where in the late 1950s his team made the discovery that when testosterone was given to female guinea-pig fetuses this propelled them later to perform male sexual activity (mounting), and vice versa with males. Diamond was surprised to learn that his case was famous in medical literature and that it was still being used as a precedent to perform sex reassignment surgeries on children. So he agreed to let Diamond and Sigmundson write an update on his case, although he would be referred in it as “Joan” and “John.” Written over the winter of 1994, it was finally published in the March 1997 issue of Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine; and here the authors noted that “no support” exists for the idea that “individuals are psychosexually neutral at birth or that healthy psychosexual development is dependent on the appearance of the genitals” in a child. Furthermore, psychiatrist William Reiner wrote in an editorial which accompanied the article that what is “critical to psychosexual development” is “the prenatal hormonally differentiated brain,” not genital anatomy or social-environmental influences. Reiner also reported on six XY males he was studying who had been castrated at birth due to severe genital abnormalities and were then raised as females; and he noted that all of these “girls” displayed striking masculine characteristics, with two of them declaring themselves to be male before the age of 12, and another three describing themselves as the “most masculine girl I know.” Diamond and Sigmundson noted other cases where genetic males reassigned as females switched back to live successfully as males. Then in June 1997 David was introduced to journalist John Colapinto and agreed to let him write a feature article on him for Rolling Stone (because David was a rock’n’roll fan), which appeared December, 1997. David later collaborated with Colapinto to produce a full-length biography titled As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl (2001, updated 2006)—a story which should be read by all those truly interested in understanding sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as to observe how academic theory can sometimes go far astray and cause great harm.
Yet in the end, David came to an unfortunate end. First, he was never the same after his twin brother, Brian, took his own life, with an overdose of antidepressants. Then David lost his full-time job as night watchman at a slaughter-house, which he loved, which left him brooding at home. Then finally, Jane asked for a temporary separation, trying to get her own life together. All of this, along with the rage, frustration, and humiliation that David had felt his whole life, led him to take a rifle and shoot himself in his car in a parking lot, at age 38, on May 5, 2004.124 Although this story deals with a heterosexual, the way in which homosexual orientation and cross-dressing or transsexual orientation cases are firmly and nearly irreversibly rooted in prenatal experiences are no different.

A century ago the Austrian psychotherapist Sigmund Freud wrote that a normal infant passed through different libidinous (erotic) stages and that those who later became homosexual had failed to leave the oedipal phase where the infant is erotically fixated on his mother; and so later in life they seek out male rather than female sexual partners.125 Modern psychologist Daryl Bem (1996) of Cornell University acknowledges that biological factors (such as prenatal hormones) influence a child’s personality, especially relating to gendered traits, and non-gender-conforming boys tend to view themselves as different from boys in general; yet he also advocates that because of this, they later tend to look upon other males as sexually-desirable objects.126 However, no real scientific evidence supports either Freud’s mother-fixation theory or Bem’s “exotic becomes erotic” theory, or the latter’s belief that seeking to change the atypical behavior of such children will prevent a later homosexual orientation.127 Then UCLA psychiatrist Richard Green (1987) believes that femininity often triggers rejection by a child’s father (probably true) and so by improving the son’s relationship with his father and male peers the likelihood of that child growing up to be gay can be decreased. But this attempted “socialization” overlooks the biological fact that “genes and hormones continue to exert a sustained and even growing influence over a person’s life span” (LeVay).128 The deeply-ingrained gender and sexual orientation of atypical, pre-gay children is reflected in how they often suffer as children and as adults; so if they could easily change, why would not many of them? But they do not—because of how gender and sexual preferences have been irrevocably implanted on their brains.129

Behavior psychologists have held that the minds of newborns are pretty much blank slates, and that sexual orientation stems from a child’s earliest sexual and pleasurable acts, e.g., a person’s being gay may have resulted from early homosexual contact with an older sibling or a male adult. However, cross-culture studies contradict this. For example, among the Sambians in New Guinea all boys are required to engage in sexual contacts with older males for several years before they have any access to females; yet most if not all of these boys become heterosexual men (Herdt, 1981).130 Also, homosexual behavior is common among British boys who attend single-sex boarding schools; and yet male adults from such schools turn out no more gay than other men in Britain (Wellings et al., 1994).131 In fact, most young people seem to develop an awareness of their sexual orientation while they are still virgins. Ellen DeGeneres, who was molested by her stepfather, told Allure magazine, “But I was a lesbian way before that. My earliest memories are of being a lesbian” (Associated Press, May 18, 2005).132 Also, if one out of three girls in the U.S. are molested before she reaches the age of eighteen (by one broad definition, in Dominguez), then why don’t more of these girls turn out to be lesbian?133
In summary, animal studies have demonstrated that when female fetuses are given testosterone injections, the animals later tend to exhibit a sexual attraction for their own sex and male sexual behavior. Also, when male fetuses experience lowered levels of testosterone, they move in the opposite direction sexually. That this androgen (male hormone) theory of sexual development relates to humans is shown in CAH females, who for genetic reasons experience elevated testosterone levels in the womb; and many later experience lesbian attractions. That not all become lesbian, however, shows that multiple biological factors come into play here. Conversely, CAIS “women,” genetic males whose androgen receptor-cells respond poorly or not at all to androgens, develop feminine genitalia and generally live out their lives as women.

Although bisexuality is far more common among animals than exclusive, lasting homosexuality, about 10 percent of common rams (*Ovis aries*) show sexual attraction for only other rams, although otherwise they exhibit normal male sexual behavior. Equally interesting is the fact that a certain spot (called oSDN) in the hypothalamus, a small region at the brain’s base which is concerned with sexual and other basic functions, was found to be smaller (and more female-like) in homosexual rams than in heterosexual rams. In human brains a corresponding area (INAH3) was also found to be smaller in gay men than in straight men. Moreover, numerous gender differences generally appear between boys and girls, and “atypical” or “non-conforming” children often grow up to be gay or lesbian. CAH girls also typically display an atypical preference for boy playmates, rough-and-tumble activities, and later male occupations. Therefore, it becomes clear that through complex and varying factors the brain of a human fetus is implanted with a certain (typical or atypical) gender identity and sexual orientation very early in life—which express themselves in a “rainbow” of diversity (Roughgarden). Studies of identical twins raised apart but then reunited show that their genetic closeness leads to many similar characteristics, not resulting from social learning; and this may relate to gay men as well. Cases like that of Bruce/Brenda/David Reimer, who because of a damaged penis was raised as a girl but never felt like a girl and later rebelled against this, show that it is very difficult to change one’s pre-natal gender identity and sexual orientation. The fact that gay and transgender children suffer so much to try to fulfill their deep-seated gender and sexual desires show that these desires are very deeply and early implanted on the brain, and they are not easily altered.

REFERENCES


The Philistines knew they had it good. As the Iron Age began (ca. 1200 BC), they had guarded their advantage of knowing how to make iron as a state secret. No metalsmith was found in Israel—for working either iron or bronze—and farmers had to go to Philistia (along the coastal plain of southern Canaan) to have their tools sharpened, including plow blades, digging tools, axes and sickles, and cattle goads. No one in Israel was allowed to possess a sword or a spear except Saul and Jonathan, the king and his heir apparent (1 Sam 13:19–22). Meanwhile, the Philistine soldiers were armed with long straight swords, spears and daggers, smaller face shields and better armor, and large chariots, as pictured in the famous battle scene at Medinet Habu, Egypt. Note all of the fine weapons and armor that Goliath brings with him, an exotic lot (17:4–7), although “javelin” (RSV) is better translated as “sword” (Peterson), since kidon (Strong H3591, v. 6,) appears in the Dead Sea scrolls from Qumran definitely referring to a sword of some kind. Also, no ancient battle scene has ever shown a warrior with a javelin “slung between his shoulders” (cf. 17:6, RSV), although this could be said of a scimitar, a single-edged, curved sword, good for slashing and a common weapon at this time. No wonder Saul spent much of his time brooding and dillydallying.

Jonathan makes his appearance in 1 Sam 13:2. Although the Bible gives no physical description of him, since Saul was tall (10:23) and had been a “handsome young man” (9:2), one can imagine that Jonathan might have inherited his imposing, good looks. Still, perhaps his father towered over him, as he addressed his son. What we do know for sure is that at one point Saul decided to form a standing army (13:2), taking command of two-thirds of the men himself (located at a place called Michmash) and giving command over the other third to Jonathan (located at Gibeah). Jonathan probably was 20 years of age or older, since Israelites traditionally entered the army when they reached that age (Num 1:3)—although probably he had been trained earlier in archery, sword-fighting and other military skills by his father and Abner, an uncle who became Saul’s general (cf. 1 Sam 13:22a, 14:50b, 18:4b). We remember that Alexander the Great distinguished himself at the age of 17 as a cavalry commander in his father Philip II’s army, at the crucial Battle of Chaeronea; then he was made king of Macedon in 336 BC at the age of twenty. However, Jonathan never displayed Alexander’s military genius. The larger section of 1 Sam 13–15 may be titled “The Decline of Saul,” and it is stirring to read the whole passage. Two great themes interweave here; one describes Jonathan’s leadership of two daring assaults against the Philistine forces which end with him becoming a hero in Israel, while the second follows Saul’s disintegration as king and God’s rejecting him because of his disobedience. Yet, chapter 13 begins this section with a number of linguistic uncertainties: Gaps in the royal introduction, in the Hebrew for 13:1 (cf. NRSV text and footnotes) leave the reader guessing as to how old Saul was when he began to reign and for how long he reigned. Also, Kyle McCarter believes that the “three thousands” in 3:2 really means “three military units” (or companies), since Hebrew letters can carry both numerical and non-numerical meanings. Then, the Hebrew in 13:3, describing Jonathan’s first raid, has been translated in different ways, as: he took the “garrison” (RSV, NIV, REB), killed the “governor” (McCarter, NEB, Peterson), and destroyed a hallowed “pillar” (JB) at Geba. The basic idea of the Hebrew word netsib, “army camp” (CEV) or “garrison, outpost” (Strong H5333), is
probably best. Scholars have also debated whether Geba and Gibeath might actually refer to the same place (since both derive from a root meaning “hill”), although Geba probably was located 2 miles south of the strategically-important, east-west Michmash Pass (located eight miles N/NE of Jerusalem and where Jonathan’s second raid occurred), while Gibeath, Saul’s capital, was a different place in the territory of Benjamin, located about two miles south of Geba.\textsuperscript{15} Fortunately, the Hebrew for most of the other text in these chapters is clearer and more easily translated.

\textbf{Jonathan’s emergence as a national hero in Israel.} In this section, Jonathan emerges almost overnight as a national hero, through his great faith, courage, and initiative. However, his first surprise attack on the Philistines, at Geba, was an unmitigated disaster, for it elicited such a devastating counterattack that most of the Israelite soldiers fled into hiding or across the Jordan River (13:3–7); and Saul trotted the 600 or so men who remained with him back to Gibeath, his hometown (13:15). However, this fiasco taught Jonathan that human strategy, self-confidence, and even surprise maneuvers were not enough to gain a victory over the superior Philistines; instead, he needed to turn humbly to Yahweh for guidance, help and deliverance. With a simple plan (in fact, suicidal from a human perspective), Jonathan and his aide climbed down into the valley of the Michmash Pass and then boldly showed themselves to the enemy, having asked God to reveal his will through what the Philistines called down to them. If they said, “Come up to us,” then Jonathan and his aide would take this as a sign that God would give them the victory (14:1,6–12). So when the two heard this mocking reply shouted back to them, they scrambled up the northern cliff of the Michmash Pass, probably even leaving behind their heavier weapons.\textsuperscript{16} Then the “Philistines fell before Jonathan,” helplessly, as it were (14:13).\textsuperscript{17} God also caused a great “trembling” to spread among the Philistines, which resulted not only from fear and panic but from “a quaking of God” (lit.), an earthquake (14:15).\textsuperscript{18} Tony Cartledge writes, “The disdainful Philistine troops had judged Jonathan to be an overconfident cub, but he scaled the cliff like a cat and then fought like an enraged tiger, felling Philistines left and right while his armor-bearer came behind to finish them off.”\textsuperscript{19} However, McCarter comments on this verse\textsuperscript{20} that Jonathan probably fought “with darts [long arrows\textsuperscript{21}] and crude flint weapons,” the simplest of implements. Jonathan, whose name means “the Lord has given,” sees this become a reality in his life.\textsuperscript{22} One can see in this scene Jonathan’s bravery and resoluteness; his ability to devise a plan, keep it secret, and carry it out; his physical strength and athleticism; the obvious admiration he inspired in his aide; and most of all his personal relationship with and trust in Yahweh, the mighty God of Israel, who answers prayer.\textsuperscript{23}

Now 1 Sam 14:24a translates literally from the Hebrew as “Now the men of Israel were pressed [NJB, UNASB: ‘hard pressed’] on that day” (J. Green), or were “distressed” (KJV, cf. NIV), “worn out” (NLT), or “driven to exhaustion” (REB). Yet, the much older Greek Septuagint version says here that Saul acted “in great ignorance” that day (van der Pool). Therefore, McCarter prefers “Saul made a great blunder that day,”\textsuperscript{24} or as several other translations render it, “committed a very rash act” (NRSV) or “did something really foolish” (Peterson). What Saul did specifically was to place a curse on all of his men, if they did not fast until evening “and I have been avenged on my enemies” (14:24b). Now any king or general who withholds food from his army during an offensive is bonkers. J. P. Fokkelman thinks that since Saul knew that Jonathan was away and would not know of his order, perhaps the king was digging a trap for his son here.\textsuperscript{25} Sure enough, it is not long before Jonathan unwittingly eats of some honey he finds dripping in the woods (14:25–27, NIV). Later, when Saul consults the
Urim and Thummim (14:36-45)—objects which the high priest kept in his breastplate (Exod 28:30) and used in some way to seek guidance—to find the culprit for a divine silence that has fallen on his inquiries to the Lord, his asking of only two questions to discover the guilty party (whether the blame lay with the royal command or the army, then with Saul or Jonathan) suggests that the king already knows what he is looking for (cf. 14:39). When the second inquiry points to Jonathan, the king shows no dismay, surprise or mercy, but immediately calls for his son’s death. Jonathan acknowledges his fault and accepts his fate, apparently feeling that to make any defense or appeal would be pointless (Fokkelman). However, the army finds the idea of killing their hero preposterous, and so they force Saul to renounce. They have no doubt upon whom God’s favor lies. Fokkelman further views 1 Sam 13–14 as a triptych, with Jonathan’s bold act of faith the “radiant centre panel,” joined front and back by two dark panels, the first showing how hopelessly lost Israel’s situation was in facing the Philistines (without God’s help) and the second revealing how far Saul has lost his grip on leading Israel, as he calls for the execution of Jonathan. Then, chapter 15, where the prophet Samuel utterly abandons Saul (v. 35), becomes darker still, although it divides the book of 1 Samuel since afterward the reader’s attention is focused on David, a new and engaging character who makes his appearance in chapter 16.

Jonathan’s closeness to his armor-bearer. One particularly interesting aspect of this story is the special bond that Jonathan has with his young armor-bearer. Armor-bearers are mentioned some 21 times in the OT, in the books of Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. The primary duty of the “bearer of armor” (nose keli, from nasa, H5375 = “bearer,” and keli, H3627 = “armor”), as the name implies, was to carry weapons and perform other functions related to warfare, needed by a king (e.g., Saul, 1 Sam 31:4-6), a commander-in-chief (e.g., Joab, 2 Sam 18:14–15), or a champion (e.g., Goliath, 1 Sam 17:7), as he went into battle. The tomb of Senbi at Meir in Egypt contains a scene of the tomb owner hunting, while behind him stands his retainer or “arms-bearer” holding a battle axe, a quiver for arrows, and a water bottle. Jonathan’s armor-bearer is called a na‘ar (H5288, 14:1,6), indicating that he was a “boy” no older than a teenager; yet because he had to kill those whom his warrior struck down (14:14) and even protect him from any side or back attack, he was no doubt a fully-grown youth, who was in top physical form and who had fighting skills and quick reactions. Jonathan may even have spent countless hours with this teenager helping him hone his military skills. A warrior might also select someone for whom he had a fondness. At least, Saul would later make David his armor-bearer for a while because “he loved him greatly” (16:21), a phrase which some have viewed as having homoerotic meaning (e.g., Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli). Wallace Hamilton, in his novel David at Olivet (1979), even portrays Saul as drawing David to his side at night in his tent (where David slept to attend the king when summoned), until David becomes Jonathan’s buddy, to Saul’s great displeasure. “Love” has a thousand meanings, of course; but still a big deal is made in the text about David’s head-turning good looks (16:12,18). Saul is only the first of many who will “love” David and be captivated by his “charming appearance” (Fokkelman).

The account of Jonathan’s second raid (14:1–14), with his aide, is unusual in a number of ways. It is the fullest account in the Bible of an armor-bearer and the only place where he speaks in a direct quote (v. 7). A spotlight seems to zoom in on their sharing one with another—129 words in the Hebrew text of vv. 6–13, with 80 of them in direct conversation. Jonathan’s words to his armor-bearer reveal his spiritual depth. In this, his first words in the
Bible, he speaks of faith both at the beginning (“nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few,” 14:6, NRSV) and at the end (“Come up after me; for the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel,” 14:12). His “it may be that God will act for us” (v. 6) shows Jonathan’s respect for God’s freedom (to act or not to act), while at the same time “the LORD has given them” to us (v. 12) shows his trust in Yahweh’s faithfulness and provision. In the one sentence where the young armor-bearer speaks, he says (lit.): “Do all that [is] in your heart [leb]. Turn yourself, for I [am] here with you according to your heart [leb]” (14:7, J. Green). The KJV reads similar to this, although some English translations have changed “heart” to “mind” (one wonders if whether to move away from any possible romantic reading). Actually the word leb in OT Hebrew is used to refer to the “heart” or by extension to “the inner person, self, the seat of thought and emotion” (Strong, H3820). However, it is a mistake to wipe the dialogue in 14:6–13 clean of emotion, translating leb here only as “mind” (14:7, twice; RSV, NRSV) rather than “heart” (KJV, UNASB, ESV), and turning it into an intellectual discussion. The fact that the armor-bearer is mentioned nine times here, in 14:1–17, shows that he is more than a caddy; and the two fight as a team. In fact, it may be this very strong same-sex emotional bond shared between Jonathan and his side-kick that was one reason why the narrator of 1 Samuel picked this whole episode for including in such detail and with dialogue. As Gary Comstock suggests, the author of 1 Samuel may have been sympathetic to homoerotic feelings and have intentionally framed the story of Jonathan and David to “be read or heard differently by gay men than by nongay people”—although the text here describes their closeness in a very discreet manner. Furthermore, Barbara Green suggests that this masked (unnamed) armor-bearer “is a marker for the young David” whom we will see later stand also in “one heart with Jonathan, and with God,” in a sacred triangle. There is a deeper subliminal meaning here, for those who have eyes to see it.

Jonathan’s relationship with his father. In contrast to Jonathan’s close emotional attachment to his aide, we sense right from the beginning that there is not much affection, respect or communication between the king and his eldest son; in fact, their relationship grows more strained and fractured with every passing hour in the Biblical story. Jonathan attacks Geba without informing Saul, and then the king responds by taking credit for the initiative himself (13:3c). Then relations grow worse when Jonathan disappears with his aide, to carry out another secret mission on his own initiative. Clearly Jonathan has a mind of his own, displaying some of his father’s impulsiveness and independence. As Fokkelman notes, Saul surely looked on Jonathan’s sneaking off to do military operations on his own as an attack on his authority and a loss of prestige. Black thoughts (of jealousy, distrust, anguish and uncertainty?) fill the king’s mind, which will only cause him to inflict further pain on himself as well as on those around him, as he self-destructs. Finally, the king becomes so angry he simply wishes his son dead. However, his plan for this foiled, Saul then apparently removed Jonathan from any military responsibility (in chapter 17 he is nowhere seen in the confrontation with Goliath, and in 18:5 Saul appoints David in command over his whole army), sending the prince home where no doubt he missed his life with other soldiers and especially the close relationship he had enjoyed with his young armor-bearer. Now there is a deep void in Jonathan’s life, as he waits for something (or someone) to fill it and rekindle his joie de vivre.

Overall chapter 14 presents Saul and Jonathan in stark contrast. All the glory accrues to Jonathan, while Saul looks ridiculous. Jonathan and his aide boldly snatch a military advantage; but then Saul, facing signs of God’s disapproval, insists on consulting the divine
markers (14:16–19), the Urim and Thummim. Because of his bizarre oath, his soldiers cannot fight as well as they might have otherwise; and he places his son’s life in jeopardy. The final scene is pathetic, when the troops have to prevent the king from killing his own son, who has just brought Israel a great victory. In contrast, Jonathan shows resolute decision-making and bold action, along with other noble qualities. In fact, the prince displays those marks of divine approval and public acclaim that would befit a king. Jonathan’s honest acceptance of blame and willingness to accept his punishment stand in marked contrast to Saul’s fondness for using alibi and shifting the blame. Yet, Jonathan is drawn into the tragedy of his father, even though he does not know about God’s future rejection of Saul and his house for the throne of Israel (1 Sam 15:26–28).

So, are Saul and Jonathan a sad example of a father’s iniquities being passed on to his children (Exod 20:5, 34:6; Deut 5:8)? Indeed not. God still has a very special plan for Jonathan’s life—not what he expected—but one that will give him great joy (David’s companionship) and an important role (David’s care and survival) in God’s overarching plan. Jonathan is one of those forgotten heroes of the faith; so far I have not been able to find even a single image of him by himself in Jewish or Christian art, and only scattered examples with David. Yet, what if he had not been there to stand between his demented father and the distraught David?

**Summary.** Jonathan makes his appearance in 1 Sam 13:2, when after he reaches military age Saul appoints him as a commander over one-third of his army. Although no physical description is given of Jonathan in the Bible, like his father he was probably a “handsome young man” as well as tall in stature (9:2, NRSV). Jonathan comes to the forefront as the main character in chapters 13-14, where he leads two assaults on the hated Philistines, the first an unmitigated disaster but the second, after the prince has learned to lean wholly upon Yahweh, a stunning victory for Israel. However, after he becomes a national hero, his father’s jealousy leads the king to try to execute Jonathan, although his troops step in to prevent him from killing Israel’s new hero (14:43-45). Especially interesting in these chapters is the spotlight that zooms in for a close-up view of Jonathan and his teenage armor-bearer (including 80 words in the Hebrew of direct conversation, in 14:6-12), as they seek the Lord’s will in how to gain a victory over the Philistines. Right from the beginning we sense that Jonathan and his father, King Saul, share an emotionally turbulent relationship; and the prince displays some of his father’s impulsiveness and independence as he sets out on military missions without consulting the king, in the last case making plans with his armor-bearer, with whom he shares a very close relationship. The fact that this aide is mentioned 9 times in the account of the second raid (14:1-15) shows that he is definitely more than just a caddy (someone to carry Jonathan’s weapons); rather they share everything and fight as a team. When Jonathan suggests to his companion that they climb up a cliff of the Michmash Pass to attack a Philistine post there, trusting in God to give them success, the armor-bearer replies: “Do all that is in your heart [leb]; turn yourself, and here I am with you according to your desire [leb]” (UNASB). In fact, this intimate bond between Jonathan and his sidekick may be one reason why the narrator devotes so much space to this story, along with the desire to recount the great victory which their bold faith received from the Lord, who rattled the enemy with panic and an earthquake (14:15). Barbara Green views the unnamed armor-bearer here as “a marker for the young David” to come, who will stand also in “one heart with Jonathan, and with God.” Although Samuel will inform Saul that God has rejected him as king because of his disobedience (15:23b), God is not finished with
Jonathan. Indeed he has a very special task for him to do: to love and protect David, whom God has chosen to become the next king of Israel.

END NOTES, CHAPTER 2
25. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, vol. 2, p. 64.
26. Ibid., pp. 72–74.
34. Ibid., p. 50.
35. Ibid., pp. 53–54.
SUPPLEMENT 2A

Homosexuality in Ancient Egypt

Could a homoerotic relationship have occurred in ancient Israel between Jonathan and David, have been known about openly, and furthermore have been recorded in that nation’s historical records? To try to answer this question, we now turn to see how homosexuality was more widely perceived in the ancient Near East, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia (modern Turkey), and the Aegean coastline and islands. Also, we shall look at what the general social climate was during Israel’s early period, in the Books of Judges and 1 Samuel. Ancient Egypt is a good place to start, because the nation of Israel was born in Egypt. From the sixty-six members of Jacob’s family who moved there from Canaan during a period of famine, along with Joseph’s family of four who were already there (Gen 46:26–27), descended the multitude of Israelites whom the Lord would later deliver out of Egypt. Although Jacob’s family settled in Goshen in northern Egypt and the Egyptians had a general dislike of foreigners (Gen 46:33–34), still the Joseph story (Gen. 37–50) and the Book of Exodus show “a marked familiarity with Egypt and Egyptian customs.”

Yet, studying homosexuality in ancient Egypt is not easy. Not a single legal text has survived from there (in contrast to elsewhere in the ancient Near East), and no evidence points to cult prostitution taking root there (until the late Roman period). In fact, sexual intercourse was viewed as ritually defiling in sacred places. Explicitly sexual motifs in art and literature are limited, and ambiguous images and metaphors often puzzle the investigator. Also, as Egyptologist Richard Parkinson puts it, “[T]he subject [of homosexuality in ancient Egypt] is surrounded by modern as well as ancient taboos.” Edgar Gregersen noted how some Egyptologists have been embarrassed by statues of the god Min, who is always depicted with an erection; and he tells how one young museum curator was surprised to discover a box containing over a dozen wooden phalli that had been hacked off of Min statues in his museum and then hidden away. Today more open-minded research is being done, although academic homophobia still exists. In this study, we shall focus on six major subjects that relate (or have been related) to homosexuality in ancient Egypt: the conflict of Horus and Seth, the Book of the Dead, the teaching of Vizier Ptahhotep, Neferkare’s affair with General Sisene, Akhenaten’s disappearing boyfriend, and the tomb of the two royal manicurists.

Conflict of Horus and Seth. One famous story in ancient Egypt described an extended conflict between the god Osiris and Seth, his rival brother, who murders Osiris and then seeks to replace Horus, Osiris’s son and heir, with his own claim to be king of the gods. This narrative, often referred to as “The Contendings of Horus and Seth,” exists in different versions and dates back to the early Middle Kingdom (2040–1674 BC), with origins that are probably older. The longest surviving version, dated ca. 1160 BC, late in the 20th Dynasty in the New Kingdom, describes how “Seth said to Horus: ‘Come let us spend a pleasant hour at my house.’ Horus answered, ‘With pleasure, with pleasure.’ When it was evening a bed was spread for them and they lay down. During the night Seth made his penis stiff and he placed it between the loins of Horus. Horus put his hands between his loins and caught the sperm of Seth. Then Horus went to his mother, Isis [and said]: ‘Help me . . . ! Come, see what Seth has done to me.’ And he opened his hand and let her see Seth’s semen. With a scream she took her weapon and cut off his hand and threw it in the water, and conjured up for him a hand to make up for it.” Then Isis
helped Horus ejaculate and smeared his sperm over some lettuce, which was Seth’s favorite vegetable and which she then gave to him to eat. Later, when Seth boasted to the Ennead (nine gods) that he had done the “work of a male [warrior]” on Horus, the gods “screamed aloud, and belched and spat in Horus’ face.” Wolfhard Westendorf thinks that the Egyptians looked upon semen when taken into the body in the wrong way—although Seth does not die. Still, the gods apparently felt that for Horus to be used sexually like a woman was so incompatible with kingship that they erupted with contempt. Seth’s act is usually interpreted as one of dominance and aggression, yet as Dominic Montserrat points out, the story is more complex than that. First, two males, comparatively of the same age (adults) and same status (gods), lie down for sexual play. Second, both rivals are able to penetrate the other, in some way, and therefore may be looked upon as equals. Third, Horus willingly consents to have sexual relations with Seth (although not anal intercourse), who physically desires him (“sweet to his heart”) and unabashedly makes his request known.

An earlier but shorter version, dated ca. 2000 BC, from the 12th Dynasty in the Middle Kingdom and from Lahun (Kahun), describes what happened a little differently: “The divine person of Seth said to the divine person of Horus: ‘How beautiful are your buttocks, how vital! [. . .] Stretch out your legs . . . .’” And the Person of Horus said: ‘Watch out; I shall tell [this]!’” Then he ran and told his mother, Isis, that Seth desired to sodomize him. “And she said to him: ‘Beware! Do not approach him about it! When he mentions it to you another time, then you shall say to him: “It is too painful for me entirely, as you are heavier than me. My strength [backside] shall not support your strength [erect penis] . . . .”’ Then when he gives you his strength, place your fingers between your buttocks . . . Lo, he will enjoy it exceedingly (?). [Keep] this seed which has come forth . . . without letting the sun see it . . . .” Later, Isis threw Seth’s semen into a nearby stream, then spread some of Horus’ semen on lettuce and gave it to Seth to eat. Later, when Seth boasted to the gods that he had sexually taken Horus, the youth denied it. To settle the argument, the gods called forth the seed of both. The seed of Seth answered from the water into which Isis had thrown it, while the seed of Horus came forth from Seth’s forehead in the form of a golden disk, which was taken by the moon god Thoth to become his symbol.

This story of the family of Osiris, who was viewed also as the first king of Egypt, suggests that from the earliest period for a male (god or human) to take, or to be forced into, a woman’s sexual role and be anally penetrated was looked upon as humiliating and shameful. Yet, at the same time, homosexual desire was known about and spoken of openly; and some males engaged in homosexual play in bed. For Horus to be penetrated was a frightening prospect; yet at the same time his semen in Seth brought benefit to the moon god. So, the signals are mixed. Actually Seth only fell into disfavor in the eighth century BC, when his castration and incineration began to be celebrated in hymns—while earlier kings worshipped him as the god of storm and violence, including the Hyksos rulers in Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1674–1553 BC) and Seti I and Ramesses II at the beginning of the New Kingdom (thirteenth century BC). Only much later did the valiant god become a vile demon.

Book of the Dead. The Book of the Dead is a compilation of funerary (tomb) texts, gathered together from the 18th-21st Dynasties (1552–945 BC), although it derives from earlier sources. These spells were meant to preserve and protect the body, particularly from terrifying demons who were believed to inhabit the region through which the spirit (ba) must pass before reaching the blessed kingdom of Osiris. Chapter 125, titled “The Protestation of Guiltlessness,”
included two sets of “negative confessions” that the deceased was instructed to declare before Osiris and forty-two other gods, to show that he or she was worthy to be granted eternal life.20 The first series simply stated certain actions that the deceased was to declare that he or she had never committed, while the second series contained confessions that were directed to specific deities. Acts that were considered “impure” included everything from murder (A14), blaspheming a god (A8), using dishonest scales (A25), and committing adultery (B19), to lesser offenses such as lying (B9), being quarrelsome (B25), being loud-mouthed (B37), and making someone weep (A13). Clearly no one could say that he or she had never done any of these things. Therefore, Hans Goedicke (1967) suggested that perhaps the deceased only selected and declared those statements that he could truthfully make, while ignoring the others.21 In any case, four of the declarations are relevant to our discussion. The initial translations, below, are by John Wilson (found in J. B. Pritchard22):

A20 “I have not had sexual relations with a boy.” Parkinson notes that this reads, “I did not nk a nkk(w),” which is better translated as “I did not sexually penetrate another male,” not indicating any age bracket.23 Later inscriptions in the temple at Edfu (in Memphis) and in a papyrus from Tanis stated that it was a taboo “to unite oneself with an hm [effeminate male] or with a nkk [passive homosexual].”24 Yet, other versions of A20 are more general, stating something like “I have not committed fornication” (Budge 1951) or “I have not copulated [illicitly]” (Allen 1960, and cf. Faulkner 1972).25

B27 “O His-Face-Behind-Him, who comes forth from Tep-het-djat, I have not been perverted; I have not had sexual relations with a boy [a male].” Tep-het-djat was a sanctuary in the region of Memphis, the northern capital of Egypt (about twelve miles south of modern Cairo) during the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom.26 Budge translates this confession as, “Hail, thou whose face is [turned] backwards, who comes forth from the Dwelling, I have not committed acts of impurity, neither have I lain with men.”27 Posener notes how homosexuality was forbidden in Memphis and two other nomes (provinces).28 Therefore, it may be asserted that this prohibition really outlawed sexual acts, whether heterosexual or homosexual, from taking place in sacred locations.

A21 “I have not defiled myself.” Because of its vagueness, Budge translates this as “I have not polluted myself [in the holy places of the god of my city]”—filling in from the Papyrus of Amenneb (British Museum, 9964).29 T. G. Allen translates from the Ryerson Papyrus (OIM 787, University of Chicago): “I have not been unchaste, as priest of the city-god”—drawing from the Turin T 2 and Leyden L 3074 papyri.30

B20 “O Maa-Intef, who comes forth from the Temple of Min, I have not defiled myself.” Budge translates this as, “Hail, thou who lookest upon what is brought to him, who comest forth from the Temple of Amsu [Min], I have not committed a sin against purity.”31 Min, an Egyptian fertility god, was normally depicted with an erect penis, which sometimes he held in his left hand. Bunson notes that “his festivals were joyous occasions”32 and one wonders what that might have meant with a fertility god. As Posener notes, “The Egyptians, who devoted themselves enthusiastically to the pleasures of life, knew how to appreciate the art of ‘spending a merry day’—to quote their expression.”33 Still, perhaps homosexual acts were frowned upon in the sacred precincts of Min, since they were, in fact, infertile.

At certain points and in certain strata, then, the Book of the Dead looked upon both active and passive homosexual acts as a “sexual taboo”34 and as “a deviation from Maat,”35 the goddess and pathway of universal harmony.36 Yet, at the same time, ample evidence displays a high
concern with purity (rather than moral) issues and with the prohibiting of sexual intercourse in sacred places and with priests serving at such locales.  

**Teaching of Vizier Ptahhotep.** The oldest surviving text of this dates from the 12th Dynasty (1991–1785 BC) in the Middle Kingdom, although it may have had an earlier origin. Although this “manual of good and polite conduct” was difficult to understand even back in ancient times, this kind of text was popular. The earliest (and fortunately complete) copy of Vizier Ptahhotep’s manual is contained on the Prisse Papyrus (National Library, Paris); and it begins, “The teaching of the City Governor and Vizier Ptahhotep under his Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Izezi [Djedkari Isesi],” who reigned in the 5th Dynasty (ca. 2470 BC), near the end of the Old Kingdom. The term “vizier” (tjaty) referred to the chief minister of Egypt, subordinate only to the Pharaoh. While this kind of literary work belongs to the most official and idealizing of discourses, it seeks to give practical advice on human dangers and failures. Such teaching could well have been recited at the Pharaoh’s request. Maxim 32 (of forty-five total) is of special interest here, which reads: “Do not copulate [nk] with a woman-boy [hmt], for you know that / what is (generally) opposed will be a [necessity] to his heart, and that which is in his body will not be calmed. Let him not spend the night doing what is opposed in order that he may be calm after he has [quenched] his desire.” Parkinson translates the last line a little differently: “Let him not spend the night doing what is opposed; he shall be cool after destroying [renouncing] his desire.” Here Vizier Ptahhotep argues that the nocturnal activities of a woman-boy will not bring him lasting relief. Nk refers to anal penetration, and hmt refers to a male who desires to take the passive, feminine position, although his social status is unclear. In many cultures, women and boys were interchangeable as sexual objects. Parkinson notes that although same-sex penetration is condemned here, it is the passive partner who is demeaned and not the active partner, who has not departed from his appropriate (dominant) sexual role. Still, a certain reticence is displayed here toward the male who lies with a woman-boy. Since it is assumed elsewhere in these maxims (21st, 37th) that the pupil or listener will marry, the aim of this prohibition is probably to safeguard the morality of youth. Yet, any homosexual person reading this maxim would immediately know that it was written by a heterosexual male, not someone who knows how strong same-sex desire can be and how futile the call for abstinence can sometimes be, as well.

**Neferkare’s affair with General Sisene.** Pharaoh Neferkare (Pepi II) and Sisene (Sasenet), a military commander, lived during the 6th Dynasty (2460–2200 BC) in the Old Kingdom. Known from three fragmentary copies, from the 19th–25th Dynasties (1295–656 BC), this text also surely appeared earlier and had a long reading history. Although the beginning of the text is damaged, there is a reference to Sisene amusing the king “because there was no woman [or wife] there with him”; and the word “love [desire]” is mentioned in the line above. A little later we read that Teti, a commoner, saw “the divine person of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Neferkare, going out during the night to walk on his own . . . . [Remaining hidden,] Teti said to himself, ‘if this is the case, then it is true what is said about him, that he goes forth during the night.’ . . . [Then Teti followed the king, who] arrived at the house of the general Sasenet. He threw up a stone and stamped his foot, at which a [ladder] was lowered down for him. He climbed up, and Teti son of Henet waited . . . . When his divine person had done what he wanted to with [the general], he returned to the palace, and Teti son of Henet followed him . . . .” Teti noted further that the king went to the general’s house at the fourth hour of the night [10 p.m.]

36
and spent four hours there.” Montserrat notes that this tale stresses the “clandestine nature of the affair,” points to “rumors [circulating] of the king’s nocturnal cruising,” and “enhances the secrecy” of the affair by describing the king’s sneaking off to meet the general. Although the narrative implies a censure of homosexuality, Neferkari is “not criticized per se for having sex with another male but for being a bad ruler.” Some Egyptologists have suggested that this piece, including the affair, conveys an atmosphere of “royal corruption,” yet David Greenberg notes that the description of this encounter is fairly “neutral in tone and non-judgmental.” Still, contemporaries might have considered such activity on the part of their king, who was considered an incarnation of deity, as undignified and inappropriate. Yet the Pharaoh evidently had homosexual desires strong enough to lead him to find a lover and nightly ways to fulfill his passion.

**Akhenaten’s disappearing boyfriend.** Was there a homoerotic relationship that existed between Akhenaten, tenth ruler (ca. 1352–1338 BC) of the 18th Dynasty in the New Kingdom, and his co-regent, the youthful Smenkhkare? Akhenaten came to the throne as Amenophis IV, but he turned from the worship of Amon-Re to Aten (“sun disk”), changed his name to reflect this, and built a new capital in middle Egypt named Akhetaten (now known as Amarna). Also the king had himself portrayed in an unusual way, with feminine-like hips, swelling breasts, and large thighs—rather than normally as an ideal young man—and his image also displayed a long face, bulbous chin, and plump belly. Grafton Elliot Smith suggested that these symptoms might have been caused by Froehlich’s Syndrome, a glandular–hormonal disorder—although this condition leads to infertility, which would hardly fit Akhenaten, who fathered six (surviving) daughters by Queen Nefertiti, plus two other girls through his daughters. Alwyn Burridge suggested Marfan’s Syndrome, caused by an abnormal gene, which also may have led to heart trouble and the king’s early death. Still other Egyptologists believe that Akhenaten had himself portrayed in a bisexual way for theological reasons, e.g., to echo Hapy, the god of Nile flooding, who was deliberately portrayed bisexual to suggest both male and female fertility—although this idea seems speculative.

After the discovery in 1922 of the tomb of Tutankhamen (a child of unknown relationship to Akhenaten), Newberry noted that objects had been taken from Smenkhkare’s burial chamber to increase the treasure in Tutankhamen’s tomb; and among these was a box inscribed on its knobs with “Ankheprure beloved of Neferkheprure” and “Neferneferuaten beloved of Waenra.” Decoding these titles, the text really reads, “Smenkhkare beloved of Akhenaten” and “Akhenaten beloved of Smenkhkare.” Even more unusual, “Neferneferuaten” had formerly been a title borne by Queen Nefertiti, suggesting that in some way Smenkhkare came to fulfill her role. Newberry (1928) in an article also drew attention to a small private stele (upright stone slab) in the Berlin Museum, originally made for a military officer, which shows two kings (identified by their crowns, one the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and the other a war crown), nude and sitting side by side. Although the piece is unfinished, with its cartouches (ovals usually containing names) left blank, the figures seemed easily identified as Akhenaten and Smenkhkare, the former caressing the youth’s chin, while Smenkhkare rested his arm around the older king’s shoulder. Two other pieces then also came to mind, a relief of a similar youth pouring wine into Akhenaten’s cup (Berlin Museum) and a sculptor’s trial piece of Akhenaten kissing a child seated on his lap (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)—and some scholars pondered whether these pieces might also be of Akhenaten and Smenkhkare. (Actually the former conveys no sexual meaning, and the child in the latter seems very young.) Subsequently,
Egyptologists battled over Akhenaten’s sexual biology and orientation. Donald Redford (1984), a Canadian archaeologist, wrote that he personally disliked “this effete monarch, who could never hunt or do battle,” while Cyril Aldred (1968), Keeper of Art and Archaeology at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh, saw “homosexual relations between the elder and the younger monarch” pictured on the Berlin stele, taking into account also the same-sex “beloved” titles, the disappearance of Nefertiti’s name from all records near the end of Akhenaten’s reign, and the king’s physical deformity (although how the last might be a cause of homosexuality is unclear). And he warned, the evidence is “slender” and inconclusive.

Then in 1973 John Harris, after looking more thoroughly at the seven blank cartouches on the Berlin stele, wrote that the four cartouches flanking the sun disk would have contained the name of Aten, while the other three contained the name of a king and a queen, since the name of a king always required two cartouches, but a queen only one. Therefore he concluded that the figure being petted on the chin was Queen Nefertiti, and not Smenkhkare. Nicholas Reeves (2001) details this and other research which has led Egyptologists now, on the whole, to believe that Queen Neferititi did not disappear or die but was elevated to become co-regent by Akhenaten. She apparently changed her name to “Smenkhkare” and then even succeeded Akhenaten on the throne for a few years as an independent ruler, similar to the remarkable Queen Hapshetsut (1478–1458 BC) who a century earlier had also presented herself as Pharaoh, with male attributes and names. So, Smenkhkare may not have been a youth at all, but the great queen in a new guise. Dominic Montserrat, who has written elsewhere perceptively about sex in ancient Egypt, reviews this subject also (2000), takes the gay community to task for claiming that Akhenaten was “the first historical gay person” as well as a free spirit in some modern sense, and says that “almost nothing reliable is known about Smenkhkare” not even his or her sex.” He notes how important it is for historical writing to include any homosexual presence but also not to read in things which are not really there. At the end of his book, he offers no conclusions on who the real Akhenaten and Smenkhkare were; and perhaps that is where the matter must rest. Still, there remains “fierce resistance” on the part of some Egyptologists to the theory that Nefertiti became Smenkhkare, and questions linger.

**Tomb of the two royal manicurists.** On November 12, 1964, Mounir Basta, Chief Inspector of Lower Egypt, descended into a newly opened shaft just south of the causeway of Unas in Saqqara, Egypt, leading into a 5th Dynasty tomb, and was surprised to see something that he had never seen before in any tomb: two men embracing each other. Other blocks from the tomb were discovered in the causeway; and all of the these blocks, some free-standing and others cut into the rock, were reassembled to restore the original tomb, which was first described in print by A. Moussa and H. Altenmüller (1977), who thought that the two men might be brothers, or even twins. However, this view later was questioned by Jean Reveze (1997), who showed that the term sn, “brother,” might also be translated as “friend,” “lover,” or “colleague”—in other words, it indicated that the two men were closely related on an equal footing, though not necessarily through a blood connection. Although inscriptions in the tomb show that both men had wives and children, intimacy is reserved for scenes between the two men. In a large banquet scene pictured in one room, the two manicurists are entertained by musicians, dancers, and singers. Yet strangely behind Niankhkhnum is a blank space where his wife was apparently represented, but then her image was plastered over and removed from the scene. An inscription near the conductor reads, “[P]lay the one about ‘The Two Divine Brothers [Seth and Horus],’” who went to bed following a banquet; and texts discovered in the pyramid of Pepi I (ca. 2300 BC) describe
how Horus inserted his semen into the backside of Seth, and then Seth reciprocated. Perhaps such a ribald song along these lines was sung at banquets. More than one scene in the tomb shows the two men holding each other and gazing into each other’s eyes, and with their noses rubbing—exactly like a husband and wife are often pictured in other Egyptian tombs. Yet, this tomb shows the two men who were buried there holding hands and embracing intimately, noses touching.

Inscriptions reveal that both men held the title of Royal Manicurist and Chief of Palace Manicurists; and the tomb dates from the reign of Niuserre (2453–2422 BC), in the 5th Dynasty in the latter half of the Old Kingdom. The two men, Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, had their names decoratively intertwined above the entrance to the inner chambers as “Niankh-Khnum-Hotep,” which may be translated as “joined in life and joined in death [or ‘peace’].” Both men are identified as hm (with the sense of “priest” here), and another inscription instructs other priests (hm) to carry out their duties, while forbidding the men’s families to hinder them. The Egyptian sign hm derives from the common hieroglyph for “female,” but drops the feminine ending. This pictograph was used to convey a variety of meanings, including “coward,” more generally “eunuch” (more in the sense of being born a male biologically but then changing one’s gender without being castrated), and commonly “priest” in tomb inscriptions. How these males were changed into hm is not clear, although such androgynous servants often played a role in cultic rituals related to death and burial in the ancient Near East. Both men, as palace officials, enjoyed a high social status; and they also were counted as members of a large favored circle of priests who performed a significant religious role. Since the inscriptions note that both men were married and had children, they were not physically castrated.

Various explanations have been offered for the relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep—that they were brothers, twins, related by marriage, close relatives, business associates, or members of the same guild—yet as William Naphy (2004) notes, the unique nature of the iconography (images and symbols) here and their closeness (especially their embracing) point to a much stronger emotional bond. Also, both of them being called hm (a gender-ambiguous term) would be more in keeping with a homosexual bond than any of the other relationships suggested. Egyptian art rarely depicted figures embracing, and scenes of two men doing so are virtually unknown. Yet, if these men were lovers, it would demonstrate that homosexual love did express itself on some occasions in ancient Egypt and also found some acceptance.

In the outer part of the tomb, the two men can be seen seated together, arm in arm, greeting offering-bearers and visitors to their burial place, and also walking, hand in hand, touring and inspecting their tomb. Here also are three scenes of the two men embracing: one rests his arm around the other’s shoulder, while the second grasps the first man’s arm. In two scenes, the figures stand so close together that their noses touch and even their thighs—exactly how the two men wished to embrace each other throughout eternity.

Overall Dominic Montserrat notes that most references from Egypt of the Pharaohs view homosexual acts as morally negative (not reproductive), socially dangerous (like adultery), or physically violent (about conquest). Yet limited evidence also suggests that same-sex acts sometimes took place between partners of a comparable age and social status. Also, the negative references display an equivocation (ambiguity) that argues against there being a single, monolithic attitude toward it which prevailed. Parkinson notes a distinction between commemorative and religious texts, and fictional and autobiographical texts—the first category (including the Book of the Dead and the teachings of Ptahhotep) being a kind of “official”
discourse, while the second category (including the stories of Horus and Seth and of Neferkari and Sisene) allowed for a “freer discussion of problematic events.”

Other pictorial evidence exists, as well, but is often tricky to “read,” as we have seen with the Berlin stele of “two kings.” The Turin Papyrus contains a drawing of a boy sodomizing another short-haired boy (although some scholars insist that the latter is a girl). Scratched on an ostraka (broken pottery piece) in the Berlin Museum is a boy gently fondling the genitals of another boy (although this is often called a “wrestling match”). Yet the Tomb of the Two Royal Manicurists provides a remarkable testimony to the devotion that these two men had for each other, a deep and abiding love which had both emotional and physical content.

Parkinson notes that certainly “same-gender sexual acts, such as sodomy, took place in ancient Egypt”; and some individuals, then as now, probably displayed a greater tendency to this desire and these acts than others. However, for a man to abandon his “proper gender role” and allow himself to be sodomized was looked upon as a sign of weakness and disgrace; and the act of penetration was generally viewed as one of power and conquest. We do not find “initiatory pederasty” in ancient Egypt, but same-sex relationships between two adult men were conceivable here. Also, one can be sure that daily life was even less “schematic” (planned) than found in literature, and surely presented many “untidy facts” (to use Bruce Smith’s phrase). Parkinson concludes, “[Homosexual] acts and desires occurred [in ancient Egypt],” despite the official ideology and “more frequently than the texts offer any means of assessing.”

Vern Bullough notes that the shame that could be felt by a male who was anally penetrated is reflected in the sentiment of the two male gods Shu and Tefnet, in the reference: “[T]heir abomination is for the hand of [a] god to fall on them, and for the shade of the god to abuse them sexually. His seed shall not enter into them.” Then a coffin text states: “Re has no power over me, for I am he who takes away his breath. Atum has no power over me, for I copulate between his buttocks.” This suggests that Re and Atum could be rendered powerless by being anally penetrated. Bullough continues: “[A]lthough anal intercourse was known and practiced by the ancient Egyptians, when it took place between two men, it was not viewed with great public favor, [and] if a man and a young boy were involved, it was more strongly condemned . . . . As to sex life, the need for producing children was stressed, and this accomplished, other sexual activities were allowed, provided they did not take advantage of others. All sexual activities, from bestiality to anal intercourse to oral-genital contacts are portrayed in the various tomb pictures, and though the Egyptians might have disapproved [of] some activities more than others, their society seemed to be fairly permissive sexually.”

So, what light might all of this shine on the Jonathan and David story? First, although there was a negative official view of homosexuality in ancient Egypt, still there were persons with dominant homosexual desires, who found ways to satisfy them, as with Pharaoh Neferkari and his general, and the two royal manicurists. Second, although descriptions of such relationships rarely made it into the official or historical record, at the same time there must have been many examples of same-sex desire and behavior which went unnoticed and undocumented. Third, the examples of same-sex love that we do know about tended to occur with kings or members of the court, whose lives were often recorded and whose power also shielded them from negative reaction. It should not come as any surprise, then, that a homoerotic story also crops up in the historical record of the royal life of Israel, where it is recorded by a sympathetic but cautious scribe. Fourth, ancient Egyptian culture primarily condemned certain negative forms of
homosexuality, namely, becoming the passive partner in anal intercourse and having sex in sacred places and with priests—and we shall find a similar attitudes in Israel, as well.

Summary. Ancient tombs picturing all kinds of sexual activities, including masturbation, anal intercourse, oral-genital contact, and even bestiality, suggest that Egyptian society was fairly permissive (Bullough), perhaps as long as people married (Parkinson). Certain religious and official texts, such as the Book of the Dead (in various versions) and the teaching of Vizier Ptahhotep (a moral handbook), display a negative view toward homosexual acts at sacred sites (with another worshipper or a priest) and anal intercourse (with a passive or effeminate homosexual); and in general homosexual coitus may have been viewed as morally negative (not reproducing), socially dangerous (like adultery), and physically violent (about conquest; Montserrat). Still, attitudes and actions were often ambiguous, as can be seen in the enduring story of Horus and Seth, where Isis, the mother of Horus, and the gods are horrified to learn that Horus has been anally penetrated. Yet, at the same time, Seth openly admires Horus’s buttocks and invites him to go to bed, which the younger Horus delightedly accepts (but not anal penetration, which was viewed as giving one partner power over the other). Even so, some versions of the tale have both Horus and Seth, in the end, enjoying anal penetration with the other. There may have been rumors circulating about Neferkare’s special delight in his general Sisene, along with his nightly visits to his bed, but this did not keep the Pharaoh from fulfilling his strong homosexual desires. Still, the most remarkable evidence of homosexual love and commitment in ancient Egypt is the Tomb of the Two Royal Manicurists, which contains multiple scenes of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in intimate embrace, holding each other, and rubbing noses (kissing). Although they both had wives and children, a tomb inscription declares boldly that they wished to be joined to one another “in life” and “in death.” They obviously felt that their standing at court and power as priests shielded them from negative repercussion, although the fact that there is a space in the banquet scene where Niankhkhnum’s wife was originally portrayed but then was plastered out suggests that criticism did come from this quarter (their wives). Homosexual acts (even sodomy) certainly occurred in ancient Egypt, and some men displayed a greater passion for this than others, even though general opinion frowned upon a man who submitted to the passive role in sex (Parkinson). Still, at the royal court homosexually-inclined men felt secure enough to be rather open about their love and lives.

WEB IMAGES, SUPPLEMENT 2A

Art of the Amarna period (ca. 1382–1327 BC). See online: http://www.heptune.com/art.html and then click on “The Art of the Amarna Period” and look for the “Kissing Akhenaten” statuette (tenth picture down) and the “Two Pharaohs” Berlin stele (thirteenth picture down). This site was set up by Megaera Lorenz (2000). Accessed April 5, 2005.

Tomb of the Two Manicurists (ca. 2400 BC), Saqqara, Egypt. For various images of the tomb, both actual and restored, see Greg Reeder’s website (1999) at: www.egyptology.com/niankhkhnum_khnumhotep/ Accessed April 5, 2005.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 2A


28. Later the capital of Egypt was moved to Hierakonpolis (in central Egypt) in the Middle Kingdom, and then to Thebes (in southern Egypt) in the 18th Dynasty. Still, throughout Egyptian history Memphis would remain an important religious and cultural center, located only about eighty miles from where the Israelites settled in the Delta. Cf. Posener, *Dictionary of Egyptian Civilization*, p. 279; Thompson, John Arthur, “Memphis,” p. 317.


34. Montserrat, *Sex and Society*, p. 140.


38. Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire,” p. 68.


41. Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire,” p. 70.


43. Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire,” p. 68.

44. Ibid., pp. 68–70.


47. Trans. by and in Montserrat, *Sex and Society*, pp. 142–143.
48. Ibid., p. 143.
51. Ibid.
52. Shaw, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 147.
53. Ibid., pp. 146–147.
60. Ibid., p. 13; Aldred, *Akhenaten*, p. 139.
64. Reeves, *Akhenaten*, p. 172.
68. Ibid., pp. 22–23.
70. Montserrat, *Sex and Society*, pp. 140–141, 144.
71. Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire,” p. 60.
72. Gregersen, *Sexual Practices*, p. 188.
75. Ibid., pp. 74–76.
Besides looking at homosexuality in ancient Egypt, how was this viewed to the north, in the rest of the ancient Near East? This is important, for throughout the Israelites’ history there was continual interaction between God’s people and the larger world in which they lived. The Bible records how Abraham came from Ur (Gen 11:31), a city of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia. During a famine, he migrated to Egypt (Gen 12:10); and when he returned to Canaan, he bought a tomb for Sarah from the Hittites, “the people of the land” (Gen 23:1–4). His sons and grandsons chose wives, for the most part, from among the Aramaeans, Bedouins (desert nomads) who lived in the region of Syria (note the city of Haran, Gen 11:31, 24:1–4, 28:1–2,10). Joseph, his brothers and their descendents (Gen 46:26–27) lived in Egypt for generations, until the Exodus. Back in the Promised Land, both Samson and David lived a portion of their lives among the Philistines (Judg 14:1–2, 16:4–5; 1 Sam 27:1–6), a people who had settled along the southern coast of Canaan. From the beginning, the Babylonians (including the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Chaldeans) and Assyrians built great cities (Gen 10:10–11) and dominated the Mesopotamian valley through the 3rd-2nd millennia BC. Tom Horner points out that the sexual mores of the Bible must have been influenced, tremendously influenced, by the sexual mores of the peoples and nations in whose midst this same Bible was produced; and “among all the above-named peoples and nations, homosexuality existed alongside heterosexuality to a greater or lesser degree . . . .” But what does this mean more specifically?

**Certain narrow homoerotic expressions banned by law.** Legal codes in the ancient Near East—including those of Urukagina (2375 BC), Ur-Nammu (2100 BC), Eshnunna (1750 BC), and Hammurabi (1726 BC)—virtually ignore homosexual acts. Vern Bullough notes that these early law codes, which had a great influence on later law codes, were intended to deal not with general moral principles but to ban specific acts; and they also seem not to have been observed in all cases or at all times. The Hittites, who flourished in eastern Anatolia (Turkey) and Syria ca. 1700–700 BC, had one law that stated, “If a man violates his son, it is a capital crime” (section 189c). This same judgment was declared on father–daughter incest and mother–son incest. Hittitologist Harry Hoffner, Jr., observes that “a man who sodomized his son is guilty of urkel [illegal intercourse] because the partner is his son, not because they are of the same sex.” Later, he would add, “[I]t would appear that homosexuality was not outlawed among the Hittites.”

Two laws from a Middle Assyrian code, from Asshur the capital city (12th century BC, but probably reflecting earlier laws going back to at least back the 15th century), also mention homosexuality. They speak of a “seignior,” a man of high social rank in the community, and his “neighbor,” another man of equal social status who lived in the vicinity. Later scholars view these laws as applying to any male Assyrian citizen. Tablet A, paragraph 19 reads (trans. Theophile Meek): “If a seignior [an Assyrian man] started a rumor against his neighbor in private, saying, ‘People have lain repeatedly with him,’ or he said to him in a brawl in the presence of (other) people, ‘People have lain repeatedly with you; I will prosecute you,’ since he is not able to prosecute (him) (and) did not prosecute (him), they shall flog that seignior fifty (times) with staves (and) he shall do the work of the king for one full month; they shall castrate him [lit., shall cut off] and he shall also pay one talent of lead.” Harsh punishment was often
decree in ancient times, in this law code, e.g., including death and cutting off ears, noses, lips and fingers (cf. A5,9,12). The Akkadian term igadimus (shall cut off) here has been read also as meaning “[he] shall be cut off” from the community (G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, 1935) and “[they] shall cut off” his beard or hair, as a form of branding (CAD, gadamu, G, 8). The preceding prohibition (A18) in this law code deals with false or unproven rumors spread about a man’s wife sleeping around (like a prostitute); and its wording and punishment are very similar to A19, although there is no “cutting off” and less blows are specified. In both cases, the lord’s reputation was at stake in the face of a grave slur that had been circulated about him or his wife.

Table A, paragraph 20 deals with a physical act done, not just a rumor: “If a seignior [an Assyrian man] lay with his neighbor, when they have prosecuted him (and) convicted him [the first citizen], they shall lie with him (and) turn him into a eunuch.” This describes a situation where a man has forced himself sexually on a local resident or business partner, who then has the option of bringing a charge against him. Noticeably, the perpetrator is punished while the victim is not; so the crime here is rape. Homosexuality per se is not condemned. Anyone could visit a prostitute or lie with another male, as long as false rumors or forced sex were not involved with another Assyrian male citizen. Still, both laws do suggest that for an adult male to assume the passive sexual role was viewed as shameful and degrading.

A broad range of other homoerotic expressions allowed. Pictorial and literary references in ancient Mesopotamia show acceptance of some forms of homosexuality, and wariness toward others. Anal intercourse was freely pictured in figurative art in the ancient cities of Uruk, Asshur, Babylon, and Susa from the 3rd millennium BC on—and images suggest that it was practiced as a religious act. Both Zimri-lin (king of Mari) and Hammurabi (king of Babylon) had male lovers, which Zimri-lin’s queen mentions matter-of-factly in a letter. The Almanac of Incantations contained prayers favoring on an equal basis the love of a man for a woman, of a woman for a man, and of a man for man. Lesbian love is not mentioned, however, probably because of the low status of women in ancient times, when women were considered property and adultery was viewed as a trespass against a husband’s property. A husband was free to fornicate, but a wife could be put to death for the same thing. The Summa alu, a manual concerned with the interpretation of dream omens (signs), contained four that mention homosexual couplings:

If a man copulates with his mehrishu (equal) from the rear, he becomes the leader among his peers and brothers.
If a man copulates with an assinu (cult prostitute), a hard destiny will leave him (?).
If a man copulates with a gersegu (assistant), terrors will possess him for a whole year but then will leave him.
If a man copulates with a dushnu, (house-born slave), a hard destiny will befall on him.

The fact that different kinds of homoerotic pairing will occur is taken for granted. What mattered was the role and status of the partner, especially the passive partner, and the anticipated ramifications in each kind of case. To penetrate a male who was of equal status or a cult prostitute was thought to bring good fortune; but copulation with an assistant (or attendant) or a
male house-born slave (like someone in the family) was thought to lead to trouble.\textsuperscript{19} The \textit{assinnu} is one of the most interesting kinds of persons mentioned here, even if his nature and role are debated. The \textit{assinnus} wore attire and makeup as women in their ritual worship of Ishtar, they typically carried spindles (a feminine symbol) and swords (an emasculation and masochistic symbol) at the New Year Festival, and texts speak of Ishtar desiring them as sex partners.\textsuperscript{20} Nissinen believes that not only were \textit{assinnus} eunuchs and transvestites, but they offered themselves as prostitutes to men in taverns near the temple, where it is said that Ishtar herself went to pick up men (Gwendolyn Leick).\textsuperscript{21} In fact, \textit{assinnu} comes from the same root as the verb \textit{assinnutu}, meaning “to submit to anal intercourse.” Another \textit{Summa alu} omen speaks about a man who has need to have sex with another man “like an \textit{assinnu}.” And having sexual union with an \textit{assinnu} was, in fact, a way to have sex with the goddess herself.\textsuperscript{22}

Jean Bottéro notes that Mesopotamian cultures overall considered sex “far too natural” to write about or to boast of sexual abilities and prowess. He writes, “We find not the slightest declaration of love, no effusion or sentiment or even tenderness. Such impulses of the heart . . . are suggested rather than openly expressed.” It was expected that everyone marry and bear children, but still men who had the economic means could take additional wives or concubines. They were also free to visit professional prostitutes of both sexes. In fact, Inanna/Ishtar was called a hierodule, a divine “sacred prostitute”; and many male prostitutes, homosexual and transvestite, served her. Making love was a natural activity that should not be demeaned, they believed; and it could be practiced as one pleased as long as no third party was harmed and no prohibition was broken (e.g., indulging in sexual activity that was banned on certain days, or not respecting that certain women were reserved for the gods).\textsuperscript{23} William Naphy notes that a striking feature of the ancient Near East was “how few cultures seem to have any significant ‘moral’ concern about same-sex activities . . . Most cultures seemed to accept that males might have sexual relations with other males”—although for a male to assume the passive position in intercourse (unless he was an adolescent) was thought somehow to make him less than a male thereafter.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Warriors and heroes in love.} Another kind of same-sex relationship in the ancient Near East was the love experienced between heroes or warriors; and the most famous example of this is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, a long poem that deals with “man and nature, love and adventure, [and] friendship and combat,” along with the “stark reality of death.”\textsuperscript{25} Gilgamesh was king of Uruk (called Erech in Gen 10:10), a Sumerian city-state ca. 2600 BC; and his exploits and glory elevated him to supernatural rank shortly after his death. Five legends about him survive in Sumerian, composed around 2000 BC. Then an unknown Akkadian editor (ca. 1600 BC) assembled a composite and far-reaching account uniting the earlier tales. This literary text was esteemed enough to be translated into Hurrite (spoken in N/NW Mesopotamia), it was abridged by the Hittites of Anatolia (Syria and eastern Turkey), and remains of it have even been found in Palestine.\textsuperscript{26} The fullest text available today is sometimes called the Ninevite version, because it draws primarily on thirty-five manuscripts found in the great library at Nineveh belonging to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (mid-7th century BC), but using also other fragments found elsewhere.\textsuperscript{27} The story may be briefly summarized as follows:\textsuperscript{28}

Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is described as “most handsome.” But because he is two-thirds god and one-third man, he distresses the citizens of Uruk with his insatiable sexual appetite and boundless energy. So the gods create a companion for him, named Enkidu, a wild, hairy man with “long tresses [locks of hair] like those of a woman.” After a prostitute is sent to tame and
train Eniku, who also is “handsome . . . just like a god,” he comes to Uruk, where he meets Gilgamesh. Meanwhile Gilgamesh has two dreams, one of a falling star and the second of a mighty axe, toward both of which he feels strangely drawn. His mother explains, “A mighty comrade will come to you . . . [and] like a wife you’ll love him, caress and embrace him” (Tablet I). When Gilgamesh and Enkidu finally meet, at first they wrestle furiously, but then they “kissed each other and formed a friendship.” Gilgamesh persuades Enkidu to go with him to subdue the monster Humbaba, who lives in the Cedar Forest; so the young king and his companion “took each other by the hand,” first to go have great weapons fashioned (Tablet II) and then to seek the blessing and prayer of Queen Ninsun, Gilgamesh’s mother (Tablet III). When Gilgamesh has a series of bad dreams, Enkidu comforts him, saying, “Take my hand, friend, and we shall go [on] together, [let] your thoughts dwell on combat!” (Tablet IV).

After they slay the forest’s guardian, with the help of great winds (Tablet V), Gilgamesh washes his hair, letting it fall down his back; and he puts on fresh clothes and his royal crown. When the goddess Ishtar looked down and saw “the beauty of Gilgamesh,” she was filled with longing and asked him to become her bridegroom. When he refuses, Ishtar is enraged; and she persuades the gods to release the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh. However, Enkidu grabs hold of the animal’s tail, while Gilgamesh thrusts his knife into the great beast and slays it (Tablet VI). However, the gods are now angry that their great bull has been killed, and so they decide that one of the heroes must give up his life, namely Enkidu. And so Enkidu grows weak and dies (Tablet VII). Gilgamesh, beside himself with grief, covers the face of his friend “like a bride,” tears out his curly hair in clumps, rips off his fine clothes, and mourns inconsolably over the loss of his companion (Tablet VIII). Thereafter, he sets out to find a way to obtain immortal life, so that he might be reunited with Enkidu (Tablets IX-XI). Although numerous scholars have argued that there is no homoerotic content here, the intensity and exclusivity of their love, along with the emphasis on their beauty, makes this viewpoint difficult to maintain. Later we shall look more fully at the Gilgamesh Epic and its parallels with the Jonathan and David story.

**Cult prostitution, and the love for a beautiful boy.** Although some scholars have cast doubt on whether there were male sacred prostitutes in ancient Mesopotamia; we read, e.g., relating to the assinmus that Inanna/Ishtar, goddess of love and war, “changed them from men to women in order to show the people piety” (Erra 4.55); and while this is vague, the *Summa alu* (above) twice mentions men who copulate with an assinmu. The Summogram *UR.SAL* for assinmu joins the symbols for “dog/man” and “woman,” perhaps referring to someone who has intercourse in dog-like position (David Greenberg). The Summogram *GISH.DUR*, for kalu, another class of Inanna/Ishtar devotees, combines the words for “penis” and “buttocks,” describing their similar sexual service. William Naphy notes that male and female prostitutes had intercourse with male worshippers in (or near) sanctuaries and temples in ancient Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Corinth, Carthage, Sicily, Libya, and West Africa. Norman Sussman explains that “male and female prostitutes, serving temporarily or permanently and performing heterosexual, homosexual, oral-genital, bestial, and other forms of sexual activities, dispensed their [sexual] favors on behalf of the temple.”

Another kind of homosexuality that existed in ancient times was the love for a beautiful boy. Michael Rice writes, “It is a fair assumption that all of the great cultures of antiquity regarded a good-looking boy as a fitting target for a man’s attention or admiration . . . and, given the way in which women tended to be protected in Mediterranean cultures, [he would be] a good deal more accessible. There is plenty of evidence for the ritualization of the love of boys in
societies which have developed strongly bonded groups of older warriors and younger cadets.” Here the lover guided his beloved in “training in arms and for the hunt.”33 In fact, “It is widely believed that one of the principal uses of the Upper Paleolithic caves [with their scenes of running bulls, boy attendants, and acrobatic leaping] may have been for the initiation of children [boys] into the technique, lore, and mystery of the hunters’ way of life.” Added to the awe and fear could also have been the pain of circumcision and the elders’ sexual use of the initiates.34

On Crete, from Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love, 2007* – Plato (c.429-c.347 BC) could never figure out what to do with the myth of Ganymede, so in his *Laws* he claims that the story was invented by the Cretans to support their practices. He does not detail Cretan customs, but Euphorus (Greek historian, c.400-330 BC, of Cyme in Asia Minor - *Wikipedia*) does in his massive history, about 200 fragments of which have survived in the work of other authors; and he is a pretty good historian. One long fragment preserved in Strabo’s *Geography* describes a custom in which certain Cretan males win their beloved boys by abduction. A few days beforehand the admirer tells the boy’s friends of his intent; and if they approve, *they put up only a moderate show of resistance at the rendezvous location.* However, if they feel that the admirer is unworthy of the boy, their efforts will be more than just a sham, the abduction will be prevented. If the boy and friends do not show up at the appointed place and time, this is read as a black mark against the boy. (Davidson 2007, p. 301) In the abduction the boy is taken to the admirer’s Men’s House (*andreon*, a kind of military dining hall), where the boy is given presents and a welcome. Then the admirer takes the boy away to a *place in the ‘country’* where he chooses, with the boy’s friends tagging along. For two months they feast and hunt; and then they return to the Men’s House, where the boy receives a military outfit, an ox, a drinking cup, and other costly gifts. The boy sacrifices the ox and entertains his friends with a feast, and declares whether or not he is happy about the association (*homilia*) with his suitor. Afterward, the abducted youth, called *parastathentes* (associated), occupies a place of honor at the dances and races. Thereafter he wears distinctive clothes, even into manhood, that announce that he has become “famed,” with his partner called *philetor* (lover). (p. 302)

So, what was going on here? First, Crete was one of the most mixed communities in Greece in the first millennium BC, and the customs which Euphorus described probably related to *Lycus* and *Gortyn*, two old cities which spoke the Dorian dialect and were most closely linked to Sparta. (pp. 302-303) A collection of laws written on a great wall in Gortyn distinguish between *dromeus* (“runner,” an adult male member of the gymnasium = *dromos*), *apodromos* (a male perhaps under Twenty, “not qualified for the running-track” (perhaps the same as *apagelos* = “under twenty,” and then *apagelos*, “not [yet] a member of the herd.”) (p. 303) All male citizens of Lycus belonged to an *hetaireiai* (association of comrades), or *andreia* (Men’s House), and they dined every evening. Young Cretans sat on the floor, in shabby clothes, and waited on the adults, who sat on chairs. Later the boys joined an *agela* (herd), headed by a powerful boy; and there were often fights between herds. When they are ‘selected’ to graduate, they are married to girls en masse, although they don’t take the girls until they are older. So, there are at least 4 stages for a Cretan boy between his mid- to late teens and mid- to late twenties: (p. 304) (1) They sit on the floor in their father’s *Men’s House*. (2) In their late teens they join a ‘herd,’ where they are fed a public expense. (3) After a kind of graduation ceremony, they enter the ranks of the ‘runners,’ although they live apart from their wives until the girls are old enough. These males form the backbone of the army, living either at home or in communal barracks. (4) Perhaps only when a *neoi* (young man) takes his
wife home and he becomes a full member in the Men’s House. Also, there are Ten-Year Runners (30 or older) and Fifteen-Year Runners (35 or older). (p. 305)

However, the abduction ceremony is not presented in any sense as a ‘coming of age’ activity, (p. 307) as many scholars have suggested (p. 302). Rather than a mass ceremony, the boy is on his own in a decidedly unique occasion; and he continues to wear his special attire which marks him as an abductee, into adulthood. This was, in fact, a homosexual wedding, an initiation into a homosexual relationship, a homilia. The boy is perhaps an Eighteen-plus. The abductor is probably a couple of years older, a member of a Men’s House. (p. 307) The group of ‘friends’ of the abductee—who are neither relatives, clan-members or coevils [peers] of the abductee—decide whether a match is a suitable one, accompany the pair on their hunting trip, and later make contributions to the later lavish gifts. They must therefore be property-owners and in a position to spend some of it; and, in fact, are probably the boy’s fan-club and guard of honor. Taken to the Men’s House, we know from one note on a MS, the abductor then ‘kisses’ the boy, a critical moment, a display of public affection.

By ‘country’ here, Euphorus is not speaking of some untamed wilderness; the Greek word for country (chôra) simply refers to someplace outside the town, which could be landed estates worked by Cretans on behalf of their Dorian masters. Most scholars think it is at this point in the ‘honeymoon’ that sex takes place—but what kind of honeymoon is it when your friends tag along? Did they hang around outside the enclosure while the boy was deflowered? (p. 309) Hardly. Probably the boy had to be of such character that no one could say he was easy, and his friends were along to see that he was not raped. Yet, the Cretans were notorious for the homosexuality, and Plato talks about it as a defining feature of their culture, a very physical and sexual homosexuality (Plato, Laws, 636b-d, 835e-842a). (Davidson n 42, p. 559; cf. C, p. 1318ff). And Aristotle said that the Cretan lawgiver instituted ‘intercourse [homilia] with males’ as a method of population control (Aristotle, Politics, 1272a). The Gortyn Law Wall has a whole series of laws which punished anyone who has forced sex with a free man or free woman. (p. 310) The two-month trip then is an elaborate way to obtain the boy’s consent, and after which the boy returns and accepts his ‘abductor’; then they can have sex and the boy can no longer say that he was raped. An attempt is often made to separate ‘beauty’ from ‘sexual attractiveness’ from sexual lust, but sometimes this is difficult. (p. 312) The cup given to the boy, a deep goblet of bronze, called a chonnos, was probably a symbol of loyalty and faith which in the ceremony bound the boy to his lover. And the boy was supposed to wear his dressy esthes (new clothing) all the time: this military garment could be a fringed cloak or an embroidered dress. But what do the places of honor given to the ‘Famed’ at dances and races mean? Ephorus compares them to the Spartan Knights, a group of 300 select troops in the Twenties. This was a corps, then, of the most beautiful men; they probably did not fight together but were spread throughout the Cretan army, as champions. (p. 313) ‘Fame’ might point to a shorter life, but it would be a remembered life of glory. Two months in the ‘country’ formally inaugurated the relationship between two men, one under Twenty and the other older and already in the ranks of the Knights. Aelian talks of the Cretan beloved laying out the body of his lover, as Achilles does for Patroclus, as Andromache does for Hector, as wives do for their husbands. (Davidson 2007, p. 314)

The Philistia-Crete connection, and a homoerotic rite-of-passage. Tom Horner wrote (1978) that the Philistines had a culture which “accepted homosexuality” and so probably influenced Israel in this respect.35 Now, new findings can be reported that further clarify this

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matter. But first, who were the Philistines? Battle scenes and inscriptions at Medinet Habu (near Thebes) in Egypt describe the victory of Ramesses III over certain “Sea Peoples,” who ca. 1175 BC attacked Egypt, including five groups, with the Philistines named first. Rebuffed, these Sea Peoples then settled, shortly after 1200 BC, along the southern Mediterranean coast of Canaan, where they set up a federation with five capital cities (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron, cf. Josh 13:3) and took the name of their dominate group, the Philistines. (Genesis 21 and 26 record an earlier wave of “Philistines” who came to Canaan, but this term probably refers to other sea peoples.) Looking for comparisons to the Philistines’ dress, arms and ships at Medinet Habu point to them coming from the region of the Aegean Sea, including the western coast of Anatolia (modern Turkey), the island of Crete, and the Greek mainland, specifically Athens and Mycenae (to the west).

However, the Bible links the Philistines with Crete. Amos 9:7 speaks of the “Philistines from Caphtor,” and Jer 47:4 of the “Philistines, the remnant of the coastline of Caphtor” (NRSV). The Hebrew kaphtor (#3731) has been linked with the Egyptian Keftiu (Kftyw), which in one text is specifically linked to four sites on Crete. Clearly, the Israelites believed that the Philistines (or a major part of them) had lived on Crete before they migrated to the southern coast of Canaan. Crete is a large, 156-mile long island that marks the southern boundary of the Aegean Sea, lying about halfway from Athens to Africa and 300 miles west of Cyprus. It is mountainous, has fine harbors on the northern side, and in ancient times was forested and fertile. The Bronze Age on mainland Greece (centered in Mycenae), Crete, and the Cycladic Islands (scattered between Greece and Anatolia) occurred between 3000-1100 BC, coming to an end with a destruction of sites, large population migrations, and the replacement of bronze with iron. During this same period, Crete developed its own powerful civilization called Minoan (3150–1200 BC), after the legendary king Minos. This Minoan culture reached its zenith between 2000–1500 BC, during which time colossal, labyrinthine palaces were built at Knossos and other sites. However, after natural disasters (earthquake and volcanic eruption) and subsequent invasion and destruction of Cretan centers (the palace of Knossos ca. 1400 BC), the center of power moved back to the Mycenaean empire (ca. 1450 BC), where it continued to the end of the Bronze Age, to be followed by the turbulent “Dark Ages” (1100–900 BC).

Now we turn to a remarkable little drinking vessel called the “Chieftain Cup.” Found in Crete in 1903, its significance has only recently been deciphered by Robert Koehl, a specialist in Bronze Age archaeology at Hunter College (CUNY), New York. Measuring 4.5” high, this round but tapered drinking vessel is displayed in the Herakleion Museum, Crete. On the front, it displays two slender youths, wearing necklaces and other jewelry, short kilts, and tall boots, who stand gazing at each other. Dated ca. 1650–1500 BC," this cup was found at a large villa (estate) at Ayia Triada, located on a river near the south-central coast of Crete. By studying ancient Cretan hairstyles, Koehl concluded that the youth on the left, with his hair tied in a topknot but short in the back, is the younger one (perhaps just having reaching puberty), while the youth on the right, with long hair flowing down his back and with front curls (also with a taller height and better attire) is the older youth. Various interpretations have been offered for this pair, e.g., that they represented a god and a priest, a king and a commander, or children impersonating dignitaries.

However, light is shed on this cup by the description of a sexual rite in ancient Crete that was recorded by Ephorhis (a 4th century BC historian) and preserved by Strabo (a 1st century BC historian). The rite of passage describes when Minoan boys were segregated into ageles (herds), to prepare them for manhood and to train them as soldiers. However,
when an older young man, called a *philetor* (lover), saw a youth who attracted him by his beauty, courage, and manners, he would “capture” his chosen one, called a *parathatheis*, with the consent of his parents and help of his friends. Taking him to the local *andreion* (male dining club) where he was a member, the suitor would give the youth presents and then take him into the mountains where they would spend two months together hunting and feasting. Thereafter, returning to the dining club, the beloved would tell whether he was happy with how his lover had treated him; and the lover, if praised, would present the youth with military garb, an ox, and a drinking cup, along with other gifts. After this, the youth was called *kleinos* (famous), wore distinctive clothing, and was given a special seat at dances and races and other honors. All of these youths were then married in a mass wedding. This same-sex tradition displays all of the familiar elements of a rite of passage: initiation into a select group, seclusion for a time during which an older male teaches a younger male special skills, and then return to society where the initiate receives new status and special garments.\(^{48}\)

This initiation tradition may relate also to the story of Zeus, who falls in love with the young boy Ganymede and carries him off to Mount Olympus to become his cupbearer. In one version of this myth, recorded by Athenaeus (13.601), a 2nd-century AD Greek philosopher in Egypt, Ganymede was carried off not by Zeus but by King Minos, the legendary king of Crete (believed to be a son of Zeus by Europa). Koehl proposes that this myth originated in Crete during the Minoan era to support their paiderastic rite of passage, and then the myth moved to Greece where Zeus was made the main character. The “Chieftain Cup” may now be interpreted more clearly: The long-haired lover presents his beloved with a sword and javelin. The reverse side of the cup shows three of the beloved’s friends bringing him flattened ox skins, from which a shield would be made. The cup the boy received is none other than the so-called Chieftain Cup (really, a Lover’s Cup), which originally may have been covered with gold foil. The Minos/Zeus myth clarifies why the chosen youth was called a parathatheis (one who stands beside), because after the pair returned from their shared time together alone, the beloved would stand beside his lover at banquets in the dining club using this cup to serve him his wine (a tradition that also will be seen at the Greek symposium).\(^{49}\)

Very likely, the Dorian Greeks who settled on Crete (according to Plato, Ephorus and Aristotle) absorbed this tradition and then carried it to Greece.\(^{50}\)

Archaeologists have also excavated a rustic shrine dedicated to Hermes and Aphrodite, at Kato Syme, located ca. 40 miles east of Ayia Triada and up on Mt. Dikte, 3,900’ above sea level, where numerous objects, particularly in bronze, were offered with animal sacrifices to the gods.\(^{51}\) Here and only here on Crete, chalices shaped like the Lover’s Cup, but in stone and clay, have been found from the same period.\(^{52}\) Angeliki Lebessi found bronze figures of youths from the Minoan period (before 1100 BC), showing that this was a long-standing sanctuary site.\(^{53}\) But later bronze cut-out figures (8th-7th centuries BC) found here are also interesting. One piece (Louvre, Paris) shows an older youth, with a beard, pulling toward him a younger male with long, flowing hair and curls in front—the pair a bit older than the two depicted on the Lover’s Cup. The older youth carries a horn and a partly-finished bow, and the younger male carries a slain goat on his shoulders, while their legs and feet touch and the genitals of the younger male are exposed.\(^{54}\) Lebessi’s team also found a bronze piece, dated ca. 750 BC. (Heraklion Museum), which shows two helmeted but otherwise nude males, both with erections, who stand beside each other holding hands.\(^{55}\) Still another bronze cutout (7th century BC) shows a lad, nude except for a long, decorative cape and sandals, holding a bow and quiver.\(^{56}\) These pieces
Condemned homoerotic expressions in ancient Israel. In Lev 18:22 the condemnation of an Israelite “man” (ish, #376) who lies with a “male” (zakar, #2145) as with a “woman” (issah, #802) is difficult to interpret because of its unique content and vague setting, although it reflects certain sexual “customs” in Egypt or Canaan (18:3, REB) and it may have had a cultic connotation, since the preceding ban prohibits the ‘sacrificing’ of children to the god Molech (18:21, NRSV). Lesbianism is not referred to here, only a man having anal intercourse with another man, so this would seem to reflect the affront to male patriarchy that was attached to a man who took on the passive sexual role, throughout the ancient Near East. The Hebrew to’eba (#8441, KJV: abomination) simply points to “something offensive”—a word that in the Pentateuch was applied most frequently to cultic practices, that would certainly be offensive to Yahweh. The death penalty (20:13), moreover, was a common punishment in ancient times, when there were few prisons, also proscribed in Leviticus, e.g., for adultery and swearing (20:10, 24:16). More interesting is the fact that zakar, a rare word in the OT, was often applied to animals set aside for sacrifice and in other cases, to men, as well, who had been set apart for a religious purpose. Probably, then, what was condemned here was actually sexual union with a male cult prostitute.

Looking for parallel references between the original giving of the Law (in Exodus-Leviticus) and the later review of the Law (in Deuteronomy), before Israel entered the Promised Land, a connection seems likely between Lev 18:22 (prohibiting an Israelite man from visiting a male cult prostitute) and Deut 23:17 (prohibiting him from becoming one). Debate has occurred here, however, over the identity and service of the qadesh in Deut 23:17 (NJB, Peterson: [male] sacred prostitute) and the qedeshim (pl.) mentioned in 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; and Job 36:14, who later operated as sacred male prostitutes in Jerusalem in the reigns from Rehoboam to Josiah (928–609 BC). Elaine Goodfriend in the Anchor Bible Dictionary (1992) argued that evidence for cult personnel in Ugarit (in Syria) engaging in sex is lacking, and that qedeshim in the OT should only be viewed as a pagan “priestly class” or a group of “cult officials.” She also advocated that keleb in Deut 23:18 (lit. “dog,” but rendered in most translations as “male prostitute”) may simply refer to the animal. In an adjacent article in the ABD, however, Karel van der Toorn noted that the parallelism between the qedesha (#6948, female sacred prostitute) and qadesh (#6945, male sacred prostitute) mentioned in Deut 23:17 (or v. 18 in some translations) and the zana (#2181, female prostitute in general) and keleb (#3611, ‘dog,’ a contemptuous term for a passive male prostitute) in v. 18 (or v. 19 in some translations) “favors the idea that the qedeshim engaged primarily in sexual activities.” This does not mean, of course, that these male sacred prostitutes did not perform a variety of other tasks in the sanctuary as well. He notes two customs alluded to in these verses, then, that of Israelite women and men becoming pagan “consecrated persons” or prostitutes and that of women, and occasionally men, prostituting themselves to obtain money to pay vows made to the Lord.

This debate continued with Phyllis Bird (1995), who calls the OT references to qadesheqedesheh simply a “literary creation,” and Robert Gagnon (2001), who holds that the qedeshim were “homosexual cult prostitutes” and notes also that the slur “dog” was even applied to assinnus, the “dog-women” devoted to Ishtar, who offered themselves to be penetrated anally by other men. Based on all this (but contrary to Gagnon), Lev 18:22/20:13 cannot be read
then as a comprehensive ban on all homosexual activity; and the use of “sodomite[s]” as a translation in the KJV for *qadesh/qedeshim* (lit., holy man/holy men) in Deut 23:17 and in later OT references is entirely inaccurate and misleading.

The attempted gang-rape of the Levite priest in Gibeah (Judg 19), echoing the earlier Sodom incident in Canaan (Gen 19:1-26), is instructive in a number of ways. After a traveling priest accepted the invitation of a kindly old man to spend the night along with his party in his home, a “gang of local hell-raisers” surrounded the residence, shouting: “Bring out the man who came to your house. We want to have sex with him” (Judg 19:22, Peterson). The priest saves his life only by handing over his concubine, whom the mob proceeds to brutally rape and murder (vv. 25–26). Some translators probably take a swipe at gay people here by translating the Hebrew as “a gang of sex perverts” (LB 1971) or “some sexual perverts” (GNB 1976), only homosexuality is never mentioned in the priest’s later complaint to the whole of Israel, which speaks only of intent to assault and heterosexual rape and murder (Judg 20:5). These men were bisexual, not truly homosexual. A better translation of the Hebrew here is “worthless fellows” (NASB 1960, cf. CEV 1995) or “scoundrels” (JB 1968, NEB 1970). What is even more significant is the fact that if such a grossly negative form of same-sex activity is mentioned here, surely many other kinds of nonviolent homoerotic desire and coupling must also have been occurring at the same time in ancient Israel, but with little note or record made of them.

During the period of Judges, only a few generations before the time of Jonathan and David, “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 17:6, 21:25, NRSV), which included intermarrying with Philistines and other foreigners (chap. 16), the worship of pagan idols (even by Levite priests, chaps. 17–18), and the officially-sanctioned abduction of girls worshipping at the Lord’s tabernacle at Shiloh, Israel’s religious center (chap. 21). One does not get the impression that this was an especially up-tight society. As Charles Fensham notes, “A highly developed cult of Baal and Asherah [Canaanite deities] existed that was based on the change of seasons and appealed to primitive human instincts . . . . The charm of this form of adultery [sexual activity with religious prostitutes] made Baal worship tempting to the ordinary man, especially to the ordinary Israelite who stood under the severe laws of Moses.”67 Early in 1 Samuel, we read that the sons of Eli, the high priest at Shiloh, stole from the Lord’s offerings (2:12–17) and “slept with women [cult prostitutes?—see footnote in the Oxford Study Bible, 1992] who served at the entrance to the [Lord’s] tent of meeting” (v. 22). Of course, during the whole of Israel’s history there were devout Israelites who loved and served God as best they knew how (e.g., Gideon, Ruth, Naomi, Hannah, Samuel, Jonathan, David, and others); but Israel was still a syncretic society, constantly absorbing influences from the cultures around it.

In conclusion, what light does all of this shine on the Jonathan and David story? First, homosexuality in many forms pervaded the ancient Near East. As long as persons got married and had families, homoerotic activity was probably accepted or tolerated by most people, as somehow part of the complexity of life. This was probably true also in early Israel, if homosexual love was expressed in secret and not in a public orgy (Raphael Patai).68 Still, there was a certain stigma attached to a man who took the passive, feminine role in a sexual relationship. Second, Israelite men must have been aware of the Philistines’ acceptance of homosexuality. In 1 Samuel, the Israelites and Philistines interacted continually, especially so that Israelite farmers could get their tools sharpened (1 Sam 13:19-20). Israelite men must have seen or heard of expressions of homoerotic affection between certain Philistine men, in the street,
shop and field. Third, laws in the broader ancient Near East were only passed against certain negative forms of homosexuality, including rape, incest and slander; and no doubt a similar approach occurred in Israel and in the OT, where only certain specific negative forms of same-sex acts were condemned, namely, attempted assault, gang rape, and cultic prostitution. Meanwhile, nonviolent expressions of same-sex love, especially in secret, were probably overlooked and left unrecorded, except in certain rare cases (such as Jonathan and David, and Ruth and Naomi). Fourth, romantic attachments between heroes were accepted throughout the ancient world, as is shown in the Epic of Gilgamesh, with its extended and wide popularity even reaching Palestine. Such relationships may be dismissed as “comrades helping and comforting each other,” but for those who had strong homoerotic inclinations these attachments carried a much more profound meaning and significance. Fifth, a strong romantic attachment occurring at the royal court would probably have been winked at by the general public, not to get into trouble with the king and to focus on their own difficult lives. There were some who objected (like Saul who wanted a lineage for the throne, 1 Sam 20:30-31), while others admired, or at least did not oppose, such love (like the gay-friendly scribe who included the Jonathan and David story in 1 Samuel).

**Summary.** In the ancient Near East beyond Egypt, laws seemed only to condemn certain categories of homosexual acts, including incest (in Hatti) and rape or calling someone a passive faggot (in Assyria). On the other hand, there were magic spells that could be said to bless same-sex male love; and it was believed that if one copulated with a male of equal status or with a male cult prostitute, this would bring good luck (while having sex with a close attendant or a house-born slave would bring bad luck). The famous Epic of Gilgamesh glorified the love between the king of Uruk with his male companion, Enkidu, a relationship that was intense, exclusive, and sexual in nature. Besides between heroes or warriors, homosexual coupling also found expression in early male rites-of-passage and in sexual union with the male cult prostitutes of Innana/Ishtar. In ancient Mesopotamia it was expected that men marry; but as long as they did so, they were free to visit professional prostitutes of both sexes and also engage in other same-sex relations (Bottéro). In Israel it appears also that only certain kinds of homoerotic activity were banned, namely, raping other males (Gen 19:1-9, Judg 19:22-26) visiting a male pagan cult prostitute (Lev 18:22) or becoming one (Deut 23:17), or raising money through male prostitution to pay off a vow made to the Lord (Deut 23:18). Since the Philistines most likely brought with them (from Crete) an appreciation for homosexual attachment as young men (as pictured on the so-called “Chieftan’s Cup,” or more aptly named the “Lover’s Cup”), ancient Israelites probably saw some evidence of homosexual affection and acceptance when they visited Philistia to have their farm tools sharpened. Also, if gross examples of homosexual activity occurred in Israel, such as the mob assault at Gibeah (who wanted to gang-rape the young Levite priest), certainly milder, more tender forms of homosexual expression must also have taken place, but were ignored because they did not involve a public orgy (Patai) and because the subject was taboo. Because Moses handed down some laws against certain same-sex behavior does not mean that they were faithfully observed in Israel, where from the beginning the people ran after other gods and adopted foreign practices. Moreover, just as the homosexual affairs of Zimri-lin and Hammuabi, kings of Mari and Babylonia, are known from written records that have survived, so it should be unexpected that at one point a love affair between a prince of Israel and a young hero would included by a scribe (who was not homophobic) in Israel’s official record.
ONLINE IMAGES, SUPPLEMENT 2B
The “Chieftan Cup” (or Lover’s Cup, bet. 1650-1500 BC). Go to www.ou.edu/finearts/art/ahi4913/aegeanhtm/minoanpottery5.html and scroll down to the fifth photograph.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 2B
7. Quoted in Naphy, Born to be Gay, p. 20.
18. Adapted from Nissinen, Homoeroticism, p. 27.
22. Greenberg, D., Construction, p. 97; Nissinen, Homoeroticism, p. 33, and for fuller discussion see pp. 28–33.
24. Naphy, Born to be Gay, p. 15.
28. Ibid., pp. 1–100.
30. Greenberg, D., Construction, p. 95; Nissinen, Homoeroticism, pp. 32–33; 150, n. 88.
34. Ibid., pp. 253, 252.
37. Ibid., pp. 42, 46.
38. Ibid., pp. 47–50.
48. Ibid., pp. 106, 105.
60. Bandstra and Verhey, “Sex; Sexuality,” p. 432.
65. Gagnon, Bible and Homosexual Practice, pp. 100–110, esp. 103–104.
68. Patai, Family, Love and the Bible, p. 159.
CHAPTER 3
David’s Background
1 Samuel 16–17

“As each flaming oriental dawn summoned the family of Jesse to the olive orchards, the vineyards, the pastures, they would first gather around a primitive stone altar on a rise that dominated Jesse’s fields, seeking Yahweh’s blessings upon their labor and the day’s yield.” Yet as Jerry Landay notes, it was really in the wilderness, in the mountain silence, and in the forces of nature that the Lord spoke to David and that he came to know his God. Since Bethlehem, their home, was located in the central highlands south of Jerusalem, a mountainous region that was hilly and rocky and without brooks, David’s task of caring for the family sheep was not easy. To dispel the loneliness, fear and boredom he experienced during the long days he spent alone with his flock, David practiced on his lyre, composing songs of praise and penitence to the Lord. Little did he know that others later would come to greatly admire his “compositions on the lyre and the sweet, lamenting voice with which he sang them”—songs of rapture, hope and redemption. David played a small, portable lyre (kinnor, H3658) which he rested on his chest while plucking its 8–10 strings “with his hand” (1 Sam 16:23), which produced a softer sound than using a plectrum. He had a musician’s soul, a love of beauty, and an emotional sensitivity. A second skill that David honed in the wilderness was how to use a sling, which required a well-made leather pouch with cords, round stones, a strong arm and a sure aim, and which he used on several occasions to defend his sheep from an attacking lion and bear (17:34–36). David’s bedrock faith, heart-felt psalms, athletic skill, and remarkable bravery would later serve him well and would also resonate with Jonathan, who himself was independent-minded, ardently loved Yahweh, and had done heroic deeds in his name.

It is fascinating to look at David’s background, which is described in 1 Sam 16–17. The passage begins with Yahweh rousing Samuel out of his despondent grief over King Saul’s sad spiritual decline and the Lord’s final rejection of him as king over Israel, to send the old prophet off to turn a new page in Israel’s history. Thus begins the story of “The Rise of David” (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5), part of the Deuteronomistic History, the name that Bible scholars have given to the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings, which relate Israel’s history from Moses to Babylon and have been identified as an original, unified work by their common structure, writing style, and theological outlook. It should also be noted that chapters 16–17 contain three different stories, from 3–4 different sources, that have been brought together by the editor. In the first story David is anointed by Samuel to follow Saul as king (16:1–13), in the second he is appointed by Saul to be his royal musician (16:14–23), and in the third he slays the Philistine champion Goliath (chapter 17). Because of these different tradition histories, certain contradictions appear in the text. For example, David is introduced to Saul three different times—when he comes to court as a prospective lyre-player (16:18–21), when he offers to fight Goliath (17:26b, 31–37), and after he kills the giant (17:55–58)—and in the last two cases the reader is not sure whether Saul recognizes David as his former aide or not. Maybe Saul, paralyzed and shamed in his tent by Goliath’s unrelenting mocking, drank too much; and later when David appears in a new light (as a champion better than Saul and as a prospective son-in-law, 17:25), the suspicious king cannot believe that this is the lad who was his former lyre-player and he truly wants to know more about this maturing teenager.
David anointed by Samuel to be the next king of Israel. In the first story (16:1–13), God sends Samuel to Bethlehem secretly to meet with Jesse and his sons, telling him, “[Y]ou shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you” to be the next king of Israel (16:3, NRSV). For God has found in the youngster David what he sought, “a man after his own heart” (13:14); and now he intends to shower him with love and attention. Abrupt references to Jesse—without any description except that he resides in Bethlehem—suggest that he was a well-known figure besides being a ruling elder in the city (16:3–5); and the later description of David as “a man of valor” (16:18, NRSV) really points to his coming from a wealthy, upper-class family. In fact, the Hebrew gibbor kayil (H1368, H2428) here may refer to “an excellent youth, from a family of power and substance” (Kirsch). When Jesse appears with his seven strapping sons (minus David), including Eliab the eldest, so tall and handsome, the proud father parades them all in front of Samuel—but Yahweh is not interested in any of them (1 Sam 16:6–10). Finally Samuel requests that Jesse’s youngest boy be brought in from the field; and no one can sit down for the sacrificial feast until David arrives, and who knows how far away he is or how long it will take to find him and bring him back home?

After Yahweh’s gentle rebuke to Samuel for looking to choose a king on the basis of outward physical appearance (16:7), Samuel was surprised to see that David, when he finally appeared, was “ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (16:12, NRSV). As Walter Brueggemann describes it, “both Samuel and the narrator are dazzled!” Jerry Landay envisions David as “average in stature, but with finely chiseled Semitic features, dark hair, a ruddy complexion, and almond-shaped eyes of exceptional beauty.” Other interpreters hold that David was red-headed, e.g., Louis Ginzberg and also the New Oxford Annotated Bible, which holds that “ruddy” (admoni, H132) points both to his “reddish’ hair and complexion.” Later when Michal made a dummy to place in her bed to replicate David (who had fled for his life) and to fool Saul’s soldiers, she put a large idol under a cloak and then added a tangle of goat’s hair on its head (19:11-13, cf. McCarter); and Steven McKenzie believes the latter suggests that David had thick, wild, and probably curly hair. How striking it is that David’s name means “beloved, darling,” so suitable for such a “man of compelling physical beauty” (Kirsch). However, David’s father and brothers find it difficult to see his special-ness in any sense, and so they watch in amazement as the prophet raises his hollow ram’s horn and pours holy oil over the young man’s hair and face—and the Spirit of God came “mightily upon David from that day forward” (16:13, NRSV). We see here a “free divine selection,” as Yahweh overturns law, tradition and expectation (to honor the eldest) to pick the youngest, smallest, and least-important son, but one who truly loves God.

David summoned to Saul’s court as his lyre-player. In the second story (16:14–23), Saul is now tormented by an evil spirit (v. 14). According to an ancient tradition, a person once touched by a divine spirit could never again be free; and likewise here when Yahweh’s spirit departs from Saul, an evil spirit arrives to fill the vacuum. Saul begins to show symptoms of paranoia and manic depression; and yet this spirit will play its part also in the working out of God’s larger plan. This can be seen as one of Saul’s servants suggests that he procure a musician to play for him, music commonly being used in ancient times to confront demons and soothe melancholia. Another servant knows (providentially) about David and gives the king a glowing résumé, reporting that he is “skillful in playing [the lyre], a man of valor [i.e., from a highly-respected family], a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the
LORD is with him” (16:18, NRSV). “Prudent in speech,” or literally “clever of word,” probably points to David’s being discerning, articulate and intelligent, and with a sense for proper protocol.28 “Good presence” reads literally “[good] form or outline”29 and means that he was “good-looking” and “handsome” (Cartledge).30 What seems inappropriate here is his being called a “warrior,” which normally pointed to someone who had had considerable experience and success on the battlefield,31 hardly consistent with a lad who spends his time “with the sheep” (16:19). Perhaps the servant just got carried away in his glowing description, or the pro-Davidic editor wished to portray David here as the best choice to be the next king of Israel in all respects.32 Overall David is presented as the “ideal young man”: a fine musician, from a good family, a capable fighter, clever with words (like Jacob, Joseph, Esther, and Daniel), and handsome. His success, strength, manners, and looks are viewed as the result of divine favor; and so they all anticipate David’s rise to power (McCarter).33 When David finally steps before the king, “Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer” (16:21, NRSV). Three major themes can be seen in this section: Saul is in decline, Yahweh is with David, and Saul is deeply attached to the young musician—the latter of which will pave the way for David’s later unshakable loyalty to Saul (he will not kill nor harm him).34 Although the king’s armor-bearer was usually someone of great valor, Saul immediately appoints the irresistible David to the post.35 He is smitten with love for David from the first moment he sets eyes on him; and then and there he names David as his weapons bearer, a position of unique intimacy and importance in the royal household.36 Luckily, David is also able to ease the king’s madness through his music.

**David becoming a national hero by slaying Goliath.** In the third story (chapter 17), battle lines are drawn at the Valley of Elah (17:2) in western Judah, about 14 miles from Bethlehem and half way to the Mediterranean coast. The Philistines have encamped on the mountain slope on one side, and the Israelites are on the opposite mountain slope; and the Philistines have decided to use psychological warfare, sending out their champion to offer to fight the battle by proxy.37 The Masoretic Jewish text says that Goliath (unbelievably) stood 9’9” tall,38 while the older Greek text, the Septuagint, says 6’9”—still very tall for this time and place.39 Goliath is dressed in a diverse collection of defensive and offensive weaponry,40 but David quickly notes that with his heavy metal-laden body, the giant can hardly walk41 and his face has been left exposed.42 David’s main weapon is the name of his God.43 But he also has three other advantages: he is able to hide his weapon (the sling), he is able to run quickly (and possibly in a zigzag movement) toward the giant, and he is able to strike from a distance with bull’s eye accuracy.44 Although chapters 16–17 have a complex literary history,45 J. P. Fokkelman sees here a “great internal [literary] cohesion,” e.g., in references in all three sections to David being a shepherd boy, to his striking beauty, and to his overall, unfolding noble qualities, or assets.46 Whether the name “Goliath” was later inserted into 1 Sam 17:4,23; 21:9; 22:10 from 2 Sam 21:19 and 1 Chron 20:4–5 or whether the later Philistine giant took over the name and weapons style of the original strongman is still debated—although the latter seems more probable.

Anyway, the Philistine giant, with his intimidating height and bulk, and outfitted in full body armor and carrying oversized weapons, came out every day into the valley (morning and evening, for forty days, 17:16), pacing back and forth and shouting insults and provocations to the Israelites, and taunting them with, “Give me a man to fight!” (17:4–11).48 In response, the Israelite soldiers were “dismayed and greatly afraid” (v. 11), ashamed and demoralized. Many of these ‘soldiers’ were simply local farmers who had been called up to fight, and moreover they
had to provide their own supplies. So it was that Jesse sent David to carry food to his three brothers who had joined Saul, and to bring back news (17:17–18). When David gets to the Israelite camp, he leaves his roasted grain and loaves of bread (basic for a common meal) and ten cheeses (or slices of cheese), brought as a special gift for the commander, with the supply officer, just as the soldiers are gathering again to receive more of Goliath’s abuse (17:20). David is fascinated by the giant’s grunts and also overhears the nervous soldiers’ chatter. He learns that the king has offered to any victor a large reward of riches, marriage to one of his daughters, and “freedom for his family” (NRSV), probably meaning exemption from taxes and military and other labor service (17:25b). Although the soldiers express resignation, David expresses indignation (Thomas Boogaart); and his implicit offer to fight the giant (17:26) quickly makes its way to the king’s tent. However, when Eliab saw his youngest brother, David, talking to the other soldiers, he “lost his temper: ‘What are you doing here? Why aren’t you minding your own business, tending that scrawny flock of sheep? I know what you’re up to. You’ve come down here to see the sights, hoping for a ringside seat at a bloody battle!’” (17:28, Peterson). Like Joseph, David was not a favorite with many of his brothers. In fact, Eliab laces his words with contempt. In short, he scoffs: “War is the work of grownups, so off with you!” (Fokkelman). Actually, Eliab can’t stand the idea of the kid seeing the army’s paralysis and the “failure” of his three “big brothers.” Also, he remembers Samuel’s passing him by in favor of David, and now here is this upstart again! When David appears before Saul, the king sees just a “boy” (17:33, NRSV), an inexperienced youth. But David argues boldly that if God could give him the courage and strength to kill ferocious animals that had attacked his sheep, he surely now can help him defeat this contemptible Philistine (17:34–36). Saul is impressed by the teenager’s chutzpah, audacity and impudence, if nothing else. As Fokkelman notes, David views Goliath like a wild animal; and the shepherd, as a wild-animal tamer, is the answer! Jonathan Kirsch sees something tender and loving in Saul stripping off his royal armor and weapons and dressing David in them, although the teenager is too small and slender to bear their weight, much less to do any fighting in them (17:38–39). Fokkelman suggests that here David rejects Saul’s armor (mad, H4055, Strong: ‘clothing or armor’), although later he will gladly accept Jonathan’s armor given in love. David will face the giant with his God, his wits and agility, and his sling—not a kid’s toy but a military weapon in ancient times; in fact, entire army divisions were made up of slingers. Capable of hurling stones to over 100 m.p.h. and to a distance of more than 100 yards, these fighters knew that the sling was a lethal weapon. Sling stones the size of tennis balls have been found by archaeologists at ancient battle sites, and David probably used his stick (not a shepherd’s staff, 17:40) to dislodge just the perfectly right kind of round stones that he needed to hurl (17:40). Goliath is outraged that a boy with a stick has been sent out to fight him; and the two of them “talk trash” (trade insults and threats), while the narrator cannot help but once again draw attention to David’s striking good looks, as “a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance” (17:42ff). Finally, trusting completely in Yahweh, the living God (17:45–47), David runs forward fearlessly to deliver one deadly strike to the giant’s forehead, after which he speeds over and severs the head of the fallen giant, with Goliath’s own sword (17:48–51). David’s confidence, courage and cunning show him to be a leader and “saviour” of Israel, in contrast to Saul. However, afterward Saul’s amazement turns to uneasiness (17:55–28): “Who on earth is this youth?” Saul asks David the bare question, “Who are you [really]?”—and David replies, in court style, by naming his father and tribe. As David displays the gory head to Saul, the contest between the old king and new hero begins in earnest. The giant’s sword ends up in
the “tent [of Yahweh]” at Nob (21:8–9), about a mile east of Jerusalem; and the head probably was displayed in Jerusalem.65

David’s life growing up was not easy. His brothers had monopolized their father's favor and attention; and as the ‘baby’ in the family David was given the most menial chores to do.66 In such a large family with many sons competing for Jesse’s attention, there was probably plenty of rivalry, friction and jealousy, along with teasing and slighting of David, which he had to bear. Perhaps David preferred being alone with his sheep, and he was happy when he could get away from home and Bethlehem.67 His brothers resented the fact that Samuel had chosen Davey-boy over them, and his besting of his three oldest siblings in dealing with Goliath (and becoming a national hero) certainly did help improve their relations. In his young life David learned many survival skills, including keeping his thoughts to himself, self-control and keen observation, endurance under stress, inventiveness and adaptability, and how to get along with people who don’t like you—while at the same time keeping his faith in God. Yet imagine how attractive Jonathan's love (to come) would seem to him, which made David the center of attention, which showered him with words of praise and tenderness, and which offered him an intimate friendship filled with warmth and unconditional support. As Fred Young notes, Jonathan and David will find each "in the other the affection that he did not find in his own family."68

Summary. Caring for the family sheep (16:11), David’s main responsibility as a youth, was not easy; but he helped pass the time in the pasture lands by learning how to play the lyre and compose songs, and how to use the sling. His bed-rock faith, heart-felt lyrics, athletic skill, and remarkable bravery (as seen in killing a lion and a bear that attacked his flock, 17:34) would serve him well and also appeal to Jonathan, along with his handsome good looks. The story of “The Rise of David” (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5) begins here with three episodes: Samuel anointing David to be the next king of Israel, Saul summoning David to court to become his lyre-player, and David stepping forward boldly to kill the giant Goliath (chapters 16–17). After the Lord gently rebukes Samuel for judging prospects for the throne on their outward physical appearance, “both Samuel and the narrator are dazzled” by David’s beauty (Brueggemann) when he appears. Landay envisions him as having “finely chiseled Semitic features, dark hair, a ruddy complexion, and almond-shaped eyes of exceptional beauty” (16:12), although Ginzberg and others hold that “ruddy” here refers both to reddish hair and skin complexion. More important, God’s spirit came mightily upon David at his anointing, and left Saul (16:13–14). To ease Saul’s resulting melancholy and mood swings, a servant suggests to the king that he find a musician to play for him when he is depressed (16:16); and another servant offers a glowing résumé for David (16:18), describing him as an ideal young man: a fine musician, from a good family, a capable fighter, clever with words, and handsome in appearance. In fact, Saul is smitten with love for David when first he sets eyes on him, immediately appointing him as his armor-bearer to have him near his side at all times (Kirsch). Later, when the ragtag Israelite soldiers face a stand-off with the Philistine army, more specifically with Goliath, and David is sent to camp to bring food to his three brothers, he expresses indignation (17:26) and then his spunky attitude lands him in Saul’s tent as a candidate to fight the giant one-on-one (17:31–37). Yet David believes that he can defeat any enemy with God’s help and by using his wits, speed and sling. So, he runs forward fearlessly to deliver one devastating blow which kills Goliath. David becomes a national hero in Israel, which will certainly attract Jonathan’s attention. Growing up as the ‘baby’ in his family and probably facing much teasing and jealousy from his brothers, David
learned many survival skills. But it was not easy. One can imagine, then, how attractive
Jonathan’s love would be to David, which made him the center of his affection and attention.

END NOTES, CHAPTER 3
3. Landay, David, p. 29.
hand-held lyres, cf. McKenzie, King David, fig. 8.
12. McKenzie, King David, pp. 52, 57.
13. Kirsch, King David, p. 44.
17. Landay, David, p. 27.
19. NOAB, 1 Sam 16:12, footnote.
21. McKenzie, King David, p. 64.
23. Kirsch, King David, p. 45.
26 McCarter, I Samuel, p. 278.
27. Ibid., p. 280–281.
28. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 689; McKenzie, King David, p. 60.
29. McCarter, I Samuel, p. 280; Strong H8389 (to’ar).
30. Cartledge, 1 & 2 Samuel, p. 211.
32. Robinson, Let Us Be Like, p. 97.
34. Ibid., p. 282.
38. A cubit = ca. 18” and a span = ca. 9” approximately.
40. Ibid., p. 292.
41. B. Green, How Are the Mighty Fallen?, p. 286.
42. Cartledge, 1 & 2 Samuel, p. 215.
44. McKenzie, King David, p. 77.
46. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, pp. 144–145, 201–207.
50. Ibid.
64. B. Green, *How the Mighty Are Fallen?*, p. 293.
66. Landay, *David*, p. 27.
68. Young, “First and Second Samuel,” p. 287.
How old might Jonathan and David have been when they met? This might seem like a simple question; but trying to answer it is like walking into a dense forest or trying to solve a murder mystery, complete with missing evidence and multiple theories. One villain in all of this is Saul’s enigmatic “royal introduction” in 1 Sam 13:1, which translates (literally) from the Masoretic Hebrew as, “A son of a year (was) Saul when be became king, and two years he reigned over Israel.” Clearly, the text as it now stands is nonsensical; and probably some numbers were very early either lost in transmission or suppressed by an editor who disliked Saul, who viewed his reign as invalid and who wished for David to appear as Samuel’s true successor instead. This type of regal formula begins, in clear form, with David (2 Sam 5:4) and later it was applied to nearly all of the kings of the southern kingdom of Judah (seventeen out of twenty), after Israel was divided between Jeroboam in the north and Rehoboam in the south (1 Kings 12:1–20). This royal introduction was never applied to the northern kings, whom the editor of Deuteronomy–Kings considered illegitimate and apostate; and perhaps he had similar feelings toward Saul’s disappointing reign. Ancient rabbis tried to make sense of 1 Sam 13:1 by translating the first part as “Like a one-year-old who had no sins was Saul when he became king.” On the other hand, the King James Version sought to clarify this verse by connecting it to verse 2, with a translation that read: “[1] Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, [2] Saul chose him[self] three thousand men of Israel...” However, these readings go beyond the Hebrew and never found wide acceptance with scholars.

Most Septuagint manuscripts (the Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures that began in the third century BC) omit 13:1 entirely, although a few do include it and give Saul’s coronation age as “thirty”—which scholars think was probably an estimated guess based on the record that “David was thirty years old when he began to reign” (2 Sam 5:4, NRSV). Paul, in his sermon given in Antioch in Pisidia, said that Saul “reigned for forty years” (Acts 13:21); and this seems backed up by a reference from the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, who wrote in one place that Saul’s reign lasted forty years, divided into eighteen years before and twenty-two years after Samuel’s death (Antiquities of the Jews 6.378). However, elsewhere Josephus, drawing from another tradition, stated that Saul reigned for only twenty years (Antiquities 10.143). This concern with numbers also raises a more general question when one observes that so many of Israel’s early leaders are recorded in Scripture as having led or ruled for exactly “forty years”—including Moses (Josh 5:6), Othniel (Judg 3:11), Gideon (Judg 8:28), Eli (1 Sam 4:18), David (2 Sam 5:4), and Solomon (2 Chron 9:30). For other major leaders, like Joshua and Samuel, no time length of public service is given. As Bruce Birch notes, the Bible and other ancient texts commonly used round numbers to indicate approximate, traditional, or hyperbolic (exaggerated) rather than exact figures; and, in fact, the most frequently used round number in the Bible is “forty years,” which may have been used simply to suggest a long period of time, a full generation, or a complete term of service. Still, if “forty years” means essentially “a long time,” this is a better working number to use for the length of Saul’s reign than thirty or twenty years.

Therefore, scholars and translators have been left with trying to guess Saul’s age at his coronation and his length of reign, with their opinions varying considerably. For example, it has been suggested that Saul was crowned when he was around thirty (Hertzberg 1964, p. 103; NIV
1978; REB 1989; Youngblood 1992, p. 652), forty (NASB 1960; Klein 1983, p. 122), and fifty (Ackroyd 1971, p. 101; NEB 1970). Further, the length of his reign has been estimated to have been around ten years (John Bright 1972, in Kirsch 2000, p. 40), twenty years (Coogan 1998, p. 598; Kirsch 2000, p. 316), twenty-two years (Ackroyd 1971, p. 101; NEB 1970), thirty years (Cogan 1992, p. 1010), thirty-two years (NASB 1960), forty years (Hertzberg 1964, p. 103; Archer 1979, p. 368), and forty-two years (NIV 1978; Youngblood 1992, p. 652). If there are useful clues here in the Hebrew for 1 Sam 13:1, they probably are that Saul’s coronation age is best represented by two digits ending with “one,” and his regal term by two digits ending with “two.” To make headway, we must now look for other clues in the Biblical text that might be related to Saul’s reign.

**David called a na’ar and an ‘elem when he kills Goliath.** One can determine generally how old David was when he met Jonathan, based on two words that appear in the giant-slaying story (1 Sam 17). First, David is called a *na’ar*, twice by Saul (17:33, 55) and once by Goliath (or the narrator, 17:42), which the NRSV translates respectively as “boy” (v. 33), “young man” (v. 55), and “youth” (v. 42). Then afterward, when David appears before the king, Saul calls him an *’elem* (17:56), which has been translated as “stripling,” “young man” (Lamsa, NASB, NIV). However, Strong’s lexicon notes that *na’ar* (H5288) could be applied to a male of any age between infancy and young adulthood. For example, in Genesis it was used relating to Jacob and Esau as boys (25:27), to Ishmael as a lad of thirteen (17:25), and to Joseph at age seventeen (37:2) and then again as a thirty-year-old whom the royal cupbearer called a *na’ar* (41:12, 46), although Joseph was a slave and probably retained his youthful good looks. The term was applied sometimes to court or household servants, as can be seen in 1 Sam 9:3, where Saul’s wealthy father asked his son to take one of their *na’arim* (plural) along to search for some lost donkeys. The term *’elem*, however, refers more narrowly to a “stripling,” a youth passing into manhood. As Daniel Pecota notes, *’elem* (H5958), which appears only twice in the OT (1 Sam 17:56, 20:22), is the counterpart of *’alma* (H5959, a virgin), both referring to a youth or maiden who had reached, or perhaps was near reaching, marriageable age—one who is “ripe sexually,” as the Brown–Driver–Briggs lexicon puts it. Diana Edelman has suggested that the marriageable age in ancient Israel for males was in their twenties and for females in their teens. Later Jewish rabbis (in the treatise *Pirke Aboth* 5.21) declared that a Jewish male was old enough to marry at age eighteen, although he could not assume “full authority” as an adult until thirty. Today puberty usually appears in boys between the ages of thirteen–fifteen and in girls between the ages of nine–sixteen, and one might assume that sexual hormones began flowing in Israelite young people during these years. Most decisive, in our case here, however, is the fact that when David steps forward to fight Goliath both King Saul and the giant speak depreciatingly of him as “only a *na’ar,*” a lad, meaning that he did not look like a fully-grown male, but only a teenager. This helps determine David’s age more precisely, when he came to court, met Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1–4), and then later married Saul’s daughter, Michal (18:27). Perhaps some parents in ancient Israel liked seeing their hot-blooded teenage sons get married early, rather than to discover later that they had succumbed to temptation and so were forced into a ‘shotgun’ marriage (cf. Deut 22:28–29).

Walter Brueggemann views David at this time as “an innocent, young boy.” However, Antony Campbell reminds us that he was able to rescue his sheep from a lion or a bear, perhaps by grabbing the (small) beast around the mouth and killing it (1 Sam 17:34–35). Also, facing Goliath, David shows himself to be fast, tough, and in shape. Yet, Campbell goes too far in
calling him “a big man”\textsuperscript{18}—since when David tried on Saul’s armor, it was so large and heavy that he couldn’t even walk in it (17:38–39). Still, many days spent running after his sheep and caring for them in the fields had made David sturdy, lean and muscular. Linguistic analysis, then, along a close inspection of the text suggests that David was perhaps a strong but still young-looking nineteen-year-old when he killed Goliath and met Jonathan.

\textbf{David thirty when he was anointed king in Hebron.} In 2 Sam 5:4–5 we are told that “David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years” (NRSV). After the death of Saul and Jonathan, the Lord directed David to go with his men and live in Hebron; and “the people of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah” (2 Sam 2:1–4b). Hebron was a town located in the tribal territory of Judah, about nineteen miles south–southwest of Jerusalem, overlooking a fertile valley and containing an abundant supply of wells and springs.\textsuperscript{19} Then there followed afterward “a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David [but] David grew stronger and stronger . . .” (2 Sam 3:1, NRSV); note that bayit or “house” (H1004, KJV, NRSV, NIV) has also been translated as “followers” (LB, CEV) or “forces” (GNB). If David was around nineteen years old when he killed Goliath and met Jonathan, if he was thirty years old when Saul was killed and he (David) was declared king in Hebron, and if David’s stay in court with Jonathan was not very long (1 Sam 18–20 suggests less than a year), then he must have spent around a decade eluding Saul and his soldiers in the wilderness (1 Sam 21–30). No sooner had David unpacked his bag at court than Saul was “very angry” with him and began trying to kill him (18:8–11); and David’s safety at court was never really assured thereafter, despite Jonathan’s mediating efforts (19:4–7). Also, it should be noted, relating to the first-century idea and tradition that Saul reigned twenty-two years after the death of Samuel (1 Sam 25:1), that this is quite impossible, unless David was younger than seven years old when he killed Goliath. So David’s stay in court with Jonathan was surely less than a year, and the time he spent in the wilderness was about ten years.

\textbf{Ishbaal, Saul’s second-born son, forty years old when his father was killed.} Yet, how old was Jonathan when he met David? First, 2 Sam 2:10 notes that “Ishbosheeth [NRSV: Ishbaal] was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned for two years” (REB)—until his courage failed, after his general, Abner, was murdered (4:1). A number of verses list Saul’s sons: 1 Sam 14:49 names Jonathan, Ishyo (NRSV: Ishvi), and Malchishua; 1 Sam 31:2 names Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua (all of whom were killed along with Saul); and 1 Chron 8:33 and 9:39 name Jonathan, Malchishua, Abinadab, and Eshbaal (REB). As can be seen here, one son has been given multiple names (Ishyo / Ishvi, Eshbaal). Some scholars have reasoned that at birth he was named Ishbaal (“man of the Lord”), which is given a slightly different spelling (Eshbaal) in Chronicles. However, the Deuteronomistic editor changed his name in 2 Sam 2:8 and 12 to Ishbosheeth (“man of shame”), since at the time he lived, in the seventh–sixth centuries BC, ba ‘al (“lord,” H1167) had become a primary descriptive name for the main male Canaanite deity (“Baal,” H1168); and so it would have been considered repulsive and inappropriate as part of a good Israelite name. In Saul’s lifetime, however, ba ‘al might have been attributed as a title to Yahweh.\textsuperscript{20} Since “Ishvi” (Hebrew, 1 Sam 14:49) has no discernable meaning,\textsuperscript{21} many scholars have reconstructed it to read “Ishyo” (“man of Yahweh”).\textsuperscript{22} Yet,
Hebrew names were also sometimes shortened and given the endings of i or ay, similar to y and ie in English (as with Joey and Eddie). So, “Ishvi” might simply have been a nickname.

Another discrepancy that can be noted above is that Ishbaal is listed second in order (Ishyo / Ishvi) in the list of Saul’s sons given in 1 Sam 14:49, but last (Eshbaal) in the lists given in 1 Chron 8:33 and 9:39. So, was he the second-born or the last-born son of King Saul and Queen Ahinoam? Since royal succession was based on birth order, it would be expected that the genealogical list in 1 Sam 14:49 follow the chronological order. So why the variation in Chronicles? Yair Zakovitch has suggested that the name of Eshbaal (Ishbaal) was moved to the end of the name-list in Chronicles because he survived to succeed Saul to the throne. Yet, Ishbaal’s actual rule lasted only two years (2 Sam 2:10); and the Chronicler, a strong supporter of David, omits any description of it (cf. 2 Sam 2:8–4:8). The significance of all of this for us, however, is that since Ishbaal, Saul’s second-born son, was forty years old when his father died, Jonathan must have been only a few years older, perhaps around forty-three at the time. Since Jonathan was the first son born to this young couple, it might be assumed that another child (a son or daughter) was born the following year, and then another child one or two years later—the last one being Ishbaal. It might be suggested then that Jonathan was around thirty-two years old when he met David, who would have been around nineteen years old (with a thirteen-year age difference). Laying out a chronology for Saul, Jonathan and David during this period involves trying to fit all of the discoverable clues together until one has a unified scheme (see Table 1, “Proposed Chronology for Saul’s Reign”).

Jonathan around twenty when he enters the army and receives a military commission.
Returning to Saul’s chronology, the matter is more complicated, although still there are helpful clues to be found in the text. One of these is Saul’s appointment of Jonathan as commander over one-third of his army (13:2). Since Num 1:3 specified that at the age of twenty a male in Israel was “able to go to war,” this suggests that Jonathan was at least twenty or slightly older at this time. However, since Jonathan’s military appointment (13:2) immediately follows Saul’s royal introduction (13:1) in the Biblical text, many scholars (including Diana Edelman) have concluded that the battles at Geba and Michmash (chapters 13–14) occurred very early in Saul’s reign. However, others feel that the incidents recorded in 1 Samuel “do not give a complete picture” of Saul’s reign (Mary Evans) and that “many years” separate Saul’s coronation as king and Jonathan’s attack at Geba (Robert Gordon). Hans Hertzberg notes how Saul appears first as the young son of his father (9:1ff), then as a capable military leader (11:1ff), and then suddenly as the father of a son of military age (13:2ff). Still, he as well as Edelman suggest that Saul was made king around the age of thirty—although if 1 Sam 13 verses 1 and 2 are connected in time, this would mean that he fathered Jonathan at the age of ten or so. Edelman suggests that Saul had a 22–year reign and that Jonathan was eight to ten years old when he was given his military commission, which is hardly believable. It is more likely that a period of twenty “silent” years or so separate Saul’s coronation (chapter 12) from the grown-up Jonathan’s military appointment (13:2). It should be remembered that the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts for the Bible had no chapter or verse divisions. It was only in pre-Talmudic times (prior to 400 AD) that the Jews began dividing up their Scripture into major sections and smaller divisions to facilitate reading in the synagogue, divisions which correspond somewhat to what are found in the English Bible today. However, chapter divisions as we know them, came later, ascribed either to Cardinal Hugo de St. Caro (died 1248) or to Stephan
Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (died 1227). Surely 13:1 would best have been numbered as the last verse of chapter 12.

Saul’s ‘silent’ good years vs. his recorded bad years, including trying to kill David.

Alfred Hoerth believes that Jonathan was twenty when Saul became king (ten years before David’s birth) and at the time of Jonathan’s victory at the Michmash Pass (1 Sam 14). Then after twenty good but ‘silent years,’ relating to the Biblical record, God and Samuel reject King Saul for his disobedience (1 Sam 15). David appears to be about age fifteen when he is anointed by Samuel, and shortly thereafter he is summoned to serve at Saul’s court (1 Sam 16). Some four years later David kills Goliath, becomes a national hero and is summoned to court again, where he meets Jonathan (1 Sam 17–18); and at this time David would have been nineteen years old and Jonathan much older, forty-nine years of age. Jonathan was then killed at the age of sixty. The problem with this scheme is the difficulty of explaining how Jonathan was born and then nearly twenty years passed before Saul and Ahinoam had their second-born son, Ishbaal, who was forty years old at Jonathan’s death (2 Sam 2:10). For this reason, the gap fits much better between 1 Sam 13:1 and 2. At least Hoerth is correct in proposing that Saul had a twenty–year reign of “good years” before his bad years (1 Sam 16–31), even though the Scriptures are silent on this early period. During his good period, Saul may have consulted frequently with Samuel, as he fought various battles, perhaps some alluded to in 14:47–48. Yet the Bible is not a modern history book; rather it focuses on events which have spiritual significance, while often ignoring other periods of time that lack such significance. In some ways the story of Saul resembles that of Isaac. Both were important historically (Isaac as Abraham’s promised son, and Saul as Israel’s first king), yet they both appear to lack that depth of character which would add anything positive to the spiritual perspective of Biblical history. Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah (Gen 25:20) and sixty when Esau and Jacob were born (25:26). Then Jacob was past forty when he cheated Esau out of his blessing (26:34) and ran away to stay with his uncle Laban, where he married and lived twenty years (31:38). From Jacob’s flight, however, the focus switches from Isaac to Jacob; and so the Scriptural record says nothing about Isaac’s life for the last eighty years or so of his life, before he died at the age of 180 (35:28). Overall, Isaac’s life is reduced to a few key events, and even there he is portrayed as essentially a passive character. Similarly with Saul, one should not be surprised to find large gaps in the Biblical record of his life, suggesting that even his ‘good’ years were not really that good (spiritually); and the reader will have to wait for the real story of God’s overarching plan to resume with appearance of David.

However, can one imagine what Saul might have been doing during these two ‘silent’ decades? Wood and O’Brien suggest that the government that Saul established was simple, which probably was a good thing since the people were not ready for an elaborate rule. Archaeology has suggested that Saul’s residence in his hometown of Gibeah may have been more like a small fortress than a fancy palace; and in fact only one main, long-standing officer is associated with Saul in the OT: Abner, captain of his army and also his “uncle” (dod, H1730; 1 Sam 14:50, NIV, NJB, REB, UNASB, ESV), or a close relative of some sort (NLT: “cousin”). Saul may have held monthly meetings at the time of the new moon to discuss problems and strategies (20:24–27), or perhaps more frequently. The twelve tribes still thought of themselves as separate tribes rather than as a unified nation, and perhaps Saul realized that a strong central government could only come into existence through an eventual voluntary allegiance based on the people coming to see its merits. Relating to the military, Saul may have continued with the
approach he used at the beginning in rescuing Jabesh-gilead (11:1–11), when he simply summoned for men from all of the tribes to come and fight as enemy threats arose (vv. 7–8). The Philistines, who earlier had captured the Ark of the Covenant in battle (chapters 5–6) but had suffered a horrible outbreak of bubonic plague, from mice, perhaps retained a fear of the Israelites’ God so that they only became more and more aggressive as decades passed, finally forcing Saul to upgrade his military approach by forming a standing army and enlisting the leadership help of his eldest son, Jonathan, who in the meantime had reached military age. Still, when the new army faced its first real test, 2,400 of Saul’s three thousand troops deserted (1 Sam 13:2, 5–7, 15–16).

**Saul called a bakur (around twenty-one?) when he is anointed king.** In 1 Sam 9:2, Saul is introduced to the reader as “a handsome bakur”—the last word translated as “young man” (NRSV, Peterson), “choice young man” (KJV, cf. NASB), and “young man in his prime” (NEB, REB). Since the noun bakur (H970) comes from the verb bakar (H977) which means “to choose, to select [an excellent choice], or to be [divinely] appointed” (Wildberger), it is not surprising that many scholars have held that bakur, as it relates to Saul in 1 Sam 9:2, pointed to a man around the age of thirty, like David when he was made king in Hebron (2 Sam 5:4). Hans Wildberger defines bakur as a “fully-grown, strong young man,” who has come into the bloom of life. Daniel Pecota, in his article on Hebrew words used for young(er) men, notes that bakur, like na’ar, referred to a young man who had come into “the prime of manhood,” who had reached marriageable age—although na’ar generally referred to a slightly younger age. However, bakur in Scripture is often paired with bethula (a virgin); and bakur and bethula parallel ‘elem (a youth who has just reached or is about to reach adulthood) and ‘alma (a virgin), its counterpart. Dr. Goldenring defines adolescence as that period generally between the ages 13–19, when the adolescent experiences not only physical change and growth, but also emotional, psychological, social, and mental change and growth. Therefore, a na’ar might be located in the teen years, and an ‘elem and bakur in the late teens or early twenties. As Tony Cartledge explains, bakur became a technical word for a male “who has reached the age of assuming adult responsibilities, such as marrying and going to war (the age of twenty).”

In surveying the use of bakur and bakurim (plural) in the OT, it becomes clear that these terms really do not carry over the meaning of the verb (someone who is “chosen” for a leadership role), but rather are applied to a youth who has completed adolescence. For example, we read, “Rejoice, young man [bakur], while you are young [bakurim] . . . Remember the creator in the days of your youth [bakurim], before the days of trouble come” (Ecc 11:9a, 12:1, NRSV). Also, “The glory of youths [bakurim] is their strength . . . .” (Prov 20:29); and “[A]s a young man [bakur] marries a young woman [bethula, H1330], so shall your builder [the Lord] marry you [Israel] . . . .” (Isa 62:5). In numerous cases, bakur is paired with bethula, pointing to youths and maidens who have reached marriageable age (cf. Deut 32:25, 2 Chron 36:17). Jer 6:11 puts bakurim in an age sequence that includes: children, young men (bakurim), husband and wife, old folk, and the very aged. Isa 40:30 and Lam 5:13–14 even place bakurim in parallel with na’arim. None of these points to an older male who is thirty or forty (much less fifty) years old—but more likely to be a young guy near or in his early twenties, who has become sexually potent and no doubt has sex on his mind. Therefore, contrary to popular scholarly opinion, Saul may have been around nineteen when Samuel anointed him to become Israel’s first king. We must remember that Samuel also appears to have been recognized as a prophet of the Lord in Israel at a young age (1 Sam 3:19–20). Also, Jonathan was around twenty-one when his faith led
Israel to a great victory, and David was perhaps a nineteen-year-old when he killed Goliath, moved to court, and then was appointed by Saul to be commander over a thousand men (18:13). However, a year or less later David will flee and become the young leader of his own band of vagabonds (22:1–2). Perhaps God likes calling younger people, who are not set in their ways, who can dream big dreams, and who hopefully will place their trust in the Almighty for success. Therefore, it may be suggested that Saul was around twenty when he became king of Israel.


There is one other problem still to be dealt with, however. When David returns to court after killing Goliath, Saul does not seem to recognize him (17:55–58). After he has become a national hero and celebrity, the king curiously asks Abner, “[W]hose son is this young man [’elem]?” and the general does not seem to know (1 Sam 17:55)—neither one seeming to recall that David earlier had served as the king’s lyre-player and armor-bearer (16:19-23). Of course, we cannot be sure how long David stayed with Saul the first time or how regularly, since 18:14 explains that “David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father’s sheep.” Perhaps he missed his animals and the peacefulness of being with them; and so he asked the king for repeated leaves, which were granted him, until finally Saul got others to fulfill his duties. Also, perhaps David had grown and filled out so much that the disturbed, drunken king did not recognize him as the earlier skinny, fourteen-year-old lyre-player. Whatever the situation and explanation, there could be envisioned a five–year period between David coming to Saul’s court as his musician and then later as the famous national hero.

**Summary.** Although some numbers have dropped out of the “royal introduction” for Saul (1 Sam 13:1), those that remain suggest that Saul was x+1 years old when he began to rule and that he reigned for x+2 years. References by Paul (Acts 13:21) and Josephus (Antiquities) suggest that Saul may have reigned around forty years. Saul is called a bakur at the time of his coronation as Israel’s first king (1 Sam 9–10, esp. 9:2). A survey of the use of bakur in the OT shows that this word refers to a “young man” who had reached the age of assuming adult responsibilities, like going to war (age twenty) and marrying. So, Saul could have been around twenty-one at his coronation. If his eldest son, Jonathan, was of military age, perhaps twenty-one, when Saul later appointed him as a commander in the army (13:2), then twenty years passed since Saul’s coronation, with Jonathan possibly born the year before. These twenty years may be called Saul’s “silent years” of good rule, although the Bible records little, except certain battles which occurred them may be alluded to in 14:47–48. If Jonathan was twenty-one when he was given his military post, Saul would have been around forty-one years of age. Turning to David, the Bible records that he was thirty when Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle and he was then crowned king over the tribe of Judah (2 Sam 5:4–5). If Ishbaal (nickname, Ishvi), Saul’s second-born son, was forty years old at the same time (and when he was crowned king over the northern Israeliite tribes, cf. 1 Sam 14:49, 2 Sam 2:8–10), then Jonathan at his death must have been only a few years older than Ishbaal, perhaps forty-three years of age. Thus, twenty-two years had passed since his early attacks at Geba and the Michmash Pass (13:3–14:15). David is called an ‘elem (17:56, KJV: a stripling) when he fights Goliath and meets Jonathan for the first time (17:1–18:4), a term which referred to a youth who had become “ripe sexually” and had reached marriageable age; so David may have been around nineteen. David will marry the princess.
Michal a few months after arriving at court (18:20–21, 27). Thus, David may have been around fourteen when Samuel anointed him to be future king and Saul then summoned him to court to serve as his lyre-player (chapter 16). Jonathan was around thirty-two when he first met the nineteen-year-old David. However, David’s precarious stay at court and his time with Jonathan lasted less than a year, after which he fled from Saul to wander for about a decade in the Judean wilderness. Saul was probably twenty-one at his coronation, and ruled for forty-two years, between 1047–1005 BC.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 3A
1. J. Green, Interlinear Bible, 1 Sam 13:1.
4. Robinson, Let Us Be Like, p. 73.
7. Ibid.
12. Webster’s New World College Dictionary, “stripling.”
17. Brueggemann, David’s Truth, p. 23.
24. Saul also had two daughters, Merab and Michal (1 Sam 14:49), as well as two sons by the concubine Rizpah, named Armoni and Mephibosheth (the latter not to be confused with Jonathan’s son with the same name, cf. 2 Sam 21:7–9.
29. Evans, 1 and 2 Samuel, p. 71.
31. Hertzberg, I & II Samuel, p. 103.
34. Two Talmuds served as a commentary on and expansion of the earlier Mishnah (“Interpretation” on Scripture) compiled by Jewish rabbis ca. 200 AD—including the Jerusalem Talmud (ca. 400 AD) and the Babylonia Talmud (ca. 600 AD). Cf. Neusner, “Talmud,” p. 717.
37. Ibid., pp. 252–253.
42. Wildberger, ‘bhr,’” pp. 209, 212.
44. Pecota and Simpson, “Young(er) (Man),” pp. 1165–1166.
45. Goldenring, “Puberty and Adolescence,” p. 3.
### Table 1

**Proposed Chronology for Saul’s Reign**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event(s)</th>
<th>David’s Age</th>
<th>Jonathan’s Age</th>
<th>Saul’s Age</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saul marries</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1049 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 year follows)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saul is anointed to be king, and Jonathan is born</td>
<td>birth</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1048 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 year follows)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saul’s coronation in Gilgal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1047 BC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20 years follow)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saul reorganizes the army, the Battle at Michmash</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1027 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 years follow)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saul subdues the Amalekites, then is rejected by God</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1022 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 year follows)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David is anointed by Samuel, and joins Saul’s court</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1021 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 years follow)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>David kills Goliath and meets Jonathan at court</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1016 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 year follows)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David flees Saul’s court, parts from Jonathan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1015 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10 years follow)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saul and Jonathan are killed, David made king in Hebron</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1005 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It reliable information can be gained from 1 Sam 13:1, it would seem that Saul was x+1 years old when he first began to rule (= 21) and he reigned thereafter a total of x+2 number of years (= 42). To Saul’s 20 good but “silent” years of reign may be added 5 more years (1047–1022 BC) before the Lord and Samuel ‘reject’ him after his disobedience in dealing with Amalekites. Then Saul’s 17 declining ‘bad years’ of depression and decline follow (1022–1005 BC).
CHAPTER 4
The Two Heroes Meet
1 Samuel 18–19

After killing the giant, when David is brought into Saul’s presence, something very unusual happens, for in 1 Sam 18:1 we read: “When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (NRSV). Unfortunately, this verse is not easy to understand because of ambiguous words (“loved” and “soul”) and strange expressions (“bound to the soul of David” and “loved him [David] as his own soul”). Furthermore, verses 3–4 describe Jonathan as making a secret pact with and giving special gifts to David “because of his love” for him, acts which are not further explained, leaving unanswered questions. Therefore, this pact and these gifts will be examined in depth in Chapter 6 (“The Partners’ Three Covenants”) and Supplement 6A (“Jonathan’s Gifts and Their Secrets”).

The so-called “Rise of David” (1 Sam 16:1–2 Sam 5:10) follows the movement of a humble shepherd boy on his journey to finally become the great shepherd king of Israel. However, the central focus here is on the conflict that breaks out between Saul and David, which increasingly reveals the advance of David and the decline of Saul, and that ends only when the king is killed in the Battle of Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31). The key theological theme is “[A]nd the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day [when Samuel anointed him as future king] forward” (16:13b, NRSV); and at the same time “the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul . . .” (v. 14). David’s path was not easy. This is clearly shown in the section to which we now turn, chapters 18–19, which describe David’s short stay in Saul’s court (and its environs), surely less than a year. During this time, the valiant hero struggles to survive as Saul plots to eliminate him as a (perceived) rival, since David has shown himself to be a charismatic warrior with more leadership potential than the king himself. Of primary interest are the emotions expressed in 18:1–4 and their setting in chapters 18–19. Chapter 18 may be titled “David Joins the House of Saul, with Mixed Results,” and its key verbs are “love” (ahab, H157, in 18:1, 6, 20, 22, 28; plus ahaba, H160, in 18:3, a variant of ahab) and “fear” (yare, H3372, in 18:12, 29). Cartledge notes that gur in 18:15 (H1481, NRSV: Saul “stood in awe”) may also be translated as “lived in fear” (NIV: “was afraid” of David). In this chapter, Jonathan ‘loves’ David and makes a secret pact with him (18:1–4); Saul uses David, but grows increasingly fearful of him (18:5–19); and David forces Saul’s hand to give him Michal as a promised princess-wish for killing Goliath (18:20–30, cf. 17:25). Chapter 19 may be titled “Saul Becomes Devoted to Trying to Kill David,” and its key verbs are “kill” (mut, H4191, in 19:1, 2, 5, 11, 15) and “escapes” (malat, H4422, in 19:10, 11, 12, 17, 18). In this chapter, Jonathan brokers a peace for David with Saul, although it is short-lived (19:1–10); Michal concocts a plan to save David’s life (19:11–17); and God’s spirit protects David as Saul follows his tracks to Samuel’s camp (19:18–24). These two dramatic chapters are as exciting to read as any modern psychological drama.

Public adoration of David, and Saul’s jealousy. When David, now in his late teens, brings Goliath’s head to Saul, we are told that Jonathan (sitting or standing nearby) “loved” David (18:1, 3). Then later we are told that Michal the younger princess “loved” David (18:20, 28), the king’s servants (high-ranking members at court) loved David (18:22), and in fact “all Israel and Judah [the soldiers?] loved David” (18:16). Gnana Robinson labels 18:1–16 “David,
the Darling of Jonathan and the People.” Hans Hertzberg notes, David “takes hearts by storm, and everyone falls for him . . . [A]Il, one after the other, are captivated by David’s irresistible appearance”—the father, the son, the daughter, the court, and the army. Yet, in a dark counterpoint, Saul grows increasingly uneasy with David. It starts out as ‘anger’ and ‘displeasure’ at the women who praise the youthful hero as victor as much as (McCarter) or more than (Robinson) the king himself (18:6–8, NRSV), which causes Saul to ‘eye’ (become envious of) David from that day on (v. 9). He is “afraid” of David because he sees that the Lord is with him (18:12); and even when the king sends David out of his sight to the battlefront, he survives and succeeds (vv. 13–14). Then when Saul decides to offer him Michal’s hand in marriage as a “snare” (so that she can spy on David, 18:20–21), the king ends up only being “still more afraid,” when he realizes how much she loves David (18:29) and has given her loyalty to him (19:17).

After twice throwing his spear at David (18:10–11), then at the beginning of chapter 19 Saul “goes public” (Gordon) with his desire to kill him (19:1). Saul openly becomes the hunter and David his prey. Ironically, he reveals his murderous intentions to Jonathan, whom we are told “took great delight” (NRSV, kaphets, H2654), or “delighted much” (KJV) in David. “Love” and “delight” often occur together in sexual passages in the OT. In this reconciliation scene (19:1–7), Jonathan leads his father out to an open space (“a field”) near where David is hiding, so that David also can assess the king’s attitude; and then afterward the prince fills his friend in on the details of his conversation with Saul. Jonathan appears to calm his father’s fears, reminding the king of David’s service and usefulness (vv. 4–5); and so he is able to return to court. Yet, Jonathan no doubt wants David nearby himself, as well (Jobling). David once again resumes his duties as court musician and army commander (19:8–10). However, it is not long before Saul goes berserk again and tries “to pierce David and the wall” with a violent thrust of his spear (19:10), which he always carries with him. David escapes only because he can jump quick as lightning. Then David runs home (19:11–17) to his new bride, Michal (see below); but she warns him that his life is still in danger, and indeed Saul sends soldiers to guard their door, with instructions to kill David in the morning. Some interpreters think that this may have occurred on their wedding night. If so, Saul at least seems willing to allow them one consummated encounter before the execution; but Michal forgoes sex in her haste to get David moving. She lowers him out of a window into the darkness, where he apparently lands outside the city wall so that he can escape unobserved. Then she makes a replica of David, placing a life-size household idol (teraphim, H794) on the bed, covering it up, and placing a wig or a piece of goat’s hair on its head. In the morning, she moans to Saul’s soldiers that David is sick; and as they run back to Saul for further instructions, David gains a little more time to distance himself from the king. In the final scene of this chapter (19:18–24), David goes to Samuel at Ramah, a rustic village two and a half miles north of Gibeah, Saul’s capital; and then he goes with him to hide out at “Naioth” (navot, H5121, 19:19), a shepherd’s camp or pasturelands (cf. nava, H4999) where Samuel no doubt presides over an assembly of prophets. But Saul’s henchmen are right on their heels. David escapes only because the Lord’s spirit lifts Saul’s three bands of dispatched assassins into a state of uncontrollable ecstasy, where they begin speaking gibberish. When Saul himself shows up, he is “seized” in the same way, begins to dance in a frenzy, throws off all of his clothes, and then sinks into unconsciousness (19:23–24). No one can thwart the will of God, who is David’s real deliverer.


Jonathan giving his heart to David. However, returning to the opening verse (18:1), what does it mean that Jonathan became “bound” to David and “loved him as his own soul”? Since the 1960s, interpreters have argued about whether this love was primarily political affiliation, general affection, or homoerotic attraction (or some combination mostly of the first two), with the majority emphasizing a political significance.33 However, with the publication of Tom Horner’s Jonathan Loved David (1978), which viewed their relationship primarily as homosexual, this last view over time has come to find increasing scholarly interest and support. Horner wrote, “Jonathan was obviously smitten” with David, and “whatever he saw he liked.”34 David Damrosch (1987) agrees that this was “love at first sight,” and a love that was familial (as close as between brothers), political (offering loyalty to David), and erotic (romantic and homosexual) in nature.35 Robert Polzin (1989), pointing to the physical description of David in 16:12, notes, “We stand before the Deuteronomist’s David much as we would before Michelangelo’s statue [of David, 1501–1504] and are struck by the figure’s grace and beauty.”36 Jonathan Kirsch (2000) sees in Jonathan “a man wholly governed by his appetites and passions.” He is “smitten with love for David on the very day that David smote Goliath.”37 Susan Ackerman (2005) notes that “love” is used in many places in the Bible to describe heterosexual erotic and sexual attraction, and there is no reason why it cannot, and should not, here in 18:1–4 refer to a “homoeroticized relationship” that was entered into by Jonathan and David.38

Yet, what does the wording mean more specifically, that “the soul [nephesh, H5315] of Jonathan was bound [gashar, H7194] to the soul [nephesh] of David, and Jonathan loved [ahab, H157] him as his own soul [nephesh]” (18:1)? We can get some idea of the intensity expressed here from another passage,39 where this same language is applied to the patriarch Jacob, who greatly “loves” [ahab] his youngest son, Benjamin (Gen 44:20). In fact, Judah (an older son of Jacob) tells the Egyptian minister of state (Joseph, but still unrecognized) that his father’s “life [nephesh] is bound up [gashar] in the boy’s life [nephesh]” and if Benjamin does not return with his brothers, “he [Jacob] will die” (Gen 44:30–31, RSV). Various translations say that “[Jacob’s] heart is bound up with him [Benjamin]” (JB, NJB), his “life is wrapped up” with the boy (GNB2), and “He loves him so much that he will die if Benjamin does not come back with me [Judah]” (CEV, italics added). Although this is not a homosexual context, still it describes a feeling for a beloved one so deep, an attachment so strong, and a need to have someone near so pervasive that the affected party feels like he or she will die if deprived of this. Gay people can also understand how intense love and desire can be sometimes, not only on a psychological but a sexual level. Yet, what about the phrase “loved him as his own soul [nephesh]”? As Samuel Terrien notes, nephesh is far from a reference to the pure and immortal psychē (G5590) or “soul” in Hellenistic philosophy;40 nephesh is not a spiritual entity opposed to an impure “flesh.” No such dualism existed in Hebrew thinking. Instead, nephesh referred to “the fullness of self,” including the body (physical impulses) and erōs (sexual passion). That Jonathan loved David as his “whole being” points, Terrien believes, to an erotic aspect in this friendship.41 It is interesting to note that many translations render nephesh as “life” in Gen 44:30, but then as “soul” in 1 Sam 18:1, 3 (KJV, RSV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV)—or another good translation is “heart” (44:30, LB, NJB). Some better translations of 18:1 do read: “Jonathan found himself bound up with David” (McCartner 1980, p. 300), “Jonathan was deeply attracted to David” (GNB2), and he “had given his heart to David” (REB). However, the Hebrew language is far too strong in this passage to support such restricted or tepid renderings as Jonathan became “one in spirit” with David (NIV), they became “best friends” (CEV), or Jonathan was simply “fond” of David (NAB).
Michal also falling in love with David. An intriguing side of this story, not often given the attention it deserves, is the relationship that develops between Jonathan and David and Michal. Michal appears on the scene in 18:20, after Saul offered to give David his eldest daughter, Merab, as his wife (18:17–19), but then married her off to Adriel the Meholathite (v. 19), probably for political advantage. Saul’s offer to David had to do with the reward promised anyone who could kill Goliath, rumored earlier among the soldiers (17:25), although also, in return for Merab, Saul had requested that David “fight the LORD’s battles” for him in the future (18:17). Saul also must have felt apprehension toward this, since marriage to any of Saul’s daughters would place David in a potential position to succeed him to the throne—and the thought must have crossed David’s mind, as well, that this might just lead him “from son-in-law . . . to dead” (Green). Then Michal lets it be known that she “loved David” (18:20, NRSV), the only place in the OT (except for the Song of Songs) where it is says explicitly that a woman loved a man. Even though it may be assumed that many Israelite brides loved, or came to love, their husbands, it apparently takes an aggressive, unorthodox, and “unfeminine” woman to get her love mentioned in the official record. Still, what young woman (or some men, for that matter) would not be attracted to a virile, athletic, youthful, handsome hero; and Michal makes no attempt to hide her feelings. The same basic verb for “love” (ahab) is used for her feelings (18:20, 28) as for Jonathan’s feelings (18:1, 3). In this heterosexual context (18:20), ahab has been translated as “had fallen in love” (McCarter 1980, p. 315), “fell in love” (JB, NEB, GNB2, REB, NJB), and “was in love” with David (NIV, CEV, Peterson). However, when it comes to describing Jonathan’s feelings for David (18:1), nervous translators tone down the language to read more blandly, he “loved” David (McCarter 1980, pp. 300–301; NIV, NJB), “had grown to love” him (NEB, REB) or, removing the word “love” even, “thought as much” of David as he did of himself (CEV) or “was deeply impressed” with David (Peterson). One sees clearly here how homophobic bias can affect translation (Fewell and Gunn). However, in both cases in this chapter when Jonathan appears and then when Michal is introduced, the narrator first draws attention to each one’s erotic feelings for David (18:1, 20); and then, in case the reader has missed this, he mentions that love a second time in both cases (18:3, 28).

When Saul learns of Michal’s love for David, he decides to use this as a trap (18:21) to lead David to certain death, requesting of him first a bride price of one hundred Philistine foreskins. David’s evasive answer to the king’s offer shows how much he is on his guard. However, is his reply, “I am a poor man and of no repute” (18:23, NRSV), an expression of genuine humility or just polite court language? Does it express a genuine interest in Michal or is it simply a subtle mocking of the undependable, fickle Saul? Whatever the case, no Philistine soldier is going to give up his foreskin without a fight to the death, not to mention the fact that touching uncircumcised Philistines’ phalluses would make David and his men contaminated and “unclean.” Yet, those who think that David would have recoiled from touching Jonathan’s private parts, or the other way around, need to see David and his men here running through the Philistine ranks, slaughtering men left and right, then lifting up their short tunics, holding up their genitals, and cutting off the foreskins. In the end, in an act of “bold over-trumping” of the king, David and his men collect two hundred specimens; and then he stands before Saul and his court, counting each and every prepuce so that no one can doubt that he has fulfilled the king’s bride price and no way can the king now renege on his promise to make David a part of the royal family. Much later, after David becomes king, in an act of free abandonment he will dance alongside the Ark of the Covenant, as it is carried into Jerusalem, dressed only in a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:12–14), a short, sleeveless vest that left his genitals fully exposed for all to see (v. 20).
As Jonathan Kirsch notes, the Talmudic sages and Church Fathers would later try to make the real David over into a plaster saint by concealing, denying, or explaining away many things which the Bible really discloses to us about David, this very human but also divinely-called individual.

In the end, Michal shows her true love for David by helping him escape (19:11–17), at no small danger to herself because she must then face Saul’s anger. Yet, David will never again spend a night at Saul’s court or with Michal. It is also interesting that in David’s parting scene with Michal there appear no last-minute hugs, kisses or tears, before David bolts out the window and is gone in the night. Moreover, when he returns from Samuel’s camp (20:1ff), it is not to see Michal or seek her help, but to find Jonathan and his love, comfort, strength and advice (20:1–23). As Susan Ackerman (2005) notes, “[B]racketing the story of David’s and Michal’s marriage (1 Sam 18:20–29a) between the two stories that introduce David’s and Jonathan’s marriage-like relationship (1 Sam 18:1–4 and 19:1–7) . . . suggests . . . that Jonathan is not only the structural equivalent of a wife to David, but a wife who supplants one of his sisters.” In effect, Michal is “squeezed out” and her relationship becomes “parenthetical” (only a minor insert) in the primary story of Jonathan and David’s love.

Summary. In 1 Sam 18-19 the way in which Jonathan’s relationship with David brackets and then squeezes out David’s relationship with Michal (whom he probably married as a way to get to the throne) suggests that Jonathan becomes a kind of “wife” to David, in a “marriage-like relationship” (Ackerman). In fact, when David leaves Michal and the threat of Saul’s guard (19:12), there are no last-minute hugs, kisses or tears (nor does he ever show her any emotional warmth); and when the distraught David returns to Gibeah, he does not seek out Michal but Jonathan and his love, closeness, comfort, strength and advice (20:1–23). When we read in the opening statement (18:1, NRSV) that “the soul [nephesh] of Jonathan was bound [qashar] to the soul [nephesh] of David, and Jonathan loved [ahab] him as his own soul [nephesh],” there is no reason why ahab here cannot carry the idea of “fell in love with,” as this verb is translated in 18:20, relating to Michal, in the JB, NEB, GNB2, REB, and NJB, or “was in love with” in the NIV, CEV, and Peterson. It should be noted that nephesh in Hebrew referred not to a spiritual or immortal entity, but rather to the whole self, including physical sensations and sexual passion (Terrien). Elsewhere in the OT nephesh is translated as “heart” or “life,” e.g., referring to Jacob’s intense love for his youngest son Benjamin (Gen 44:30), where we are told that “his heart [nephesh] is bound up with him” (JB, NJB), or “his life [nephesh] is bound up in the lad’s life” (KJV, RSV, NASB, RSV2, NKJV; and cf. NEB, NRSV, REB). The point is that Jacob felt that he would die if the boy was taken from him (v. 31). Although this is not an erotic context, it still demonstrates a kind of love that is so intense that someone feels like he cannot go on living if someone dear is not by his side; and this kind of overpowering love can be felt in both nonromantic and romantic situations, by both heterosexuals and gays. Simply put, Jonathan fell in love with David, and longed to be with him, day after day. In modern English 1 Sam 18:1 might be paraphrased as: Then “Jonathan’s heart [nephesh] fell for David, and he became so attached to him [qashar] that he could not stop thinking about him; in fact, he loved him so completely—more than life [nephesh] itself—that he felt like he would die if he did not have this handsome youth by his side as his beloved” (1 Sam 18:1). This was indeed “love at first sight” (Damrosch), where the prince is “smitten with love for David” (Kirsch), because David had grown into a youth as strikingly formed as Michelangelo’s famous marble statue (Polzin). There is no reason to deny that we are dealing here with a “homoeroticized relationship” (Ackerman).
END NOTES, CHAPTER 4
2. Cf. Supplement 3A, in this text.
4. Ibid., p. 231.
8. Robinson, Let Us Be Like, p. 103.
11. Robinson, Let Us Be Like, p. 103.
12. Kyle McCarter writes that the reference to “thousands” and “ten thousands” in the women’s chant in 18:7 is simply a poetic way of saying that their heroes have killed “a great many,” with no real distinction made between Saul and David (I Samuel, pp. 311–312). Still, Saul probably heard “but” instead of “and” (Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, p. 214).
23. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, p. 223.
25. However, J. P. Fokkelman thinks that Michal and David had perhaps “a few weeks” together, before David had to flee (Narrative Art, 2, p. 272).
26. Remember that Rahab’s home was located adjacent to the city wall at Jericho (Josh 2:15), so that Joshua’s spies were able to make a similar nighttime escape (Hertzberg, I & II Samuel, p. 166).
32. Hertzberg, I & II Samuel, p. 166.
34. Horner, Jonathan Loved David, p. 27.
35. Damrosch, Narrative Covenant, p. 203.
37. Kirsch, King David, p. 59.
39. Damrosch, Narrative Covenant, p. 203.
40. “Hellenistic” refers to Greek history, culture, and thought after the death of Alexander the Great, in 323 BC.
44. R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, p. 186; McKenzie, *King David*, p. 80.
54. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 2, p. 239.
56. We are never told anywhere in Scripture that David loved Michal.
64. Ackerman, *When Heroes Love*, p. 181.
Only a handful of strikingly handsome men are singled out as such in the Bible. For example, Joseph is described as “fair in form [yepheh to’ar] and fair of appearance [yapheh mar’eh]” (Gen 39:6, J. Green’s literal translation), or “handsome and good-looking” (NRSV). Further, if this is read as a hendiadys (a Hebrew construction where two words connected by “and” express a singular idea), then it may be said that Joseph was “stunningly beautiful” (Peterson). The description of Joseph as “a goodly person and well-favored” in the KJV is a completely inadequate translation. Saul is introduced as a “handsome [tob] young man” (1 Sam 9:2, NRSV). Of Absalom (David’s third son, by Maacah), it was said, “Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty [yapheh] as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish” and he cut his [long] hair only once a year (2 Sam 14:25–26). Also, Adonijah (David’s fourth son, by Haggith) was “a very handsome man [tob to’ar];” he, like Absalom, would try to grab Israel’s throne, at the end of David’s life (1 Kings 1:5–12). Later, Daniel and his three friends (Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah) were among those Judean youths selected by the Babylonian chief eunuch because they were “without physical defect and handsome [tob mar’eh], Dan 1:4; J. Green: ‘of good look’,” as well as of noble birth and good education, to be taken captive, castrated, and trained to serve King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 1:3–6). An African, “an Egyptian, a handsome man [mar’eh]” was killed by David’s valiant warrior Benaiah (2 Sam 23:21, NRSV). Throughout these references, the key words used are tob (Strong H2896, ’good, pleasing, desirable, handsome’) and yapheh (H3303, ‘beautiful, handsome’), combined with to’ar (Dan 1:4; J. Green: ‘good look’), or mar’eh (H4758, ‘appearance’).

It is interesting to note here that ‘handsome blood’ seems to run in Jonathan’s and David’s families. Although we don’t know what Jonathan looked like from any physical description given of him in the Bible, 1 Sam 9:2 records that Saul, his father, was “handsome” (tob) and very tall (“he stood head and shoulders above everyone else,” NRSV). Since attractive males often marry attractive females and produce attractive children, Jonathan could well have been good-looking and tall like his father. When Samuel comes to anoint a new king from among Jesse’s sons, he is first impressed with the “appearance [mar’eh]” and “height” of Eliab, the eldest (1 Sam 16:6), who looked like what one might expect a king should look like, tall and handsome. However, after God rebukes Samuel for thinking that Eliab’s good looks were a sign that he would make a good ruler (v. 7), the reader is completely astonished when David appears and the narrator ebulliently and excitedly describes him as being “altogether handsome!” (Tony Cartledge, cf. 16:12). The author (or editor) was such an admirer of David (or the Davidic traditions) that he cannot help but draw repeated attention to his appearance. Later, David’s stunning good looks are passed on to (and noted in) his sons, Absalom and Adonijah.

David’s beauty, repeatedly noted. In the early material on David (1 Sam 16–17), three times the narrator calls attention to David’s beauty—more times than in any other case in the Bible. First, in 16:12 the prophet Samuel notes that David “was ruddy [admoni, H132], and had beautiful eyes [yapheh ’ayinim, H3303, H5869], and was handsome [to look at, tob ro’i, H2896, H7210]” (NRSV). Then, in 16:18 when a young court servant recommends David to Saul, he describes him (among other things) as “a handsome [to’ar, H8389] person” (NKJV). Finally, in
17:42 the giant notes that David, his opponent, was “a youth, ruddy [admoni] and good-looking [yapheh mar’eh, H3303, H4758]” (NKJV). Here, the common language used throughout the OT to describe beauty is repeated again, including yapheh and tob (“handsome” in both cases), along with to’ar and mar’eh (“[in] form or appearance”). However, new words in the descriptions of David include ro’i (H7210, “a . . . sight [to look at]” and admoni and ‘ayinim, translated as “ruddy” and “eyes,” respectively, in the NRSV—although these last two Hebrew words have presented a challenge to interpreters.

The servant’s and giant’s descriptions. Turning first to the second and third descriptions of David’s appearance (which are easy to interpret), the court servant in 1 Sam 16:18 calls David “a handsome person” (NKJV). Kyle McCarter points out here that the Hebrew ‘ys t’r (ish to’ar), meaning literally “a man of form,” is shorthand for “a man of good form,” which the Septuagint Greek translation makes clear. In 1 Kings 1:6, in the Hebrew text, to’ar (form) is found combined with tob (good) in the description of Adonijah’s physique. Clearly, “very handsome” (NIV) is a much better translation here than “very goodly” (KJV). Then in 1 Sam 17:42 the giant, according to the narrator, describes David as “a youth, ruddy and good-looking” (NKJV). Here McCarter thinks that only “a youth [na’ar, H5288]” was in the original text, but then it was expanded by the editor of 1 Samuel by taking language from 16:12, to draw attention once again to David’s handsome features. The storyteller clearly has an interest in male beauty and in David’s appearance, and cannot help but repeatedly note that David is “a good-looking young man” (Barbara Green). The Hebrew wording for “good-looking” (yapheh mar’eh) is different here than in 16:12 (tob ro’i), but the meaning is the same: “beautiful in appearance” and “beautiful to behold.” The word na’ar (H5288) applied to David in 1 Sam 17:33, 42, 55 refers to a youth no older than a teenager, while ‘elem (H5958, 17:56) points to a youth who is coming into or has reached adulthood. The Brown–Driver–Briggs lexicon uses “sexually ripe” to describe an ‘alma, (young woman, H5959), the counterpart for an ‘elem (young man)—reminding us that lasses and lads at this age were ready to mate sexually. Probably David was around eighteen years of age when he faced Goliath.

Samuel’s description. The primary description of David’s appearance, however, is the first mention of it by the old prophet, in 1 Sam 16:12, where he notes that “he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (NRSV). All three parts of this description are noteworthy: ‘Handsome.’” Looking at the last part first (the most simple expression here), it can be noted that the two words tob ro’i mean literally a “good sight [to behold].” Many modern translations have rendered these two Hebrew words as “handsome” (Hertzberg 1964, p. 136; NEB 1970; Ackroyd 1971, p. 131; GNB2 1983; NRSV 1989; REB 1989) or as “handsome features” (NIV 1978), “attractive appearance” (NJB 1985), and “good-looking” (NKJV 1982, CEV 1995, Peterson 2002). Translations that flatten the meaning include “goodly to look at” (KJV 1611), a “pleasant bearing” (JB 1968), and a “fine appearance” (Klein 1983, p. 157). Instead, Lamsa (1933) captures the true sense with “very handsome.”

“Beautiful eyes.” The Hebrew yapheh ‘ayinim has been read as saying either that David was pleasing to look at or he had beautiful eyes—he was a “good-looker” or “beautiful-of-eyes.” Translations that take the former route have suggested “beautiful countenance” (KJV 1611; Fokkelman 1986, p. 130), “fine appearance” (NIV 1978), “handsome to the eye” (McCartter 1980, p. 274), and “handsome to look at” (Elman 1994, p. 228; NAB 1995). However, because “handsome to the eye” so closely parallels the last part of this description
“handsome [to look at]”), most translators have read ’ayinim ("eyes," plural of ’ayin, H5869) in 16:12 to be a reference to David’s eyes, not to the onlooker’s.15 In fact, ’ayin is the most common Hebrew word used in the OT to refer to the physical organ of sight.16 Elsewhere we read of Leah’s “eyes” (’ayinim, Gen 29:17a), although the accompanying adjective rak has been variously translated, as “weak” (RSV 1952, NIV 1978), or probably better as “tender” (KJV 1611; Hamilton 1995, p. 257) or even “lovely” (NRSV 1989, NJB 1985).17 However, Leah is paled by the adjectives piled up for Rachel, her sister (29:17b), who is described as yapheh to’ar and yapheh mar’eh (literally “beautiful in form” twice), rendered as “shapely and beautiful” (NJB 1985), “beautiful in both face and figure” (REB 1989), “shapely, and in every way a beauty” (LB 1976), and probably best of all “stunningly beautiful” (Peterson 2002). In the same way, multiple Hebrew terms of beauty are heaped on David—painting him as one of the most gorgeous males in the Bible. Moreover, 1 Sam 16:12 is the only place in the OT where a male’s “beautiful eyes” are mentioned. Such translations as “bright eyes” (Ackroyd 1971, p. 131; NEB 1970; NKJV 1982; REB 1989), “eyes [that] sparkled” (GNB2 1983, cf. CEV 1995), “pleasant eyes” (LB 1976), “fair eyes” (Fox 1999, p. 81), or “fine eyes” (Alter 1999, p. 97) water down the Hebrew and introduce shades of meaning that have no root in the original language.

“Ruddy.” But what does it mean that David was admoni, rendered in most translations as “ruddy”? Admoni (H132) relates to dam (H1818, “blood”), adam (H119, “to be red”) and adom (H122, “red; ruddy”)—the last being the most frequent term found for this color in the OT and used, e.g., to describe the “red” bean stew that Jacob gave to Esau (Gen 25:30, 34, CEV).18 Adam (H120) was the name given to the first earthing, in general (“man,” H120) and in particular (“Adam,” H121), who had red blood in his veins and may have looked reddish like the dust of the earth from which he was formed (Gen 2:7).19 However, admoni (H132), “red; ruddy” is a rare word, appearing only in two references, relating to David (16:12, 17:42) and in Gen 25:25, where we are told that the newborn Esau “came out red [admoni], all his body like a hairy mantle” (NRSV) or “cloak” (NJB). Esau was later called Edom (H123, a nickname meaning “Red,” Gen 25:30; 36:1, 8, 43) and also a name that was given to the region where he and his family settled and their descendents prospered, southeast of the Salt Sea (Dead Sea), where there is sandstone reddish in color.20 Claus Westermann held that admoni pointed to a “reddish-brown” color,21 while John Hartley more to a “tawny [tan]” color.22 However, this rare term probably referred to something more than a tan. No one knows the exact color, except that admoni means “reddish”23 and we do well to stick with that. Nahum Sarna believed that, since red-headedness sometimes was associated in ancient times with the dangerous and sinister, a ruddy complexion is inferred; although he also notes that in Egyptian and Cretan art, as well as in Ugaritic texts, red skin was equated with heroes.24 Clearly, the term is applied to David in a most complimentary way.25 Victor Hamilton notes that admoni could refer to the color of the baby Esau’s skin or hair, but probably the latter.26 Robert Graves and Raphael Patai visualized the baby Esau as having red, shaggy hair—which some rabbis viewed as a sign of his later murderous inclinations toward Jacob, his brother.27

However, it is not surprising that some interpreters feel that admoni describes David’s reddish skin color. Tony Cartledge notes that “fairer skin” would stand out among a dark-completed people.28 Lighter skin would have been striking in appearance.29 Jerry Landay describes David as “average in stature, but with finely chiseled Semitic features, dark hair, a ruddy complexion, and almond-shaped eyes of exceptional beauty” (italics added).30 Most English translations of 16:12 have rendered admoni by using the ambiguous “ruddy” (thirteen out of twenty versions checked)—although some describe David (16:12) as a boy with “fresh
complexion” (JB 1968), a “healthy” boy (GNB2 1983, CEV 1995), with “ruddy cheeks” (Ackroyd 1971, p. 131; NEB 1970; REB 1989), or “ruddy-faced” (LB 1976). The worst translation, undoubtedly, is Robert North’s “pink-cheeked babyface” (1982).³¹ Yet, other interpreters think that admoni describes David’s reddish hair. For example, Robert Alter sees David as “the fair-haired boy of Israel [and] if the term ‘red’ or ‘reddish’ refers to hair color, it might be something like auburn [reddish-brown].”³² Carl Keil and Franz Delitzsch note that red hair no doubt would be regarded as “a mark of beauty in southern lands, where hair is generally black.”³³ However, still a third option recognizes that often reddish hair and reddish skin color go hand in hand. Fred Young speaks of David as having “red hair and fair skin.”³⁴ Hans Hertzberg applies admoni to “fair hair and colouring,” which match David’s whole attitude which is “fair and winning.”³⁵ The New Oxford Annotated Bible says that David was both “‘reddish’ of hair and complexion.”³⁶ Steven McKenzie envisions David as being short, “with a ruddy complexion and thick, reddish-brown, uncontrollable hair.”³⁷

What is perfectly clear, as Jonathan Kirsch writes, is that David “was not only a charismatic figure who inspired love and loyalty but also ‘a comely [attractive] person,’ a man of compelling physical beauty”—even like a fairy-tale prince³⁸ He appears in court (16:18ff) as a “bewilderingly beautiful boy with a magical gift for the harp [lyre],”³⁹ and he only grows more striking as he enters young manhood. The description of David’s looks in these three references would transform him, in fact, into “an icon of sensuous male attractiveness,” not unlike the Greek Apollo or Roman Antinous (Hadrian’s adolescent lover).⁴⁰ With red or reddish-brown tousled hair, fairer skin than usual and a reddish tint, endowed with unimaginably beautiful eyes, and displaying a lean but muscled physique, David could not help but turn everybody’s head.

Jonathan’s love: a puzzling description. Not surprisingly, after making such an ado about David’s looks, the reader begins to find responses to this in the text. For example, in 1 Sam 18:1 we read, “Now when he [David] had finished speaking to Saul, the soul [nephesh, H5315] of Jonathan was knit [qashar, H7194] to the soul [nephesh] of David, and Jonathan loved [ahab, H157] him as his own soul [nephesh].” Then (v. 3), “Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he [Jonathan] loved [ahaba, H160] him as his own soul.” Later, when the two make a second covenant, we are told (20:17) that “Jonathan again caused David to vow, because he [Jonathan] loved [ahaba, H160] him; for he loved [ahaba] him as he loved [ahab, H157] his own soul” (NKJV). In addition to this, we are told in 19:1 that Jonathan “delighted [kaphets, H2654] greatly in David” (NKJV). So, in response to three references to David’s beauty, there appear also three references describing Jonathan’s love, in response to this (1 Sam 18:1–3, 20:17, 19:1)—two of them twice using the verb “love” and the third using a related verb “delights [in].” Strong’s lexicon notes that ahab (H157) means “to love,” as a friend, lover, relative, or ally, along with the related terms ohab (H159) and ahaba (H160), the last a feminine form.⁴¹ However, the masculine and female forms of “love” (both as a verb and a noun) appear to be used interchangeably in Scripture, e.g., in Song of Songs 2:4–5 the beloved maiden says, “He [King Solomon] brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love [H160]. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love [H160]” (NRSV). Here the feminine form ahaba is used to describe both the “love” of a male (the king) and a female (his female beloved). The Hebrew word qashar is translated in the NRSV as “was bound [to], and its basic meaning is “tied [to]” (Strong, H7194).

Of course, the word “love” in Hebrew, as in English, can convey a wide range of diverse meanings. For example, J. P. Fokkelman notes that in the pages of 1–2 Samuel one can see it
applied to selfish love, self-love, tenderness, masked aggression, infatuation, and sexual violence, as well as true and lasting love.\textsuperscript{42} Love can be utilitarian as well as erotic.\textsuperscript{43} Here in 1 Sam 16–19 it is said that “all Israel and Judah loved David” (18:16), probably because of his courage and skill shown against Goliath (17:45–51a), bringing Israel a great victory (17:51b–53), and the continuing triumphs that he won on the battlefield as commander (18:13–14). The king’s servants at court loved David (18:22) not only as a popular, acclaimed hero (18:6–7) but because of their more intimate appreciation of him as “a skilled player [musician]” as well as being “well spoken, good-looking and Yahweh is with him” (16:18, NJB). Certainly “Michal loved David” (18:20) romantically and sexually. As Norah Lofts puts it, Michal feasts her eyes and ears on David and falls in love. “And the beautiful young man who could accompany his music with songs of his own making, who had easy good manners and an air of confidence and high destiny, proved as attractive to Saul’s daughters and son as to the king himself.”\textsuperscript{44} She continues, “Half the women in Israel were in love with him,”\textsuperscript{45} being aware that very often stunningly good looks solicit erotic feelings, whether recognized or subliminal, from both sexes far and wide, among those who see and admire them. Yet, what about Jonathan’s love? Even at first glance, 1 Sam 18:1–4 seems clearly to speak of “intense feelings of personal affection and homoeroticized endearment” (Ackerman).\textsuperscript{46} Still, as Jonathan Kirsch notes, “The nature of the love between David and Jonathan is one of the most tantalizing mysteries of the biblical life story of David.”\textsuperscript{47} Non-romantic interpretations of Jonathan’s love. More than a century ago, William G. Blaikie (1898) characterized Jonathan’s love as a spiritual love, writing that his fascination with David’s “childlike trust in God” shows “what a pure heart he must have had,” and “noble character.” What tied the two together was “the bond of a common, all prevailing faith, faith in the covenant God of Israel . . . .”\textsuperscript{58} Yet, Henry Preserved Smith (1899) viewed this on a more natural level, as a kind of friendship of “brotherhood,” sealed with a covenant—\textsuperscript{49} as had W. Robertson Smith earlier (1894), who compared Jonathan and David’s friendship to that between the Greek warriors Glaucus and Diomede, who exchanged garments as a sign of their commitment to one another.\textsuperscript{50} Later, Hans Hertzberg (1964) would call this “the most beautiful description of a friendship which the Bible offers us,” viewing it basically as an attraction of similarities. On Jonathan’s side, it was “completely disinterested” (from the standpoint of ulterior motives). Jonathan saw in David his alter ego.\textsuperscript{51} The Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (2001) defines “alter ego” as “1. a second self; a perfect substitute . . . 2. an inseparable friend. 3. another aspect of one’s self.” Other dictionaries read, “another side of oneself; a second self . . . an intimate friend or constant companion”\textsuperscript{52} and “a person’s secondary or alternative personality . . . an intimate and trusted friend.”\textsuperscript{53} Both Jonathan and David saw much of himself in the other. Surely they talked about their deep faith in God and spiritual matters, shared their experiences on the battlefield and their hopes for Israel, spoke of family pressures and strains—and revealed in subtle ways their growing love for one another. Mary Evans (2000) writes that Jonathan welcomed David “as a kindred spirit, equally impulsive, equally brave, and equally confident that God was behind Israel.”\textsuperscript{54} Tony Cartledge (2001) believes that the description of David as “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14) points to “David’s openness—his spirit of adventure, his delight in trying new things, [and] his willingness to let God work through him.” His heart was not closed nor had he figured everything out. He was open to the future, to new possibilities, to mystery, and to the spirit of God.\textsuperscript{55} Likewise, Jonathan appears to have had an open spirit, to have loved doing the unexpected, to have appreciated the mysterious working of
the Lord’s spirit, and to not fear attempting impossible things. Adin Steinsaltz (1984) suggests that Jonathan was “heroic and beautiful in body and soul,” as was David, although perhaps the latter was “simpler [and] more earthy.” Both were handsome heroes in Israel. Yet, both might have been attracted to differences in each other, as well. Jonathan may have enjoyed a certain unaffected simplicity in the village hero (when David felt he could let down his guard), as well as his remarkable musical gifts. In return, David must have found it flattering to be invited into the prince’s inner world, as well as to gain from his wisdom and experience. Also, lest we get too removed from the real world, they probably laughed, told jokes, and played games together, as buddies do.

J. P. Fokkelman (1986) sees here a remarkable selfless love. He envisions Jonathan “watching the amazing dual” with Goliath, and he saw more deeply than anyone else David’s “rock-firm faith” and the creativity and courage he derived from this. Further, Fokkelman views Jonathan as the ideal example of fulfilling Lev 19:18b (“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”), the standard for this being the respect and esteem that one has learned to give to oneself. He notes, however, that this does not mean that their love could not also have been homoerotic; and he adds, “Only [a careful study of] the text can steer us through . . . the sea of eros and dualistic claims.” In any case, Jonathan’s love was the “alpha and omega [the beginning and the end]” of the two men’s friendship. Certainly, a concerned, caring, self-giving and sacrificing love was part of this friendship, offered without bounds by Jonathan to David, whatever he got in return. Yet, he probably couldn’t help himself. Such is the case with people who are in love.

Another, pervasive view has been that Jonathan’s love was primarily a political love, a giving of allegiance and loyalty on Jonathan’s part to David as the future king of Israel. The impetus for this view came from an article by William Moran (1963), in which he proposed that the covenant love of Israel for Yahweh in Deuteronomy referred not to personal attachment or affection, but related to a divine command that the Israelites show loyalty to the Lord through unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law. He pointed to various ancient suzerain-vassal (ruler-subject) treaties and texts, such as an oath which Ashurbanipal of Assyria (seventh century BC) required his subjects to swear, that “the king of Assyria, our lord, we will love.” Also, letters sent by Canaanite kings to Akhenaton of Egypt (fourteenth century BC) repeatedly declare their “love” for the Pharaoh, which Moran read as confirming their servant relationship to him. Moran held that this view of love as political language extended through the whole of Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings). So, when “all Israel and Judah loved David” in 1 Sam 18:16, this simply meant that the whole nation gave the new hero their allegiance and support, anticipating the covenant loyalty that they would one day give him as king. In a footnote, Moran further declared that the love between Jonathan and David (18:1, 3; 20:17) was not about personal affection but “loyalty, service and obedience” which Jonathan promised to David as Israel’s future king. Moran’s view gained great popularity—although it also raised troublesome questions: First, can all “love” mentioned in 1–2 Samuel, even that with political elements, be confined to such a narrow, absolute “political” meaning—or is love often more complex than that? Second, can any description of love between God and Israel be transported to love between humans without recognition of the wide diversity of forms that human love can and does take, as witnessed in Scripture itself? Third, does defining the kind of “love” God seeks from Israel strictly in terms of loyalty and obedience not fail to take into account the emotional side of human adoration (which God would surely delight in), revealed, e.g., in Deborah and Barak’s song of praise (Judg 5), Hannah’s prayer of exaltation (1 Sam 2:1–
9), and David’s psalm of joy (2 Sam 22)? Fourth, how widely was David’s royal destiny really known during his stay at court, and how realistic is it to insert political symbolism into Jonathan and David’s first covenant? Michal provided David a pathway to the throne by marrying him; yet all interpreters view her “love” primarily as sensual and erotic. Why not the same kind of (sexual) love in Jonathan’s case?

In fact, most commentators, while taking note of Moran’s hypothesis, never adopted his idea that Jonathan’s love was to be understood exclusively as political in nature. For example, John Thompson (1974) points to a “political significance” in the term “love” in 1 Sam 18:1–4, but also writes that this included a “natural affection” that may have been “deep and genuine.” Peter Ackroyd (1975) suggests a “political sense” for the love between David and Jonathan, but insists on both a “nonpolitical and political meaning.” Kyle McCarter (1980) suggests that there is a “political nuance” here in 18:1–4, but also “a deep bond of friendship”—and the “common meaning” of “love” is especially evidenced in 19:1, where we are told that Jonathan was “deeply fond” of David (McCarter’s translation).

A homoerotic interpretation of Jonathan’s love. The above views do not preclude the possibility of Jonathan and David’s relationship including a homoerotic love, although most commentators ignore this as a possible (or even the most important) element here. However, Tom Horner noted that it was only natural that these two heroes would gravitate toward each other, as objects of desire. “Ordinarily heroic love affairs in the ancient East were between two persons of equal rank” and David was from a good family. Moreover, “it was only natural that Jonathan act as the initiator; David never could have.”

David Damrosch (1987) astutely notes, “As the story now stands, this relationship has been developed far beyond anything that would have been required simply to assure the audience that David and Jonathan were close friends and that David did not wish to deny the succession to Saul’s heir” (to Jonathan; note the contradictory view here). Their bond had both “a political expression and erotic overtones.” In fact, their friendship “has clear overtones of a relationship of husband and wife,” and even “suggests a quasi-marriage.”

As Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000) emphasize, the Hebrew word for “love” (ahab, and its variants) is always context-dependent. Interestingly, the love relationship between Jonathan and David appears in 1 Sam 18:1–4 “like a bolt [of lightning] out of the blue”! The original sense of nephesh (“soul” in most translations) is “yearning throat,” which points to the “craving, drive-like and life-seeking aspects of human existence,” such as the survival instinct and the sex drive. The terms found in 18:1, 3 are also used by Solomon’s beloved in Song of Songs 3:1–4, who upon her bed at night “sought him who my soul [nephesh, H5315] loves [ahab, H157]”—then she actually goes out wandering the streets and squares of the city seeking the one “whom my soul [nephesh] loves,” so captive is she to longing and desire (3:1-2, NRSV). Further, one should recall the story in Gen 34 about Shechem son of Hamor who “seized her [Dinah] and lay with her by force” because “his soul [nephesh, H5315] was drawn [dabaq, H1692] to Dinah daughter of Jacob [and] he loved [ahab, H157] the girl, and spoke tenderly to her” (34:2–3, NRSV). Later, Hamor asks Jacob to give Dinah to Shechem as his wife, because “the heart [nephesh] of my son Shechem longs [kashaq, H2836] for your daughter” (34:8, NRSV). The leaders of Shechem (the city and prince both share the same name) were willing to do whatever was needed to obtain this marriage, because the prince “delighted [kaphets] in” (J. Green) or “was very much in love with” (LB, 34:19) Dinah, Jacob’s daughter. One finds the same words here—ahab (“love”), nephesh (“soul” = heart) and kaphets.
(“delight [in]”—as are found in 1 Sam 18:1–4 and 19:1. Also, “drawn [to]” (Gen 34:3, NRSV) or “cling [to]” (Strong, dabaq, H1692) and “longs [for]” (Gen 34:8, NRSV) or “attached [to]” (Strong, kashaq, H2836)—echo the “bound to” (NRSV) or “tied to” (Strong, qashar, H7194) found 1 Sam 18:1. In the end, Silvia Schroeer and Thomas Staubli conclude that “David and Jonathan shared a homoerotic “passion” and “homosexual love.”68

The Brown–Driver–Briggs lexicon (2000) notes that a person can take “delight [in]” (kaphets, H2654, 1 Sam 19:1) many matters and things, as well as various persons for different reasons; yet among these is taking sexual delight or pleasure.69 Schroeer and Staubli (2000) note how the expression “delight [in]” (kaphets) in 1 Sam 19:1 carries sexual connotations both in Gen 34:19, where Shechem’s feelings for Dinah are so described, and in Deut 21:14, which refers to the feeling that an Israelite man might have toward a beautiful captive women, so that he takes her as his wife.70 Surely this word also carries a sexual meaning in Est 2:14, which speaks of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) not calling for a concubine again unless he ‘delighted’ in her. Most commentaries, however, even those that discuss the Hebrew, usually pass over 1 Sam 19:1 or the statement here which relates how “Jonathan Saul’s son delighted much in David” (KJV), or “delighted” in David “exceedingly” [me‘od, H3966]” (J. Green, 1986). The Hebrew me‘od is an intensive or superlative which expresses ideas of ‘greatly, exceedingly, very much [so]’ (Strong, H3966). One can clearly sense the level of emotion conveyed in passages that say, e.g., that Cain was “very [me‘od] angry” (NRSV) when he killed his brother Abel (Gen 4:5,8), that it was “very [me‘od] distressing” to Abraham when Sarah made him send away his son Ishmael (Gen 21:10–11), and that when Jacob died there was “a very [me‘od] great [NEB: loud] and sorrowful lamentation” (Gen 50:7, 10, NRSV). Therefore, this expression points to Jonathan having very strong feelings for David. The best English translations of 1 Sam 19:1 say that Jonathan “greatly delighted in David” (NASB 1960, cf. NKJV 1982), “delighted in David exceedingly” (J. Green, 1986), “took great delight in David” (NRSV 1989; Cartledge 2001, p. 235), “was very fond of David” (NIV 1978, GNB2 1983), and “was deeply fond of David” (McCarter 1980, p. 320; cf. Youngblood 1992, p. 713). More tepid translations, that speak only of Jonathan’s “close friendship” with David (LB 1976), or say that he “was devoted” to him (REB 1989), or he simply “liked” him (CEV 1995), must be set aside.

The Brown–Driver–Briggs lexicon notes that the basic meaning of qashar (H7194) is “to tie, bind” (Strong, H7194); and it is translated in the KJV as “was knit [with]” in 1 Sam 18:1. In fact, “was knit [to]” is the most frequent translation here (Moffatt 1922; Lamsa 1933; Hertzberg 1964, p. 146; RSV 1952; NASB 1960; RSV2 1972; NKJV 1982; cf. J. Green 1986), with other translations reading “became closely bound [to]” (JB 1968) or “bound up [with]” (Fox 1999, p. 92; Alter 1999, p. 112), or “there was” an immediate bond of love [between them]” (LB 1976, cf. NRSV 1989). Renderings such as “became one in spirit” (NIV 1978), or “a bond was forged between them” (Peterson 2002) are too non-emotional for the context and must be rejected. Better offerings, although freer, include “[Jonathan] was deeply attracted [to David]” (GNB2 1983) and “had become attached [to him]” (Elman 1994, p. 236). Still other translations omit any reference to this word, but still try to capture the overall meaning of this ambiguous sentence, e.g., Peter Ackroyd (1971) interchanged 1 Sam 18:1 and 2 in his translation to read, “That same day, when Saul had finished talking to David, he kept him and would not let him return any more to his father’s house, for he saw that Jonathan had given his heart to David and had grown to love him as himself” (Ackroyd 1971, p. 146)—an approach that was also taken in the NEB (1970) and REB (1989).
Summary. More attention is drawn to David’s good looks than to any other handsome male so described in the Bible. Samuel notes that he “was ruddy [admoni], and had beautiful eyes [yapheh ‘ayinim], and was handsome [to behold, tob ro’i]” (Sam 16:12). He was an “attractive” boy (NJB), with “almond-shaped eyes of exceptional beauty” (Landay); and “ruddy [admoni],” a rare word in the Bible which most likely suggests that he had reddish hair along with the lighter, red-tinted skin that usually accompanies this (Young, NOAB). McKenzie thinks that if his hair resembled goat’s hair (as 19:13 suggests), it would have been thick and uncontrollable (unbrushed). He was simply a “bewilderingly beautiful boy,” the kind who only grows up to be even more striking as he enters young manhood (Kirsch). The storyteller, clearly interested here in male beauty (B. Green), cannot help but draw repeated attention to David’s physical appearance, in 16:12 and then again in 16:18 and 17:42; and the piling up of adjectives portrays David as one of the most gorgeous young men in the Bible, if not ever. But then there are not only three references to David’s beauty, but also three references to Jonathan’s love and erotic delight in David (18:1–3, 19:1, 20:17), which this solicited. Of course, there was a spiritual bond also between the prince and musician here, since Jonathan was “heroic and beautiful in body and soul” as was David (Steinsaltz), and they saw something of themselves in each other. At the same time, Jonathan may have been attracted to David’s remarkable musical gifts, while David felt flattered to be invited into the prince’s inner world, with access to his wisdom and experience. Yet, how totally unselfish Jonathan’s love was may be questioned (did he not really want to touch him?), as well as whether there was any political element in the first pact they made, for which there is no real textual evidence in 1 Sam 18:1–4. Damrosch agrees that, because of the way in which Jonathan’s relationship brushes aside and replaces Michal’s relationship with David (both being attracted to him), one can see here with Jonathan and David “overtones of a relationship of husband and wife,” with their covenant being a kind of “quasi-marriage.” Another passage (albeit heterosexual), that closely parallels 1 Sam 18:1–3, is the Shechem and Dinah story in Gen 34, which uses the same terms (aheb = “love,” kaphets = “delights [in],” and nephesh = “[his] heart [was drawn to the other person]”), along with kashaq (“attached [to]”), which parallels qashar (“tied [to]”) in 1 Sam 18:1. With David’s handsome looks, modeled body, gemlike beautiful eyes, and distinctive red hair, he was the most beautiful sight the homosexually-inclined Jonathan had ever seen.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 4A
2. 2 Sam 3:3.
3. 2 Sam 3:4.
5. Kirsch, King David, p. 44.
12. See Supplement 3A in this text.
13. Strong, H2896 (tob), H7210 (ro’i).
30. Landay, *David*, p. 27.
34. Young, “First and Second Samuel,” p. 286.
36. *NOAB*, note for 1 Sam 16:12, p. 424.
37. McKenzie, *King David*, p. 65. The “uncontrollable hair” is drawn from the reference to a piece of goat’s hair that Michal placed on the head of a covered statue in bed that she wanted to look like David, in 1 Sam 19:13.
41. Strong, H157 (*ahab*), H159 (*ohab*), H160 (*ahaba*).
44. Lofts, “Michal,” pp. 234, 236.
45. Ibid., p. 237.
47. Kirsch, *King David*, p. 60.
57. Ibid.
64. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, pp. 202–204.
66. Ibid., p. 28.
CHAPTER 5
The Pair’s Companionship
1 Samuel 20

After David flees from Samuel (Saul and his troops having trailed him to the prophet’s camp to kill him, 1 Sam 19:18–24), he heads back to the king’s capital, Gibeah (20:1). He desperately needs to find Jonathan, the only person he really trusts.¹ Timewise, 1 Sam 18 stretches over a number of months, as David gains military experience² and piles up victories (18:5, 13–14, 30; also 19:8). However, in chapters 19–20 it is hard to determine how much time elapses between the recorded events,³ for time is clearly condensed and the clock is ticking, especially as David flees from Michal to Samuel (19:11–24), then back to Jonathan, with only three days left before he must leave the prince and the capital city for good (chapter 20).

Chapter 20 divides into two halves, the first a long dialogue between Jonathan and David (20:1–23), and then its aftermath (20:24–42). In their conversation, David at first struggles to convince Jonathan that his father, Saul, is once again trying to kill him; and he offers a plan whereby the skeptical prince can check out for himself his father’s true intentions (20:1–9). Then relating to how he will get back to David, Jonathan suggests a second plan (20:10–13a, 18–22). Also, in the midst of this, Jonathan renews and expands his love pact with David (20:13b–17, 23). The great length of this recorded conversation underscores its unique importance, as it reveals the deepening of their relationship, the immortalizing of their covenant, and the conviction that they share that their love can conquer anything the future may hold.⁴ The second half of this chapter divides into three parts: Jonathan soon witnesses firsthand Saul’s rage toward David at a royal New Moon feast (20:24–34), then he lets David know through a secret arrow signal that it is not safe for him to return to court (20:35–40), and finally the two share a highly emotional parting scene (20:41–42).

A long, secret conversation between Jonathan and David. The first part of the dialogue (20:1–9) begins with David excitedly asking (three times, 20:1b), Why is Saul trying to kill me?⁵ This concern cannot be understood without recalling the earlier oath that Saul had sworn to Jonathan, that “As the LORD lives, he [David] shall not be put to death” (19:6).⁶ Therefore, Jonathan believes that no hostile intention exists, and so he answers simply, “That’s impossible!” (20:2). Mary Evans thinks that Jonathan’s “uncomplicated character” makes him want to hold onto his father’s earlier assurances, and for this reason he finds it difficult to accept the idea that Saul has regressed to his earlier murderous attitude.⁷ Tony Cartledge suggests that the prince loves his father and is loyal to him almost to a fault, and so his heart is torn.⁸ The sad truth is, Saul has been plotting behind Jonathan’s back, even though the prince thought he had “his father in his pocket” (Fokkelman).⁹ Thus, David must show Jonathan that the threat against his life is real, so he can secure his support.¹⁰ David tells him, “Your father knows well that you like me” (20:3a, NRSV) and that’s why he hides his actions from you. The Hebrew reads literally, “... that I have found grace [ken, H2580] in thine eyes” (KJV, cf. J. Green); but more modern translations render this as “Your father knows very well that I enjoy your favour” (NJB) or, better, “... how much you like me” (GNB2, CEV). Although the RSV and NEB widely translated ken as “favor,” this word can also point to the approval, delight, or joy that one finds in another’s loveliness and sweetness (Smedes).¹¹ David cannot yet verbalize his feelings for Jonathan, but he can and does acknowledge here the prince’s deep amorous feelings for him.
Finally, David’s ominous words “there is but a step between me and death” (20:3b, KJV) silence Jonathan; and he then asks the prince to tell his father that he (David) has asked leave from court to attend an annual family sacrifice in Bethlehem, to see what the king’s reaction will be (20:5–7). If Saul is angry, David asks Jonathan not to seek a reconciliation again (20:8b), which not only failed the first time but nearly cost David his life (19:6–10). The straightforward Jonathan does not deviate from the love he felt for David from the very first moment he set eyes on him, in contrast to the more complex, often secretive, and sometimes deceptive person with whom he has made his love pact. Hertzberg explains, Jonathan excels at affectionate, unselfish friendship, while David displays a more resolute, superior intellect. So Jonathan says to David, “Whatever your heart [nephesh, H5315] says, I will do for you” (20:4, cf. J. Green)—echoing the words of total commitment that Jonathan had received from his armor-bearer years earlier, before they climbed the cliff in the Michmash Pass together: “Do all that is in your heart [nephesh] . . . for I am here with you . . .” (1 Sam 14:7, J. Green). The relationship between Saul and David has now deteriorated to the point where Jonathan must choose between them; yet without hesitation he gives David carte blanche, full freedom, to ask for whatever he wants. Later (20:16b), Jonathan will even call down God’s judgment upon all of David’s enemies, which, sadly enough, include his father.

The next topic discussed (20:10–13a, 18–22) is how Jonathan will report back to David what he learns, which Jonathan swears to David he will surely do (20:12–13a). The prince offers this plan: three days hence, at the end of the three-day New Moon festival, the prince will come out into a field where David is to hide and where he had hidden earlier (probably a reference to 19:3, Youngblood), “by the stone Ezel” (H68, H237; KJV, NIV, cf. J. Green), or “. . . a certain mound” (MCarter, REB) or “. . . a big boulder” (Peterson)—perhaps a well-known landmark (Ackroyd, Radmacher). Jonathan will come with a young servant lad, who will not suspect any more going on here than the prince’s usual archery practice. The secret signal for David will be this: a short shot with instructions to the boy to fetch the arrows nearby will indicate that David may safely return to court; however, a long shot with instructions to the boy, “It’s beyond you! Keep going farther” will indicate that David will need to flee for his safety (20:18–22). The New Moon festival occurred when the first sliver of the crescent moon appeared to begin a new lunar cycle (every twenty-nine and a half days). Although the Law of Moses called for special sacrifices (meat, grain, and wine) to be made at the start of each new month (Num 28:11–15), King Saul seems only to have celebrated this as a family festival—another example of how real life deviated from religious law in ancient Israel. In this present situation, however, one wonders how Saul could have expected David to appear in his presence, but he does. In fact, he thinks that David will—and should—be there, in his service (20:27). Probably David had been given a regular seat at the king’s table as his son-in-law.

Midway through the conversation, Jonathan suggests that he and David “go out into the field” (20:11) to continue talking. The court is “too hot” a place for David to remain for long. There, away from the castle and hidden among the grain, bushes or trees, Jonathan brings up again the subject of their love covenant (20:13b–17, 23). Mendenhall and Herion define berit (H1285, Strong: ‘covenant, treaty, pact’) as “an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.” This term covered many different types of oath-bound promises, relationships, and treaties; and typically it called upon a deity to “witness” the oath, to observe subsequent behavior, and to carry out the blessings and curses attached to the agreement. Besides the great covenants that Yahweh made with Noah, the patriarchs, and Israel (e.g., Gen 9:9–17, 15:7–21,
17:1–14; Exod 6:2–8), the OT also describes many bonds or agreements that were made between people,25 which were made in the presence of God as a witness. So when David calls his pact with Jonathan a “covenant of the LORD” (20:8, KJV) or “sacred covenant” (NRSV), this was nothing unusual; yet it also meant that Yahweh had been called upon to witness the making of their solemn pact.26 The term berit was not only commonly applied to political treaties, but also to business contracts, military orders, and marriage commitments. For example, Israelites in the besieged city of Jabesh-gilead offered to make a peace “treaty” (berit) with Nahash the Ammonite (1 Sam 11:1); Solomon made a “treaty” with King Hiram of Tyre for the latter to provide timber and stone to build the Temple (1 Kings 5, esp. v. 12); Jehoiada the high priest made a “covenant” (berit) with certain captains and guards “and put them under oath in the house of the L ORD” to guard the life of Joash, the young heir to the throne (2 Kings 11:4–8); and a proverb condemns the prostitute, who has forgotten her sacred “covenant” of marriage (Prov 2:16–17).27

In contrast to the first secretive pact between Jonathan and David (18:1–4), the content of the second pact (20:13b–17) is clearly described. Facing the real possibility that David may have to leave him and the capital for good, Jonathan begins to look into the future. His blessing, “May the L ORD be with you, as he has been with my father” (v. 13b) and his requests, “If I am still alive, show me the faithful love [kesed] of the L ORD” (v. 14) and “if I die, never cut off your faithful love [kesed] from my house” (v. 15a) implicitly recognize—and give us our first textual evidence—that Jonathan now believes that one day David will become king of Israel.28 It is hardly conceivable that David, in his first meeting with Jonathan (18:1–4), would blurt out to him that he was destined to be the next king, not Jonathan. Instead, David consistently displays a submissive attitude toward Jonathan, saying, e.g., “you have brought your servant into a sacred covenant” (20:8, italics added) and, at their parting, prostrating himself repeatedly before the prince (20:41). Yet J. P. Fokkelman notes, “We readers enjoy the advantages of overview and retrospect,” yet we should resist the temptation to make this “the starting point of our perception.”29 We should be careful about reading things into the text without any real basis there. It could very well be that by now David’s demonstrated military courage, his charismatic spell over people, and God’s blessing on everything he does had led Jonathan, by his own intuition, to conclude that it would be beneficial and best for David to be the next ruler over God’s people. Yet, Jonathan also knew that new kings were prone to assassinate all rival families,30 and so he asks David to show kind, merciful, and unfailing love (the full meaning of kesed31) to him and his descendants (20:14–15) when he comes to the throne. In their second covenant, then, they reaffirm their love for each other; Jonathan gives David a blessing, praying for his safe-keeping; and David promises indeed to show kesed love to Jonathan and his descendants when he is king (20:14–17).

**A sexual outburst from Saul at the New Moon feast.** When Saul learns that David is not coming to the New Moon festivities, he goes ballistic: “Then Saul’s anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, ‘You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen [bakar, H977] the son of Jesse to your own shame [boshet, H1322], and to the shame [boshet] of your mother’s nakedness [’erva, H6172]? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die’” (1 Sam 20:30–31, NRSV). When Jonathan asked, “Why . . . ?” (v. 32), Saul hurled his spear at him; and then Jonathan knew that this really was what his father wanted for David. Relating to the first part of Saul’s insult (“You son of a perverse, rebellious
woman!”), Ronald Youngblood notes that it “is difficult to render this [the Hebrew’s full force here] without being equally vulgar”—and suggests that “You bastard!” (TEV) or “You son of a rebellious slut!” (NJB) come close. Relating to the last part of Saul’s insult (“. . . and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness”), Kyle McCarter notes that *erva* in the OT most often refers euphemistically (indirectly) to the genitals; and so the reference here is to Queen Ahinoam’s sexual organs, from whence Jonathan came. 33

Relating to the middle part of Saul’s insult ("Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame . . .?") some scholars have wondered whether *bakar* (“to choose,” H977) wasn’t originally *kaber* (H2270), meaning “companion” (e.g., D. H. Weir, S. R. Driver, H. P. Smith), based on the Greek Septuagint text, although most English translations follow the standard (Masoretic) Hebrew text. Still, you “are choosing” (J. Green) in this verse can be understood in different ways, including being “in league with” David (JB) for political reasons, “siding with” David (NIV) perhaps in a more general sense, or “are delighted in” David (Lamsa) with perhaps erotic overtones. Probably all three (political, affectionate, and homoerotic) aspects are involved. David Jobling thinks that David’s threat to Jonathan’s succession is why Saul condemns David to death (20:31), and yet this fails to explain the full extent of Saul’s fury against his son. “It is fair [therefore] to look for some unspoken cause for the irrational rage, and the modern experience of irrational homophobia suggests that this may be the cause.” This interpretation is bolstered when Saul brings Jonathan’s choice of David directly into the sexual realm with the phrase “to the shame of your mother’s nakedness [genitalia]” (NRV). Perhaps Saul is trying to lay the blame for his son’s sexual inclination and behavior on the queen, since the idea of a gay son being a “mama’s boy” is a common accusation in homophobic slurs. Also, Saul wishes to make sure that no one thinks that he might have been responsible for Jonathan turning out like this. 34

**An emotional parting in the field, before David flees.** The next morning Jonathan went out into the field and signaled the bad news to David. Then David came out of hiding and “prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more” (20:41, NRSV). The King James Version and Jay Green translate the last part more literally as “until David exceeded [italics added].” Of course, bowing down to the ground was the Oriental way of paying homage to a superior, especially a royal personage. Kissing between men was done easily in many ancient cultures, in contrast to the nervousness felt among many men in modern Western cultures—although males kissing is still commonly witnessed today in the Middle East). In the Bible we find non-erotic kissing between Laban and his nephew Jacob (Gen 29:13), Samuel and the young Saul (1 Sam 10:1), and King David and Barzillai son of his good friend Chimham (2 Sam 19:39). 35 Yet, probably there was some eroticism attached to David kissing his strikingly handsome son Absalom (2 Sam 14:33), as well as afterward when Absalom kissed all the men who came to see David in Jerusalem and so he “stole the[ir] hearts” (2 Sam 15:5–6). The most enigmatic part of 20:41, however, is the phrase ‘ad david higdil (“until David exceeded”). Strong’s lexicon notes that gadol / gadal (H1432 / H1431) mean basically “great” / “to become great,” and these terms are used in the OT to convey ideas of excelling at something, becoming famous, or growing in size.

However, a set of old Arabic words (kabirun / akbara), which also mean “large” / “to grow large,” are used in certain contexts to convey the sexual meanings of “erection” / “to have an erection, or to ejaculate.” The study of parallel words in Hebrew and Arabic often helps scholars
by shedding light on unclear words and poorly understood texts in the OT. Warren Johannson thinks that an early Israelite editor in 20:41 “drew a discrete veil over the subsequent events” in Jonathan and David’s embrace. Yet, as J. P. Fokkelman notes, this is the only kiss we have in 1 Samuel and the only mutual kiss in 1–2 Samuel; so, it must be important. It is, in fact, “the emotional climax of the entire episode [1 Sam 20].” As Ralph Klein notes, the kisses here clearly express Jonathan’s and David’s love for each other. The Song of Songs contains a number of erotic kisses (1:2, 7:9, 8:1); and whether a kiss is erotic or not depends, of course, on who is kissing and, even more so, on the context. Some will argue that we cannot know for sure whether Jonathan and David’s physical embrace and kissing led to a more intimate sexual sharing or not; but in this setting such a possibility cannot be easily dismissed. What we do know is that the usually composed David is so overcome with emotion (and passion?) that Jonathan has to take charge, comforting him, holding him close, and reminding him that their love is forever, before he finally sends him away into the shadows and the unknown.

Summary. Jonathan’s long conversation with David recorded in 1 Sam 20:1–23 is remarkable because for the first time in the text David acknowledges Jonathan’s deep amorous feelings for him (your father knows “how much you like me,” 20:3, GNB2, CEV)—and ken (KJV: “grace”) here can point to the delight one takes in another’s loveliness (Smedes). Although Jonathan feels bound to remain with his father, he never hesitates to side with David at court in the Saul–David conflicts; and he replies: “Whatever thy soul [nephesh, J. Green: “heart”] desireth, I will even do it for thee” (20:3, KJV)—echoing the words of total commitment that were given to Jonathan by his armor-bearer a decade or so earlier: “Do all that is in thine heart [nephesh]: . . . [for] behold, I am with thee according to thy heart” (14:7, KJV). Then in 20:13b–17 Jonathan renews and expands his love pact with David, which from the beginning was made before God (as were all covenants) and so was considered a sacred bond (20:8), recognized before God, as in marriage (cf. Prov 2:16–17). It is inconceivable that at their first meeting and the making of their first pact (18:1–4) David would have blurted out to the prince that he, the shepherd-boy, was going to be the next king of Israel, and not the Prince; and we should be careful not to read into Biblical passages all that we know in retrospect (Fokkelman). Yet, during the few months that followed, Jonathan came to sense that the charismatic, divinely-blessed David would and should become the next king of Israel. Later, when David does not come to the castle to join the New Moon festivities, Saul goes ballistic and shouts an insult at Jonathan (20:30–31), which begins by calling him, “You son of a rebellious slut!” (NJB). Then Saul notes that Jonathan ‘is choosing’ (bakar) or ‘is the companion [of]’ (kaber) David—the original Hebrew word here is disputed—which Saul then locates in the sexual realm by tying it to the “shame” (’erva) of his mother’s “nakedness” (boshet), both Hebrew terms used euphemistically in the OT to refer to the genitals. In the final parting scene, the conclusion of this emotion-filled meeting rests with the enigmatic phrase ‘ad david higdil (KJV: “until David exceeded,” italics added). Johannson believes that the Hebrew verb gadal (“[to] grow or make large”) parallels the Arabic verb akbara, with the same basic meaning, but which also was used in certain cases to refer to “ejaculation.” Yet, a nervous editor of 1–2 Samuel apparently “drew a discrete veil” over this passage—even though the kisses of the male pair here are clearly kisses of love (Klein).

END NOTES, CHAPTER 5
1. Youngblood, 1, 2 Samuel, p. 720.
10. R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, p. 204.
17. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 723.
32. **Note that this is from the Today’s English Version, different from the Good New Bible, 1983 edition – Check first volume at Burke again.**
35. McKim, “Kiss,” p. 43.
SUPPLEMENT 5A

Saul’s Sexual Insult and David’s Losing It

Looking at sexual language in the OT is like walking into a house with distorted mirrors, where what you see (or read in English translations) is not often what is (or appears in the original Hebrew). This is because, as Raphael Patai notes, there is “practically no sexual terminology proper” in Hebrew, and references to sexual organs and actions are almost “always couched in euphemistic terms.” (Patai 1960, p. 141) A “euphemism” is an indirect (or vague) way of referring to something considered too intimate or offensive to be spoken about forthrightly; and usually English translators are usually happy enough to keep matters in the dark. Only a few direct sexual words appear in Hebrew, e.g., ‘orla (foreskin, #6190, cf. Gen 17:11) and eshekim (testicles, #810, cf. Lev 21:20, NRSV). Instead, general words are usually borrowed and applied to sexual parts and acts, which are only understood as sexual from the context. For example, these terms are used to refer to the genitals: yarek (thigh, #3409), regelim (feet, #7272), yad (hand, #3027), and, negatively, boshet (shame, #1322) and ‘erva (nakedness, #6172). When Abraham asks his eldest servant to swear by placing “thy hand under my thigh [yarek],” thus promising that he would find a proper wife for Isaac (Gen 24:2, KJV), the patriarch really asked him to place his hand on his genitals, or “generative power.”

(Bandstra and Verhey, “Sex; Sexuality,” p. 432) We read that later in the evening Ruth “came stealthily and uncovered his [Boaz’s] feet [regelim], and lay down. At midnight the man [Boaz] was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet [regelim], was a woman!” . . . And she said to him, “[S]read your cloak over your servant, for you are my next-of-kin” (Ruth 3:7b-9, NRSV). Actually it was not Boaz’s feet that were uncovered here, but his penis. Ruth exposed him, then lay her head nearby his genitals as a marriage proposal. (B&V, pp. 432-433) Actually, “foot water” in the Hebrew refers to urine (2 Kings 18:27), and “foot hair” to pubic hair (Isa 7:20), (B&V, 4, p. 432) although the KJV and NRSV renders the latter meaninglessly as “hair of the feet,” and the NIV even more erroneously as “hair of the legs.” Isaiah condemns the Israelites who worshipped pagan gods and visited their cult prostitutes, saying, “you have made a bargain for yourself with them, / you have loved their bed, / you have gazed upon their nakedness” (Isa 57:8b, NRSV)—although the word for “nakedness” here is yad (hand, cf. J. Green), and the NRSV explains in a footnote that “hand” here really means “phallus.” The KJV ignores the word yad here, while the GNB2 avoids mentioning phalluses with “you . . . climb into your large beds with lovers, whom you pay to sleep with you,” and the NAB further distorts the meaning with “And of those whose embraces you love / you carved the symbol and gazed at it.” In fact, the Israelite men loved to lie with the pagan male cult prostitutes and gaze on their erect organs. Isaiah also recalled how the Israelites’ ancestors, en route to the Promised Land, “went to Baal-peor, and separated themselves unto that shame [boshet] . . . ” (Hosea 9:10, KJV), which refers to the incident related in Num 25, where the men “began to indulge in sexual immorality with the Moab women,” and then joined in worshipping their god, the Baal of Mount Peor (vv. 1-3). Also, Lev 18:6 (KJV) reads, “None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him to uncover their nakedness [erva],” or genitals. General verbs like yada (know, #3045, cf. Gen 4:1), bav (go [in to], #935, cf. Gen 16:2, KJV), shakab (lie [with], #7901, cf. Gen 19:33), qarab (approach, #7126, cf. Lev 18:14), naga (touch, #5060, cf. Gen 20:6), and “cleave/cling to” and “be/become one flesh” (Gen 2:24) all refer to lying sexually with someone. (B&V, p. 433; Patai, p. 141) The KJV is often a good reference, which tries to stay with a
literal translation of the Hebrew; and after that the NRSV is recommended—although all English translations fail badly at some point in translating sexual Biblical references. What all of this shows is that, when dealing with sex in the Bible, one must study the Hebrew original and literary context very carefully, and also look for more than initially meets the eye.

**Saul’s sexual insult: an enigmatic stream of epithets.** Following the long conversation between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 20:1–23), the scene moves to the first evening meal of the New Moon festival in Saul’s castle (vv. 24–34). The king sat at his usual place at the table, with his back to the wall (v. 25), a position of safety and no doubt honor. Abner (who had earlier served as Saul’s army commander [14:15], before David [18:5], and may now still have served as an advisor to Saul) sat next to the king, David’s seat was empty, and Jonathan either sat opposite (Septuagint Greek) or stood in front of (Masoretic Hebrew) his father, perhaps too nervous to sit at all. On the second day of the festival, when Saul asked why David had not come, Jonathan gave him the prearranged answer: because David had asked leave to join his family for an annual sacrifice offered in Bethlehem (vv. 6,27–29). At this point, we read: “Then Saul’s anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, ‘You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen [bakar, Strong #977] the son of Jesse to your own shame [boshet, #1322], and to the shame [boshet] of your mother’s nakedness [’erwa, #6172]? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die [lit., ‘for he is a son of death,’ J. Green]’” (1 Sam 20:30–31, NRSV). When Jonathan asked, “Why . . . ?,” the enraged king threw his spear at the prince, who barely escaped it. In his blind rage, Saul saw Jonathan and David as one; and as the spear came hissing at the prince, Jonathan no longer could deny David’s diagnosis of Saul. Then Jonathan “rose from the table in fierce anger” and left, eating nothing at all that day, because “he was grieved [Fewell and Gunn: hurt] for David, and because his father had disgraced him [KJV: had done him shame]” (v. 32-34). Kyle McCarter thinks that “disgraced him” refers to Jonathan, while Ralph Klein thinks that it refers to David. Probably Jonathan hurt because of the peril his beloved David was in, although the prince was the one who had been shamed at the table. J. P. Fokkelman holds that the “shame” in 20:34 (although another word is used: kalam, #3637) most naturally points back to the “shame” (boshet) mentioned in Saul’s outburst in 20:30. Yet Hertzberg points out that Jonathan’s angry departure shows the strength of his feeling for David. One can see Saul’s attitude deteriorating toward David, as he changes from calling him at first by his personal name (David, 16:22; 18:11,22) to using his family name (son of Jesse, 20:27,30,31) to finally assigning to him the name of a condemned man (son of death, v. 31). Yet, what does this highly-charged sexual language in Saul’s insult really mean?

**Three parts to Saul’s condemnation of Jonathan.** “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!” (NRSV). The Masoretic Hebrew reads literally “son of a perverse woman in respect to rebelliousness [having gone astray]” and the Septuagint Greek and the Qumran 4QSam Hebrew texts read “son of rebelling young women.” Jerome, usually sensitive to erotic nuances in the original, conveys the idea in his Latin Vulgate translation (ca. 400 AD) as the “son of a woman freely seizing a man [whom she desires].” Most English translations read very close to the NRSV (above), gliding over the fact that the Hebrew here is quite vulgar. A more accurate translation would be “You son of a slut!” (Peterson 2002) or “You son of a bitch!” (Jobling 1998, p. 178; Schroer and Staubli 2000, p. 29)—the latter conjuring up the image of a
promiscuous pup in heat. Further, Lucian’s version of the Septuagint adds a second word, *gunaikotraphē*, to the phrase here, meaning and calling Jonathan “[you] women-nourished [or, effeminate] (man).” S. K. Soderlund notes that the Samuel recension (a revision based on critical sources) of Lucian of Antioch (martyred 311) appears in particular to preserve elements of great antiquity, which by careful analysis S. R. Driver and others have been able to use to make significant emendations (corrections or additions) to the later Masoretic Hebrew text, dating ca. 500 AD or later. John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), bishop of Constantinople, paraphrased this line by describing Jonathan as “You son of common whores, who are men-crazy and run after every man who comes into sight; you weak, effeminate wretch; you nothing of a man [], who lives only to shame yourself and the mother who bore you.” In fact, Danna Fewell and David Gunn hold that Saul well may have been inferring here that Jonathan *is* a woman, like the perverse, rebellious female from whose genitals he came. As Hans Hertzberg notes, with his “foul-mouthed anger” Saul is saying that Jonathan is “utterly ‘degenerate.’” Still, Chrysostom recalls 1 Sam 20:30 in a sermon on 1 Cor 13:4 (“Love is patient . . . .”) and praises Jonathan who, in the face of Saul’s insult, did not “turn away from his beloved” but “displayed his fondness as an ornament,” adding: What a “wonderful quality . . . .” Even though the king was trying to put the crown on the prince’s head, Jonathan “went away and fell on David’s neck.” True love knows no shame, but will “endure all for the beloved.”

“[T]o the shame of your mother’s nakedness” (NRSV). Relating to the third and last part of Saul’s insult, H. P. Smith (1899) writes that while it has remained common in the Near East to revile or humiliate a man by referring to his mother’s nakedness, still Saul chooses to express his excitement here in coarse language. Martti Nissinen writes that the “indecent” language here may simply be an “oriental outburst of rage” and it might also relate only to “an intimate [but non-sexual] camaraderie of two young soldiers.” Still, he asks, “What could Saul have seen as so shameful in an ordinary friendship of his son and the young man under his care?” What is clear is that Saul’s outburst is loaded with sexual terminology—including *‘erwa* (#6172, nakedness), *boshet* (#1322, “shame”), and *bakar* (or *kaber*, see below). Susan Ackerman notes that in the OT “nakedness” (*‘erwa*) most often refers to the genitalia. Barry Bandstra and Allen Verhey point out that there are a number of Hebrew terms for “nakedness” in the OT: *‘arom* (#6174) and *‘erom* (#5903) are primarily associated with a lack of clothing (e.g., the state of the newborn or the poor), while *‘erwa* (#6172) is usually associated with sexuality. For example, in the incest laws in Lev 18:6–18, to “uncover [someone’s] nakedness” meant to expose that person’s genitals, for sexual purposes. The Lord commanded Israel not to build steps leading up to any altar, lest the priests’ “nakedness [genitals] . . . be exposed” to those standing below (Exod 20:26), which would be defiling in a cultic (worship) setting. Not surprisingly, *boshet* appears also in Saul’s insult, not once, but twice—applied first to Jonathan and then to his mother. As Tom Horner notes, “nakedness” and “shame” were associated in mainstream Israelite thinking. This can be seen, for example, in the Garden of Eden story, where we are told that before their fall into sin Adam and Eve “were both naked [*‘erwa*], and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25, using *bosh*. the verb form, #954); however, afterward they “knew that they were naked” (3:7, *‘erom*) and they “hid” themselves (3:8). Often captives were taken away naked to shame them, and in that way they could more easily be taken advantage of sexually, as indeed they sometimes were. On one occasion (2 Sam 10:1–5), David sent envoys with friendly greetings to Hanun, an Ammonite ruler; but the suspicious king “shaved off half their beards and cut their robes off at the buttocks and sent them home half naked” (v. 4, LB) and greatly embarrassed. Of course, Saul’s insult here was not really directed against
Queen Ahinoam, but against Jonathan; and one has to wonder what the prince might have done (nakedly, sexually and shamefully) to receive this kind of abuse.

“Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame . . . ?” (NRSV). The key Hebrew word here is bakar (#977), which means “to choose,” or more precisely, as an active participle here, “[you] are choosing” (cf. J. Green). In its place, the Septuagint uses metochos (#3353), a noun, which Charles Thomson (1808) and Sir Lancelot Brenton (1851) rendered in their early English translation of the Septuagint as “an accomplice.” However, S. R. Driver (and quoting D. H. Weir) rendered this word as “a companion [of],” preferring the Greek text over the Hebrew.

Moreover, Charles van der Pool (2006), in his Apostolic Bible Polyglot (with interlinear text, in Greek and English), renders metochos as “a partner [to].” Strong’s Greek-English dictionary (1890) notes that metochos comes from the verb metechō (#3348), meaning “to share, participate, or belong to.” Bauer’s Greek-English lexicon (1958), translated by Arndt and Gingrich (1979), renders the noun metochos as “[a] partner, companion.” Kittel and Friedrich’s NT theological dictionary (1933-73), translated and abridged by Bromiley (1985), notes that in the Septuagint metochos often meant “companion.” Of course, a more basic question is not whether the Hebrew or the Septuagint is the more authentic text, but what is the precise meaning of “choosing” or “companion” in 1 Sam 20:30? Most English translations remain with bakar, rendered as “[you] have chosen” (cf. KJV 1611; McKane 1963, p. 129; Hertzberg 1964, p. 170; NKJV 1982; NRSV 1989; Breuggegmann 1990, p. 151; CEV 1995; Alter 1981, p. 128; Fox 1999, p. 105)—or, more accurately, “are choosing” (Green, J., 1986; Elman 1994, p. 244). Others read “are in league [with]” (JB 1966; McCarter 1980, p. 334; cf. Peterson 2002); “have sided [with]” (NIV 1978; GNB2 1983; cf. NJB 1985); “have made friends [with]” (Ackroyd 1971, p. 165; NEB 1970; cf. REB 1989; cf. Fokkelman 1986, p. 334); “are delighted [in]” (Lamsa 1933); “are a comrade [of]” (Klein 1983, p. 202); or “are the companion [of]” (Driver 1890, p. 136; Moffatt 1922; Horner 1978, p. 31; NAB 1995). Tom Horner supports Driver in the idea that the original Hebrew bakur (#970; Strong: a select youth, or a choice young man”) got somehow misread as bakar (#977, “to choose”) in the handing down of the Hebrew text (which originally had no vowels). We have already noted (in supplement 3A of this series) the use of bakar applied to Saul in 1 Sam 9:2, translated as “a young man in his prime” (NEB, REB). Jerome’s Vulgate translation uses the verb diligo, which has the primary meaning of “to love” (Levine’s dictionary 1967) which Ronald Knox (1948) also conveys in his translation of 1 Sam 20:30: “At this, Saul fell into a rage with Jonathan; What, cried he, thou son of a lecherous wife, dost thou think I have not marked how thou lovest this son of Jesse, to thy own undoing and hers, the shameful mother that bore thee?” The Vulgate reads numquid ignoro quia diligis filium Isai . . . ,” which may be translated into modern English as “do you think I am ignorant that you love (cherish) the son of Jesse . . . ?”

A composite and contextual approach to understanding. The context and textual evidence, then, points to both political and erotic components: The political component. As H. P. Smith (1899) notes, the reason given in 1 Sam 20:31 for Saul’s anger is that “For as long as the son of Jesse lives . . . thy kingdom shall not be established.” Robert Polzin (1989) explains that Saul is upset at his naïve and shortsighted son. Kyle McCarter (1980) recalls the old theme of Saul’s fear, which takes on a new dimension as Saul becomes aware “not only that his own position is threatened by David’s popularity, but also that Jonathan’s is; that is, Saul now knows that David stands in the way of his establishment of a dynasty.” William McKane (1963) writes that Saul is angry because Jonathan is putting his friendship with David before the
loyalty he owes his father, as well as acting against his own interests, since Saul is sure that David has his sights fixed on the throne.\(^{35}\)

The erotic component. C. F. Keil and F. Delitsch (1950) hold that *bakar* means “to choose a person out of love, to take pleasure in a person.”\(^{36}\) Tom Horner (1978) translates the second phrase of Saul’s outburst (from the Greek)\(^{37}\) as “for, do I not know that you are an intimate companion to the son of Jesse . . . ?” (20:30, italics added).\(^{38}\) Warren Johansson (1990) translates the same phrase as “do I not know that you are the darling of the son of Jesse . . . ?” (italics added).\(^{39}\) Jonathan Kirsch (2000) agrees that the Greek version, probably the more accurate, does suggest that Jonathan is sleeping with David.\(^{40}\) Certainly, this is as valid an interpretation as any other; and, perhaps in the end it is the most accurate one, since one must connect the clues here with other homoerotic, semi-buried clues found elsewhere in the text. Although Nissinen (1998) states that he does not see a homosexual relationship here, he then writes, contradictorily, that Saul’s mention of the mother’s nakedness “gives the impression that Saul saw something indecent in Jonathan’s and David’s relationship.” He notes that the word *bakar* (choosing) indicates “a permanent choice and firm relationship.”\(^{41}\) Ackerman (2005) notes that Saul’s insult seems to suggest that Jonathan, through his disgraceful actions, has brought shame to his mother. The language Saul uses is “extremely sexually-charged”—as if we were meant to interpret it in sexual ways. “Saul perceives his son’s misdeeds to be sexual as well as political.” She notes that the same word “to choose” is used also in Gen 6:2 to describe “the sons of God [who] saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them[themselves] wives of all which they chose [bakar]” (KJV).\(^{42}\) Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000) conclude, “The issue here is not only the political scandal of a prince betraying father and kingdom for the sake of a stranger, but also the effrontery [audacity] of this homosexual love.”\(^{43}\)

David’s losing it: bowing, kissing, embracing, weeping and more. The next morning Jonathan goes out into the field with the bad news, and he and David share an emotionally wrenching farewell (20:35–42). Either Jonathan shoots a number of arrows (20:20,36), the third one being the decisive one,\(^{44}\) or in the end he only shoots one,\(^{45}\) perhaps in his great desire to see David. The Hebrew in 20:36 reads “arrows which I am shooting,” but in 20:38 “Jonathan’s boy gathered the arrow and came to his lord” (J. Green). In either case, Jonathan hastily shuffles the boy back to the palace; and he looks for David, who then appears from behind a rock formation. Then David “prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more.” (20:41, NRSV)—although a footnote in the NRSV says that the meaning of the Hebrew at the end is “uncertain” (cf. KJV: until David exceeded). This is one of those dramatic scenes in literature where strong emotions remain hidden in the text, and only are hinted at through a series of terse, emotion-ridden verbs, each of which is significant. David prostrated himself and bowed three times, then the two men kissed each other (and surely embraced in the process) and wept together, until David “exceeded.”

Bowing down to a superior was a common practice in ancient times,\(^{46}\) as an Oriental way of paying homage.\(^{47}\) To do this, one fell down on one’s knees, then gradually bowed over until the forehead touched the ground.\(^{48}\) In spite of their close and intimate friendship, Jonathan was still a prince and David a subject. However, David’s “gestures of thanks and honour” should not be viewed as distracting from the deep feeling that these two felt for each other.\(^{49}\) Later, when David saw Saul at a distance, he “bowed his nose to the earth and prostrated himself” (1 Sam
24:8, lit. trans., J. Green). In the next chapter, when Abigail came seeking favor, she “fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground” (1 Sam 25:23, and again in v. 41, NRSV). Later, when Mephibosheth (who was five years old when his father Jonathan was killed, 2 Sam 4:4) was brought before David, the boy “fell on his face and bowed himself” (2 Sam 9:6, J. Green) before the king. Yet, since Jonathan wanted a love affair between himself and David that was “equal and mutual,” David’s prostrating himself here “strikes a discordant note” with the prince.  

Jonathan surely would have preferred David just rushing into his arms! The OT mentions kissing most often in the context of the family, e.g., between siblings (Joseph and his brothers, Gen 45:15), other family members (Moses and his older brother Aaron, Exod 4:27), and in-laws (Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, Ruth 1:9)—although Ruth’s covenant speech (1:16–17) suggests way more than simple friendship. Donald McKim notes that in the OT “kisses were more than conventional” and “they were enacted with great emotion.” There are kisses of friendship, of course, and kisses of passion. Perhaps the most expressly erotic kiss in the OT is found in Proverbs 7, which describes a woman who, when her husband is away, goes out into the street, finds ‘a senseless youth’ whom she likes, then “seizes him and kisses him” and invites him to come home to her bed, saying, “Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love” (Prov 7:6–19, NRSV). The “beloved” maiden in the Song of Songs dreams, “Let him [my lover] kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (1:2), then she says to her lover, “[Y]our kisses are the best wine . . . ” (7:9). She also wishes, “O that you were like a brother to me, [then] . . . [i]f I met you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me” (8:1, NRSV). Paul R. Johnson in his Song of Songs: A Gay Version (1987) proposed a revisionist reading of this admittedly difficult book, where, e.g., Marvin Pope notes that “there is no general agreement . . . as to the number of dramatis personae [players] . . . nor the assignment of speeches to speakers.” Johnson translates asher leselomoh in 1:1 not as “which is Solomon’s” (KJV), but as a proper name, “Asher of Solomon,” since Asher is a common name in the OT (cf. Gen 30:13, 35:26, etc.). Johnson identifies Asher as a descendent (or son) of Solomon, who has a black mother, since he is described as “black” (1:5). Then Johnson translates kalla (#3618) in 4:8 as “Caleh,” the name of a beloved young man, rather than “spouse” (KJV). Johnson views Caleh in the story as a humble shepherd youth from the north who serves perhaps as a palace guard, guarding the harem and castrated for that purpose. He notes, for example, that no prince in his right mind would ask a young girl to go sleep with the shepherds (1:8) and that shad (#7699) in 1:13 can refer to male “nipples” as well as to female “breasts.” Whether the richly-sexual Song of Songs might be open to such a reading requires further investigation. However, Johnson believes that, as with Jonathan and David, familiar terms for erotic desire are used in the Song of Songs, even though applied to a male couple, Asher and Caleh. Although kissing between men in the ancient Near East need not have conveyed eroticism, the emotional context of Jonathan and David’s farewell scene suggests that these were kisses of great affection and devotion. Also, it should be noted that this is the first time in the text where we see Jonathan’s feelings for David reciprocated, since earlier we were given no word of David’s emotional engagement. The kisses here clearly express their love for each other. Sadly, however, after only a short time together, they are forced into a lifelong separation, robbed of the friendship, solace, and joys which it provided.

A Biblical text mutilated and difficult to interpret. The Hebrew ‘ad higdil translates literally as “until [David] exceeded” (KJV; J. Green 1986; Houser & Johannson 1990, p. 298). Higdil relates to the adjective gadol (#1432), which means “large,” and to the verb gadal
(#1431), which means “to be (or causative form: make) large” in some way, e.g., “to exceed, become great, grow up, lift up, magnify, etc.” (Strong). Most English translators connect ‘ad higdil to the preceding weeping and relate the idea of “exceeded” to the amount of weeping, e.g., but David “wept the more” (Lamsa 1933, NASB 1960, cf. NKJV 1982, NRSV 1989), “the most” (NIV 1978), “weeping especially hard” (Peterson 2002)—or “both shed many tears” (JB 1966), “wept aloud together” (NAB 1995), both “weeping copiously” (NJB 1985) or “wept with one another to excess” (Hertzberg 1964, p. 171). Another translation reads, “David’s grief was even greater than Jonathan’s” (Ackroyd 1971, p. 166; NEB 1970; GNB2 1983; REB 1989). Others view “exceeded” as referring to a longer time, e.g., “the longer” (Fokkelmann 1986, p. 350)—or to an increased volume, e.g. “wept very loud” (Keil and Delitzsch 1950, p. 215) or “cried louder” (CEV 1995). Still others view “exceeded” as referring to an ending point, e.g., “recovered himself” (RSV 1946; cf. Elman 1994, p. 244) or “until David could weep no more” (LB 1976). Another translation views it as just the opposite: “there was no staunching [stopping] David’s tears” (Knox 1948). Finally, a few translations simply insert elliptical dots, rendering it as “until . . .” (Moffatt 1922; cf. McCarter 1980, p. 334). One can see ideas expressed here of weeping more, hard, longer, louder, to the end of it, with seemingly no end, or who knows?

The Septuagint Greek reads hōes sunteleias megáles, which early translators rendered as “[for] a great while” (Thomson 1808, Brenton 1851). However, van der Pool’s new Apostolic Bible Polyglot (2006), based on old sources, adds at the end, David uperebalen—and translates the whole sentence here as, “And each kissed his dear one [plēsion], and each wept over his dear one [plēsion], unto of a great finale, David exceeded [sunteleia].” Strong’s Greek-English dictionary notes that plēsion (#4139) refers to “a neighbor, a friend” and that sunteleia (#4930) to “an entire completion, a consummation.” Jerome’s Latin Vulgate reads osculantes se alterutrum, fleverunt partier, David autem amplius, which translates literally as “one kissing the other, and likewise weeping; David, however, enlarged [amplio].” The final verb, amplio, means to “enlarge, amplify, extol, or glorify”—but only the first meaning makes any real sense here, as we shall see.

Many objections may be raised to most of the English translations. As William McKane notes, the idea of “excessively” is dubious Hebrew; and also the Hebrew cannot be translated as “until David recovered himself.” David Jobling writes that the textual evidence for “wept the more” or “the longer” is flimsy. Also, both the Hebrew and Greek texts make it clear that it is only David who “exceeded,” not both Jonathan and David. On the other hand, in view of the larger story, it can hardly be held that “David’s grief was even greater than Jonathan’s.” The idea “until David recovered himself” does not represent a great “consummation” as the Septuagint suggests, but only a winding down. Peter Ackroyd points out that very likely something is missing here in the text, as it now stands. Hans Hertzberg notes that the Hebrew (‘ad higdil) is “incomprehensible”; and based on the older Septuagint text, the original Hebrew probably read ‘ad taklit gedola, which may be translated as “until [David] grew large [to] completion.” Peter Ackroyd translates the ending as “to a great climax,” and Warren Johansson more bluntly as “until the ejaculation.”

**Uses of the verb gadal and adjective gadol in the OT.** It should be noted that ‘ad higdil (“until [David] exceeded”) contains the verb gadal (#1431) in the Hiphil (Causative) form—which expresses the idea of “he caused . . . to become great.” Other examples of gadal in the Hiphil/Causative are found in Dan 8:25 and Lam 1:9. In the first instance, Daniel saw in one of
his dreams a “little horn” (representing a future ruler) who came and took control, and “he shall magnify himself in his heart . . . .” (Dan 8:25, KJV, the italics in the KJV marking a word not in the Hebrew). In the second instance, the prophet Jeremiah laments that Jerusalem, because of her sin, has fallen to the Babylonians, an “enemy [that] hath magnified himself.” (Lam 1:9, KJV) So also in 1 Sam 20:41, it is David who “made himself great” or who ‘enlarged’ himself—but in what way? 

Gadal is used in the OT to refer to “making large” in many senses, of course (cf. Brown, gadal, #1431, p. 152). Yet in some instances, the verb is applied things growing in a physical sense. For example, Samuel “the boy grew up [in size, gadal]” (1 Sam 2:21, J. Green). An Israelite man taking the Nazarite vow was to let “the locks of the hair of his head grow [in length, gadal]” (Num 6:5, KJV). In another example, David complained that a friend whom he trusted and even fed had “lifted up [in degree, gadal] his heel against me” (Ps 41:9, KJV). All of these physical shades of meanings could be applied also to a male erection (growing in size and in length, and upward degree). Yet, is there any evidence supporting such a sexual use in Scripture?

Although the verb gadal is nowhere used in a sexual context in the OT, the adjective gadol (#1432) is. In Ezek 16, the Lord condemns Jerusalem and Judah for their unfaithfulness, which included making “male images [of the god Baal or of fertility phalluses]” (v. 17), building “a lofty place in every square [shrines for worshipping foreign gods and having sex with cult prostitutes]” (vv. 24–25), and “whoring [making alliances]” with foreign nations, rather than trusting in the Lord (v. 26, NRSV). The “lewd behavior” (v. 27) here is symbolic of Israel’s forsaking the Lord for foreign gods and placing their trust in them, as well as referring to actual sexual activity that went on. At one point Ezekiel complains (v. 26), “Thou hast also committed fornication with the Egyptians thy neighbors, great [gadol] of flesh [basar]” (KJV). Walther Zimmerli and Leslie Allen recognize basar (flesh, #1320) here as a “phallic symbol” and a “[sexual] euphemism”; and indeed this is a common use of the word in the OT. As Moshe Greenberg notes, this is a reference to the penis, and more specifically to the Egyptians’ huge or enlarged phalluses. As can be expected, most translators slide over this, offering instead “the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors” (GNB 1983, NIV 1978, NRSV 1989, REB 1989) or they omit the phrase entirely (CEV 1995, Peterson 2002). Among general Bible translations, only the NJB (1985) seeks to be faithful to the Hebrew, with “your big-membered neighbors.” Nor is this the only place in Scripture that speaks of sex in a blunt and direct manner. In Ezek 23:20, again speaking of the Egyptians, the prophet says, “For she [Jerusalem] doted upon their paramours [lovers], whose flesh [basar] is as the flesh of asses, and whose issue is like the issue of horses” (KJV). The NRSV says here that Israel lusted after the Egyptians, “whose [phallic] members were like those of donkeys, and whose [seminal] emission was like that of stallions.” Earlier, after Solomon’s death, Rehoboam told the people, “My little finger shall be thicker than my father’s loins”—and their lives would be much harder than before (1 Kings 12:10–11, J. Green). All translations add “finger” (this word is missing in the Hebrew), but fail to note that “loins” here (#4975, mothnayim) is “clearly a degrading comparative reference to Solomon’s male organ.” In the end, we must accept that God’s revelation is both spiritual and lofty, but also sometimes very earthly, blunt and sexual.

Only a few references to ejaculation appear in the OT (besides the one above), including two references that are generally held to refer to masturbation in general: “if semen goes out from him [a man]” (Lev 15:16,32; J. Green) and “a man who has go out from him an emission of semen” (Lev 22:4, J. Green). Another reference refers to nocturnal emission, i.e., “because of an accident at night” (Deut 23:10, J. Green; cf. NRSV). The Hebrew word used here for
“semen” is zera (#2233), which can refer either to “seed” planted for crops or human “semen” or “offspring.” An earlier reference relates to Onan, who was supposed to give his widowed sister-in-law, Tamar, an heir; but instead every time he laid intimately with her, “he spilled it on the ground” (Gen 38:9, KJV). The Hebrew lacks a word for “semen” here, which the reader must fill in. Such limited references as these, in the Law of Moses and to Onan and to the Egyptians, show that speaking of male ejaculation was basically a taboo in Israel—a view that probably influenced the editing out of what occurred at the end of the meeting as described in 1 Sam 20:41.

The damaged sexual reference in 1 Sam 20:41 probably has its closest parallel in the drunken Noah story (Gen 9:20–27). (Add footnote: See article by this author titled “Family Sexual Secrets in Genesis” on the website http://www.epistle.us/homobile.) Here Noah “uncovered” himself in his tent (v. 21), whereupon his son Ham saw his “nakedness [‘erwa = his genitals]” (v. 22); and then evidently Ham got his youngest son, Canaan, to go into the tent, after which something was “done” to Noah (v. 24)—apparently something sexual and so embarrassing that the deed itself was later deleted from the text. Hence we are left guessing as to why Noah, after he awoke, laid such a horrible curse on Canaan (vv. 25-27). Gerhard von Rad writes, “Probably the narrator suppressed something even more repulsive than mere looking.” Umberto Cassuto feels that “a coarser and uglier” deed was done than the Biblical editor wished to retain in the text, and so it was slurred over. In 1 Sam 20:41 we are faced with the same kind of situation: a fragmented text, relating an intimate situation, probably sexual in nature, where something “sensitive” has been deleted. As a result, the text now is incomplete and puzzling.

Overall, then, various interpreters have concluded that Jonathan and David did share a homoerotic (homosexual) relationship. David Jobling (1998) thinks that if we have a gay relationship here, which seems to be the case, then Jonathan must have taken the female role. He offered himself to David sexually, which David could not resist. Jonathan Kirsch (2000) reminds us that we should not be blind to the “earthiness and ribaldry [vulgarity]” that is part of the Bible—and “nowhere are these qualities more extravagantly on display than in the biography of David.” There is no mention of sex between the Greek heroes Achilles and Patroclus, as well, although the former called his later slain friend his “dearest companion . . . whom I loved as much as my own life” (Homer, Iliad, 18.80-82). David Greenberg is sure that one or more editors of the David and Jonathan story could have altered certain text of which he or they did not approve. Still, what we see here hidden away, behind the text, are the two companions in each other’s arms, kissing, weeping, and holding each other close. The juices begin to rise. As J. P. Fokkelman envisions it, they are enacting here their own version of the Song of Songs: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging fire” (Song 8:6, NRSV).

Summary. Relating to the words “perverse, rebellious” in Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30) which he applies to Jonathan’s mother, Jerome’s Latin Vulgate saw the idea of being ‘promiscuous,’ while Lucian’s Greek Septuagint version viewed this comparison as implying that prince was ‘effeminate.’ Chrysostom (4th cent.) blended these ideas together, viewing this verse as implying that Jonathan was an effeminate man, who runs after other men for a shameful (sexual) purpose. Of course, such coarse language may be simply part of expressing Oriental rage—and yet what was Jonathan doing with David that was so shameful (Nissinen)? Saul’s insult is loaded with sexual terms, including ‘erva (nakedness, genitals) and boshet (shame—
often applied to disapproved sexual acts, cf. Exod 32:25, KJV), along with baker (choose) or perhaps originally kaber (companion), both of which could point to a sexual partner. Of course, Saul’s insult was not really directed against Queen Ahinoam, but against Jonathan and something that the latter was doing that was perverse, rebellious, shameful and naked. Some translators render metochos in the Septuagint Greek here (for “have chosen” in the Hebrew) as “companion” (Driver, Weir, Moffatt, NAB), a frequent use of the Greek word (Kittel and Friedrich). Modern writers clarify its meaning here by saying that David was Jonathan’s “intimate companion” (Horner), his “darling” (Johannson), and his “sleeping [mate]” (Kirsch). Clearly part of the problem here is the “effrontery” (audacity) of Jonathan’s homosexual affair with David (Schroer and Staubli). Later, in the companions’ parting scene (20:41) the eroticism alluded to in Saul’s insult actually comes onstage—although the emotion-ridden verbs (“kissing [and embracing]”, “weeping,” and David “did more”) only hint at the passionate love that was expressed between them, flashing like “a raging flame” (cf. Song 8:6, and Fokkelman). The enigmatic Hebrew ‘ad higdil (KJV: “until [David] exceeded”) has been badly translated into English, no doubt related to the fact that some of the original text is missing, as well as due to homophobic bias. For example, it can hardly be held that David’s grief here exceeded Jonathan’s (e.g., NEB, GNB2, REB). Rather, David came to “an entire completion, or consummation” (Gk. sunteleia, cf. Strong, #4930) in a different manner. In fact, his “climax” (Ackroyd) was most likely sexual (an “ejaculation,” cf. Johannson)—which an editor of 1 Samuel felt should be expunged from the text. Gen 9:20-27 is another example of where original Biblical text has been deleted, because it probably was also too sexually intimate (van Rad 1949, Cassuto 1972).

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 5A
4. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, pp. 325, 339.
5. Fewell and Gunn, Gender, Power, and Promise, p. 150.
18. Fewell and Gunn, Gender, Power, and Promise, p. 150.
27. 1 Sam 20:30 in Thomson, *Septuagint Bible*, and Brenton, *Septuagint*.
29. 1 Sam 20:30 in van der Pool, *Apostolic Bible Polyglot*.
37. Greek: *ou gar oida hoti metochos ei su to huiō lessa*.
42. Ackerman, *When Heroes Love*, pp. 187–188.
45. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 725.
46. Ibid.
51. McKim, “Kiss,” p. 44.
52. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 35.
54. Ibid., pp. 18, 21.
55. Ibid., p. 22.
59. Greek: *kai katephilēsen ekastos ton plēsion auton kai eklausen ekastos epi to huiō lessa megalēs David uperebalein*.
60. Levin’s dictionary (*amplio*).
65. Cf. Strong, #1431 (*gadal*), #8502 (*tikla*).
68. Brown, #1431 (*gadal*), p. 152.
74. Ibid., p. 434–435.
76. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 137.
79. Kirsch, *King David*, p. 3.
A reader of 1 Samuel might think that the tearful and tragic farewell of Jonathan and David in 1 Sam 20:41–42 marked the end of their relationship; but, in fact, it didn’t. Later, Jonathan reappears in 23:16–18, making a surprise visit to David, who is hiding in the wilderness. Before turning to look at this remarkable reunion, however, it is helpful to summarize what happened to David after he left Jonathan and the capital city of Gibeah.

David on the run from Saul. David first headed for Nob (a town three miles southeast of Gibeah), where there was a sanctuary and a community of priests and where he picked up some badly-needed food and Goliath’s sword (21:1–9). His asking for and being given five loaves of holy bread from the Tabernacle there is another example of how life in Israel often varied from the Law of Moses, since bread that was displayed before the Lord was only to be eaten by the priests (Lev 24:5–9, Mark 2:25–26). Yet David, in desperation and in a hurry, lies to Ahimelech the high priest, telling him that he is on a secret royal mission (although he is not) and that he is on his way to meet other men who have pledged themselves to chastity (which also is not true). Still, Hans Hertzberg believes that it may be significant that David begins his flight from “the sphere of the holy,” from the sanctuary and God’s presence, in spite of his woeful faithlessness and falsehood. David then flees to Gath, a Philistine city (forty miles southwest of Jerusalem); but feeling very unwelcome and unsafe there, he acts like a madman and so is able to escape unharmed (21:10–15). He then retraces his steps to the northeast (about twenty-four miles), to hide in the “cave of Adullam” near the old Canaanite city by that name (twelve miles west of his hometown of Bethlehem). Here family members join him, along with some four hundred men in distress, in debt, or discontented, who gather and hide in limestone caves scattered throughout the area (22:1–2). David decides to relocate his family to Moab, east of the Salt Sea (Dead Sea); however, the prophet Gad then instructs David to return with his men to Judah, which he does (22:3–5). Meanwhile, Saul, hearing how Ahimelech had helped David, slaughters eighty-six priests at Nob, including their families and animals (22:6–19). Abiathar, the sole survivor, joins David, bringing with him the precious ephod (22:20–23, 23:6), the high priest’s vest which displayed twelve precious stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel and which carried in two pockets the sacred Urim and Thummim, two stones or other objects that were cast as lots to discern God’s will.

David then hears that the Philistines have attacked Keilah (about three miles south of Adullam), to rob its threshing floors of harvested grain. Since a rescue mission would be very dangerous, David inquires of the Lord as to whether he should go and help his tribesmen there. In fact, his men are so fearful of being in Judah and near the Philistines that David inquires twice of the Lord—but God answers, “Go . . . save Keilah” and “I will give the Philistines into your hand” (23:1–6, NRSV). So, even though David is not yet king, he takes up the task of defending God’s people. However, after rescuing the Keilahites, some residents there betray David and report his whereabouts to Saul, who then “summoned all the people to war” against David (23:7–8). When this was told to David, he gathered his band together (now numbering about six hundred) and they set off, “wandering wherever they could go” (23:9–13). Finally, they reached the Wilderness of Ziph with its “strongholds” (23:14) of barren peaks and rock formations, a
place where David and his men could both hide out and watch the horizon. Zhang was a town located about twenty-five miles south of Gibeah, in the southern part of the Judean hill country and adjacent to a wilderness which sloped down to the barren Salt Sea region. In a larger sense, David’s whole life during this period, after he went on the lam, is summarized in 23:14 with: “David stayed in the desert, in the strongholds and in the mountains . . . [while] Saul kept looking for him day after day” (NJB).

**Jonathan’s surprise visit.** In spite of the Lord’s care, David is still fearful, seeing how Saul continues to search for him (23:15). As Walter Brueggemann notes, “Saul will pursue David to the edge of his realm, to the end of I Samuel, to the end of his own life. Indeed, Saul now has no other purpose than the elimination of David.” David’s miraculous success against the Philistines should have shown him that God was with him—and indeed the Lord and David speak together as good friends, with an easy trust on David’s part (23:10–12). David escapes Saul’s hand, not because he is faster or more clever than the king, but because Yahweh keeps intervening. Yet David still cannot help but worry. Then, lo and behold, who should show up but Jonathan—his dear Jonathan, who loves him and has encouraged him so often in the past. The irony here, of course, is that while Saul and his troops cannot locate David, Jonathan has no difficulty finding the way. How was Jonathan able to slip away from his father’s camp to make this journey to see David? Also, what was the response of David’s men when they saw the Prince walking toward the entrance to their camp? Yet Jonathan has come, knowing that he might be killed by some of David’s nervous guards (cf. 23:3) or later by his father if he ever found out about this secret visit and who once before had ordered his execution, although unsuccessfully (1 Sam 14:44). Still, he bravely comes over from his father’s camp, unobserved in the rough territory and perhaps under the cover of darkness. He has come by the Lord’s leading and just at the right time, “to strengthen the hand” of David (23:16). This Hebrew phrase in the OT generally means “to encourage,” especially someone who was afraid. Nearly six hundred years later, when enemies gathered to try to discourage Nehemiah, the governor of Judah, and the Jews with him from rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah prayed, “O God, strengthen my hands” (Neh 6:9, KJV), “give me strength” (CEV). Other translations of this phrase in 1 Sam 23:16 read, Jonathan “gave [David] fresh courage in God’s name” (REB), “helped him find strength in God” (NIV), and “encouraged him in his faith in God” (LB).

Then one can see Jonathan telling David quietly, “Don’t be afraid” (23:17a, CEV). He should not fear the future but keep his faith strong in the Almighty (Elohim). Furthermore, the Prince gives David four reasons for doing this, in his comforting advice: “Do not be afraid; for the hand of my father Saul shall not find you; you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you; my father Saul also knows that this is so” (1 Sam 23:17, NRSV). First, Saul will never find David, no matter how hard he tries. Although God is not mentioned in 23:17, he is the “reason” behind what is stated and foreseen here. Yahweh will guarantee what he has destined to be. David need not fear because God’s gracious and providential care rests upon him. The “hand of Saul” will never be able to find David, even though Jonathan found his way with apparent ease, to come check on him. Second, David will become king over all Israel. Jonathan tells David, “You [emphatic in the Hebrew] will be king” and “I [emphatic] will be second to you.” Earlier, in their long conversation (20:1–23), Jonathan only implied in general terms that David would someday be king (vv. 13b–15); but now he states it unequivocally.

Third, Jonathan promises to support David and stand by his side. The Hebrew says literally, “and I [Jonathan] shall be to you [David] for second” (23:17c, J. Green).
Strong’s lexicon notes that mishneh (H4932) refers to someone or something that is ‘second, next [in line], or a double.’ Esther 10:3 notes how Mordecai was made “second [mishneh] to King Ahasuerus [Xerxes I, of Persia]” (J. Green), or given a position “next” to him (KJV). Kyle McCarter points out that by the reign of Ahaz (a king of Judah, some 275 years later) mishneh had become a formal title, for 2 Chron 28:7 speaks of the king’s Second-in-Command (mishne hammelek, H4932, H4428), along with the Crown Prince (ben hammelek, H1121, H4428) and the Minister of the (Royal) Household (nagid habbayit, H5057, H1004). 20 J. P. Fokkelman suggests that Jonathan envisioned himself serving David in the new regime as a kind of “vizier” (minister of state), 21 and Robert Alter as a “viceroy” (a deputy second-in-command). 22 Still, as Peter Miscall points out, it should be remembered that mishneh can also mean “double” or “copy” or refer to a person’s “equal”—and “double” is the first meaning given in the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon. 23 Still, perhaps it was not a high, important office that Jonathan really wanted but simply to be near his beloved, so he could continue to encourage him, watch out for his safety, and help him in other personal ways that could fulfill him and help David become a great king over God’s people.

Fourth, even Saul knows that this is so. Finally Jonathan says, poignantly, Saul also knows, in his heart of hearts, what will be. Brueggemann writes, Saul “knows [this], but he cannot yet publicly concede. . . Saul knows but he cannot yet admit it to himself” or accept that fact that David will succeed him to the throne. He must still cling to his “flimsy grasp on power and on the future.” So, “the chase must continue.” 25 Fokkelman notes how twice Jonathan refers here to Saul “my father” (v. 17), suggesting that although he loves David with all his heart, he still feels strong paternal ties. Perhaps he wants to leave “the door to reconciliation open,” hoping still that “Saul will change” (although he won’t). Then, as the dutiful and faithful son that he is, Jonathan would “not need to break with Saul just because he loves David.” 26 Interestingly (and sadly), had Jonathan decided at this point to join David and leave his father’s court, he would have been spared his tragic death in the Battle on Mount Gilboa (31:2) and he might even have seen his vision for the future come to pass. A bisexual king (i.e., David) is no more incredible than one who amassed a thousand wives and concubines (i.e., Solomon, 1 Kings 11:3). Still, Jonathan cannot let go of his father and family and the past. Some might want to judge Jonathan on this account, for his holding back; yet it is difficult in our modern age to appreciate the strong ties of duty and honor that bound a son to his father in the ancient Near East. As Leslie Hunt notes, in OT times family life was father-centered and all those included in the larger family unit were ruled by the authority of the patriarch, who held the power even to sacrifice them if he so desired. Moreover, the family provided the basis for the larger social structure. 27 It is very different today, where children often move far away from their parents to begin fully separated and independent lives. However, the statement “Saul also knows that this is so” is especially interesting because grammatically it would seem to apply back to this whole compound sentence (23:17)—implying that Saul not only senses that David will someday be king but that Jonathan (if he had lived) would also someday desert him to support David. Finally then, “the two of them made a covenant before the LORD; [and] David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home” (23:18, NRSV). 28

The companions’ three different covenants. So the Bible records three pacts that Jonathan and David made. The first covenant occurred very shortly after David killed Goliath. In 1 Sam 18:3–4 we read: “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul [NIV: ‘as himself,’ nephesh]. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing,
and gave it to David, and his armor [NIV, REB: ‘tunic’], and even his sword and his bow and his belt” (NRSV). The preceding verses relate how after David had finished speaking with Saul, “the soul [nephesh] of Jonathan was bound [gashar] to the soul [nephesh] of David, and Jonathan loved [aheb] him as his own soul” (v. 1); and after this, Saul would not let Israel’s new victorious hero return home (v. 2). The emphasis here is clearly on the intense love that Jonathan felt for David, expressed through the combined and repeated use of “loved,” (twice), “bound [to]” (once), and nephesh, (REB: “his heart” or “himself,” twice), which shows that Jonathan’s love for David was as compelling as the self love and interest one has towards oneself. Jonathan’s attraction to David appears in the narrative “like a bolt out of the blue”20—spontaneous, instantaneous, and earth-shattering for him. He expresses this love then by giving David all of the clothes he was wearing and his weapons, the significance of which has been debated but which surely represented, as Hans Hertzberg explains, the “giving away [of] one’s own self,”30 the giving of his whole heart and self (and body) to David. We are not told, however, what they specifically said to one another and pledged in this first pact.

The second covenant was made perhaps six months later, near the end of their time together in Gibeah: “Thus Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, ‘May the LORD seek out the enemies of David.’ Jonathan made David swear again, by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life” (1 Sam 20:16–17, NRSV, italics added). Here, in contrast to the first pact, we are told something specific about what was said and sworn—which now includes both amorous and political emphases. Yet the phrase “Jonathan made David swear again” is difficult, and there has been disagreement among interpreters as to who is swearing here, whether Jonathan or David. This is because the Hebrew Masoretic text reads, “So again Jonathan caused David to swear . . .” while some important Greek Septuagint sources (LXX1,3) suggest that the original read, “So again Jonathan swore to David” (20:17, italics added in both cases).32 “Again” is probably the key word here. Kyle McCarter holds that since David has not yet sworn anything (at least that is noted in the text), the preferable reading here is “Jonathan swore to David out of his love for him . . . .”33 English translations are divided on the matter. About half stay with Hebrew text, having David swear (KJV 1611; Lamsa 1933; RSV 1952; NASB 1960; Hertzberg 1964, p. 169; AB 1965; LB 1976; J. Green 1986; NIV 1978; NKJV 1982; CEV 1995). For example, the GNB2 (1983) reads, “Jonathan made David promise to love him . . . .” The other half follow the Septuagint text, having Jonathan swear (Thomson LXX 1808; Brenton LXX 1851; Moffatt 1922; Knox 1948; JB 1968; NEB 1970; Ackroyd 1971, p. 162; McCarter 1980, p. 333; Klein 1983, p. 202; REB 1989; NAB 1995; NJB 1985; Van der Pool LXX 2006). For example, Peterson (2002) reads, “Jonathan repeated his pledge of love and friendship for David . . . .” What we have in the text here and in the larger context does seem to point toward the latter meaning, of Jonathan reaffirming his love to David. However, there was some oath-swellering on both sides, since 20:42 reads, “Then Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the LORD, saying, “The LORD will be between me and you, and between my descendents and your descendents, forever”’” (NRSV). And the repetition of ahaba / aheb (“loved,” H160, H157) and of nephesh (H5315, “as [much as] his own life”) in 20:17 points to this pact having homoeroticized elements, not just political elements (Schroer and Staubli, Ackerman)34 and referring back to 18:1–4, although the same-sex content is kept mostly hidden.

The third covenant was probably made a few years later and is noted in 1 Sam 23:18: “Then the two of them made a covenant before the LORD . . . .” (NRSV). Since this verse is tied to the preceding verse, this covenant recognized both that David would become king of Israel and that
Jonathan would support him by standing at his side in the new reign. Walter Breuggemann writes that the two friends covenant again “because such mutual promises [of loyal love] cannot be reiterated too often” among friends.\(^{35}\) Marti Stuessy feels that Jonathan keeps making covenants with David because on some level he still questions David’s (full) commitment.\(^{36}\) However, J. P. Fokkelman notes that the pact made in 23:18 is not merely “a simple extension or re-confirmation of the [earlier] pact,” described in 1 Sam 20, for the last covenant looks deeper into the future and “lays down the work distribution and relationship which is the centre of everything.”\(^{37}\) The third pact is best understood as a “fresh, bilateral covenant defining their new relationship.”\(^{38}\) In fact, each of the three pacts, while containing a common core of expressed love and commitment, seems to differ from what was pledged before, advancing in content and adding detail. Although “love” is not mentioned specifically in the third covenant, this surely was the driving force that led the prince to make his perilous journey to see David and was the motivation behind his wanting to serve by David’s side in the new regime, as a kind of helpmate. Nevertheless, the lives of Jonathan and David are sadly like others that have been witnessed: not only do wonderful loving relationships appear unexpectedly in life, to thrill the heart (and body) with pure delight, but also sometimes these treasured moments are cut short by an unexpected tragedy, in this case Jonathan’s death in the Battle of Mount Gilboa.

**Summary.** Jonathan and David made their first pact shortly after David slew Goliath, the second pact maybe six months later, right before David fled Saul’s court for good, and the third pact a few years after that, when Jonathan, missing David as well as motivated by the Lord, secretly sneaks off to visit to David’s camp in the southeastern Judean wasteland (for estimated time periods here, cf. Supplement 3A). With Saul continually on David’s trail, seeking to capture and kill him, and saddled with the burden of leading and providing for the 400–600 dissidents who had joined him (which surely reinforced Saul’s sense that David was a very real threat to the throne), David during these years on the run lived a nerve-wracking life. So when Jonathan, his soul-mate and former bed-mate, shows up out of the darkness one night to comfort, strengthen and encourage him, this may have been a turning point in renewing David’s courage and faith in the Lord, so that he could endure his ordeal to the end. The prince tells David not to fear but to cling to God, because Yahweh himself will protect him from Saul’s troops and bring him to Israel’s throne, as he has ordained. Not only that but Jonathan pledges to stand “next” (mishneh) to David (1 Sam 23:17c, KJV) in the new administration, as his “double” (Peter Mscall) or “beloved” (2 Sam 1:26c), to encourage him, watch out for his safety, and support him in other personal ways, so that David might become a great king. The contents of the first pact (1 Sam 18:3–4) are kept strangely secret from us (too personal and intimate?), although they surely sprang off from Jonathan’s falling head-over-heels in love with David (18:1), after which he showers David with gifts (his clothes and weapons), a sign of giving himself to David (Hans Hertzberg), with his whole heart, soul, and body (nephesh). The contents of the second pact (20:16–17) also emphasized the love between the pair, although this pact now displays political as well as amorous commitments. Jonathan, now convinced that David will probably become the next king of Israel, asks David then to show mercy (love) to him, as Saul’s son, and to his “house” (suggesting that Jonathan feels that one day he will marry and bear children, 20:13b–17, his father still badgering him to do so). Yet, the pair swear themselves to an undying love (20:42), ‘between us and our descendents forever.’ Then, in the third covenant (23:18), Jonathan and David envision a future when the former will serve at the latter’s side, when David becomes king, serving as his helpmate and soul-mate.
END NOTES, CHAPTER 6
2. Cf. LaSor, “Adullam,” p. 58.
10. Ibid., pp. 163–164.
18. Ibid.
22. Alter, David Story, p. 143.
31. LXX refers to Lucian’s important text, and LXXB to a Septuagint text in the Vatican.
36. Steussy, David, p. 74.
37. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, p. 440.
Jonathan’s Gifts and Their Secrets

Having surveyed the development of Jonathan and David’s relationship, with the progression of their three covenants, we now return to the first covenant, the most enigmatic and elusive of the three, to examine closely another key piece in the puzzle: What specifically were the gifts that Jonathan gave to David, and what meaning(s) were they meant to convey? In 1 Sam 18:3–4 (NRSV), we read: “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.” Jonathan stripped himself of the robe [me’il, Strong, #4598] that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor [mad, #4055], and even his sword [kereb, #2719] and his bow [qeshet, #7198] and his belt [kagora, #2290]. Actually a great deal of discussion and difference of opinion have occurred among interpreters over the significance of Jonathan’s gifts given to David, including his clothes and weapons. In past century three general approaches have appeared, which have looked upon these gifts primarily as: 1. practical and personal (to 1964), 2. political (after 1964), and 3. homoerotic (1987 on), in meaning.

Gifts with practical, personal and/or political meanings? Henry Preserved Smith (1899) held that Jonathan gave David his cloak, apparel and weapons so that “the simple shepherd lad is thus fitted to shine at court.”¹ W. Robertson Smith (1894) noted how ancient peoples left blood, hair, weapons and personal garments with a deity at a sanctuary as a “life-union” with that being, as “a vehicle of personal connection,” and as “a pledge of attachment.” In return, it was believed that something belonging to the god remained with the gift-giver. Also, Homer’s Iliad describes how Glaucus and Diomedes exchanged armor “in token of their ancestral friendship.” Glaucus was a Lycian (from the ancient country of Lycia in SW Asia Minor, an ally of Troy), while Diomedes was a Greek (held in high esteem second only to Achilles among those warriors who went to lay siege to Troy). Still, when Glaucus learned that his grandfather and Diomedes’ grandfather had been good friends, he said, “So let us avoid each other’s spears [at Troy] . . . . And let us exchange our armour so that everyone will know our grandfathers’ friendship has made friends of us.” So they did.² Likewise, when Jonathan makes “a covenant of love and brotherhood with David,” he invests him with his garments and weapons. Smith believed then that “by ancient law Saul was bound to acknowledge the formal covenant thus made between David and his son,” and this should be remembered “in judging the subsequent relations between the three.”³ William McKane (1963) wrote, “The clothes, armour and weapons are so much part of the man that they can serve as a vehicle of personal connection and by means of them Jonathan and David become one flesh [italics added].”⁴ Johannes Pedersen (1926) believed that to wear the clothing and carry the weapons of another was to be imbued with his essence and to share intimately in his very being.⁵ Hans Hertzberg (1964) held that Jonathan’s gift “is more than the generous action of a prince to a shepherd boy who has neither clothing for court nor equipment for battle. It is the recognition of the alter ego [his attraction to David as a second self] . . . .” By giving him his clothes, Jonathan gives to David “his own self [himself].”⁶ In summary, then, it may be suggested that: first, Jonathan’s gifts represented a personal pledge of love, and by giving them Jonathan gave his heart and himself to David; second, by David’s accepting them, he accepted Jonathan’s invitation to become his dearest friend, and so a “life union” was established between them; and third, besides this, the prince’s gifts could serve David well in the king’s service.
The main thrust of interpretation changed, however, with the appearance of an article by William Moran in 1963 which argued that the love between David and Jonathan should not be viewed as personal affection but rather as an expression of “loyalty, service and obedience” as Jonathan pledges his allegiance to David, recognizing him as the next king of Israel. Later commentators were greatly influenced by Moran’s view, although most did not accept this as the sole explanation of these gifts, as Moran did. For example, Peter Ackroyd (1971) wrote, “The presentation of cloak and tunic, together with military equipment, expresses the closeness of the bond; but it is [also to be] understood as a recognition by Jonathan that David is to be king.” J. A. Thompson (1974) declared that the gifts “denoted more than natural affection,” because the “passing of arms . . . seems to have had political implications in the Ancient Near East.” Kyle McCarter (1980) saw both “a deep bond of friendship” here and “political nuance” that perhaps suggests that Jonathan does “transfer his privilege of succession willingly to David” out of admiration, affection and loyalty. Robert Gordon (1986) saw in the giving of the robe “a virtual abdication [renouncing of the throne] by Jonathan, the crown prince.” However, J. P. Fokkelman (1986) proposed a three-fold meaning here: By giving David his arms, Jonathan “is transferring the title of champion [of Israel] to David,” as the national hero and great liberator in the name of the Lord. By giving David his cloak (me’il), the crown prince hands over to him “his rights and claims to the throne.” But we should not forget that these gifts also were given to David as “tokens of love and as a material sign of the pact.”

**Gifts with a homoerotic meaning?** Yet David Damrosch (1987) is more cautious. He does acknowledge that the me’il becomes a symbol of kingship when Saul grabbed and tore Samuel’s “official robe,” and then Samuel told him, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, better than you” (1 Sam 15:27–28, RSV2). Then Damrosch adds, “This scene is echoed when Saul’s son unwittingly fulfilled this symbolism by giving his robe (again, me’il) to David (18:4)” (italics added, except for the Hebrew). Yet, he notes also that this relationship in the text “has been developed far beyond anything that would have been required simply to assure the audience that David and Jonathan were close friends,” noting that their bond definitely has “both a political expression and erotic overtones.” After Jonathan gives David his royal robe and armor, David does assume Jonathan’s former role as a commander over the army. However, the struggle over the kingship thereafter is less a political maneuvering than an issue of finding the right balance between historical pressures (Saul’s hunt for David) and divine imperatives (God’s choice of David to be the next king). In fact, Gary Comstock (1993) notes that a covenant in 18:4 of political advantage doesn’t make much sense at all. There is no evidence in the text that Jonathan and David conspire to gain power for David or to overthrow Saul. David deliberately refuses to harm Saul, even when opportunities present themselves (1 Sam 24, 26), and Jonathan remains behind to fight alongside his father (31:1–2). What Jonathan and David do conspire is “to love each other and keep each other safe. . . . They nurture and comfort each other . . . and they are there for one another at the most difficult times [and] when they are frightened, worried, or lonely.” Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1993) note that interpreters often bring “a conventional, heterosexist interpretation” to this story, assuming “that reading a homosexual relationship is ‘reading in’ what is not there, stretching the bounds of interpretative moderation, or [that seeing same-sex love there] is simply ‘perverse.’ Yet not a few modern interpreters are willing to devote discussion and extend credibility to reading ‘love’ here as a cipher [symbol] for
political commitment—borrowing from ancient treaty language...[which] turns out to be a highly prejudicial decision.” Steven McKenzie (2000) writes, relating to the gifts, that “it is hard to believe that Jonathan would give up his future as king to someone he had just met” and also “[i]t is hard to imagine Jonathan joining with David in a conspiracy against his father. And it is simply beyond belief that the crown prince would surrender his right to the throne in deference to David.” In fact, Jonathan never leaves his father to join David, but remains with Saul to the end.

A closer look at Jonathan’s gifts. However, one needs to take a closer look at Jonathan’s gifts. As 1 Sam 18:4 (NRSV) notes, these gifts included the prince’s robe (me’il, #4598) armor (mad, #4055), sword (kereb, #2719) bow (qeshet, #7198), and belt (kagora, #2290). Yet, what did this me’il actually look like? And how might mad best be translated—which is rendered elsewhere as “garments” (KJV), “tunic” (NEB), and “all else he wore” (Knox)? First, however, can we visualize how Jonathan (and David) might have dressed in general? This turns out to be a challenging question because the Bible gives us little fashion description, and also no pictorial representations of Israelite dress have survived from the 11th–10th centuries BC. Still, we do have earlier and later examples of attire from Syria and Israel that appear in Egyptian and Mesopotamian scenes; and many stylistic features continued over hundreds of years and were widespread in ancient Near East (apart from Egyptian fashion, which had its own more unique character). In general, the tunic (Heb. kettonet/kuttonet, #3801) became predominate in Bronze Age III (1550–1200 BC) and normal dress in the Iron Age (1200–586 BC), replacing the waistcloth (ezor, #232) as a widespread form of basic male attire, except for soldiers and laborers. This kettonet was worn next to the skin, was made of wool or linen, came with or without sleeves, and could be short or long. For work or running this tunic was usually tied to the waist with a belt or sash. Underwear (shorts or briefs) was unknown in the ancient Near East, except later in Persia—although priests in Israel were instructed to wear special, loose-hanging “breeches” that covered the waist and thighs (Exod 28:42, NJB), when ministering before the Lord. Over the kettonet, then, was often worn an outer garment, called generally a kesut (“covering,” #3682), or more specifically a silma/salma (“[outer] garment,” #8071). This was sometimes wrapped around the body and sometimes draped like a toga over the body. Ordinarily the silma was removed when working. Yet, it was useful in protecting the wearer from cold and rain, and it was often used as a covering at night. The kettonet (#3801), then, was a “tunic” (Brown, p. 509; cf. Gen 37:3,31, Ex 28:39-40), and the silma (#8071) was a “wrapper...[or] outer garment” (Brown, p. 971; cf. Gen 9:23, Ex 22:26-27).

The kind of tunic (kettonet) and outer garment (silma) worn generally in Israel (and, in fact, widely throughout the ancient Near East north of Egypt) can be seen on the famous Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (9th cent. BC), which shows Jehu, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, bringing tribute to the Assyrian king. The humbled Jehu bows prostrate before Shalmaneser, wearing only his tunic, a short-sleeved garment that was put on over the head and tied at the waist with a folded sash; it reaches down to near the ankles and has a long fringe along the bottom. Jehu is followed on the six and one-half feet high obelisk by four Assyrian officials, then thirteen Israelite porters bearing the gifts. In contrast to Jehu, the porters wear over the tunic a silma, which hangs nearly (but not quite) as long as the tunic and is also fringed along the edge. One fringed edge of the silma, however, has been pulled up over the left arm or in some cases up the front of the body. Mary Houston, who has studied fashion design in the ancient Near East, describes this garment as a large, U-shaped piece of cloth (measuring around

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which was fringed on the curved edge but unfringed on the straight edge. Although worn in varying ways, it seems generally to have been put on by throwing one corner of the straight edge backwards over the left shoulder; then drawing the straight edge across the chest, under the right armpit, around the back and across the front again; and then throwing the remaining corner of the straight edge over the right shoulder, where it hung down the back. Then the lower fringed edge on the left side was lifted up over the shoulder so that the left arm stuck out and could be used, as well as the uncovered right arm. Fringes and tassels on garments, including a blue thread, were required by the Law of Moses (Num 15:37–39, Deut 22:12) and so were placed on all Israelite garments with four corners—although they appear here, as well, on the porters’ U-shaped silma. It should be noted that fringes and tassels were commonly seen on ANE attire; and so it would have been the blue thread that was distinctive in Israelite wear, to remind the Israelites to keep God’s commandments. We can suppose that Jonathan sometimes wore a long tunic (kettonet) like this, with a wrap-around outer piece (silma). However, the floppy caps with back-turned tips and soft shoes with upturned toes seen on Jehu’s porters seem more unusual, since they are not seen commonly elsewhere in ANE representations. Men in Syria, Canaan and Israel either wore sandals or went barefoot, while the women sometimes wore shoes—as can be seen in the caravan of Semites depicted in the tomb of Khnumhotep III (19th cent. BC). Sandals (na’al, #5274; pl. na’alayim) usually had a leather base attached to the foot and ankle with leather straps. This term appear 23 times in the OT, showing that sandals were used from earliest times (cf. Gen 14:23, Deut 25:10, Josh 5:15) to protect the feet from sharp stones and hot sand. However, everyone removed their sandals indoors.

Another group of scenes, from Assyria, is equally interesting. Hundreds of wall reliefs were carved to decorate some 70 rooms, halls, courtyards and other areas in Sennacherib’s great Southwest Palace (7th cent. BC) in Nineveh. Depictions of captives from all over are considered quite accurate since Assyrian scribes (artists) accompanied all campaigns and also deportees were brought back to Nineveh wearing their native attire. Of particular interest is Room 36, which contains scenes of the siege of Lachish, a major town in western Judah, showing captives being led away, some men stripped to their long tunics and others depicted with some battle gear (e.g., helmets). In the latter category, males from Judah are shown wearing a waistcloth reaching to the mid-thighs, leaving the figure barelegged and barefooted. The waistcloth here has no fringe along the bottom, but instead there hangs down from a belt, in front (or to the side), a single, 2”-wide, 2’-long fringe that extends past the knees. Such a waistcloth, with its decorative fringe, was commonly worn by soldiers, workers, and captives. The tunic here at Lachish is short-sleeved, was put on over the head, and extends only to just below the genital area. Shorter garments, such as these tunics and waistcloths, allowed for more facile movement than a long tunic. We might expect that Jonathan wore similar attire when he went for regular archery practice, since Assyrian archers are always so pictured.

David when he came to court, as a youth and not yet a full-fledged soldier, might have worn a simple, knee-length tunic, as seen hanging loose on the Assyrian youth leading a horse in procession in Nineveh, in Room 67 in the SW Palace.

**Visualizing Jonathan’s me’il.** Probably made of fine linen (1 Chron 15:27), the me’il (#4598) in the OT was a special outer garment worn by royalty, high priests, prophets, and other notables. Examples include the high priest (Exod 28:4,31); Samuel the prophet, as a child, an adult, and a ghost (1 Sam 2:19, 15:27, 28:14); King Saul (1 Sam 24:4); King David (1 Chron 118
15:27); Prince Jonathan (1 Sam 18:4); Job the rich man, and his friends (Job 1:20, 2:12, 29:14); other rich people (Ezek 26:16); Ezra the priest (Ezra 9:3); and Levites, singers and the music director who accompanied David in the procession bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chron 15:27). In the NRSV me’il was variously translated as: “robe(s)” (Exod 28:4, 31, 29:5, 39:22; 1 Sam 2:19, 15:27*, 18:4*, 28:14*; Job 1:20, 2:12, 29:14*; 1 Chron 15:27*; Isa 61:10*; Ezek 26:16*), “mantle” (Ps 109:29*, Isa 59:17*, Ezra 9:3*), and “cloak” (1 Sam 24:5). In ten of these instances (asterisked above), the NJB changed the translation to “cloak.” Leona Running (1982) has described the me’il as a sleeveless coat, mantle or robe of rank. Philip King and Lawrence Stager (2001) visualized it as a wide-sleeved, loose-hanging elegant garment that was worn over all the other garments. Douglas Edwards (1992) viewed it as a type of cloak that was wrapped around the body. The confusion here, in translation and definition, certainly relates to the fact that the term appears applied to different types of garments in the Scripture itself. For example, the high priest’s me’il had a hole in the center and was put on over the head (Exod. 28:32). Perhaps it hung loose, since the sash is described along with the tunic worn underneath the me’il (28:39). However, on top of the me’il was worn the vest-like ephod, which carried 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Josephus later described the high priest’s me’il as “descending to the ankles, enveloping the body and with long sleeves tightly laced round the arms.” It might be assumed that the me’il of the young Samuel, over which he wore a little linen ephod, was also modeled after the high priest’s attire (1 Sam 2:18-19)—although Samuel went on to become a prophet and not a priest. However, other OT passages speak of persons being “wrapped . . . in a me’il” (1 Sam 28:14, Ps 110:29, Isa 59:17), suggesting the idea of a cloak. Also, Saul’s grabbing (and tearing) Samuel’s me’il suggests that this garment had a hem extending upward within easy reach of the king (1 Sam 15:27). From a larger perspective, what may be most significant relating to the high priest’s me’il, rather than its exact shape, is that it had expensive color (it was dyed blue [tekelet, #8504] all over), it had an unusual decorative hem (with alternating multicolored balls and golden bells), and it was made uniquely to signify a special office (for use by the high priest, cf. Exod 28:31–35). On the surface, it would appear that the me’il later evolved into a kind of long cloak.

But perhaps we should dig a little deeper. By Saul’s time, Israel already had an obsession to be “like other nations” (1 Sam 8:5); and Zephaniah would later record how the officials and princes of Israel “dress themselves in foreign attire” (Zeph 1:8, NRSV). Since Saul came to the throne as a “man of wealth” (1 Sam 9:2, NRSV), he and his family could afford fine clothes, including imported dyed cloth and beautifully embroidered hems. Jacob Milgrom (1983) notes that the more ornate the hem, the greater the social status and wealth of a person. Still, when we survey Assyrian wear (of which numerous images remain, and which shared features with Syrian and Israelite wear), we find almost no examples of cloaks. Some “Westerners” depicted in Room 12 of Sennacherib’s SW Palace wear cloak-like garments that hang open in the front, are knee-length, and have short sleeves—but these are common and not royal wear. Other males in Room 32 wear animal-skin cloaks—but this seems a different kind of garment. Elsewhere, there is the picture of a Canaanite ruler of Megiddo, incised on ivory (late 13th–early 12th cent. BC), who wears over his ankle-length tunic a short, wrap-around garment (reaching down just past the hips), which is “spangled,” i.e., that has pieces of metal sewn onto the cloth to reflect the light—yet this cape-like garment hangs over one shoulder and under the other arm, and so it hardly looks like a cloak. Perhaps it is this near absence of cloaks in pictorial evidence that led Cornelius de Wit, honorary conservator at the Royal Museum of Art and History in
Brussels, to suggest that both the special “robe” of the favored Joseph (Gen 37:3,31) and of the princess Tamar (2 Sam 13:18-19, both called a kettonet passim⁴⁶—along with Jonathan’s me’il—might belong to the class of garments shown on Syrians in the tomb of Huy (14th cent. BC) in Egypt⁴⁷—which might be best described as a beautifully decorated wrap-around outer garment. When we look at the royal wear of Assyrian kings, this is exactly what we find. For example, Ashurnasirpal II, sitting in his audience hall (Room G) in one scene, displays royal garments with beautiful figural, floral and geometric patterns, even replicating scenes on the adjacent walls and showing divinities facing the sacred tree, the king with his attendants, and scenes of hunting and warfare.⁴⁸ Sennacherib also, when he receives bowing captives from Lachish, wears a garment (silma) similar to Jehu’s porters, but with richly-patterned cloth, decorative hems, and both small fringe tufts and large tassels. Elsewhere in the SW Palace, Sennacherib is shown wearing a plain tunic but with a short top shawl decorated all over with a dotted (or rosette) pattern,⁴⁹ recalling the sparkle effect of the garments of the Syrians in the tomb of Huy.⁵⁰ In one scene Sargon II wears a wrap-around garment like Shalmaneser III and Jehu’s porters, but decorated with embroidered rosettes. In another scene, he wears a wrap-around garment with a lengthy fringe (ca. 15” long), worn in this case over a short, only knee-length, fringed tunic.⁵¹ Therefore, most likely the me’il that Jonathan wore and then gave to David was neither a cloak nor a mantle, but rather the familiar wrap-around, sari-like garment (silma)—but made special and signifying rank because of its beautiful hemming, rich embroidery, and perhaps longer fringes. The difference between the silma and me’il, then, was something like the difference today between a suit and a tux, a dress and an evening dress, and a plain robe and a decorated, colorful ecclesiastical robe—the latter in each case being elegant wear.

Assyrian garments were probably beautifully colored as well, although no traces of garment color remain on the Assyrian reliefs.⁵² Scripture notes that when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they especially prized dyed cloth (Judg 5:3); and later lists of booty taken by Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC) from kings of the west, including Samaria and Judah, mention “linen garments with multicolored trimmings, garments of their native (industries) (being made of) dark purple wool.”⁵³ Images of Syrian wear in Egyptian tombs through the 2nd millennium BC clearly show a love for and a use of vibrant color and pattern.⁵⁴ Therefore we must imagine Jonathan’s wrap-around me’il as having beautiful color and pattern, as well. Of course, the question arises whether David ever wore Jonathan’s royal garment in public or at court, which might well have been viewed as presumptuous, and even arrogant, since he wasn’t royalty (until he married Michal near the end of his stay at court). Perhaps David remembered another teenager who got into trouble by parading around in an elegant garment given to him as a gift (Joseph), and so he wisely put on this me’il only when he and Jonathan were alone and Jonathan asked him to do so.

Describing Jonathan’s mad. Although beged (#899) is the most common word used for “clothes” in the OT (over 200 times),⁵⁵ mad (#4055) is a similar word. Strong’s lexicon notes that the latter derives from a root meaning to “stretch or measure,” and so it refers to “vesture” (clothes, a garment, raiment, including armor).⁵⁶ The word always appears in a collective plural form (madin, etc. = maddim),⁵⁷ although, like “clothes” in English, it may refer to only a single article of clothing. Translators have variously rendered mad/dim/ in 1 Sam 18:4 as: “garments” (KJV 1611, Lamsa 1933), “apparel” (J. Green 1986), “tunic” (Ackroyd 1971, p. 147; NEB 1970; NIV 1978; REB 1989; Elman 1994, p. 236), and “all else he wore” (Knox 1948)—but more frequently as “armor/armour” (RSV 1946; NASB 1960; Hertzberg 1964, p. 146; JB

*Maddim* is a rare word in the OT, appearing only 12 times—4 times referring to the “measure” or “stature [great size]” of something (Job 11:9, 2 Sam 21:20, 1 Chron 20:6, Jer 13:25); once to something hand-made (Judg 5:10); and 7 times to some kind of wear. Relating to the latter, Lev 6:10 required that the high priest put on special linen “vestments” over his linen undergarments. (Words used to translate *maddim* in the NRSV are underlined below.)

In 1 Sam 4:12, a messenger ran from the battlefield to report Israel’s defeat to Eli the high priest, with his clothes torn. In Judg 3:16, Ehud fastened a dagger on his right thigh under his clothes, then went off to kill King Eglon of Moab. In 2 Sam 20:8, Joab (David’s commander-in-chief) set off to kill Amasa wearing a soldier’s garment (REB: tunic) and over it a sheathed sword attached to his belt. Joab may have been wearing military garb, or just as likely (as with Ehud) he might have gone out in everyday wear to disguise his mission. The KJV’s “garment” alone seems sufficient, and better. The word appears twice in 1 Sam 17:38–39, where David came forward to fight Goliath: “And Saul clothed David with his armor [*maddim*]; he put a bronze helmet [*koba*, #6959] on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail [*shiryon*, #8302]. David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor [*maddim*], and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them... So David removed them” (NRSV). Although the NRSV and most versions translate *maddim* here as “armor,” the meaning could just as well be “apparel,” with Saul’s military articles then specifically named. Koba (*#6959*) referred to a “helmet,” and shiryon (*#8302*) to “armor” (cf. 1 Sam 17:5,38, NRSV), or more specifically to a “breastplate” (1 Kings 22:34, Isa 59:17, NRSV) or a “coat of mail” (2 Chron 26:14, NRSV). Although we have no pictorial representations of Israelite armor, Egyptian reliefs at Medinet Habu (ca. 1175 BC) depict Philistine soldiers wearing an armored piece of bronze or leather across the abdomen, shaped like an inverted V and containing overlapping plates. Underneath they wore the standard military knee-length tunic, and they seem to have fought barelegged and barefooted.  

Richard Gabriel, a specialist in modern and ancient warfare, pictures an elite Israelite soldier as wearing scale or lamellar armor (*shiryon*)—“lamella” referring to thin plates, like on the Philistine armor. In full gear, an Israelite light infantryman may have worn a bronze helmet, held a short thrusting spear and a straight iron sword, carried a dagger in his belt and a shield on his back, and wore a short tunic and sandals. Of course, with metalworking controlled by the Philistines during Saul’s reign (1 Sam 13:19–22), it might be questioned just how much metalware the fighting men in Israel had access to, beyond bringing along their axes, sickles and other farm tools, with bows and slings. In 1 Sam 18:4, which speaks of Jonathan giving his *maddim* to David, there is no reason why here as well the basic, primary meaning of the word (“clothes”) should not be preferred over “armor.” However, since Saul’s coat of mail seemed way too heavy and cumbersome for the much smaller, shorter David, one can expect that the coat of mail of Jonathan (if tall like his father) would not have been of much usefulness either; and that instead David needed to be fitted with a smaller, more suitably fitting piece—although he could use Jonathan’s sword and bow.
Jonathan’s belt, sword and bow. Jonathan’s sword (*kereb*, #2719) would have been a very valuable gift, since only the king and the crown prince were allowed by the Philistines to possess swords in Israel (1 Sam 13:22). Earlier swords were more like daggers (Judg 3:16, ca. 17 inches long); but the fact that Saul asks his armor-bearer at the end to “thrust me through” (1 Sam 31:4) shows that he and Jonathan probably had (ca. 3 feet long) straight, two-edged thrusting swords, not daggers or scimitars (curved, slashing swords). Perhaps these were still bronze swords, since archaeology suggests that the Philistines were still exploring at this time how to make the more superior carbonized iron sword. By giving David his precious, irreplaceable sword, Jonathan expressed his belief that David had become the new military hero and ‘saviour’ of Israel. Later, when David flees, however, this sword remains behind with Jonathan. David then retrieves Goliath’s long sword, which had been stored at Nob (1 Sam 21:9).

Jonathan’s belt (*kagora*, #2290) could refer to either a sash or a belt. Often it was a long piece of wool or linen that was folded and wrapped around the waist several times; and in its folds could be carried things like money (Matt 10:9) or even a dagger (2 Sam 20:8). However, leather and bronze belts have also been found in Iron Age tombs at Tel Aitan, which would provide more support for carrying a heavy sheathed sword. Probably the belt that Jonathan gave to David was of the more unusual type (leather), which would be sturdy enough to carry a large sword. Assyrian wear sometimes included a wide waistband with a narrower belt.

Jonathan’s bow (*qeshet*, #7198) and arrows was no child’s game, but useful both in hunting and warfare. If this was a composite bow (introduced ca. 2200 BC), it was made of several strips of wood (for better resiliency), combined with sections of animal horn, animal tendons and sinews, and glue. (At Lachish, both sides used composite bows.) When strung, it reached generally from the top of the head to the waist of the archer; and a powerful bow had a range of up to 650 feet. For this reason, skilled archers were the most formidable warriors in the ancient army. David will later describe Jonathan as an expert archer (2 Sam 1:22), and so he must have practiced regularly. In a later song of thanksgiving, David refers to his “bow of bronze” (2 Sam 22:35, repeated in Ps 18:34)—which could refer to decorative metalwork or to a bronze handle or tips, as pictured in some ancient Egyptian scenes. Whether Prince Jonathan’s bow included bronze or not, this fine weapon would certainly have been a special gift. Moreover, since David came to court with apparently little training in regular warfare, it is not hard to imagine that Jonathan followed his gifts with spending a lot of time with David out in the field, training him hands on, in how to use these fine weapons in an expert manner. (Also, did they find some place to bathe together afterward, to rid themselves of sweat and dust, before heading off to the evening meal?)

So may an enactment of the first covenant be reconstructed? As we have noted, it is very unlikely that David could have used Jonathan’s armor or breastplate, or that this was given to David, since if Jonathan was very likely taller and bigger than David the teenager. What happened then in 1 Sam 18:4 is that “Jonathan stripped himself of the robe [*me’il*] that (was) on him and gave it to David, even to his apparel [*maddim*] . . .” (J. Green, literal trans.)—which refers here simply to Jonathan’s “tunic” (so translated by Ackroyd, NEB, NIV, REB, and Elman). In other words, Jonathan takes off everything he’s got on and stands before David in the nude, and then hands his clothes to him. But before David can put these on, he must undress *himself*—and so finally the youth stands before the prince disrobed, and perhaps
embarrassed and uncertain. Most readers fail to note here, as do Fewell & Gunn, that “Jonathan strips himself for David” (italics added). Jonathan Kirsch sees Jonathan here as a “man wholly governed by his appetites and passions for David,” and there may even be “flirting” here on his part. Anyway, Jonathan gets a good look at the young, bare David, who is presented earlier in the Biblical text as having such dazzling looks and an appealing body. David also gets a look at Jonathan in all his manliness—who was tall, stately-looking, still of a handsome age, and probably in shape from his military interests (he does, after all, accompany his father to war, cf. 1 Sam 31:2). Forget all of the talk of claims to the throne and renunciation of kingship, as Jonathan, who was attached to young men in the past and now is smitten head-over-heels in love with David, and fixes David’s beauty in his consciousness forever. Finally, after a long pause, Jonathan reached over, his clothes still in hand, and (as Kirsch writes) “tenderly draped them on the handsome young man.” Then, he leaned over and kissed him.

Summary. Although scholars fell under Moran’s spell after 1963, of interpreting Jonathan’s gifts given to David primarily as a sign of giving his allegiance to David as Israel’s next king, with an eye more to the Biblical story one can hardly believe that Jonathan would hand over the throne to someone he had just met or rush to join David in a conspiracy against his father (McKenzie). Interpreters, coming with a heterosexist mindset, have happily assumed that “reading a homosexual relationship” here was ‘reading in’ something that is not there, when actually their interpretation of the pact primarily a cipher (symbol) for political commitment, borrowing from ancient treaty language, turns out to be a much more a prejudicial decision (Fewell and Gunn), and one based on fantasy, not the facts, i.e., evidence (sexual clues) in the story itself. What Jonathan and David conspire to do is “to love each other and keep each other safe” and “nurture and comfort each other” (Comstock), as two people in love are apt to do. Basic wear for the Israelite male in the 11th century BC was a wool or linen “tunic” (kettonet), which was put on over the head and worn next to the skin, and often tied at the waist with a sash or belt; then an “outer garment” (silma) was either wrapped around the body or draped from the shoulder like a toga, and which could also be used as a covering at night. Jonathan’s me’il (1 Sam 18:4, NRSV: robe), given to David, was clearly a special garment of the kind worn by important people, but still it is hard to further describe it because this term is applied to different styles in different OT references. Further, cloaks and mantles are hard to document in ANE scenes, and so this might even have been a silma. Most probably, then, it was an outer garment that signified rank because of its elegance: unusual color, beautiful hemming, rich embroidery, and longer fringes. However, one has to wonder whether David (not being royalty) ever took the chance of raising Saul’s ire by paraded around at court in such a garment. As for Jonathan’s me’il (NRSV: “armor,” but KJV: “garments,” and NEB: “tunic”), a question also must be raised as to whether Jonathan’s big armor, or breast-plate, would have fit the small teenager David any better than Saul’s did (17:38-39). No doubt me’il in 18:4 refers rather to Jonathan’s tunic—so that in making his love-pact with David he strips before David (Fewell and Gunn), probably flirting (Kirsch) and letting David know what he really desires. Then he hands his clothes over to David, who must follow suit and disrobe, so that Jonathan gets a full view. Yet, their love felt so special that they pledged themselves to one another in the name of the Lord (20:8).
http://www.biblelandpictures.com/gallery/gallery.asp—In the Search box, type the number for the online Radovan images (given below in this section and in the end notes section), and click Search. When you get to the next screen, click on an image to see it enlarged.

http://www.biblepicturegallery.com—to see the “Assyrian Rulers” section, type onto the end of the web address: /pictures/AssyrianR.htm—and to see the “Dress” section, type onto the end of the web address: /pictures/Dress.htm—and to see more Assyrian pictures, go to the front webpage and type “Assyria” in the Search box. Again, click on an image to see it enlarged.

SPECIFIC SCENES:

Caravan of Asiatics (Semites) Bringing Tribute for Senusert II, in the Tomb of Khnumhotep III, wall painting, ca. 1890 BC, at Beni Hasan, Egypt. The hieroglyphic text with this long relief panel records a group of “thirty-seven,” although only 12 Semitic adults, plus 3 children, are depicted, along with 2 Egyptian royal officials (at the far right), who accept their gift of eye-paint. Note how most of the Semites’ loincloths and robes are colorfully patterned. See: Biblelandpictures.com, 3639, 1819, 1820; Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 3, pp. 2-3.

Syrians Bringing Tribute for Thutmose IV (ca. 1421–1413 BC), wall painting, Tomb 63 at Thebes in Egypt, now in the British Museum. Eleven men (with one child) are shown, presenting vessels, ointment, a quiver, etc. Most wear a shawl-like wrapped around and around the waist, decorated with a beautiful, multicolored hem. See: Biblelandpictures.com, 1835–3, 1835–2; Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 47, p. 16.

Syrians Bringing Tribute for Tutankhamen (ca. 1361–1352 BC), wall painting, Tomb of Huy (tomb 40) at Thebes. Twenty-two figures are pictured, including 12 elite males who are dressed in special full-length, wrap-around sari-like garments, decorated all over with dots. The porters, however, only wear short kilts (waistcloths), with long hanging tassels at the corners. See: Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 52, p. 17.

Ruler of Megiddo Celebrating a Victory (late 13th–early 12th cent. BC), 10” long, incised ivory plaque, from Megiddo (Canaanite), now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. The ruler wears an unusual spangled upper garment draped over one shoulder. Megiddo, located near Mount Carmel on the coast, had been allocated to the tribe of Manasseh, but it did not become part of Israel until the time of David and Solomon. See: Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 332, p. 111; King and Stager, Life in Biblical Israel, ill. 136, p. 264; Rainey, “Megiddo,” p. 310.

Four Prisoners, Mortuary Temple of Ramses III (ca. 1195–1164 BC), multicolored glazed tiles (faience), Medinet Habu (Egypt), now in the Cairo Museum. Panels include a Lybian, a Negro, a Syrian, a bedouin (or Philistine), and a Hittite. Figures wear highly decorative, beautifully colored, and variously styled garments. See: Biblelandpictures.com, 1872–2, 1876–2, 1876; Malek, Egypt, pp. 252–253; Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 54, p. 18.

Philistine Prisoners, Mortuary Temple of Ramses III (ca. 1195–1164 BC), wall relief, Medinet Habu, Egypt. Scene shows Philistine soldiers taken captive in the great naval battle with the Sea Peoples, ca. 1175 BC (Bierling, Philistines, p. 39). One can see the distinctive headdress of the Philistines, made of (what was once thought to be) feathers, but more likely reeds, stiffened horsehair, or leather (Gabriel, Military History, p. 25). See: Biblelandpictures.com, 3544–1, 3545–4; Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 57, p. 19; Gabriel, Military History, fig. 2.4, p. 25; Bierling, Philistines, fig. 83.

Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), stone monument, originally stood in the main square of Nimrud, Assyria, and now in the British Museum, London. Four panels extending around the second row show King Jehu of Israel with 13 porters (with 4 Assyrian officers separating the king and the porters) bringing tribute to the Assyrian king. Gifts include golden vessels, tin, javelins, and fruit. See: Biblelandpictures.com, 1000–1, 1001–3, 1001–1, 1001–2 (in proper sequence); Biblepicturegallery.com, search for “Dress,” then click on “AssyrianR” and look at Shalmaneser III images; Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, figures 351–354, pp. 120–121; King and Stager, Life in Biblical History, ill. 134a-e, pp. 261–262; Harrison, “Jehu,” p. 982; Bierling, Philistines, fig. 7.

Scenes, Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), carved wall reliefs, Nimrud, Assyria), and now in the Brooklyn Museum, New York. See: Paley, Ashur-nasir-pal II, plates 6, 11, 18b,19a-c; Reade, Assyrian Sculpture, ill. 41, p. 33; Crawford, Assyrian Reliefs and Ivories, figures 20–21, pp. 27–28.


Scenes, Palace of Sargon II (721–705 BC), Khorsabad, Assyria. See online: Albenda, Palace of Sargon, plates 47, 70; figures 16, 17, 19, 61; Reade, Assyrian Sculpture, ill. 38, p. 31.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 6A
5. Pedersen, Israel, 1, pp. 302–03.
12. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, pp. 198–199.
15. Comstock, Gay Theology, p. 86.
16. Fewell and Gunn, Gender, Power, and Promise, p. 149.
17. McKenzie, King David, pp. 80, 84–85.
26. Houston, Ancient Costume, fig. 144a, c, pp. 146–147.
32. Pritchard, Ancient Near East in Pictures, fig. 371, p. 129.
34. Ibid., ill. 135, p. 263.
35. Barnett, Southeast Palace of Sennacherib, 2, pl. 324.
36. Ibid., pl. 458.
42. Cf. Spanier, Royal Purple, pp. 9–10.
44. Barnett, Southeast Palace of Sennacherib, 2, plates 155, 280.
46. Translations have variously described Joseph’s garment as a “coat of many colors” (KJV), a “long robe with sleeves” (REB), and a “richly ornamented robe” (NIV); no consensus agrees on which is best, cf. Hamilton, V., *Book of Genesis: 18-50*, pp. 407–409.


51. Albenda, *Palace of Sargon*, pl. 70, and fig. 19.

52. Crawford, *Assyrian Reliefs and Ivories*, p. 27; but see the color imagined in Healy and McBride, plates B,D,G.


61. Ibid., p. 34.


70. Ibid., p. 1041.

71. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, p. 149.


73. Ibid., p. 60.

74. Pedersen notes that any kind of bodily touch would have strengthened an ancient covenant, whether done by hand-shaking or a kiss (cf. Pedersen, *Israel*, 1, p. 303).
In 1 Sam 31 we read about Saul’s final battle and death (vv. 1–7) and of what followed (vv. 8–13). Then 2 Sam 1 describes David’s receiving a report of this from a messenger (vv. 1–16) and of the lament he composed to honor the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and the other fallen heroes and to express his personal loss (vv. 17–27). In these two chapters, four responses are described to Saul’s death: by the Philistines (1 Sam 31:8–10), by the citizens of Jabesh-gilead (31:11–13), by the Amalekite messenger (2 Sam 1:2-10), and finally by David himself (1:11–27). Initially the Philistines had gathered for battle against Israel at Shunem (1 Sam 28:4), a town located a few miles northwest of the Jezreel Valley, which extends westward from the Jordan River, and was located about eighteen miles southwest of the Sea of Chinnereth (later called the Sea of Galilee). Meanwhile, Saul had gathered his forces at the spring of Jezreel (29:1), also the name of a crossroads town about four miles south of Shunem on the northern edge of Mount Gilboa, a ridge of limestone peaks that borders the southern edge of the Jezreel Valley and rises to a height of some 1,640 feet. The Philistines no doubt started the battle by charging across the open valley with their formidable chariots and horsemen (2 Sam 1:6), whereupon Saul and his lightly-armed troops scrambled up the rugged slopes of Mount Gilboa to seek a better advantage. However, the Philistines followed on their heels and soon killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul’s three sons who were present (1 Sam 31:2). Early on, many of Israel’s farmer-soldiers fled or were killed (31:1), leaving Saul’s elite guard to fight on to the end, so that “all his men died together” (31:6). Then the Philistine archers hit Saul so that he “was badly wounded” (31:3, NRSV), or as Kyle McCarter expresses it, “was wounded in the belly,” drawn from the Septuagint Greek (LXX). Saul then asks his armor-bearer to take his sword and end his life as the king, but the aide is too terrified to do this. So, the text tells us that Saul, somehow, fell on his own blade (31:4). The king had learned several days earlier during his visit to a medium at En-dor (28:7–25), who had called forth the ghost of Samuel, that he and his sons would be killed in this battle (v. 19); still he leads his men against the enemy and so dies a heroic, if finally self-inflicted, death, rather than to let the Philistines get hold of a living, humiliated Saul. However, the narrator has imagined the dialogue here between the king and his aide, since no one survived from the scene of Saul’s last moments to recount it. After the battle, the Philistines triumphantly controlled the entire Jezreel Valley, cutting off the southern tribes from the northern tribes and leaving only the Judean hill country in the south as uncontested Israelite territory.

The next day the Philistines returned to the battlefield, as was customary, to strip the dead of weapons and of whatever else was of value. They may have identified Saul by his tall size and special armor, or perhaps they brought along an Israelite prisoner to help them identify the king and his sons. Saul’s head was carried off to be hung as a war trophy in the temple of Dagon (1 Chron 10:10), and his armor was displayed in the temple of the Ashtarot (H6253, plural H6252, goddess statues, 1 Sam 31:10). In excavations at Bet-shan, two temples were found on level V (dated around the eleventh century BC) dedicated to the god Resheph and the goddess Antit, respectively; and archaeologist Alan Rowe believes that these were the temples of “Dagon” and “Ashteroth,” where Saul’s head and armor were put on display. Bet-shan, located on the eastern edge of the Jezreel Valley, was an old, important Canaanite city which controlled
the north–south and east–west trade routes in the area.12 Very likely Jonathan and his brothers were beheaded as well.13 Since David earlier had done essentially the same thing to the Philistines’ champion14—presenting Goliath’s head to King Saul (which was no doubt later displayed in Jerusalem), while the giant’s sword was stored as a trophy in the Lord’s tabernacle at Nob (1 Sam 17:50–57, 21:9)—he surely must have known that Jonathan would be beheaded, and his body dishonored, a realization that added to his shock. Then the corpses of Saul and his sons were hung exposed on a wall (1 Sam 31:10) in the public square (2 Sam 21:12) in Bet-shan, where birds of prey (vultures, buzzards and the like)15 surely gathered, attracted by the smell. The people of Canaan greatly feared these flesh-eating birds; and it may be remembered how Abraham had to drive such creatures away, who circled his sacrifice (Gen 15:9–11).16

However, the men of Jabesh in Gilead, a region east of the Jordan River stretching down from the Sea of Chinnereth (of Galilee) to the Salt Sea (the Dead Sea), remembered how Saul early in his reign had bravely rescued them from the Nahash the Ammonite, who had threatened to enslave them and gouge out their right eyes (1 Sam 11:1–11). So, during the night, they secretly crept to Bet-shan (about ten miles to the north), forced their way into the city, retrieved the royal bodies, and carried them back to Jabesh (31:12). Then they did the unusual practice (in Israel) of burning the flesh off the bones, probably to rid them of defilement by pagan hands, as well as to prevent any re-capture and further abuse.17 Also, decomposition would have quickly set in, aided by the birds’ ravages; and burning the bodies would obliterate this disfigurement.18 The royal bones were then buried under a well-known tamarisk tree (eshel, H815, 1 Sam 31:13),19 where there was probably a cemetery20 and which was regarded as a sacred place (cf. Gen 21:33). In 1 Chron 10:12, this tree is called an oak (NRSV, ela, H424)—although this term may refer to other evergreen species, as well. Such an evergreen tree seldom, if ever, would have lost its greenness and shade, and so it would have been considered a special site.21

David learns of Saul’s and Jonathan’s deaths. Earlier, Achish, king of the Philistine city of Gath, had given David and his men the country town of Ziklag for their home (1 Sam 27:3–7), located about forty miles southwest of Gibeah, Saul’s capital, and about eighty-five miles south of Mount Gilboa. With a major battle approaching, Achish had asked David to fight with the Philistines against Saul (28:1–3); and although David appears willing enough on the surface, surely his respect for Saul as the Lord’s anointed and his love for Jonathan would have made him very conflicted about such a mission. Fortunately, other Philistine commanders strongly objected to having Israelites among their fighting men; and so David and his men were sent back to Ziklag (chapter 29). To his horror, however, David then discovered that Amalekite nomads, who lived in the desert south of Judah and who had been Israel’s longtime enemies,22 had attacked Ziklag, set his city ablaze, and carried off all of his wives and children, and those of his followers. Hot on their pursuit, David finally locates the bandits—feasting, drinking and dancing—and he and his men kill most of them and recover their women, children, flocks; and with other spoil taken, they return to Ziklag (1 Sam 30). Significantly, overall, and perhaps by Divine providence, no one from Saul’s tribe of Benjamin (or anyone else) could later claim that David had had anything to do with Saul’s death.23 Yet, David had recently been through a lot emotionally, when then he receives the even more gut-wrenching news that Jonathan has been killed, along with his father.

The books of 1–2 Samuel in the Hebrew were originally one scroll, the division being introduced later by translators of the Greek Septuagint. Yet they could not have picked a better division point, since Saul’s death in 1 San 31 changes everything; and 2 Sam 1:1–5:10 then
follows the awkward, bloody transition from Saul’s death to David’s ascent to the throne in Israel and in Jerusalem. In 2 Sam 1, we are told how the news is brought to David by an Amalekite messenger (surprisingly enough) who had “escaped from the camp of Israel” (1:3, NRSV) and then traveled three days to reach David in Ziklag (1:1–2). As a foreigner living in Israel (1:13), perhaps he was a mercenary soldier or he had been assigned to do a job at Israel’s army camp. Whatever the case, many of the details of Amalekite’s story of Saul’s death (2 Sam 1:6–10) differ from those given in the narrator’s earlier version (1 Sam 31:1–6).

Interpreters now generally agree that this messenger invented a good bit of his tale about killing Saul, in order to gain favor with the most powerful man now in Judah and perhaps also to obtain a large reward. He tells David how he wandered upon Saul on Mount Gilboa, who begged him to kill him, saying “for convulsions have seized me” (1:9, NRSV) or “My head is swimming” (1:9, NJB); and so he obliged, as an act of mercy. However, David receives this not as welcome news but as horrible news; and, in fact, the messenger’s lies will cost him his life (2 Sam 1:14–16). It is true that this plunderer had gotten to the battlefield before the Philistines, because he brought to David the king’s “crown” and “armlet” (1:10, NRSV), the first probably a royal fillet (thin head-band) that could easily be worn in battle and the second a bracelet (McCarter) or arm-band (CEV)—both objects surely made of gold. David, who had spent time at court, no doubt recognized both of these royal insignia (symbols) as belonging to Saul. But instead of rejoicing upon hearing the news, David with his men tear their clothes in traditional mourning custom (1:11, cf. 1:2) and they weep and fast until evening.

David holds a public memorial service. David then composed a eulogy (a speech or writing in praise of someone or something), which he probably sang himself at the public memorial gathering held at Ziklag to honor Israel’s fallen heroes. The lyrics were recorded in the Book of Jashar (“of the Upright”), a kind of Book of Golden Deeds and they are also preserved for us in 2 Sam 1:19–27. Aage Bentzen has charged David with insincerity in his praise here for Saul (who had hunted him like an animal); but as William McKane notes, one cannot expect criticism and discord to be introduced into an elegy (a poem or song written to lament and praise the dead), particularly one delivered in public to mark the passing of Israel’s first king, the Lord’s anointed—along with the eldest prince. (Were Jonathan’s brothers so undistinguished that they did not warrant special mention? Or perhaps they had scorned David as Jonathan’s companion?) Anyway, David is generous in his tribute to Saul, remembering only those qualities in the king that had inspired devotion and admiration. Moreover, what a poem this is! Carl Keil and Franz Delitzsch (1950) have called it “one of the finest odes [song lyrics] in the Old Testament,” and Barbara Green (2003) “the most beautiful stretch of language in the Bible.” and J. P. Fokkelman (1986) “a pearl of Hebrew poetry,” as one might expect from “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam 23:1, KJV). Read the poem slowly and out loud (2 Sam 1:17–27), for it is lyrical and moving, not only in the Hebrew but translated into English. After a brief introduction (vv. 17–18), the lament divides into two parts, which Francisco Garcia-Treto (1993) has called a “public” part (v. 19–25a) and a “private” part (1:25b–27). In the first part, we are given “a dazzling kaleidoscopic effect of multiple views and multiple responses to the death of the fallen gibborim ['warriors'],” while in the second part we are granted “an anguished intimate revelation of David’s grief for Jonathan.” The poem begins and ends and is divided into its two sections with a refrain which repeats a “how” statement (characteristic of Israelite lamentation), i.e., “How the mighty have fallen” (vv. 19, 25a, 27, NRSV).
In the opening stanza 1 (v. 19) David sees “the land humiliated, deprived of its pride and ornament, the dead everywhere up there” on Mount Gilboa. It is such a terrible sight that he can only look at it briefly, then must turn away to speak about it indirectly. In stanza 2 (v. 20) the pain of defeat is intensified, however, by the thought of singing and dancing in the enemy camp; David imagines messengers on their way westward to disseminate the news, whom he fiercely (but fruitlessly) prohibits from doing so. In stanza 3 (v. 21) the poet returns to Mount Gilboa, site of the massacre, where he calls for the landscape “to wither and stay scorched just like Saul’s [leather] shield,” which still lies there and will never again be rubbed with oil to keep it in good condition. Since only the Almighty can bring this to pass, the wish expresses “David’s impotent need for revenge” (Fokkelman). In stanza 4 (v. 22) the royal pair are praised and their successes in battle commemorated, turning from the present horror to remember better days in the past. J. P. Fokkelman understands this verse to say that Saul and Jonathan “were wont [accustomed] to be successful on the battlefield, so that their weapons became drunk ‘with the blood [life] of the slain and with the fat [power] of warriors’” who attacked Israel—although this still sounds like an exaggeration, since the Philistines remained master of much of Israel’s land. In stanza 5 (v. 23) David honors Saul and Jonathan, who stood shoulder to shoulder, are equally loved, and had fought against Israel’s enemies together to the death. In stanza 6 (v. 24) David calls upon the women of Israel (who had benefited from Saul’s spoils of war) to weep for Saul, contrasting with (and hopefully drowning out) the jubilant women in Philistia (verse 20). In stanza 7 (v. 25) “How the mighty have fallen” reappears as a refrain, while at the same time David comes to the climax of his poem, turning his attention to the loss of his bosom friend. There is no particular warmth in David’s speaking about Saul (v. 24)—in fact, he had called upon a third party (Israel’s women) to commemorate him; but when his attention turns to Jonathan, in stanza 8 (v. 26) David speaks “extremely personally, very intensely and very warmly to Jonathan,” presenting us with a “me” face-to-face address to “you”—from lover to beloved. Stanza 9 (v. 27) then ends the lament by repeating the refrain a third, final time.

David hurts with grief over Jonathan’s passing. Of special interest, of course, is David’s lament for Jonathan (v. 26). Typical of early commentators, Stanley Gevirtz (1963) goes into great detail analyzing all of the other stanzas in this poem, but when he comes to verse 26, he writes only that “Just as the Israelite women who had benefited from Saul’s munificence [generosity] were called upon to weep, so David mourns, confessing the gift of Jonathan’s friendship”—allocating to this verse only a single sentence. Marvin Pope (1976) acknowledges more openly, “The friendship of David and Jonathan has provoked suspicion because of the line in David’s lament, ‘Your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’ (II Sam. 1:26). Whether there was any sexual involvement in the intimacy with Jonathan, David’s heterosexual character is well attested and his ample experience with women enhances the tribute to Jonathan’s love.” Yet Jonathan Kirsch (2000) writes more boldly, “[T]he passion in David’s elegy cannot be overlooked, and the plainspoken references [here] to love between men cannot so easily be explained away.”

David’s address to Jonathan contains three beautiful lines: The first line, “I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan” (1:26a, NRSV), reveals to us, writes Robert Gordon, “a particularly intense affection . . . shown toward Jonathan” by David, in addressing the prince as “my brother.” Susan Ackerman notes “the well-known tendency in ancient Near Eastern literature to sometimes use the terms brother and sister euphemistically [indirectly] to refer to a beloved and/or to the object of one’s sexual desire.” Further, the Hebrew word tsarar (“am
distressed,” H6887) can convey the meaning of to be “tied up” or “cramped,” in a literal or figurative sense (Brown–Driver–Briggs); and this points to “the pinching or pressure of the heart consequent upon pain and mourning” which David is feeling (Keil and Delitzsch). Here the real cause of David’s intense grief is revealed, in unfettered words. The second line, “greatly beloved were you to me” (1:26b, NRSV), contains the word na’im (H5276), which means “to be pleasant, delightful, lovely.” This word can also designate physical beauty; and, in fact, an old related Aramaic word is sometimes translated as “my darling” (Brown–Driver–Briggs). Then me’od (H3966), meaning “very, greatly, exceedingly” (Strong), underscores the intensity of David’s love for Jonathan, which is here expressed openly for the first time in the Biblical story. The third and final line, “your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (1:26c, NRSV), not only compares David and Jonathan’s same-sex love with the love between a man and a woman, but it says that Jonathan’s love was more “wonderful” (pala, H6381) to him than the heterosexual love of any woman. Walter Brueggeman writes of the words “pleasant [NRSV: ‘beloved’]” and “lovely [NRSV: ‘wonderful’]” that the first here denotes physical attractiveness, a trait Jonathan shared with David, and the second an elemental devotion, a feeling that both men felt toward each other. Moreover, “passing” (NRSV) or “more than” (NJB) points to Jonathan’s love being “greater, more wonderful, more marvelous” than the heterosexual relationships and sex which David had experienced with the three women he had married: Michal (1 Sam 18:27), Abigail (25:40–42), and Ahinoam (25:43)—although one may doubt whether David ever had the chance or even wanted to have sex with Michal. Evidently David did not find the pleasure, comfort, solace, support, and oneness with any of these women as he had found in Jonathan’s arms.

**Summary.** Clearly 1 Sam 31 marks the end of one period of Israelite history (Saul’s reign) and the beginning of another (a transitional period, leading eventually to David’s reign), for in the battle on Mount Gilboa the Philistines killed King Saul and four of his sons, including Jonathan. David, living in southern Judah in Ziglag, a town given to him by the Philistine king Achish, was at first requested along with his men to join the Philistine forces against Saul; but when Philistine commanders objected, David was spared the dreadful prospect of having to fight against Saul, Jonathan, and his countrymen. However, returning home, David and his men found that Amalekites had set Ziglag ablaze and carried off their wives, children and flocks, which they had to retrieve. So David had been through a lot emotionally, shortly before he received the shocking news from the north, via a messenger, that Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle (2 Sam 1). He also heard later how Saul, and probably his sons as well, had been beheaded and their bodies hung in the public square at Bet-shan. How could something so horrible happen to Jonathan’s body? Anyway, when David and his men hear the news of their deaths, they tear their clothes and weep and fast until sundown. Then David composed a elegy, which he sang himself at a public memorial ceremony held at Ziglag. This moving poem (1 Sam 1:19–27) is divided into two parts, including a public part (vv. 19–25a) and a private part (vv. 25b–27), which begin, are divided, and then end with the lamenting refrain, “How the mighty have fallen” (1:19, 25a, 27, NRSV). In the first half, David is generous in his tribute to Saul, recalling only his good qualities; however, in the second half, David chokes up with real emotion, as he turns to speak to Jonathan, as if he were present (1:26). His “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan” (1:26a) reveals “intense affection” (Gordon), and the term “brother” elsewhere has been used to express sexual desire (Ackerman). The reason for David’s intense grief is then stated: because “greatly beloved were you [Jonathan] to me” (1:26b). Here, na’im (NRSV:
“beloved”) can also mean “pleasant, delightful, lovely” or even “physically attractive” (Brown–Driver–Briggs, Brueggemann), and me’od means “exceedingly so.” Moreover, in “your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (1:26c), David not only compares their love to that between a man and woman, but says that their “love” surpassed this. Pope notes how this remark in the past has “provoked suspicion” of homosexuality, and Kirsch of how the “passion” and “plain-spoken references [here] to love between men cannot so easily be explained away.”

END NOTES, CHAPTER 7
2. Cf. Anderson, 2 Samuel, p. 7; additional Philistine forces also gathered at Aphek (29:1), about twenty-two miles northwest of Shunem.
4. Ishbaal = Ishbosheath, Saul’s other son, was not at the battle, probably by design; later he will surface as a contender for the throne of Israel (2 Sam 2:8–10a).
6. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, pp. 623, 627, 630.
11. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 800.
27. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, p. 641.
30. Ibid., p. 352.
34. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 807.
38. Webster’s New World College Dictionary, “elegy.”
41. B. Green, How Are the Mighty Fallen?, p. 440.
42. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, p. 649.
45. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 2, p. 659; note, however, that the numbering of stanzas here is the author’s, and not Fokkleman’s.
46. Ibid., pp. 659–660, 662–663.
47. Ibid., pp. 663–665, 667.
David’s Lament, Part 1

David’s lament in 2 Sam 1:19–27 is prefaced by a short introduction (1:17-18), which begins (NJB), “David sang [qin] the following lament [qina] over Saul and his son Jonathan . . . .” Because of the common root [qn] here, the King James Version simply reads, “And David lamented with this lamentation . . . .” The Hebrew qin (Strong, #6969) means “to chant or wail” (with the underlying idea of striking a musical note), as at a funeral. So also, qina (#7015) refers to a “dirge or lamentation,” which might involve beating on one’s breasts or on instruments. 1 Eileen DeWard (1972) defined the qina as “a formal utterance which expresses grief or distress”—and it could express great “directness, passion and innocence,” as is seen here in the lament of David, who had lived with Saul and Jonathan and had “loved Jonathan so deeply.”

Sometimes laments began with a “How” statement (e.g., Jer 9:19, 48:14; Lam 1:1, 2:2, 4:1; Ezek 26:17), to draw attention to the present despair, then moving on to contrast that with the glory of the past—although the word “how” appears in the second line of the first verse in David’s eulogy: “How the mighty have fallen!” (2 Sam 1:19b, NRSV, NIV). The qina utilized a particular rhythm, in which the first line predominated, followed by a pause; and then the second statement was chanted with a tapering-off effect, echoing the first and giving the whole a plaintive lilt. 5 Interestingly, then, the most revealing part of David’s statement to Jonathan (1:26b–c) would probably have been sung on the backswing; and so it might have been missed by some of its first hearers. However, it was not unusual in mourning to address the departed directly (cf. 2 Sam 3:34, 18:33, 19:4), as is seen here in David’s words directed to Jonathan (1:26). 6 Also, as S. R. Driver pointed out, “[N]o religious thought of any kind appears in the poem: the feeling expressed by it is purely human.” 7 Perhaps when one has lost someone so dear, there is always some resentment felt toward God for his not having prevented the tragedy; or perhaps David is simply consumed by his sense of loss. In any case, he must get through the official duties of mourning the passing of Israel’s first king, while at the same dealing with his own pain over Jonathan’s death.

This lament is “a masterpiece of early Hebrew poetry,” wrote Stanley Gevirtz (1963). 8 Robert Gehrke (1968) noted that it “has rightly been considered one of the finest pieces of literature of all time.” 9 Walter Brueggemann (1990) described it as “powerful, passionate poetry . . . .” 10 Yet, J. P. Fokkelman (1986) pointed out that the lament “is a rich and complex work of art, the interpretation of which demands patience, artistic insight, and subtlety.” 11 Figures of speech abound in it, including the: apostrophe (turning aside to address someone as if he or she is there), as in David’s command given to Philistine messengers (1:20) and in his words later addressed to Jonathan (1:26); personification (representing a thing or an idea as a person), as in David’s speaking to the Gilboan mountain range as if it has ears (1:2); merismus (mentioning the extremes of something to express a totality), as in “no dew or rain” (1:21), meaning that all moisture was banned from Mount Gilboa, site of the royal deaths; metaphor (an implied comparison using the verb “is,” instead of “like” or “as”), as in David’s saying that Saul and Jonathan “were swifter than eagles [and] stronger than lions” (1:23); and synecdoche (pronounced si-NECK-de-key, where a part stands for the whole of something), as in the references to Saul’s “shield” (1:21) and the “weapons of war” (1:27), which stand, respectively, for the fallen king and for the royal pair (and perhaps, in a wider sense, for all those who had given their lives). 12 Sometimes the language contains poetic hyperbole (exaggeration for
effect), as in David’s praising the unity of King Saul and Prince Jonathan (1:23); although this hyperbole is not dishonest,\textsuperscript{13} it surely relies on selective memory. However, one cannot diminish David’s words expressing the love between himself and Jonathan by simply calling this a “hyperbole.” Since such exaggeration would only serve to put David in a vulnerable position, his words here can only be viewed as an honest expression that escaped from the depths of his being. Hebrew poetry is not marked by rhyme nor rhythm, but primarily by parallelism, a literary form which uses couplets or triads of thought and in which the follow-up line (or lines) defines, expands, intensifies, or contrasts with what was expressed in the first line.\textsuperscript{14} In “synonymous parallelism,” the most common form, the following line restates the first line but in different words, as can be seen in: “Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! / How the mighty have fallen!” (1:19, NRSV). Such a repetition strengthens, heightens and amplifies both parts.\textsuperscript{15} However, in “synthetic parallelism,” the thought of the first line advances to a new thought in the following line(s), as in: “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; / greatly beloved were you to me; / your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (1:26, NRSV). Here David moves from an expression of his grief, to explain what he has lost (Jonathan, whom he greatly loved) and then the measure of that loss (whose love was more wonderful than that of any women).

**Summary of the eulogy’s nine stanzas (2 Sam 1:19-27).** Frank Cross and David Freedman divided the poem into six main strophes, or stanzas (vv. 20,21,22,23,24,26), excluding the beginning and twice-repeated refrain (vv. 19, 25, 27).\textsuperscript{17} Yet J. P. Fokkelman notes that the poem’s structure is so varied that practically every interpreter divides it differently.\textsuperscript{18} We prefer to look at the eulogy as consisting of nine stanzas, which divide as do the verses in 2 Sam 1:19-27—noting also, however, the inclusion of a three-fold refrain, “How the mighty have fallen” (vv. 19,25,27), which is part of the introductory stanza, the closing stanza, and an intermediate stanza, the latter dividing the public part from the private part of the lament (which is addressed to Jonathan). In *stanza 1* (v. 19), David begins with the poetic, if ambiguous, “Your glory [hassebi], O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! / How the mighty have fallen!” (NRSV). Other translations have rendered hassebi here as “beauty” (KJV), “splendour” (NJB), and “Gazelles” (Peterson). Since hassebi may be read as a singular or collective noun, this also adds to its ambiguity.\textsuperscript{19} However, the first clue as to its reference comes from the poem’s introduction (vv. 17–18), which informs us that David sang this lament “over [the loss of] Saul and his son Jonathan.” In fact, Saul and Jonathan are both mentioned four times by name in the lament. Although this might seem to exclude the other brave Israelite men who sacrificed their lives for their country in this battle, the vague wording here artfully leaves the door open for hearers to mourn the loss of all those beloved relatives and friends who were also lost in the fighting.\textsuperscript{20}

In *stanza 2* (v. 20), David expresses the deep resentment that all Israelites felt toward the Philistines.\textsuperscript{21} Gath is located on the eastern edge of Philistia, near the territory of Judah, and Ashkelon lies to the west, on the Mediterranean coast; so these two cities stood for the whole of Philistia.\textsuperscript{22} The rejoicing Philistine women illustrate the ancient custom of the womenfolk coming out to celebrate military victories;\textsuperscript{23} and one can recall how the Israelite women, after David killed Goliath and then Saul’s army pursued the Philistines, also ran out of “the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments” (1 Sam 18:6–7). In *stanza 3* (v. 21), David now curses the ill-fated site of slaughter, that it might be condemned to everlasting barrenness.\textsuperscript{24} The mountain is held
accountable for the deaths there, and it has become defiled. The Gilboan slopes, generally quite steep, descend gradually on the western side as fertile terrain, where barley, wheat, figs and olives were grown; and it is no doubt this area that David had in mind in this curse of desolation. Saul’s shield, known to be particularly large, now lies useless on the ground, without its customary care (oiling).

In stanza 4 (v. 22), the mention of “blood” and “fat” along with “bow” and “sword” carry us vividly into the clash of battle, where we see the sword spilling blood and the arrow spitting into fat (flesh); yet the king and his son did not draw back in the face of brutal conflict. Although Saul and Jonathan lost their lives, they had faced their enemies and inflicted heavy casualties. Elsewhere “blood” and “fat” are spoken of in the OT in connection with sacrifices made in the Tabernacle (cf. Lev 4:2–10, Isa 1:11); so perhaps there is an allusion here to the heroes laying down their lives as a sacrifice to the Lord. In stanza 5 (v. 23), the poet backs off from the sounds of battle to envision Saul and Jonathan in better days, before Saul’s paranoia, when the king and his son were treasured in Israel, attractive in appearance and united in battle against Israel’s enemies. Together they could outfly eagles and outmuscle lions! Of course, the speed of eagles and the strength of lions were legendary. David laments the loss of Saul and Jonathan “with a proud sadness” as befits mighty warriors, even though their relationship at times was highly strained.

In stanza 6 (v. 24), David calls for the “daughters [women] of Israel” to come out and grieve; yet more specifically this is directed to the rich, affluent, and well-off ladies in Israel, who thought themselves immune from trouble but who now are to exchange their luxurious robes for mourning attire. They are to join the crowds in the streets in national weeping—especially since Saul had lavished on them fine clothes, expensive jewelry, and other spoils of war. Still, as Barbara Green notes, this calling on the women to praise Saul for economic reasons has a very odd ring to it, like “damning with faint praise.” Indeed, upon closer inspection, David’s praise of Saul seems “provocatively shallow and implicitly critical.” In stanza 7 (v. 25), we come to a fake or false coda (ending), where David seems ready to close his lament—but then he continues on, to mourn the loss of Jonathan. Might it be that he expressed intimate feelings here that he had not intended or decided beforehand to include in his eulogy—although in the end they spilled out and became the climax of his lament? “How the mighty are fallen!” taken from 1:19 now “punctuates the lament with a repeated cry of grief . . . .” Also, 1:25 marks the division of the poem into its two main, if unequal, parts, as David now turns his full attention to Jonathan.

In stanza 8 (v. 26), David reveals his deep anguish over the loss of his dear companion, and his gratitude for the experience of Jonathan’s love. There is a “burst of grief at the recollection of what Jonathan’s friendship had been.” His words speak of “utter loss.” He is “utterly naked in his grief,” and he does not hesitate to express it or to embrace all of his loss and hurt. (We could learn from David, indeed, how to deal with grief.) The root pala (NRSV: was wonderful) is “particularly beautiful here,” as it is applied to Jonathan’s love for David. Then, finally, in stanza 9 (v. 27), the lament closes with a repeat of the “how” refrain one last time. Here “weapons of war,” mentioned in the second part, could refer to actual weapons, although more likely they recall Saul and Jonathan, the fallen champions of Israel.

Returning to 1:26, David sings to Jonathan, almost as if they were in private: “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; / greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (NRSV). The Good News Bible (1983) reads, “I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan; / how dear you were to me! / How wonderful was your love for

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Ronald Knox (1948) rendered this verse from the Latin Vulgate as, “Shall I not mourn for thee, Jonathan my brother, so beautiful, so well beloved, beyond all love of women?” Then he adds: “Never woman loved her only son, as I thee.”—which he notes in a footnote is not in the ancient Hebrew or Greek but comes from an addition tacked onto the verse in the Latin Vulgate translation (ca. 400 AD). The Jerusalem Bible (1966) tying v. 26 to v. 25 reads, “O Jonathan in your death I am stricken, / I am desolate for you, Jonathan my brother. / Very dear to me you were, / your love to me more wonderful / than the love of a woman.” Because of the difficult Hebrew grammar here, Michael O’Connor (1980) prefers dividing the text up into short sentences: “It is hard for me because of you, my Brother Jonathan. My Brother Jonathan, you were very good for me. You were a wonder. Your love was mine. What is the love of women?” The New American Bible (1995) reads, “I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother! / most dear have you been to me; / More precious have I held love for you / than love for women.” Now, each of the three lines in this verse needs to be looked at in closer detail:


In “I am distressed,” the verb sarar (#6887) conveys ideas of “being bound or tied up, cramped, in straits, or distressed.” In the book of Lamentations, the prophet weeps for Jerusalem, his city laid waste and with many of its inhabitants led away into captivity; and he cries out, “See, O Lord, how distressed I am [#6887]; my stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me . . .” (Lam 1:20a, NRSV). The word is given a sexual meaning in the story of Amnon, David’s son, who fell so madly in love with his stepsister Tamar that he was “distressed” (KJV: vexed, NRSV: tormented) that he could not lie with her—until his friend Jonadab came up with a diabolic plan (2 Sam 13:1–2ff). Actually, recorded words of deep loss and inner turmoil over a departed loved one is rather rare in the OT record, although another wrenching lament is found in David’s cry over the death of his beloved and beautiful, if rebellious, son Absalom: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33b, NRSV; and 19:1b, NJB). As Samuel Terrien (1985) notes, relating to 1:26, one sees here the “all-shattering quality” of David’s pain, which stems from the “all-embracing character” and the “depth” of his love for Jonathan.48 Peter Abelard, the 12th century French monk, better known for his heterosexual love for Heloise, who writing perceptively in his 6th plangent (Latin, for “lamentation”) filled out David’s lament for Jonathan “with great sensitivity and feeling the nature of love between two men” (Boswell). He penned: “You now, my Jonathan, / I mourn above all, / among all delights / there will always be tears. / Woe, why am I / followed by evil counsel, / and could give you / no protection in battle? / If I had fallen by your side / I would have died happy / for there is
nothing greater / than what love will do, / and living after you / would mean continual dying / since half a soul / is not enough to live. . . . / I silence my lyre: / if only I could silence too / my mourning and weeping. / My hands hurt from playing, / my voice is hoarse from crying / and my breathing faint.” (This modern though freer translation is offered by Sedulia Scott.) Whether Abelard meant to portray their relationship as sexual or not, he certainly invested it with erotic language, and more so than in any other *planctus* (Boswell). 49

In “my brother Jonathan,” the word *ak* (“brother,” #251) is applied in the OT to a wide range of both blood relationships (as with a brother, nephew, or member of the same tribe or people) and non-blood relationships (such as with a close friend, an ally, or another of equal rank). 50 John Boswell (1994) believed it was significant that here in 1:26 David refers to Jonathan not as “like a brother” or “more than a brother” but as “my brother,” 51 the last implying a closer union. Othmar Keel (1986) noted that in Egyptian love lyrics (as well as in Hebrew texts) lovers often referred to one another as “brother” and “sister,” expressing their relatedness and belonging. 52 In fact, an eroticized use of the terms “brother” and “sister” occurs repeatedly in the Song of Songs (4:9,10,12; 5:1,2; 8:1), as well as in the Apocrypha (Tobit 5:21; 7:11,15; 8:4; Additions to Esther D:9), and in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QapGen, col. ii). 53 For example, in the Song of Songs one reads: “You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes” (4:9). Then these words are spoken to the male sweetheart: “O that you were like a brother to me, who nursed at my mother’s breast! If I met you outside, I would kiss you . . .” (8:1, both NRSV). When the father Raguel gives Sarah to Tobit as his wife, he declares, “[F]rom now on you are her brother and she is your sister” (Tobit 7:11). Susan Ackerman notes that from such references as these, even though they are heterosexual, the ancient Hebrew audience might possibly have perceived erotic overtones in David’s use of the term “brother” referring to Jonathan in this lament. King Hiram of Tyre also calls David “my brother” (1 Kings 9:13), as his ally; but this involves an entirely different context. The meaning of this term in David’s lament carries a very different meaning, since Jonathan’s Jonathan’s love is compared to that of a woman, in 1:26. 54

“[G]reatly beloved were you to me” (1:26b). The second clause in this stanza has been variously translated as: “[Y]ou were very [*me’od*, #3966] dear [*na’im*, #5276] to me” (Lamsa 1933; cf. JB 1966; NIV 1978; cf. McCarter 1984, p. 67; cf. REB 1989; cf. NAB 1995; cf. NJB 1985), “very pleasant have you been to me” (cf. KJV 1611; RSV 1946; cf. NASB 1960; RSV2 1972; cf. J. Green 1986; cf. NKJV 1982), “greatly beloved were you to me” (NRSV 1989; B. Green 2003, p. 443), “dear and delightful you were to me” (NEB 1970; Ackroyd 1977, p. 24), “How much I loved you!” (LB 1976), “You delighted me greatly” (Freedman 1980, p. 265), “you were beautiful to me, exceedingly so” (Shea 1986, p. 19), “you pleased me greatly” (Elman 1994, p. 286), and “you were a great delight to me” (Schroer and Staubli 2000, p. 30). Some examples of bad translation include, “Jonathan, you have been exceedingly gracious to me” by A. A. Anderson (1989, p. 12), which waters down the Hebrew. “I loved you / like a brother” in the CEV (1995) also changes the original. “Your friendship was a miracle-worker” in Peterson (2002) is likewise misleading, since “friendship” whitewashes the Hebrew and the inclusion of “miracle-worker” also has no linguistic basis. Rather, the intensive *me’od* (#3966) in the verse, meaning “wholly, exceedingly, very much so” adds great intensity to David’s feelings.

The Hebrew verb *na’im* (#5276) means “to be agreeable, surpassing in beauty, delightful, pleasant, sweet,” according to Strong’s lexicon. 55 James Dennison notes that overall this word refers to “an affection of the ‘inmost heart’ . . . in which one finds pleasure, i.e., the object of
Brown’s lexicon notes that it can refer to physical beauty, and so erotic delight. For example, in the Song of Songs, the king says to his beloved, “How pretty you are, how beautiful [5276], how complete the delights of your love. You are as graceful as a palm tree and your breasts are clusters of dates. I will climb the palm tree and pick its fruit.” (Song 7:6-8, GNB). His beloved also says, “How handsome you are, my dearest, how you delight [5273] me. The grass will be our bed . . .” (Song 1:16, GNB). Na’im (5273) is derived from and is similar to na’im (5276) in meaning. In both of these references, na’im/na’im refer to physical beauty and erotic attraction. Marvin Pope notes that n’m is used in Ugaritic also to refer to male beauty and charm (as well as female), e.g., King Keret is called n’m glm il (“handsome lad of El”) and the goddess Anat addressed the young hero Aqhat as n’mn ‘mq nsm (“handsome, strongest of men”).

Earlier in the lament David called both Saul and Jonathan “beloved [157] and lovely [5273]” (1:23). Rulers in the ancient Near East were often characterized as being very handsome, yet Saul’s physical attractiveness is especially noted elsewhere before he was chosen to be king (1 Sam 9:2), and one might assume that Jonathan inherited his good looks. Still, the words take on more powerful and deeper meaning in 1:26, where Jonathan’s physical (sexual) appeal and love for David become the focus. Although no words of love for Jonathan were earlier recorded from David’s mouth, their parting described in 1 Sam 20:41 does express the depth of his love for Jonathan. Danna Fewell and David Gunn note of David in 1:26, however, that now, “Very precisely he speaks of how extremely lovely Jonathan was to him. . . . So David perceived Jonathan as lovely?” As beautiful?! “[I]t is David who has been the object of everyone’s gaze up to this point.”

“[Y]our love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (1:26c). The third and last clause in this stanza has frequently been translated as “your love [ahaba, #160] to me was wonderful [pala, #6381], passing the love [ahaba] of women” (cf. KJV 1611; Lamsa 1933; RSV 1946; RSV2 1972; NRSV 1989; B. Green 2003, p. 443)—with some translations substituting “surpassing” for “passing” (NEB 1970; cf. Ackroyd 1977, p. 24; NKJV 1982; Anderson 1989, p. 12; REB 1989). Another common translation is, “Your love to me was more wonderful / Than the love of women” (NASB 1960; JB 1966; cf. J. Green 1986; cf. NIV 1978; cf. McCarter 1984, p. 67; cf. Shea 1986, p. 19; Elman 1994, p. 286; cf. NJB 1985; cf. Schroer and Straub 2000, p. 30). Other renderings include: “And your love for me was deeper / Than the love of women!” (LB 1976), and “More precious have I held love for you / than love for women” (NAB 1995). Some examples of bad translation include, “You were truly loyal to me, / more faithful than a wife to her husband,” in the CEV (1995), which removes the two words for love in the Hebrew here—translated as “beloved” and “your love” in the NRSV—and substitutes instead “loyal” and “faithful,” which not only strip the verse of any romantic and erotic content but give it a false cast. Also, “[L]ove far exceeding anything I’ve known—or ever hope to know” in Peterson (2002) muddles the verse, by taking out the comparison of the love between two men to the love between a man and woman, also distorting the Hebrew. In contrast, one ancient Septuagint manuscript (LXX¹) translated this part as “Your love fell upon me like the love of women” which has a slightly different and beautiful sound to it. Clearly there is more said here than homophobic interpreters would like to acknowledge.

The Hebrew verb pala (#6381), coming from a root meaning “distinguished,” refers to someone or something that is “great, wonderful, or marvelous” (Strong’s lexicon). Brown’s
lexicon notes that it means “to be surpassing or extraordinary”—and the root pl is sometimes used to describe miracles, e.g., David declares in Ps 9:1 (NRSV), “I will tell of all your [God’s] wonderful deeds [nipla’oth].” One has to wonder whether David did not often feel that Jonathan’s love, passion and care for him was exactly that, a miracle sent by God. Relating to 2 Sam 1:26, David Freedman (1980) reads the unusual Hebrew here, npl’th (NRSV: “[your love] was wonderful”), as nipla’ ‘attah, translating it as, “You were extraordinary. / Loving you, for me, was better than loving women [italics added].”

**Traditional views of David’s aside to Jonathan.** An historical survey of interpretation on this key verse over the past century and a half reveals a number of insights:

1. **No doubt uneasy with this verse and what it might imply, some interpreters have stressed purity in the friendship here, or that it was simply a (nonsexual) friendship or brotherhood.** H. P. Smith (1899) noted on David’s part “a burst of grief at the recollection of what Jonathan’s friendship had been [italics added].” S. R. Driver (1913) spoke of David’s “deep and pure affection for Jonathan [italics added].” C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (1950) wrote of David’s lament as “full of lofty sentiment and springing from deep and sanctified emotion” and of his words to Jonathan, that, “Comparison to the love of woman is expressive of the deepest earnestness of devoted love [italics added, in both cases].” William McKane (1963) notes “a special tenderness” here, “for David had been joined to him [the prince] in a brotherhood closer than that of blood and had been saved by him at a time when there was but a step between him and death.” Gnana Robinson (1993) wrote in summary, “The friendship-love between Jonathan and David has become an example for all time of all true friendship relationships.”

2. Following William Moran’s influential article (1963), many began interpreting “love” in the Jonathan and David story as primarily or especially carrying political significance. Although this interpretation was usually applied to 1 Sam 18:1-4, the idea was carried over to David’s lament by Peter Ackroyd (1977), who sought to impose a political significance here by suggesting that, although any reference in the lament to David as Jonathan’s true successor is lacking, the poem does provide “a preface to the establishment of David’s kingship in 2 Sam 2:1-4a.” Kyle McCarter (1984) commented on 2 Sam 1:26 also that Jonathan’s love for David overall is charged with “political overtones,” although “as the present passage [1:26] illustrates well, there was also warm personal intimacy in the relationship between the two men.” Ronald Youngblood (1992) writes that David’s words in 1:26 should not “perversely” be understood in a homosexual sense, but rather they refer only to “covenantal/political loyalty.” He then goes on to say, however, in a somewhat contradictory way, that “loved [NRSV: beloved]” here speaks of “physical attraction, a trait that [Jonathan] shared with David himself.”

3. **Others noted the intensity of the affection here, but stopped sort of calling it a homosexual relationship.** A. F. Kirkpatrick (1930) wrote tersely: “The climax of the elegy is reached in vv. 25b, 26, where David’s love for Jonathan finds its most touching expression . . .” Walter Brueggemann (1990) notes, “The words [here] cannot say all that needs to be said” for Jonathan’s love “has been deeper and more precious than that of a wife.” David speaks of Jonathan’s physical attractiveness (KJV: “pleasant”) and of the elemental devotion they shared (KJV: “lovely”)—and together these words articulate “a peculiar and precious bonding with David.” David is uninhibited about his friendship, which is “not simply political usefulness.” The German scholar Jens Weizer (1995) claims that “the friendship of David and Jonathan
attested to in the Bible was no gay relationship; and yet he adds, “in a certain sense it was perhaps on the way to being [becoming] just that.”

4. Some interpreters argued that 2 Sam 1:26 does not say for sure that David loved Jonathan. Cheryl Exum (1993) states that “Nowhere is it unambiguously stated that David loved Jonathan, whereas it is frequently mentioned that Jonathan loved David. In David’s lament over Jonathan, it is not entirely clear who loved whom.” However, she notes that Frank Cross and David Freedman (1975) would disagree, translating the third part of 1:26 as “To love thee was for me [David] / better than the love of women.” Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1993) also make the statement that “nowhere unambiguously is David ever said to love anyone,” including his partners; still, they hold that “a homosexual reading . . . finds many anchor points in the [larger] text.”

David Jobling (1998) writes that “there are no words (or at least unambiguous ones) of David’s love for Jonathan.” Still, he concludes that “Nothing in the [larger] text rules out, and much encourages the view that David and Jonathan had a consummated gay relationship.” He reads their “covenant” as analogous (similar) to a “marriage agreement,” based on Jonathan’s wife-like relationship to David, Saul’s outburst, and other clues in the text.

Homosexual love seen here in David’s aside. In fact, a growing number of interpreters have come to the conclusion that there was definitely a homosexual relationship here between Jonathan and David, based at least, in part, on David’s statement that “your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (1:26c, NRSV). As early as 1960 Raphael Patai expressed the view that David’s words (including “very pleasant hast thou been unto me. Wonderful was thy love to me, passing the love of women!”) could be a reference to homosexual love and its expression. “The high praise accorded in this Davidic lament to love between men, as against heterosexual love, reminds us, of course, of the spirit that pervades Plato’s Symposium,” where Phaedrus and Pausanias both praise this same kind of love. J. P. Fokkelman (1986) wrote how David’s tone in 1:26 becomes direct and warm, with words like “loved” and “dear.” These emotionally charged words express a dynamic I-you relationship which will contest even death itself. “There is no doubt about David’s love for Jonathan,” but David will only speak here of the “radiance, warmth and love he received.” Jonathan’s “ardour” (passion) was even greater than the love of women, that standard which so many (heterosexual) men consider the highest form of beauty and ecstasy in their lives. Also, Erhard Gerstenberger (1996) noted that the declaration that Jonathan’s love was more valuable to David than that of women—along with the emphasis on the keyword “love” throughout the Jonathan and David story—is “noteworthy, even given the fact that the wordfield of this Hebrew expression transcends the sexual component . . . .” David’s words to his friend “explicitly compare male love and female love,” and he describes their same-sex love with “fairly unequivocal attitudes such as ‘great joy’ and ‘bliss’ [v. 26].” Gerstenberger continues: “Opportunities for homosexual acts do after all emerge among stationed or combat troops. It thus may be that in addition to David’s intensive relationships with eight primary women, he also cultivated a relationship with another man during his life. Tradition acknowledged this, and it left its ineradicable traces in the narratives.”
But did Jonathan and David have sex, physical intimacy? Many interpreters avoid this question, or only hint at a (possibly positive) answer, while other deny that this entirely, in spite of the amorous feelings the two had toward each other. The debate over whether 1 Sam 1:26 reveals homoerotic content began in 1955, when D. S. Bailey wrote that here “there is at least the tacit [unspoken] approval of homosexual love between men.” Any “affectionate regard entertained by a man for another man” might be considered “homosexual” in a certain sense. Yet, he saw no textual evidence that showed that Jonathan and David were “inverts” (i.e., individuals with an inherent “genuine homosexual condition”) or that they expressed their love for each other “in coital acts” (anal intercourse). Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1993) point out that a “heterosexist interpretation” has often been brought to verses like 1:26, with scholars simply discounting as “perverse” the possibility of any homosexual reading. They note that it is quite possible that Jonathan could have been bisexual—although they believe that his (same-sex) passion went unrequited or was at least unconsummated. Barbara Green (2003) holds that “love” here (1:26) implies covenant as well as personal commitment; yet as Fewell and Gunn have demonstrated (1993), “the sexual element is strong as well.” Then she notes, Jonathan “is oddly praised” here, since what is omitted is what one would expect, namely, some reference to the prince’s unceasing efforts to help David. In short, what David does say about Jonathan in 1:26, to put it succinctly, is “that he loved Jonathan [italics added].” Jonathan Kirsch (2000) notes that “[N]ow, in one of the most provocative moments in the Bible, David openly declares the passion he felt toward Jonathan.” To many pious readers, these words have been interpreted as referring only to “the wholesome affection of a man toward his friend and comrade in arms,” while for others, “the same words raise a tantalizing question,” Was David gay? Kirsch sees here, at least, “an undeniable homoerotic subtext.”

Tom Horner’s perception (1978) rings even truer today than it did when he wrote it, namely, that “Israel’s greatest king and hero did have such an affair [a manly homosexual relationship with another hero-warrior] and he made no secret about it. On the contrary, he boasted about it in his famous lament . . . [in] majestic language and depth of feeling . . . .” It was “only natural that the two heroes should have gravitated toward each other”—and many clues throughout the story give us “every reason to believe that a homosexual relationship existed” between them. A. A. Anderson (1989) noted how Horner and others have suggested that this was a homosexual relationship and he concedes that “the language of the poem may, perhaps, permit such an interpretation . . . .” Still, he concluded, “the general attitude of the OT [esp. Lev 18:22, 20:13] . . . seems to contradict this exegesis . . . .” Yet, as Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000) note, one can never understand what was going on here by simply applying Biblical law (e.g., Lev 18:22, 20:13); rather, one has to consider Israel’s larger cultural context and influences, including, e.g., the Epic of Gilgamesh which clearly contains homoerotic motifs. As Susan Ackerman (2005) points out, also, that sometimes too little attention has been paid to David’s description of Jonathan’s love as being “wonderful”—that is, “something David seems to have cherished and, by implication, a love to which he responded.” So, she agrees that homoerotic love is expressed here. Even Saul Olyan, who earlier interpreted 1:26 as referring not to sexual but to covenant love, has recently acknowledged that comparing Jonathan’s love favorably to the love of women is “extremely peculiar in a covenant context” and also that “the love of women” is usually “understood by scholars to be a reference to sexual or sexual-emotional love.” How David missed Jonathan now. They’d been apart for a while—but still he looked forward to, even longed for, the time when they would be reunited.
after the old king Saul’s death—as partners, companions, warriors and even intimates. Now his heart hurt, his eyes filled with tears, and his whole body shook.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 7A
27. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel,* p. 239.
33. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel,* p. 239.
34. McCarter, *II Samuel,* p. 76.
42. Ibid., pp. 217–19.

54. Ibid., p. 191.
63. McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 73.
76. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 816.
The Biblical introduction to David’s lament (1:17–18), which we have not yet considered in full, contains several curious references: one to the “book of Jashar” and the other to a “bow.” Verse 18 reads literally (taken from J. Green): “And he [David] said to teach the sons of Judah the bow [geshet, #7198]; see it is written in the book of Jasher [yashar].” Some other slightly different translations of this include: “and afterward [he] commanded that it be sung throughout Israel. It is quoted here from the book, Heroic Ballads” (LB, 1976); “(it is for teaching archery to the children of Judah; it is written in the Book of the Just)” (NJB, 1985); and “(He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.)” (NRSV, 1989). First, what was the Book of Jashar? The Hebrew term yashar (#3477) means “straight, just, upright” (Strong); and this title has been explained as referring to Israel or to God’s actions on Israel’s behalf; or to remarkable events and heroic deeds that were remembered in this national poetry anthology. For example, Joshua’s poetic address to the sun and the moon (to stand still during the Israelites’ battle with the Amorites) is noted as having been recorded in the Book of Jashar (Josh 10:12–13). Solomon’s declaration—at the dedication of the great Temple, when the Ark of the Covenant was carried in and the Lord’s presence filled the temple like a cloud—about the Lord dwelling in thick darkness there (1 Kings 8:12–13) may also have been inscribed in the Book of Jashar. Although there is no mention of this in the Hebrew text, the Septuagint Greek here adds, “Is it not written in the book of songs?”—and many interpreters feel that perhaps an ancient scribe miscopied hysr (“Jashar”), in the original source, as hysyr (“songs”). Perhaps the Book of Jashar was a scroll or scrolls which recorded moving poetry from memorable events in Israel’s sacred history.

**Various readings given the “bow” in 2 Sam 1:18.** Relating to the enigmatic reference to “a bow” or “the bow” here, four major lines of interpretation have been offered: 1. *Since the word “bow” does not appear in some Septuagint Greek manuscripts, it should be considered as text added later and so should be dropped from the Hebrew and not included in translations.* In the 19th century, G. A. Smith considered all or part of the introduction (vv. 17–18) as a gloss, or later insertion—but then H. P. Smith (1899) asked, if so, how did the inserter ever get the idea that David not only sang this lament, but ordered that it should be taught? In the end, however, H. P. Smith sided with August Klostermann (1887), who (radically) proposed that the whole line about the book of Jashar be dropped as a later addition and that the line about the bow then be translated as “Receive, O Judah, cruel tidings”—vowelizing the original Hebrew qst not as qeshet (bow, #7198) but as qashot (hard [things], #7186). Still, Smith doubted “whether this is good Hebrew.” J. P. Fokkelman (1986) similarly read the Hebrew here as saying that the Judeans should be instructed concerning the “painful realities” of life (and not a reference to a “bow”). Kyle McCarter (1984), followed a less radical path, proposing only that “bow” be deleted from the text as a gloss. Following suit, certain English translations thus removed the word “bow” from their text, reading only, e.g., “it should be taught to the people of Judah” (RSV 1946, cf. JB 1966, RSV2 1972, GNB2 1983), “that it be sung throughout Israel” (LB 1976), or “that everyone in Judah learn it by heart” (Peterson 2002). Of course, “it” refers to David’s poem; and, in fact, a few translations substitute “this dirge” in place of “it” (NEB 1970, REB 1989). Yet, A. A. Anderson (1989) points out that while “bow” is lacking in some Septuagint
manuscripts (including the Alexandrinus text [LXX^A]), it appears in other major versions; and he believes that the omission, where it occurred, may have resulted simply from a failure on the part of some scribe to understand the significance of qst in this context (and who omitted it), not because the word for “bow” was lacking in the original Hebrew text.¹⁰

2. The “bow” means that the sons of Judah were to be taught archery, to prepare them for combat. The 11th century rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (also known by the names Rashi and Isaaki) held that the “bow” indicated that the children of Judah should “learn war and [how to] draw the bow.” The 17th century Dutch theologian Hugo Grotius viewed this lament as a song in the training of soldiers.⁹ Otto Eissfeldt (1955) also understood the wording “teach the sons of Judah (the) bow” as meaning to “make [them] fit for war.” Ralph Gehrke (1968) notes that some interpreters have viewed this statement as implying that David’s lament was to be sung during military training, such as at archery practice.¹¹ This interpretation has also been carried over into certain translations, including: “teach the children of Israel the use of the bow” (KJV 1611, cf. Lamsa 1933), “a lesson in archery” (Knox 1948, from the Vulgate), and “for teaching archery” (NJB 1985). However, as J. P. Fokkelman notes, “training” the Judeans in the bow has no real linguistic foundation here.¹²

3. The “Bow” refers to the name of a tune. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (1950) noted that the “bow” might refer to a melody (although this was not their first choice).¹³ Gnana Robinson (1993) and Tony Cartledge (2001) also mention this as a possibility.¹⁴ Similar names are included in superscriptions (i.e., notes of various kinds) that precede certain psalms, some of which seem to indicate tune titles, e.g., “The Doe of the Morning” (Ps 22), “A Dove on Distant Oaks,” (Ps 56), “Lillies” (Ps 45, 69), and “Do Not Destroy” (Ps 57-59, 75; all here as translated in the NIV).¹⁵ It should be noted that none of these words or phrases has any connection, in terms of meaning, to any text in the psalms to which they are attached. In none of the superscriptions is there any request to “teach” a certain tune; however, “For teaching” does appear in the superscription of Ps 60 (NIV), referring to the psalm itself,¹⁶ showing that an introductory request could be made for something to be taught.

4. The “Bow” is a title for David’s lament. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (1950), content to accept the Hebrew as it is, noted that the most “natural” explanation is that “a bow” here was a title given to David’s lament—because a reference is made within it to Jonathan’s bow (2 Sam 1:22), and also this was a “martial ode.” They also point out that “the bow was one of the principle weapons used by warriors of that age, and one in the use of which the Benjaminites, the tribe-mates of Saul, were particularly skilful [sic]” (cf. 1 Chron 8:40, 12:2; 2 Chron 14:8, 17:17).¹⁷ Hans Hertzberg (1964) holds that the “bow,” whether added by David or later by a “Minister of Information,” was a title given to David’s lament; and it probably was taken from a “characteristic word” within the poem itself (v. 22). He notes that the second Sura (chapter) of the Koran was called “Cow” in a similar fashion,¹⁸ because this chapter mentions the sacrifice of a cow.¹⁹ A. F. Kirkpartrick (1930) points to the story of God’s appearance to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:1–4:17), which is referred to in the Gospels simply as “The Bush” (Luke 20:37). He notes that the Vaticanus manuscript of the Septuagint (LXX^B), in the Vatican, omits the word “bow” and reads simply “teach [it] to the children of Judah”—but all relevant factors must be taken into account.²⁰ James Orr and Roland Harrison (1982) hold that “ode of the bow” comes nearest to the sense of the Hebrew, noting that the taking of a word within a poem to use as its title is a familiar Arabic convention.²¹ David Zapf (1984) also follows the lead of Kiel and Delitzsch (1950) and Hertzberg (1964). In addition, he points out the prominence of the
bow in the larger contextual setting of this lament, since Saul was badly wounded by archers (1 Sam 31:3), and it is reasonable to assume that it was the same with Jonathan and his brothers. He notes that while Saul’s preferred weapon of war seems to have been the sword, Jonathan’s was the bow (2 Sam 1:22)—and so the title here might give a subtle preference to Jonathan. Ronald Youngblood agrees, that Jonathan was probably a skilled bowman (cf. 1 Sam 20:18–22, 35–40) and this title may refer to Jonathan’s bow. Therefore, the most careful analysis supports what is also the simplest conclusion, namely, that “Bow” in 2 Sam 1:18 was a title given to David’s poem, probably by David himself, since the introduction says, “He [David] said to teach the sons of Judah the bow . . .” (1:18, J. Green). This line of interpretation can also be seen in some translations, including: “to teach the sons of Judah the song of the bow” (NASB 1960, cf. NKJV 1982), “The Song of the Bow . . .” (NRSV 1989, cf. CEV 1995), and “…this lament of the bow” (NIV 1978).

**A possible erotic meaning for the “bow,” as well.** However, there may be more meaning here, not apparent to the casual reader, than at first meets the eye. Harry Hoffner, Jr. (1966) has described how the “bow” in ancient Mesopotamian literature could be interpreted as a masculine symbol; and he points as an example of this to the Epic of Aqhat, a Canaanite tale that was discovered at Ugarit (a city-state up the coast from Israel ca. 180 miles) in texts dating from the mid-second millennium BC. In this story, the goddess Anat covets a wonderful bow which the patriarch Danel has obtained from the god Kothar and given to his son, Aqhat. Delbert Hillers (1973) adds, “That the bow is a common, practically unequivocal symbol of masculinity in ancient Near Eastern texts is sufficiently established by passages quoted in Hoffner’s article” and elsewhere—and “the phallic symbolism of the arrow is rather obvious.” Even in the Bible there are references connecting the bow and arrow with sex. For example, Ps 127:4-5a (NRSV) reads, “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them [arrows = seed = sons].” Here “arrows” refers to semen, which when shot (ejaculated) in intercourse can produce offspring to enlarge and support the family; moreover, “quiver” here (an archer’s portable case for carrying arrows) refers to the male genitals, which hopefully will always remain fertile, and not become empty (impotent). In Ecclesiasticus 26:12, in the Apocyrpha, the sage Jesus ben Sirach warns a father, “Keep strict watch over a headstrong daughter, or else, when she finds liberty . . . [and as] a thirsty traveler [stops for a drink,] she will sit in front of every tent peg and open her quiver [genitals] to the arrow [the man’s ejaculation]” (NRSV). The bow and quiver were also used in various Mesopotamian incantations as explicit sexual symbols, e.g., “May the (qu)iver not become empty, may the bow not be slack!” Here the “quiver” points again to the male genitals, and the “bow” to the penis, which when it becomes erect can ejaculate sperm. An 8th century BC treaty contained this curse: “As for the men, may the Mistress of Women take away their bow [penises]”; and an Old Babylonian prayer reads, “It is within your (power), Ishtar, to change men into women and women into men”—which refers to castration and cross-dressing (Hillers). One has to wonder, then, whether there might not be a deeper meaning here in 2 Sam 1:18, pointing not only to Jonathan’s more obvious bow and arrows, but alluding also to his genitals as a “weapon,” as well. The “bow” then would recall the prince’s phallic organ, its erection, and then ejaculation (well-shot “arrows”).

**David’s reference to the hassebi of Israel in 2 Sam 1:19.** There is still more to be discovered in David’s lament. Returning to the first stanza in the song (2 Sam 1:19), we read:
“The beauty of [hassebi] Israel is slain on thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!” (KJV). Other translations of the first line here include: “Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your high places” (NRSV); “Does the splendour of Israel lie dead on your heights?” (NJB); and “Oh, oh, Gazelles of Israel, struck down on your hills . . .” (Peterson; italics added above indicate the translation of hassebi). Most translators render this word as “The beauty of” (KJV 1611; cf. NASB 1960; J. Green 1986; NKJV 1982; cf. REB 1989; cf. Elman 1994, p. 285) or “thy/your/the glory” (RSV 1946; Hertzberg 1964, p. 235; JB 1966; RSV2 1972; NIV 1978; NRSV 1989; NAB 1995). Yet, others have rendered it also as: “your pride and joy” (LB 1976), “O prince of [Israel]” (NEB 1970; Ackroyd 1977, p. 23; cf. McCarter 1984, p. 66), “your famous hero” (CEV 1995), “our leaders” (GNB2 1983), and also “like a gazelle” (Lamsa 1933, referring to Israel) or “Gazelles of [Israel]” (Peterson 2002, referring to Israel’s slain warriors). It can be noted above that the word can be read either as singular or collective plural. However, that hassebi here might also point to Saul and Jonathan gains support from the first line in the introduction, which tells us that “David raised this lament over Saul and Jonathan his son . . .” (v. 17). Still, “How are the warriors fallen!” (v. 19b, NRSV, NIV) opens the door for applying this also to all of Israel’s fighting men who lost their lives in the battle.

But where does the idea of “gazelle(s)” come from? Strong’s lexicon notes that the basic word here, sebi (#6643), points to “prominence, splendor” or to a “gazelle (as something beautiful)”; and Brown’s lexicon holds that originally there may have been two different words (called homonyms) that were spelled the same, one meaning “beauty, honor” and the other “gazelle.” With regards to the latter, in ancient Syria and Palestine gazelles stood about 2’ high at the shoulders and came in two species: one was tawny (yellow-brown) in color and the other grey, and both had creamy-white underbellies. Gazelles were a common sight on the interior plains and uplands of Canaan, roaming alone or in small herds. The animal was a marvel of lightness and grace; and when alarmed, it ran off with great speed, even over the roughest terrain.

Stewart McCullough notes that although gazelles were a “clean” animal and could be eaten, first they had to be hunted and “were not easy to bag, for their speed of movement was proverbial . . .” Their simple beauty and elegant form explains why this animal imagery was applied to the two lovers in the Song of Songs (2:8-9a).

Views on whom hassebi (gazelle) really refers. A great deal of discussion has been given to how sebi might best be translated here and to whom it refers. Heinrich Ewald (1871) and Bernhard Stade (1879), along with other 19th century interpreters, translated it as “gazelle” and suggested that this was probably a popular name by which Jonathan was known among his men. Ewald noted, for example, that Jonathan “appears throughout as the perfect type of warrior,” with courage and speed, “slender also, and of well-made figure. This personal beauty and swiftness of foot in attack or retreat [must have] gained for him among the troops the name of ‘the Gazelle’ . . . .” S. R. Driver (1913) acknowledged this possibility, although he preferred translating hassebi (1:19) as “The beauty of [Israel],” which he referred to both Saul and Jonathan. A. F. Kirkpatrick (1930) cautioned that there is no real evidence to prove that Jonathan’s beauty and swiftness had gained him the name of “the Gazelle” among his troops, as Ewald proposed; and Kirkpatrick preferred “glory” or “beauty,” referring to both Saul and Jonathan. Hans Hertzberg (1964) felt that this lament begins by referring to the “glory” or “flower” of Israel, pointing to all of the young men who had fallen in the battle—a note that would be bitterly familiar to all peoples and times. In contrast, Michael O’Connor (1980) translated sebi here as “The Gazelle” but without designating to whom he thought this was meant.
Following the lead of Frank M. Cross (1973) and others, Kyle McCarter (1984) emended *hšby yšr’l* (the original Hebrew, without the vowels) to read *ho sebi yisra’el*, which he translated as “Alas, prince of Israel.” However, he also noted that “gazelle” was the literal meaning of *sebi* and that some interpreters related this title to Saul (e.g., Patrick D. Miller, Jr., 1971) and others to Jonathan (e.g., David N. Freedman, 1972)—although he preferred Saul. A. A. Anderson (1989) translated *hassebi* as “your Splendor” in v. 19 and referred it to Saul.40

David Freedman (1980) summarized, then, that *hassebi* might refer either to Saul or to Jonathan, or to both of them, and also that both the literal use (“gazelle”) and the figurative use (“beauty, glory”) of *sebi* are well attested (easily found) in the OT. He pointed out, moreover, that *sebi* appears in the romantic poetry of the Song of Songs, e.g., the maiden-in-love says: “The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle (*sebi*, #6643) or a young stag” (Song 2:8–9a, RSV2; cf. also v. 17). One can visualize the swiftness, agility and beauty of the male lover, as he runs like a buck frantically over the mountainous terrain to join his beloved (Marvin Pope). Freedman notes that elsewhere in the OT “gazelle” is applied to warriors, e.g., to Asahel, son of Zeruiah, who is described in 2 Sam 2:18 as “swift of foot as a wild gazelle” (RSV2). Then 1 Chron 12:8 notes that while David was staying with his men at Ziklag, some “mighty and experienced warriors” joined him from the tribe of Gad, “who were swift as gazelles . . .” (RSV2). Freedman also points out that while *hassebi* in 2 Sam 1:19 might refer to both Saul and Jonathan, the repeated refrain (“How are the mighty fallen!”) in verse 25 refers explicitly to Jonathan, suggesting that in reality “gazelle” was a nickname for the prince and not the king. Thus the meaning and application of “gazelle” in 1:19 is finally made clear.43 David Zapf (1984) writes that “the gazelle” would be a fitting term for a famous military leader and that while the *sebi* in 1:19 probably refers to both Saul and Jonathan, in 1:25 it is clearly linked to Jonathan, giving him “a certain preference” in the poem.44

J. P. Fokkelman (1986) felt that the poem probably started out ambiguously on purpose, with David drawing in his audience with the enigmatic *hassebi* and compelling them to think about the words throughout his song. Who is this “gazelle” or “ornament (jewel)”45? The mention of Saul and Jonathan in 1:17 suggests, at least to the later reader, that the reference in v. 19 refers to both of them—although this may not originally have been the case. In fact, it does not become clear until we get to v. 25 who the real “gazelle, the jewel,” of Israel is, in the eyes of David. It is Jonathan! Fokkelman writes, “David has reserved . . . [the] title of honor for his bosom friend and only now [in v. 25] reveals the real object of his affection. . . . [T]he naked truth is out.” The riddle of the first word in the poem is solved, and Jonathan becomes the first and last subject of the lament.46 Ronald Youngblood (1992) agrees that “the gazelle” here is a nickname for Jonathan. David’s comparison of Saul and Jonathan to other animals, to “eagles” and “lions” in 1:23, should also be noted, as well as his later reference to “heights” in 2 Sam 22:34, where he praises the Lord who has “made my feet *like the feet of a deer*, and set me secure on the heights” (NRSV, italics added; cf. with “the heights/high places” in 2 Sam 1:19a). That Jonathan should be compared to a gazelle is entirely appropriate.47 One can remember, for example, Jonathan’s surefootedness as he and his aide climbed up the steep cliff to rattle the Philistines at the Michmash Pass (1 Sam 14:4,13). It should not be surprising, Youngblood notes, that Jonathan is alluded to at the beginning of David’s poem, giving notice that he intends here to highlight his relationship to “the gazelle,” his dear and beloved friend.48 The growing trend, then, among interpreters has been to translate *sebi* here as “the gazelle” and to view this as a definite, if at first disguised, reference to Jonathan.
Gender roles in David's aside, in 2 Sam 1:26. Earlier in this series (chap. 4) note was made of Susan Ackerman’s analysis (2005) of David and Michal’s marriage (1 Sam 18:20–29a), which is bracketed by the two stories of Jonathan’s “marriage-like” covenant made with David (1 Sam 18:1–4) and of the prince’s mediating on his behalf with Saul because he “was very fond of David” (19:1–7, NIV)—which she says suggests that Jonathan was viewed as “the structural equivalent of a wife to David,” who supplanted one of his sisters. In the end, these Jonathan and David incidents make parenthetical (totally irrelevant) the account of David’s marriage to Michal. Mirroring Michal’s efforts to help David escape from Saul’s soldiers (1 Sam 19:11–17), Jonathan also helps David escape Saul’s murderous plans (chap. 20), but in an account that is “far more emotionally-charged” than David’s leave-taking from Michal (19:11–12 vs. 20:41–42). The language of mutual commitment expressed in 1 Sam 20 and 23:16–18 also underscores the fact that their loving relationship came to supersede any relationship that David ever had with Michal. Further, “wonderful” (2 Sam 1:26) implies that David returned the prince’s love; and the prince’s love was more wonderful than any sexual love he had received from women early in his life.

David Damrosch (1987) observed that “just as the marriage theme in the Gilgamesh Epic reaches its most direct expression at the close of the relationship, in Gilgamesh’s lament for Enkidu [his beloved companion], here [in the Jonathan and David story] it is developed most explicitly in David’s lament . . . .” After a “somewhat formal lament for Saul, [David] then concludes with a moving apostrophe [a speech addressed to a dead or absent person] to Jonathan: ‘very pleasant have you been to me; / your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’ (2 Sam. 1:26 [RSV2]).” This comparison crystallizes the metaphor [of friendship-as-marriage] and goes beyond it in the same breath. David Jobling (1998) noted that Jonathan is “like the women who empty themselves for David.” In terms of inner motivation Jonathan is cast “in the image of the women who love and marry David, who serve David and assist his rise to power without expecting anything in return other than being married to him . . . .” In the conceptual framework of the story then, it makes sense to conceive of “a gay relationship in which Jonathan takes a female role.” Still, Jonathan will have to die, for no wifely role can realistically be imagined for him in David’s household after he becomes king. Fewell and Gunn (1993) note that in saying in his lament how “lovely” (1:26, NRSV: beloved) the prince was to him—David places Jonathan “in the position of a woman, even if only to surpass her. . . . Jonathan is a woman, more woman than women are.” David now publicly acknowledges Jonathan’s attachment which was no doubt rumored, if it was not commonly known—but he now defines the relationship in a way that is favorable to himself, proclaiming himself as the object of affection. David’s words make him the “man” in their relationship; so while his words “praise Jonathan at the same time [they] subtly devalue him.”

William Holladay (1970) held that there was a relationship between 1:24 where the women of Israel mourn for Saul and v. 26 where David mourns for Jonathan. However, as Ackerman notes, he does not go on to draw the implications that he might have, e.g., that both the women and Jonathan are perceived as feminine. Further, could this comparison suggest that just as the women received and benefited from Saul, so Jonathan also received and benefited from David in heretofore unspoken ways? Saul gave to the women bounties of war from his power base as king. David had no such power base as this, but he could give to Jonathan bounties of love from his beauty and body, for which he could see the prince clearly longed. At least, as Ackerman notes, the imagining of Jonathan as womanlike or wifelike “corresponds quite well to
the ways in which male-male sexual interactions were conceived of in the ancient Mediterranean world, including the world of ancient Israel.” Here the emphasis in sexual relations was placed on distinguishing between the active and passive roles, that is, between the sexual penetrator (male), the active partner, and the sexual receiver (usually female), the passive partner. Anyone who was sexually penetrated, whether vaginally or anally, whether male or female, would be viewed as “feminine.”

Jonathan and David and gender roles, in general. Yet, there are other elements here in the story that cast David in a feminine light. Jonathan as the prince had to assume the active (masculine) role of courting David in the beginning and of bringing him into a covenant of love with himself (18:1–4), and then took the initiative in renewing this pact at the end of David’s stay at court (20:16–17). If Jonathan’s (second and third) covenants were meant to hand over the future throne of Israel to David, he would have had to be male to do this. Also, it is a long time before the love between them is expressed with anything like mutuality. Jonathan repeatedly took on the guardian role to shield David from his father’s anger (19:1–7, 20:1–34); and although it might be argued that Michal at one point also took on this same role (19:11–17), it must be acknowledged that protector in a patriarchal society was primarily a masculine function. Also, Peter Levi (1991) sees David as perhaps usurping a feminine role in the fact that he is willing to involve himself in public lamenting, which was viewed in ancient times as the women’s role. Further, he sings a very “intimate and lyrical” lament—although there are elements of masculine boasting here, as well. As Francisco García-Treto notes, “David dares to stand before the reader at once more naked and more human than ever . . . to give full expression to his grief for Saul and Jonathan in a feminine genre . . . .” He adds, “It is fascinating, and oddly embarrassing at the same time, to hear him cast all reserve or restraint aside and wail for the loss of Jonathan . . . .” This was no simple man.

Yet, if in the end Jonathan is visualized in a feminine role in David’s lament, which clearly seems to be the case, what are we to make of the prince being placed in such a passive, “shameful” position—especially since no shame or dishonor appear attached to him in this story? In fact, David viewed their love relationship as a “wonderful” thing (1:26). This frankly has led many commentators to conclude that their friendship simply could not have been sexual in nature, in spite of the eroticized language in such passages as 2 Sam 1:26. Yet, as Ackerman notes, with “such highly eroticized language and imagery,” as is found in David’s lament and elsewhere in the story, it is “impossible in many respects not to interpret the text’s depiction of their relationship as sexual in nature.” Yet, on the other hand, the positive way in which their relationship is portrayed fails to conform to the way male-male sexual relationships are condemned elsewhere in the Bible. Still, why must there be only one kind homoerotic relationship that existed in Israel? Of course, there were different kinds! We know in the larger Mesopotamian world, for example, that there were male cultic prostitutes, love and sex was shared between warriors, married men had other private same-sex affairs, and also certain aggressive expressions that were sternly condemned, such as homosexual rape and incest. Moreover, the Levitical law (Lev 18:22, 20:13) that condemns same-sex male anal intercourse can, without difficulty, be read in a cultic setting. With 18:21, the main focus changes from sexual infractions to cultic infractions, with a group of three commands: do not offer your children to the god Molech (v. 21); do not lie with (cultic) male prostitutes (v. 22, cf. Deut 23:17); and do not participate in (cultic) bestial practices (v. 23, cf. Exod 22:18–20)—for all of these idolatrous things were surely offensive (an abomination) to the Lord (cf. Lev 19:4). In
Exod 22:18–20, there is another triad of prohibitions which ties bestiality with cultic practices. As Samuel Terrien notes, the story of Jonathan and David had nothing in common with cultic homosexuality (Israelite males running off to have sex with pagan sacred male prostitutes), and Jonathan and David did not see their sexual relationship in any such terms. In fact, they made all their covenant before and in the name of the Lord, as covenants were traditionally made in Israel; and they viewed their love as a gift from God.

Ackerman points out that it should also be noted that in the old Gilgamesh Epic, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, and Enkidu, his inseparable companion, are unremittingly portrayed as \textit{equals}. Masculinity and femininity are not so easily separated or clearly defined, as some interpreters would have it. In their own eyes, Jonathan and David’s relationship had nothing to do with femininity, as they perceived it—since they viewed each other both as mighty warriors and honored heroes, even though they were also two males in love with each other. As Tom Horner points out, Jonathan and David were warrior friends and lovers. It was only natural that the two heroes should gravitate toward each other, become buddies, and later share the same bed. David Damrosch notes that when David comes forward to fight Goliath, the troops speculate on whether the slayer will gain King Saul’s daughter (Merab) as his wife in return (1 Sam 17:25). That didn’t happen (20:17–19), but David did get the king’s son (18:1–4).

Further, most interpreters of this story fail to recognize the reality and presence of bisexuality in human life, as Kinsey so convincingly documented—as well as the fluid nature of gender, in which both masculine and feminine elements can display themselves in the same individual in varying degrees and ways and at different times, even defying social norms and traditions. David may have come into Saul’s house as a “bride” and “groom” to Jonathan; and who knows what mixed gender roles they may have shared in each other’s private company or what sexual roles they preferred or exchanged in bed. As the older of the two, Jonathan certainly took the lead on many levels, while at the same time perhaps he relished submitting himself to David’s carnal longings, giving in to his own as well. In the end, however, it suits David’s purpose in his lament to present himself in the male role and to present Jonathan (who is now gone) in the female role, as he moves forward to become king over all of Israel.

\textbf{Summary.} Two other words in David’s lament deserve special attention, \textit{geshet} (bow) in 2 Sam 1:18 and \textit{sebi} (NRSV: glory, Lamsa: gazelle) in 1:19; and one must also look at gender roles in 1:26. The most natural explanation for “Bow” is that this was a title David gave to his eulogy, because it contains a reference to Jonathan’s bow (v. 22) and it was a martial ode (Keil and Delitzsch). Archery was a major weapon at that time, and especially valued in Saul and Jonathan’s tribe of Benjamin. Yet, this title might also carry a sexual significance, since in Mesopotamia the bow was viewed as a masculine symbol (Hoffner), carrying phallic meaning (Hillers). This bow-and-arrow symbolism can be seen in Ecclesiasticus 26:12, where a Jewish father is warned to keep an eye on his daughter lest she “sit in front of every tent peg and open her quiver [genitals] to the arrow [ejaculation]” of every male traveler who stops for a drink. Thus, the “Bow” here might have recalled in David’s mind not only Jonathan’s archery skill, but his sexual prowess as well. Turning to \textit{sebi} (1:19a), as Freedman notes, this term may be understood either as “beauty, glory” or “gazelle,” and it may refer to Saul, or to Saul and Jonathan, as the introduction suggests (1:17). Yet, the term may also include all those soldiers.
who lost their lives in the battle (Hertzberg), since David seems to have kept introductory verse artfully vague so that all of the slain might be included in the lament. Yet Ewald (1871) advocated that sebi here really meant “gazelle” and this was a popular name that soldiers had given Jonathan because of his manly beauty and swiftness of foot. Although there is no direct textual basis for this, Freedman notes that sebi is used in other references comparing warriors to wild gazelles (2 Sam 2:18, 1 Chron 12:8) and it is even applied to a lover who rushes to be with his beloved, “leaping over the mountains” (Song 2:8-9a). So, he concluded that sebi in 1:19 should be translated as “gazelle,” even though its real meaning does not become clear until David turns to address Jonathan (v. 26), his beloved, who is the real “gazelle, the jewel” of Israel. Relating to gender roles in 1:26, it is interesting to note how David now places himself in the manly (active) role and Jonathan in the passive (wifely) role, although earlier Jonathan, as older and having a higher social status, must have taken the active role in courting David, making love-pacts with him, and protecting him. Still, as Damrosch notes, interpreters often fail to recognize that in the ancient (homosexual) “friendship-as-marriage,” gender roles were often fluid, and “either friend can at times take on echoes of husband or wife.”

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 7B
20. Ibid.
27. Cf. Ibid., p. 73.
34. Ewald, History of Israel, 3, p. 30.
42. Pope, Song of Songs, p. 390.
45. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 2, pp. 652–653.
46. Ibid., pp. 670–671.
47. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 812.
48. Ibid.
49. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 181.
50. Ibid., pp. 192–93.
51. Damrosch, Narrative Covenant, p. 205.
52. Jobling, 1 Samuel, p. 164.
53. Fewell and Gunn, Gender, Power, and Promise, p. 151.
56. Ibid., p. 193.
57. Jobling, 1 Samuel, p. 164.
59. Ibid., pp. 63–64.
60. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 196.
61. Ibid., p. 198.
62. Terrien, Till the Heart Sings, p. 169.
63. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 198.
64. Horner, Jonathan Loved David, p. 38.
CHAPTER 8

Jonathan’s Son

Key Passage: 2 Samuel 2–21

After the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in battle (1 Sam 31), David was declared “king over the house [tribe] of Judah” (2 Sam 2:3); and a long (7-1/2 years), messy struggle ensued for the throne of the whole of Israel (2:8–3:1). Sandwiched in between stories of the murder of Abner, general of the opposing camp (3:6–4:3), and the murder of Ishbaal, Saul’s son and successor for the throne, both by supporters of David (4:5–12), we learn of another member who exists in the house of Saul—a lone, surviving child from Jonathan (4:4). After David and Jonathan had separated (1 Sam 20:42, 23:18), Jonathan had married, and a son was born. Now whether Jonathan had any real sexual desire for a wife may be questioned, since nowhere earlier in the story does he display anything other than intense homosexual interest, although he faces the strong pressure from his often explosive father to produce an heir (1 Sam 20:30–31). Anyway, so begins the story of Mephibosheth (pronounced Mephiboshet, although in this case we will stay with the spelling that commonly appears in English translations).

Yet, interpreters agree that the real name of Mephibosheth (2 Sam 4:4) was Meribbaal (1 Chron 8:34, 9:40), with the latter meaning “one who contends with [opposes] Baal” and meri (H4805) meaning “rebellion.” However, as ba’al (“master, lord,” H1167) became ever increasingly attached to the Canaanite storm-god of fertility (H1168) in the time of Solomon and later (note its frequent appearance in 1–2 Kings), an editor of 2 Samuel, so offended with the inclusion of ba’al in a number of Israelite names, changed the ending of them instead to read boshet(h) (H1322), meaning “shame.” So, Jerubbaal was changed to Jerubbesheth (1 Chron 8:33, 9:39; 2 Sam 2:8), and Meribbaal to Mephibosheth (1 Chron 8:34, 9:40; 2 Sam 4:4, etc.). So, Meribbaal, “Baal’s fighter” (Keil and Delitzsch), was renamed Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel, meaning “utterance of shame” (Strong) or perhaps more broadly “idol-breaker” (Balchin), a denigration of Baal. Now, in the brief introduction to Meribbaal (Mephibosheth), in 4:4, we learn that when he was only five years old, he suffered two disasters, first, the deaths of his father and grandfather, and then in an accident that followed, he became crippled. When soldiers carried the news of the Mount Giboa defeat and the royal deaths southward to Gibeah, Saul’s capital, Meribbaal’s nurse felt that she must flee with the boy to a safer location, across the Jordan River. However, in her haste, the boy slipped from her grasp and became permanently “crippled” (4:4) in both feet (9:13). This early reference to a lame Meribbaal was no doubt intended to point out that this son of the house of Saul was hardly a threat to the throne, since being handicapped in ancient times was even less enviable than in the modern welfare state. Also, although Ishbaal, Meribbaal’s uncle, would be murdered by supporters of David (4:5–8), Meribbaal could hardly serve as an Avenger of Blood (Num 35:16–21), someone under the Law who killed another to avenge the murder of a family member. Anyway, we simply read that “Jonathan had a son who was crippled [H5223] in his feet,” because when his nurse dropped the five-year-old “he fell and became lame [H6452]” (2 Sam 4:4, NRSV). In the Hebrew, nakeh (H5223) means “lame, crippled,” and pasak (H6452) “to hop, to limp” (Strong). So this is the preface to the story of Meribbaal and David, which then plays itself out in three acts in 2 Samuel, including: Meribbaal discovered and honored (9:1–13), Meribbaal maligned but then restored (16:1–4, 19:24–30), and Meribbaal spared a final time (21:1–9).
Meribbaal discovered and honored. After David had securely established himself on the throne over all of Israel (5:1–4), “had settled into his [new] palace” and had “rest from all the enemies surrounding him” (7:1, NJB), he remembers Jonathan and their covenant (9:1–13). That Jonathan is heavy on his mind is reflected in his name appearing four times in this chapter (vv. 1, 3, 6, 7). First, David makes a public appeal for information: “Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness [kesed, H2617] for Jonathan’s sake?” (9:1, NRSV). This leads to contact with the house(hold) of Saul through Ziba, Saul’s former servant and steward, who perhaps had been in charge of the royal estate—although later all of this would have become crown property belonging to David. When Ziba appears before David, he tells him about Meribbaal; and his mention of the young man’s lameness infers again that he is no military or political threat. Still, Lo-debar, where Meribbaal now lives, at the house of the wealthy Machir and east of the Jordan River, lay near Mahanaim, the town where Ishbaal, the young man’s uncle, had established his residence and the temporary capital of a northern kingdom.

However, as J. P. Fokkelman writes, “After the death of his dearly beloved friend, [David now hopes that] he can honour and perpetuate Jonathan’s memory and their love by demonstrating hesed” [or kased, H2617] to someone related to him—an intent mentioned three times in chapter 9, first to us and to his court (v. 1), then to Ziba (v. 3), and then to Meribbaal (v. 7). The standard for this love will be “the lovingkindness [kesed] of God” (v. 3, Fokkelman)—which points to a “great kindness” or “great love” (Mauchline). David remembers the request made of him by Jonathan many years earlier, that when he became king to “show me [or my descendents] the loyal love [kesed] of the Lord” (1 Sam 20:15, RSV2). Although kased is often translated as “kindness” in 9:1, 3, 7 (cf. NIV, REB, NRSV, Peterson), John Mauchline notes that this is too weak a translation and that “love,” “devotion,” or “loyalty” would be better. Other interpreters have described kased as referring to “covenant love” (Norman Snaith, 1946), “reciprocal love” (Nelson Glueck, 1975), or “faithful love” (NJB 1985); and the Hebrew word conveys, at its core, a threefold meaning of “kindness, mercy and love” (George Turner 1986). So finally David meets Meribbaal, Jonathan’s own flesh and blood, and what an emotional event this must have been! Alexander Kirkpatrick estimates that in addition to ruling for seven and a half years over Judah, David may have ruled in Jerusalem for at least twelve more years before the reader gets to chapter 9; and so Meribbaal may now have been around twenty-five years old. This time frame would place David in his late forties (cf. 5:4–5); and of course this scene reverses the earlier age difference between David and the older Jonathan, where there may have been a twelve year age difference (see Supplement 3A). Now David is the one with royal status and power, while Jonathan’s son is in a vulnerable position, needing kindness, protection and support. In fact, when Meribbaal came into David’s presence, he must have fallen down before the king in abject (miserable) terror (9:6), knowing that kings regularly exterminate all members of the previous dynasty. Yet, “Do not be afraid” David says to the trembling ben Yehonathan (son of Jonathan), perhaps recalling Jonathan’s soothing words, “Do not be afraid,” spoken to him in the wilderness, to strengthen his spirit and faith in the Lord (1 Sam 23:17, NRSV).

David extends his love to Meribbaal in three ways: by giving him all of the land that earlier had belonged to his grandfather Saul, by giving him a permanent seat at his royal table, and by appointing Ziba and his household to care for Meribbaal’s estate (9:7, 9–10). Because fifteen sons and twenty servants (v. 10) were instructed to “till the land” for Meribbaal, this must have
included considerable property. David’s warmth and care for Meribbaal were revealed in his request also that he “eat at my [the king’s] table forever,” which is mentioned three times (9:7, 10, 13). Now Meribbaal bows to the ground a second time, with all of the difficulty and pain that this must have entailed—as he clumsily fell to his knees and then bent over to touch his forehead to the ground. Furthermore, he refers to himself as only “a dead dog” (v. 8), a common deprecatory (depreciating) title, which points to his inferior and despicable position, as well as to his gratefulness and amazement. Once, earlier, David had applied this very same slur to himself, when he called out to Saul, who was tracking him in the wilderness: “Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue? A dead dog? A single fleece?” (1 Sam 24:14, NRSV). I tell you, I’m a nobody!

In the larger setting of 2 Samuel, however, one cannot help but recall David’s words when he marshaled his forces to take Jerusalem (5:6–9); and the Jebusites from the fortress there taunted him by calling down that “even the blind and the lame will turn you back” from their citadel (v. 6), thought to be an impregnable stronghold. Still, David figured out a way to get his men inside, by climbing up through the water shaft (v. 8); and then he ordered his men “to attack the lame and the blind, whom David hates!” The Jebusites’ taunting may simply have been part of common pre-battle tactics (remember the trashing and boasting that went on between Goliath and David, 1 Sam 17:43–47); yet word was passed around later to the effect that David had declared, “The blind and the lame shall not come into my house [palace]” (vv. 7–8). Now, the handsome but over-speaking David has to eat those words and face his bigotry. However, he does not hesitate to welcome and honor Maribbaal—the irony of which was surely not lost on the original readers (and listeners). For when David looks at Meribbaal, indeed he sees Jonathan; and so he invites him to become a prized guest at his court and at his table. Thus the love between David and Jonathan attains a new stature and profundity. Now, some interpreters have suggested that David wanted to keep Saul’s grandson “under careful watch” (Hertzberg) or “house arrest” (Youngblood). Yet, as Anderson notes, the editor of 2 Samuel, perhaps anticipating such skepticism, emphasizes twice the fact that Meribbaal was lame, at the beginning and at the end of this episode (vv. 3, 13), which would disqualify him as any rival for the throne. In this regard, one should remember what a big ado is made by the narrator over the appealing looks of Saul, David and Absalom (1 Sam 9:2, 16:12, 17:42; 2 Sam 14:25–26), in the context of their ascent to the throne. Also, in ancient Israel no one who was blind or lame (or had any other physical imperfection) could serve as a priest, to approach the altar or offer a sacrifice to God (Lev 21:17–23). Although critics regularly suggest that David gave Meribbaal a place at his table to keep an eye on him, the accent in the story here is instead on generosity and honoring Jonathan’s son, not surveillance. In the end, Meribbaal was made to feel like “one of the king’s sons” (9:11), and the homeless refugee became a fairly wealthy man (9:10). In return, Meribbaal will show David a loyalty, affection and devotion that repeatedly seems lacking in the king’s own sons, like Amnon (2 Sam 13:1–19) and Absalom (2 Sam 13:23–29, 15:1–18).

Meribbaal maligned but then restored. A decade or so later (13:38, 14:28, 15:7) Absalom, David’s third-born son, leads a full-fledged insurrection against his father; and David must flee from Jerusalem to seek refuge across the Jordan River (chapter 15). As David and his entourage pass by the Mount of Olives, who should show up but Ziba, bearing provisions for the king, fruit from the land that he had been entrusted to administer. Ziba may have worried that David might think he would defect; and so he brings a gift of bread, raisins, wine, summer fruit (fruit
return to the did not want to trouble himself any further with moved by Meribbaal’s sincerity, but makes a decision that he hopes will a
Perhaps. He realized that he had been truth? land” (19:29).

rudely with, “Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the
“Let [Ziba] take it all [the property], since th
compelling words

14:20,

kingdom

ingratiating gift to David, who had asked, Ziba had added his master’s private mount to the donkeys he
trimmed his mustache.” Clearly Meribbaal’s carele

had not bathed his feet.” The NJB reads “had not cared for his feet or hands,” the
based on a Septuagint text (LXX13). The second phrase is widely translated as “[not]
tripped his mustache,” with a wide range of applications (Strong). Ancient rabbis held
that the first clause meant that Maribbaal “had not cut his toenails,”45 although the REB reads
“had not bathed his feet.” The NJB reads “had not cared for his feet or hands,” the reference to
hands based on a Septuagint text (LXX13).46 The second phrase is widely translated as “[not]

and his long toenails and overgrown mustache could hardly have been faked acts of public
cntriation.48 When David asks Meribbaal, “Why did you not go with me?” (19:25), he replies
that Ziba had “deceived” him; and instead of preparing a donkey for him to accompany David as
he had asked, Ziba had added his master’s private mount to the donkeys he brought in his
ingratiating gift to David, before slandering his master before the king.49 Yet, Meribbaal praises
the king, who “is like an angel of God” (19:27), who knows everything that goes on in his
kingdom, and who exercises divine-like wisdom in discerning between good and evil (cf. 2 Sam
14:20, 17). Meribbaal thanks David for sparing his life and for graciously including him at his
table (19:28). His speech is so remarkable that it is difficult to remain skeptical with his
compelling words—and at the end he removes all doubt about his allegiance to David by saying,
“Let [Ziba] take it all [the property], since the king has returned home safely” (19:30).50

Before Meribbaal utters his final proof of loyalty, however, David interrupts him somewhat
rudely with, “Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the
land” (19:29). What did such an answer mean? Was David still unsure of who was telling the
truth?51 Hardly. Did he simply lack the courage to retract his earlier decision entirely?52
Perhaps. He realized that he had been duped by Ziba and so he wants no further facts; he quickly
makes a decision that he hopes will appease all of the members of Saul’s household.53 He was
moved by Meribbaal’s sincerity, but still he also appreciated Ziba’s gift.54 Also, perhaps David
did not want to trouble himself any further with this unpleasant matter on the happy day of his
return to the throne in Jerusalem.55 Underneath it all, however, as J. P. Fokkelman points out,
lies David’s fear of admitting his failures, of showing uncertainty, and also perhaps of admitting the “tenderness and warmth of renewed hesed [love]” that he felt toward Meribbaal. Still, the narrative gives Meribbaal the last word, which should have been healing to David’s heart. In contrast to the corruption of Ziba and the crippled ability of David to do what is right, Meribbaal comes through all of this ennobled and uninjured.56

**Meribbaal spared a final time.** The final mention of Meribbaal occurs in an episode where the Lord instructs David to settle a “bloodguilt” on Saul and his house committed against the Gibeonites, with whom Joshua had made a treaty generations ago, promising that the Israelites would not harm them (Josh 9). However, Saul had tried to wipe them out (2 Sam 21:1–3). When David asked the Gibeonites how he could right this wrong, they demanded that “seven of [Saul’s] sons [ben, H1121] be handed over to us” (vv. 4–6). So David turned over the five sons of Merab, Saul’s eldest daughter, and the two sons of Rizpah, Saul’s concubine—who were then executed (v. 9). The Hebrew text speaks of Saul’s sons being “hanged” (yaqa, H3363) and then ‘falling’ (napal, H5307) together (2 Sam 21:9, KJV, J. Green), although what was done here is not exactly clear. Strong’s lexicon defines yaqa (H3363) as meaning “to kill and expose” (cf. NIV), and napal as ‘to fall or drop.’ The Septuagint Greek says that the Gibeonites “hung them [Saul’s sons] in the sun in the mountain before the LORD. And they fell there the seven together” (21:9, Van der Pool). Various English translations suggest that they were “hanged” (NASB, GNB2, ESV) or “crucified” (McCarted) or “impaled” (NRSV), and then their bodies “flung . . . down from the mountain” (REB), although other translators read napal simply as a reference to their ‘perishing’ or ‘dying’ (NRSV, GNB2). Cartledge even believes that the ancient curse ritual (cf. Gen 15:10-18) was literally performed here, in a dismembering of the sons’ bodies.57 Of course, the important thing here is “But the king spared Mephibosheth [Meribbaal] . . . because of the oath” that David and Jonathan had made (12:7). We never hear of Meribbaal again, although we can expect that he lived to the natural end of his life; and his son Mica bore him four grandsons to continue his lineage (1 Chron 9:40–44).

So, David did not forget Jonathan, their love and their pacts; and after his kingdom was established, he sought out and cared for Meribbaal ben Jonathan. In ancient times, dining together created a bond between people, cementing friendship, since private meals were for family, close friends, and honored guests. David honors and shows lovingkindness to Meribbaal by giving him a seat at his personal table and bringing him into the king’s social realm (Mary Douglas).58 Although David had to face his bigotry, he extends to Meribbaal a sincere compassion and fatherly concern.59 And David will spare his life a second time (21:7). For Meribbaal, although his infirmity had curtailed his freedom of movement and fullness of life, his suffering had also purified him and given him an ability to endure his ordeal with dignity and to show the true essence of life, kedes (love and faithfulness), to others, especially to David.60 Meribbaal continues the noble spirit of his father, Jonathan. David was a man also capable of noble actions, true sincerity, and great love (for God and others), although at times he does not live to one’s expectations; and relating to Zeba’s slander (19:29) David does not extend to Meribbaal the “warmth and consideration” that he deserved, in return for his love and devotion.61 As Jonathan Kirsch notes, many attempts have been made “to conceal the flesh-and-blood David from us.” The Book of Chronicles, for example, “is a bowdlerized [scrubbed-up] version of David’s biography as originally preserved in the Book of Samuel”—and if the latter had been lost, we would know nothing at all of David’s more human side, including “his passionate declaration of love for Jonathan” in 2 Sam 1:26 (Kirsch).62
Summary. After David ascended to the throne over all of Israel and had brought peace to the land, Jonathan remains heavy in his thoughts; and so he begins asking around whether there was anyone remaining from the house of Saul (2 Sam 9:1) to whom he could show kindness (kesed), as his beloved Jonathan had requested—that after he became king, “show me the faithful love [kesed] of the Lord; but if I die, never cut off your faithful love [kesed] from my house . . .” (1 Sam 20:14, NRSV). Although kesed is a difficult word to translate, it is best understood here as “great kindness” or “great love” (Mauchline). Imagine King David’s surprise and joy, then, when he learned that a son of Jonathan named Meribbaal remained alive, of his very flesh and bone. What complex emotions must have filled his heart as this young man, frightened to death, was led into his presence. David was shocked, of course, to see that, instead of the swift gait and graceful movement which Jonathan had had, this youth walked with a limp, one foot dragging after the other; and yet still there was an unmistakable likeness of Jonathan there, in his face perhaps, or his eyes or fingers or hair, or some other physical aspect. David’s heart swelled with emotions, long buried (perhaps for twenty years); and completely overlooking the lad’s frail, crippled body, he rushes to heap upon him a multiple of royal gifts of love, just as Jonathan had done to him long ago (1 Sam 18:4) when they first met. The gifts now include all of Saul’s former property, access to the king’s presence (his daily dinner table), and many servants to care for Maribbaal’s new estate (2 Sam 9:7–11). Just as Jonathan’s gifts were meant to be an expression of his unconditional love, to make David’s life easier and fuller, and to bind him to his side, so David now does the same with Meribbaal. However, just as there are conspiracies and intrigues in any court, when David flees Jerusalem to escape Absalom’s advancing army, Meribbaal’s chief servant, Ziba, cons David into believing that his master has stayed behind to join the rebellion (2 Sam 16:1–4). Later, when Meribbaal has opportunity to clear his name with David (19:24–30), he does so with such gracious words, transparent devotion, and true love for David, as well as utter selflessness, there is no doubt that he is a worthy son of Jonathan. With all of the false flattery that surrounds any king, David must have treasured Maribbaal’s complete loyalty and unconditional love, even though he does not show it in the Ziba incident (19:24–30). At least, when David has to hand over seven descendents of Saul to the Gibeonites for execution (21:1–9), David keeps Maribbaal safely by his side and out of sight.

END NOTES, CHAPTER 8
5. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 844.
13. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, p. 27.
27. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 917.
29. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, p. 29.
34. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, pp. 58, 30.
36. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 918.
43. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, p. 31.
47. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 1036.
50. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, p. 32.
60. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, p. 40.
61. Ibid., p. 38.
The Epic of Gilgamesh, Part 1

A 4,000-year-old tale of love, death and adventure, the Epic of Gilgamesh is the world’s oldest epic masterpiece. An epic is a “long, exalted, narrative poem, usually on a serious subject, centered on a heroic figure.” Because this epic is not as widely-read as it might be and because it is extremely helpful in shedding light on the David and Jonathan story, we shall now give it some extended attention, including in Part 1 a review of its formation and basic story and of some key passages, and then in Part 2 a discussion of homoerotic elements in the epic and other analysis, which especially relate to the David and Jonathan story.

Formation of the epic. Gilgamesh (Sumerian: Bilgamesh) was an early ruler of the city-state of Uruk (called Erech in the Bible, Gen 10:10, and Warka today), around 2700 BC. By the late 3rd millennium, in heroic tales passed orally from generation to generation, Gilgamesh had become a very popular figure in Sumer (a region of the lower Euphrates and Tigris rivers, in what is now S Iraq), especially among the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004 BC). Ur was also Abraham’s birthplace (Gen 11:31). Seven short poems (between 115–450 lines each) about various of the exploits and experiences of Gilgamesh have survived. These stories, first written down in Sumerian ca. 2100 BC, are often referred to as the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems (SGP); and these rulers of Ur claimed that they were descendents of the ancient royal house of Gilgamesh. Then after Hammurabi, king of Babylon, conquered the southern region of Sumer (1763 BC), a Babylonian tradition about Gilgamesh appeared. The longest and most original of these stories, known as the Old Babylonian Version (OBV), combined elements from the earlier Sumerian stories into a new, cohesive plot which described how an arrogant, overbearing king was chastened by the realization that he too will die. Various lines were reworded, dropped and added; and whole sections were added, as well, including the Prologue, Story of the Flood, and Tablet XII. Written in a Babylonian dialect called Akkadian, this epic ran a thousand lines or more in length. New twists in the story include the revelation that Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s companion, must die as divine punishment for the heroes’ slaying of the sacred monster Humbaba (Sumerian: Khuwawa); also Gilgamesh, consumed with grief over Enkidu’s death and fearing his own mortality, journeys to the end of the world in search of a secret for eternal life. Because of its fragmented ending, it is not clear how the OBV story ended. In addition, later “middle versions” have survived, written between 1500–1000 BC. In the 2nd millennium BC the Gilgamesh story must have been widely known, as documented by texts unearthed at the Hittite capital of Huttusa (now in E Turkey)—written in Akkadian and also translated into Hittite and Hurrian—along with fragments at Ugarit (on the Syrian coast), at Akhataten (on the Nile, in Upper Egypt), and at Megiddo (in lower Galilee, 50 miles W of the Jordan River). The last site points to the existence of a Canaanite or later Palestinian version and also to the possibility that early Biblical authors were familiar with this story. The longest, fullest narrative of the Epic of Gilgamesh, today called the Standard Version (SV), includes Tablets I–XI and traditionally was credited to the poet-priest-editor Sin-lequnnini (Kovacs: Sinlequnninni), who made important perhaps definitive contributions to this final version, dated ca. 1300 BC. This stabilized text is best known from 7th century copies that were discovered in the royal library in Nineveh (in N Iraq) of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal—although substantial parts have also been found at other ancient sites. The SV text originally
contained ca. 3,000 lines. Although only about three-fifths of the whole has actually been recovered, scholars have been able to fill in numerous gaps by transferring text over from other similar passages and related versions. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke called the Epic of Gilgamesh “overwhelming” and “the greatest thing that one can experience.” William Moran described it as “the supreme literary achievement of the ancient world before Homer,” and Tzvi Abusch wrote that it deserved a place in Western literature “beside Homer and the Books of Judges and Samuel.” From our standpoint, the Epic of Gilgamesh has special interest because its central theme involves the love between two men; and, as Tom Horner noted, no one “has ever been more broken up over the loss of his (or her) beloved friend than the hero of this, the world’s first great love story.”

The Standard Version traditionally has been divided up into twelve “tablets,” eleven of which form a continuous story, while the twelfth is a partial translation of a separate but still somewhat related Sumerian poem, which was added sometime in the first millennium BC. The best, scholarly translations into English of the Epic of Gilgamesh include those by Maureen Kovacs (Stanford University, 2nd ed. 1989), Andrew George (University of London, 1999), Stephanie Dalley (Oxford University, 2nd ed. 2000), and Benjamin Foster et al. (Yale University, 2001). Also, still helpful is the text by E. A. Speiser (University of Pennsylvania, 1969), in James Pritchard’s Ancient Near Eastern Texts, Relating to the Old Testament, 3rd ed. Two other noteworthy translations include an annotated one by John Gardner and John Maier (literary scholars, 1984) and a dramatic, freer one by Stephen Mitchell (a writer, 2004). At least twenty different English translations have appeared since George Smith’s 1870 rendering, which omitted some parts as being too sexually explicit; even in Alexander Heidel’s 1949 translation some parts, still considered ‘inappropriate’ for the general public, were given only in Latin. It should be noted, also, that since translators have filled in missing lines or sections in different ways, there is no single, authoritative line numbering, which therefore varies from translation to translation.

Survey of the basic story. In the Epic of Gilgamesh (SV), Tablet I begins with a prologue which describes Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, returning home from a long journey, weary but having found wisdom. He begins building projects in the city and writes down a record of all that he has experienced. The narrator then goes back to the beginning of the story, introducing the young Gilgamesh, who was born two-thirds divine and one-third human and who was the “most handsome” of men. Yet with the energy of a “wild bull,” he oppresses his subjects so relentlessly that they cry out to the gods for help. Therefore, Anu, father of the gods orders the creation of a “match,” or companion, for Gilgamesh. This creature, named Enkidu, at first grazes with animals in the open field, until a hunter sees him and reports this to Gilgamesh, who directs that the prostitute Shamhat be sent out to tame him. When she bares herself, Enkidu couples with her for a whole week, after which the animals will have nothing more to do with him. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh has two dreams—the first of a meteorite and the second of an axe—which his mother, the goddess Ninsun, tells him foretell that a “mighty comrade” will come to him, whom he will “love, caress and embrace.” When Shamhat tells Enkidu about Gilgamesh and his dreams, he knows somehow by instinct that he should seek out Gilgamesh. Tablet II relates how Shamhat domesticates Enkidu, teaching him how to wash himself, wear clothes, eat human food and drink beer. That night Enkidu learns from a traveler passing by that Gilgamesh plans later that evening to exercise his royal right to lie first with a new bride in Uruk. Enkidu rushes off to the city, where he blocks Gilgamesh’s way into the bridal chamber,
and the two wrestle furiously. Finally, however, Gilgamesh’s anger subsides, and they “kissed each other and formed a friendship.” Gilgamesh proposes to his new pal that they go off on an expedition to slay the ferocious Humbaba, Guardian of the Cedar Forest in the west, so that they may obtain some of his precious wood. Enkidu and the city elders try to dissuade the king from this dangerous mission, but Gilgamesh is adamant; so the two companions visit the city forge to have mighty hatchets, axes and daggers made. *Tablet III* details further preparations for the expedition as Ninsun beseeches Shamash the sun god to give Gilgamesh help and success. She also adopts Enkidu as her son (and so also as Gilgamesh’s brother) and blesses them both. Gilgamesh gives instructions for the governing of Uruk in his absence.

*Tablet IV* tells how, en route to Mount Lebanon and its cedars, Gilgamesh has five dreams, which Enkidu interprets as good omens showing that Shamash will help them defeat the monster Humbaba. *Tablet V* describes the heroes climbing the Mountain of Cedar until they face the angry Humbaba. Only because Shamash releases thirteen winds that blind Humbaba are the two heroes able to slay him. Enkidu advises killing the divine guardian quickly before the other gods learn of it. *Tablet VI* tells how after the two heroes return to Uruk, Ishtar, goddess of love and special deity of Uruk, looks “with longing” on the bathing, beautiful Gilgamesh and asks him to be her bridegroom. However, he scorns her offer, reminding her of how badly she has treated all of her previous lovers. Furious, Ishtar demands that Anu, her father, release the frightful Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. When the beast appears, it snorts open huge pits in the ground into which many men from Uruk fall. However, Enkidu grabs it by the tail, while Gilgamesh stabs it in the back of the neck, behind the horns; and ripping out its heart, they offer it to Shamash. When Ishtar begins to wail, Enkidu tears off the Bull’s hindquarter and hurls it up at the goddess, who is assembling all of her priestesses and prostitutes to mourn the Bull’s death. *Tablet VII* relates two dreams then that Enkidu has, one revealing that the gods have decided that he must die to pay for the killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, and the second showing him the dismal Netherworld that awaits him. Indeed, he does fall ill and after his condition worsens over a period of twelve days, he dies.

*Tablet VIII* describes Gilgamesh’s shock and grief over the demise of his companion. He calls upon all who have known Enkidu to join his lament, and he makes lavish preparations for Enkidu’s funeral. *Tablet IX* describes how Gilgamesh’s painful loss leads him to wander off into the wilderness, continuing to weep for Enkidu and fearing his own mortality. He decides to seek out Utanapishtim—also rendered as Ut-napishtim (Dalley) and Ut-napishti (George). From this ‘Babylonian Noah,’ who survived the great flood with his family and was granted eternal life, Gilgamesh hopes to learn the secret of immortality. Along the way, he faces wild animals, a scorpion-man, severe trials, and gripping fear. Shamash the sun god warns him that he will never find eternal life, but Gilgamesh presses on, until he reaches Mount Mashu in the far east, where the sun rises. He comes to a jeweled garden by the seashore at the edge of the world, where a wise old goddess runs a tavern. *Tablet X* relates Gilgamesh’s discussion with this barmaid Shiduri, who is described in various translations as a “tavern-keeper” (George, Kovacs, Foster), an “ale-wife” (Speiser, Dalley), and a “barmaid” (Sandars, Mitchell). When Gilgamesh asks for help, she warns him of the futility of his quest and of the dangers of the Waters of Death. Finally, however, she tells him where to find Utanapishtim’s ferryman, Urshanabi. *Tablet XI* tells of Gilgamish’s final encounter, with Utanapishtim and his wife, although he fails the two tests for eternal life: to stay awake for a whole week, then to eat of the plant of rejuvenation which will make him young again. Gilgamesh obtains this sacred plant from underwater, but when he goes for a swim in the sweltering heat, a snake eats the plant.
So, Gilgamesh finally returns to Uruk, where he eventually overcomes his loss of Enkidu by focusing his attention on constructing great city walls. Actually, traces of these walls can still be seen today in Iraq, showing that they stretched over 6 miles long and contained 900 towers. So the tale ends where the Prologue began, describing Gilgamesh returning home to his throne in Uruk a weary but wiser man.

_Tablet XII_ is a literal translation of part of a Sumerian poem sometimes called “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld.” Its story relates how Gilgamesh (Bilgamesh) helped Ishtar (Inanna) by ridding her favorite willow tree of “vile inhabitants.” Then he uses the wood to make her furniture, as well as to carve two “playthings” (a ball and a mallet) for himself from the wood that was left over. The young men of Uruk are worn out playing with these new toys, but then the toys fall through a hole in the ground into the Netherworld. Enkidu, here Gilgamesh’s servant, offers to go retrieve them, although Gilgamesh warns him to take due precautions and not to draw attention to himself in the realm of the dead. However, Enkidu disregards Gilgamesh’s advice, is taken captive below, and cannot escape. He is only able to see Gilgamesh one last time, briefly, when the sun god allows his spirit to return to the earth’s surface, so the two friends are reunited and Gilgamesh “hugged <Enkidu> tight and kissed him.” But hugging a ghost is not the same as flesh, and so they turn quickly to discussing the afterlife. Enkidu points out that the more sons a man has the more his thirst in the afterlife will be quenched by the offerings of fresh water that family members bring regularly to his grave site. We now take a closer look at certain key passages that might shed light on the David and Jonathan story:

**Introduction of the heroes, and Shamhat trains Enkidu.** In the initial scene in Tablet I, the narrator describes how Gilgamesh was “most handsome.” He had a “build perfected by the divine Nudimmud <Foster: ‘Ninsun,’ p. 4>” and “his beauty was consummate” (George, I lines 62,50,61, p. 3). However, like a “savage wild bull” Gilgamesh “harries <torments>” the young men of Uruk, keeping them “on their feet with his contests.” Day or night, he “lets no son go free to his father” and “lets no [daughter go free to her] mother” and “lets no girl go free to [her bridegroom]” until Gilgamesh has lain with her (George, I 66–77,81, pp. 3–4). One can see in the text here how some word translations are uncertain (given in italics) and how text from other sources is used to fill in gaps (given in square brackets). Text added by this author, usually for clarification purposes, is indicated by < > brackets. So, the citizens of Uruk complain to their gods about their young king’s harsh “tyranny.” In Foster, the citizens complain that Gilgamesh is like a “headstrong wild bull . . . . / His teammates stand forth by <must face> his game stick . . . .” Dalley reads, Gilgamesh “had no rival, and at his pukku / <whenever> His weapons would rise up, his comrades have to rise up” also, day or night. Dalley explains that _pukku_ probably refers to a type of hockey stick that was used at games played at weddings, and this also may have had fertility significance. Some interpreters have held that the king’s sexual energies were directed toward the young men as well as toward Uruk’s maidens (Thorkild Jacobsen, John Bailey); however, the text does not clearly state this. Most interpreters today hold instead that Gilgamesh was exhausting the young men of Uruk with his violent games. As Neal Walls suggests, he was just being “compulsively masculine” in his monumental building enterprises, aggressively competitive sports, and excessive heterosexual indulgences. Anyway, Anu father of the gods orders that a companion be created for Gilgamesh, someone who would “be a match for the storm of his heart” (George, I 97, p. 5), his “equal” (Foster). As it turned out, Enkidu the new creature was hairy all over and had “long tresses <locks> like
those of a woman” (George, I 105–106, p. 5). As Kovacs describes him, he had “a full head of hair like a woman, / <and> his locks billowed in the wind like grain.”38 Yet, Enkidu was also “mighty as a rock from the sky” (George, I 152, p. 6), strong as “a meteorite(?)” (Kovacs).39 Actually, what was probably ‘feminine’ about Enkidu’s hair was not that it was long, but that all of the time he let it hang loose flowing over his shoulders and down his back.40

Then, in Tablet I, when Gilgamesh heard about the wild creature (Enkidu), he ordered that Shamhat the prostitute be sent to entice him and wean him from the animals. So, as George notes, “she bared her sex <kuzbu; Foster: ‘exposed her loins,’ p. 9> and he took her charms <Mitchell: ‘gazed at her body,’ p. 78>.” Then “his passion caressed and embraced her. / For six days and seven nights / Enkidu was erect <Kovacs: ‘stayed aroused,’ p. 9>, as he coupled with Shamhat” (George, I 189, 193–194, p. 8). She sighed, “You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god!” (George, I 207, p. 8). Then she spoke to him of Uruk, of its harlots, “fairest of form, / Rich in beauty, full of delights,” and also of Gilgamesh, “radiant with virility, manly vigor is his, / The whole of his body is seductively gorgeous <kuzbu>.” But, “Mightier strength has he than you . . .” (Foster, I 230–238, pp. 10–11). Somehow Enkidu knew “by instinct” that he should seek out Gilgamesh as his “friend” (George, I 214, p. 8). Mitchell describes the sex between Shamhat and Enkidu as: She “stripped off her robe and lay there naked, / with her legs apart, touching herself.” Then, she touched Enkidu “on the thigh, / touched his penis, and put him inside her. / . . . / For seven days / he stayed erect and made love with her, / until he had had enough.” When Shamhat told him about Gilgamesh, “Deep in his heart he felt something stir, / a longing he had never known before, / the longing for a true friend.” She fanned his imagination with talk of “‘the lovely priestesses standing before the temple of Ishtar . . . <ready> to serve men’s pleasure, in honor of the goddess . . . .’” She also said, “‘<Y>ou will stand before him <Gilgamesh> and gaze with wonder, / you will see how handsome, how virile he is, / how his body pulses with erotic power <kuzbu>.’”41

Enkidu’s coupling with Shamhat presents Mesopotamian masculine gender, desire, and sexuality in its most (heterosexual) raw and natural form.42 Some interpreters doubt whether Shamhat was a temple prostitute. Still, as Wilfried Lambert notes, “[I]t is certain that [all] prostitution was regarded as a sacrament of Inanna/Ishtar.”43 Walls notes that the line Shamhat “bared her sex and he <Enkidu> took in her charms” contains sexual euphemisms that would be better understood as meaning “she opened her vulva and he took her sexual vigor (kuzbu).”44 Enkidu is designed to be a “match” for Gilgamesh’s passions and appetites, as well as a wild man who hopefully will exhaust his energies and distract him from oppressing the young men of Uruk.45 Yet, as Neal Walls notes, “Enkidu’s physical lust for Shamhat’s body is merely his apprenticeship to desire before accepting his true vocation of loving Gilgamesh.”46

**Gilgamesh dreams of a companion, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet.** Then, in Tablet I, Shamhat tells Enkidu about two dreams that Gilgamesh had. In the first dream, Gilgamesh saw something “like a rock <kisru> from the sky <that> fell down before me”; and later he told his mother, “like a wife [I loved it], caressed and embraced it.” His mother Ninsun then explained that this meant that “a mighty comrade will come to you, and be his friend’s saviour” (George, I 245–272, p. 10). Kísru has been translated here as “ball” (Kilmer, p. 128; Kovacs, p. 8), “meteor” (Sandars, p. 66; Ackerman, p. 55), “meteorite” (Ferry, p. 10; Walls, p. 55), and “shooting star” (Gardner and Maier, p. 81). In Mitchell, the mother explains that the “bright star <that> shot across / the morning sky” and fell at Gilgamesh’s feet / “like a huge boulder” was his “double,” a “second self.” It stands for “a dear friend, a mighty hero. / You will take
him in your arms, embrace and caress him / the way a man caresses his wife . . . .” / He will be “the companion of your heart.”47 In the second dream, Gilgamesh saw “an axe <hassinnu> was lying” in the street; and he told his mother, “like a wife [I loved] it, caressed and embraced it . . . .” She explained that the meaning was essentially the same as in the first dream: “a friend” will come to you and “like a wife you’ll love him, caress him and embrace him, . . . / A mighty comrade will come to you, and be his friend’s saviour . . . .” (George, I 273–297, p. 11). As Walls notes, Gilgamesh has the young men of Uruk to bully, but no one to be a real friend, partner, equal and buddy, until Enkidu arrives. The king yearns for someone who can understand his superhuman capacities. However, instead of an Eve for Adam, a male Enkidu is created to be the soul-mate for Gilgamesh.48

Finally, in Tablet II, Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet. Shamhat “stripped and clothed him <Enkidu> in part of her garment,” and a “barber <came> and groomed his body so hairy” and anointed him with oil (George, II P 70,106–107, pp. 13–14). Foster reads a little differently: Enkidu “treated his hairy body with water <i.e. washed himself, and> / he anointed himself with oil . . . .”49 Later that night, while Enkidu was having sex again with Shamhat, he noticed a man hurrying by; and when he inquired where he was going, the fellow told him that he was headed for Uruk with food for a wedding banquet, where Gilgamesh “will couple with the wife-to-be, / he first of all, <then> the bridegroom after”—as divinely ordained. Enkidu was so angered by this (although we are not told why) that he rushed off to Uruk also, with Shamhat following (George, II P 159–166, p. 15). There the citizens of Uruk notice that “In build he <Enkidu> is the image of Gilgamesh, / but shorter in stature and bigger of bone” (George, II P 184–185, p. 15). Enkidu had “the strength and beauty, the likeness of Gilgamesh” (Ferry),50 he was “a handsome young man” (Kovacs),51 and he was “an enormous man” (Mitchell).52

Then, as Gilgamesh was about to go in to the bride, Enkidu appeared and “with his foot blocked the door of the wedding house . . . .” The two men “seized each other . . . / joined in combat . . . / The door-jambs shook, the wall did shudder . . . .” (George, II 111–115, p. 16). Then, “Gilgamesh knelt, one foot on the ground, / his anger subsided, <and> he broke off from the fight” (George, II P 229–230, p. 16). The Yale tablet then adds, “They kissed each other and formed a friendship” (George, II Y 18, pp. 17,108). Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, “‘As one unique your mother bore you, . . . / High over warriors you are exalted . . . .” (George, II P 235,237, p. 16). Dalley reads, “‘They grappled at the door of the father-in-law’s house, / Wrestled in the street, in the public square. / Doorframes shook, walls quaked.”53 Mitchell reads more dramatically (although blurring over certain sexual and other nuances in the original text): “When Gilgamesh reached the marriage house, / Enkidu was there. He stood like a boulder, / blocking the door. Gilgamesh raging, / stepped up and seized him, huge arms gripped / huge arms, foreheads crashed like wild bulls, / the two men staggered, they pitched against houses, / the doorposts trembled, the outer walls shook, / they careened through the streets, they grappled each other, / limbs intertwined, each huge body straining to break free from the other’s embrace. / Finally, Gilgamesh threw the wild man / and with his right knee pinned him to the ground. / His anger left him. He turned away. / The contest was over.”54 Actually, it is not clear in the original text who won the fight, or whether it was a draw.55 Dalley’s text at this point says about Enkidu that “He was born in the open country, and who can prevail over him?” No one.56

**Journey to the Cedar Forest, and Ishtar’s proposal.** In Tablet IV, on the pair’s way to the Cedar Forest, we are told how “Enkidu made for Gilgamesh a shelter for receiving dreams, /
A gust was blowing, he fastened the door. He made him <Gilgamesh> lie down in a circle of [flour], and spreading out like a net, Enkidu lay down in the doorway. Gilgamesh sat there, chin on his knee. Sleep, which usually steals over people, <only finally> fell on him” (Foster, IV 11–16, p. 30; repeated 5 times in the trip account here). However, the passage is difficult to translate, as can be seen in Kovacs: “Enkidu prepared a sleeping place for him <Gilgamesh> for the night; a violent wind passed through so he attached a covering. He made him lie down, and . . . in a circle. They . . . like grain from the mountain . . . / While Gilgamesh rested his chin on his knees, / sleep . . . overtook him.” Mitchell refers to “a magic circle of flour” drawn around Gilgamesh. 

Now, this does not sound like two men lying together at night and having sex. Yet, Speiser reads, “They grasped each other to go for their nightly rest. / Sleep overcame [them].” This is based on a Middle Babylonian text which reads, “They embraced each other for their night’s rest; sleep overcame them.” Gardner and Maier also have Gilgamesh lying down before he “drew his legs up to his chin.” Ferry notes that “Enkidu / prepared a sleeping place, prepared a shelter / against the wind that blew along the mountain.” Some elements in the text suggest, at least, that Gilgamesh and Enkidu may have huddled together in each other arms to keep themselves warm in the cold wind (as well as for other reasons).

Then, in Tablet VI, after the two heroes returned from slaying Humbaba, Gilgamesh “washed his matted hair, he cleaned his equipment, / he shook his hair down over his back.” He put on clean garments and then his crown. Then, “On the beauty of Gilgamesh Lady Ishtar <the goddess of love> looked with longing: / ‘Come Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom! / Grant me your fruits . . . !’” (George, VI 1–8, p. 48). Gardner and Maier read, Gilgamesh “shook out his braid of hair against his back” and put on clean clothes, a cloak and sash, and his crown. Then, “To Gilgamesh’s beauty the great Ishtar lifted her eyes. / ‘Come, Gilgamesh, be my lover! / Give me a taste of your body. / Would that you were my husband and I was your wife!’” Foster translates “cleaned his equipment” (in George) as “cleaned his head strap,” referring to a band of cloth normally worn then by men, which when undone, would allow his long hair to fall free over his shoulders, considered a sign of undress in Mesopotamia. Ferry reads, “The goddess Ishtar saw him and fell in love / with the beauty of Gilgamesh and longed for his body. / ‘Be my lover, be my husband,’ she spoke and said, / ‘Give me the seed of your body, give me your semen . . . .”

However, Gilgamesh reminds Ishtar of how she abused her past lovers, including: Dumuzi (the lover of her youth), the “speckled allalu-bird” (Kovacs: ‘colorful little shepherd bird,’ p. 52; or Foster: ‘brightly-colored roller bird,’ p. 47), the lion (perfect in strength), the horse (famed in battle), the shepherd, and Ishullanu (her father’s gardener; cf. George). In fact, as Mitchell describes it, Ishtar sent “that beautiful boy Tammuz” (Dumuzi) to the underworld, broke the wings of “the bright-speckled roller bird,” left the lion trapped in a pit to die, forced the hot-blooded stallion to gallop endlessly with a bit in its mouth, and turned the master shepherd into a wolf. Relating to her last lover, Ishtar said to the gardener, “O my Ishullanu, let us taste of your vigour. / Put out your ‘hand’ and touch my quim!” (George, VI 68–69, p. 50). Note that “hand” here is an euphemism for the penis and that “quim” is an old English slang word for the external female genitalia, or vulva. Foster reads, “My Ishullanu, let’s have a taste of your vigor! / Bring out your member, touch our sweet spot!” Mitchell is even more forthright: “Sweet Ishullanu, let me suck your rod, / touch my vagina, caress my jewel . . . .” But “he frowned and answered, ‘Why should I eat this rotten meal of yours?’” So Ishtar turned him into a toad. One should note the common use of euphemisms (indirect language) in the original
text and many translations that are used to refer to intimate sexual acts and body parts, which are often only made clear in more modern, frank renderings. The bathing scene is an erotically charged motif in ancient Near Eastern literature (cf. David and Bathsheba, cf. 2 Sam 11:1-5), although the usual gender roles (masculine/active and feminine/passive) are inverted here, in the Ishtar/Gilgamesh encounter. Clean, luxuriant hair is a natural symbol for seductive appeal; thus, Gilgamesh shaking out his flowing locks has sensual and erotic connotations, to which Ishtar reacts accordingly.71

**Killing of the Bull of Heaven, and after Enkidu's death.** In Tablet VI, after Gilgamesh has killed the great Bull, the goddess Ishtar begins to wail, calling together “the hair-curled priestesses, the love-priestesses and temple whores . . .” (Gardner and Maier).72 Then, Enkidu hurled up a part of the Bull at Ishtar. The Akkadian word here has been translated as “thigh” (Speiser, p. 85; Mitchell, p. 138), “haunch” (Ferry, p. 35; George, p. 52; Foster, p. 50), and “hindquarter” (Kovacs, p. 55). Doty notes how “thigh” is commonly used in ancient Near Eastern texts as an euphemism for the “genitals”,73 and so this could very well refer to or have noticeably included the Bull’s huge phallic organ.74 Since the “haunch” is that part of an animal that includes the hip, the buttocks, and thickest part of the thigh,75 this idea is no less offensive, and in fact is translated by Gardner as referring to the Bull’s “excrement.”76 Clearly, there is no love lost between Enkidu and Ishtar. Further, Enkidu shouts out that if he could have caught Ishtar, “I’d have draped your arms in <the Bull’s> guts” (George, VI 156–157, p. 52)! After all of this, Gilgamesh and Enkidu washed their hands in the Euphrates River and then they “took each other by the hand and in they came” to Uruk, to “make merry” in the palace (George, VI 67–68,179, p. 54). “Gilgamesh spoke a word to the serving girls of [his palace:] / ‘Who is the finest among men? / Who is the most glorious of fellows?’ . . . <and they answered,> . . . ‘Gilgamesh . . . !’” (George, VI 166–179, p. 54). Speiser notes: “They embraced each other as they went on, / Riding through the market-street of Uruk.”77 Foster reads, “Clasping each other, they came away <from the Euphrates>, / <They> Paraded through the streets of Uruk. / The people of Uruk crowded to look upon them.” Gilgamesh then asked the palace servant-women, “Who is the handsomest of young men? / Who is the most glorious of males?”78 Speiser then notes, “Down lie the heroes on their beds at night” and Enkidu has a dream.79 Foster describes how after enjoying their celebration in the palace, Gilgamesh and Enkidu “slept stretched out on the couch of night.”80 However, Ferry avoids the question of there was one or two beds with “when all had fallen asleep,”81 as does with Mitchell with “the warriors were stretched out asleep.”82

Tablet VII then relates two dreams which Enkidu has, in the first of which he learns that the gods have decided that he must die in payment for the killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. As Enkidu relates this dream to Gilgamesh, three times he calls Gilgamesh “my brother,” with two additional references to “my brother, dear” and “my dear brother.”83 “Enkidu began to speak to Gilgamesh: ‘My brother, this night what a dream [I dreamed!]’ . . . Enkidu lay down before Gilgamesh, <and> his tears [flowed] down like streams: ‘O my brother, dear to me is my brother! They <the gods> will [never] raise me up again for my brother. [Among] the dead I shall sit, . . . never again [shall I set] eyes on my dear brother” (George, VII Hittite fragment column i, p. 55). Mitchell renders the labels here as “Beloved brother,” “Dear friend, dear brother,” and “my dear brother.”84 As Gilgamesh listens to Enkidu, he begins to weep as well. Then Enkidu begins to curse Shamhat the prostitute; but Shamash the sun god reminds him that it was she who originally fed and clothed him and “gave you as
<your> companion the handsome Gilgamesh . . .” (George, VII 138, p. 58). Kovacs reads, it was the prostitute “who allowed you <Enkidu> to make beautiful Gilgamesh your comrade . . . / Now Gilgamesh is your beloved brother-friend!” Yet, over the next twelve days Enkidu grows more and more ill. Not able to cope with this, Gilgamesh avoids Enkidu until the very end, when Enkidu cries out desperately for him. Enkidu feels that Gilgamesh, who so often had encouraged him in the past, now “hates me” and so he is devastated.

Then in Tablet VIII Enkidu dies. Gilgamesh offers up a great mourning for Enkidu, calling upon everyone and everything who knew Enkidu to join him, including the city elders, the crowds who blessed them, various animals Enkidu had known, natural sites they had visited, the young men of Uruk, all of the city’s farmers and herders, and Shamhat the prostitute, as well. He exclaims, “I weep, / Moaning bitterly like a wailing woman” (Speiser, VIII ii 3, p. 87). Foster reads, “I howl as bitterly as a professional keener <mourner>.” Kilmer refers to Gilgamesh mourning “like a widow.” Gilgamesh describes Enkidu: “You, an axe <my beloved companion> at my side, so trusty at my hand— / you, sword <fighting partner> at my waist, shield <faithful protector> in front of me, / you, my festal garment <Dalley: ‘festival clothes,’ p. 92; that is, partying buddy>, <and> a sash over my loins <George: ‘girdle of delights,’ p. 65> — an evil demon(?) . . . took him away from me!” (Kovacs, VIII 34–37, p. 70). So how was Enkidu a “sash” over Gilgamesh’s loins, which is probably a reference to his genitals? In additional to all of the other wonderful aspects of their friendship, Enkidu was also missed as Gilgamesh’s bed companion.

Then Gilgamesh “covered, like a bride, the face of his friend <Enkidu>., / like an eagle he circled around him. / Like a lioness deprived of her cubs, / he paced to and fro, this way and that. / His curly [hair] he tore out in clumps, / he ripped off his finery . . . .” (George, VIII 59–64, p. 65). Dalley strangely translates “like a bride” as “like a daughter-in-law.” Gilgamesh offered animal sacrifices to the gods, ordered a splendid statue be made of Enkidu, and selected precious gifts for his spirit to take to win the goodwill of the deities in the Netherworld. Foster reads that “Like a lioness whose cubs are in a pitfall, / He <Gilgamesh> paced to and fro, back and forth, / Tearing out and hurling away the locks of hair, ripping off and throwing away his fine clothes . . . .” Later on in the story, recorded on a tablet reportedly found in Sippar (in Iraq), Gilgamesh tells the tavern-keeper, “Weeping over him day and night, / I did not surrender his body for burial—<thinking> ‘Maybe my friend will rise at my cry!’— / <This continued> for seven days and seven nights, until a maggot dropped from his nostril” (George, Si ii 5’–9,’ p. 124; X 57–60, p. 78). Gilgamesh held onto the beautiful body of his beloved until decomposition began to turn it into something odious. Then he turns to render Enkidu’s ideal form immortal through the creation of a statue, which included much gold, precious gems, and lapis lazuli (a sky-blue semi-precious stone). Gilgamesh will not express desire for any other person throughout the rest of the Epic, but rather loses himself in an abyss of despair as he wanders off into the wasteland.

Then Tablets IX and X relate how Gilgamesh is totally traumatized by the death of Enkidu, as well as by the idea of death itself. “For his friend Enkidu Gilgamesh / did bitterly weep as he wandered the wild: / ‘I shall die, and shall I not then be as Enkidu?’” (George, IX 1–2, p. 70). Speiser reads, “For Enkidu, his friend, Gilgamesh / Weeps bitterly, as he ranges over the steppe <great plain>. . . .” Then, at the end of the world, Gilgamesh meets Shiduri, the tavern-keeper, and Urshanabi, the ferryman, both of whom ask Gilgamesh similarly: “<W>hy are your cheeks so hollow, your face so sunken, / your mood so wretched, your visage so wasted? / Why in your heart does sorrow reside . . . ?” (George, X 40–43, p. 77; X 113–114, p. 80; parentheses
in this translation have been deleted for smoother reading). Gilgamesh explains, “<M>y friend, whom I loved so dear, / who went with me through every danger, / <these lines are then repeated> / six days I wept for him and seven nights . . . . / Then I was afraid . . . .” (George, X 55–58,61, p. 77–78; X 132–136, p. 81). Kovacs reads, “<W>hy are your cheeks emaciated, your expression desolate? / Why is your heart so wretched, your features so haggard? / Why is there such sadness deep within you?” Gilgamesh replies, “<M>y friend, whom I love deeply, who went through every hardship with me, / <line repeated> / the fate of mankind has overtaken him. / Six days and seven nights I mourned over him and would not allow him to be buried until a maggot fell out of his nose. / I was terrified . . . .”

Tablet XII relates one final meeting which Gilgamesh and Enkidu have. The Old Babylonian story, sometimes called “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” relates a final reunion that is allowed between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Shamash the sun god (Sumerian: Utu) “opened a hole in the netherworld, <and> / The spirit of Enkidu, like a phantom, he brought up out of the netherworld. / They embraced and kissed each other . . . .” (Frayne, GEN 255–257, p. 138). When Gilgamesh questioned Enkidu about the afterlife, he replied, “<M>y body you once touched, in which you rejoiced, / It will [never] come [back]. / It is infested with lice, like an old garment, / It is filled with dust, like a crack (in parched ground).” Then, “Woe is me!” cried the lord <Gilgamesh>, and <he> sat down in the dust” (Frayne, GEN 263–267, p. 138). Speiser reads, “When the spirit of Enkidu, like a wind-puff, / Issued forth from the nether world: / They embraced and kissed each other. / They exchanged counsel, sighing at each other . . . .” Speiser then has both Gilgamesh and Enkidu crying “Woe!” and throwing themselves into the dust.

So, what then is to be learned from the Gilgamesh epic? Is it that true happiness is not to be found in mere sensual pleasure but in acquiring virtue and wisdom (George Held)? Or is it that family and kin are most important in life (Rivkah Harris)? Or does it speak to the human fear of death and the longing for eternal life, suggesting that immortality is available to humans only in an enduring name and some lasting achievement left behind (Arthur Ungnad)? The story is rich enough to suggest numerous ideas. I believe the story is primarily about experiencing loss (of losing someone very dear, of finding out that some dreams are never attainable, and of accepting the reality of growing up) and yet continuing to live on and somehow find life worthwhile. Gilgamesh had known the joy of an almost perfect friendship, but then suddenly his partner was taken from him (by death) and now (in the face of grief, fear and desolation) he must learn to live without him, which seems more than he can bear (N. K. Sandars). Yet life goes on, and even in the face of great loss, it is still possible to find happiness, fulfillment and purpose in other ways.

Summary. The Epic of Gilgamesh developed from stories of an early Sumerian ruler’s reign in Uruk (ca. 2700 BC) to the combined, stabilized Assyrian Standard Version (ca. 1300 BC), in the process being widely translated and disseminated throughout the ANE, including Palestine. Surprisingly, the world’s first great love story involves a love affair between two men (Horner). Gilgamesh, a partly-divine and partly-human figure, both “seductively gorgeous <kuzbu>” and “radiant with virility <manly strength and sexual potency>” (Foster), is diverted by the gods from wearing out the citizens of Uruk by creating for him a special companion, named Enkidu, who also is “handsome . . . just like a god” and who, upon meeting the prostitute Shamhat, has one continuous week of sex with her, before he grows tired. So the stage is set for a sexual relationship between the two men, even though the language describes this in subtle,
ambiguous ways. Gilgamesh tells his mother Ninsun of two dreams he has, of a meteorite and an axe, to whom he felt strangely drawn; and she explains that these signs signal that a “comrade of your heart” will come into your life, and you “will take him in your arms, embrace and caress the way a man caresses his wife . . . .” (George). Enkidu’s physical arousal for Shamhat is meant to prepare him for his “true vocation of loving Gilgamesh” (Walls). When Enkidu finally meets Gilgamesh, who is about to enter a house to have sex with a new bride before her husband (his prerogative as the king), Enkidu blocks the door with his “foot” and the two massive males wrestle, rattling the walls and doorframes of the city. Finally, however, Gilgamesh stops, and the two “kissed each other and formed a friendship” (George). Thereafter they are inseparable, and they have no more sexual interest in women. They ‘clasp hands’ as they go seek Ninsun’s blessing on their expedition against Humbaba (Foster III 20, p. 23); they find warmth in each other’s arms on the cold Mountain of Cedar (Gardner and Maier); and then later, after they have killed the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu throws up the Bull’s huge genitals (or his dirty rear) as an insult in the face of Ishtar, goddess of love, who tried to steal Gilgamesh and make him her sexual partner instead. When it is decreed that Enkidu die for these misdeeds, Gilgamesh tears out his hair and rips his clothes and mourns bitterly the loss of Enkidu, who was my “axe” (beloved companion), “sword” (fighting partner), “shield” (faithful protector), festive clothes (partying buddy), and “sash over my loins [genitals]” (sexual partner). Later, Gilgamesh will get one final kiss with Enkidu’s ghost.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 8A
1. Foster, Epic of Gilgamesh, p. xi.
6. Foster, Epic of Gilgamesh, p. xii.
7. Van De Mieroop, Ancient Near East, p. 80.
13. Sandars, Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 12; George, Epic of Gilgamesh, p. xxvi; cf. map, Kovacs, Epic of Gilgamesh, p. [xxxvi].
19. See quote from Rainer Maria Rilke’s letter in Moran, Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 171.
20. Quoted in Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 246, n. 2.
27. Doty, Myths of Masculinity, pp. 74–75.
34. Ibid., p. 126, n. 8.
39. Ibid., I 134, p. 8.
42. Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death*, p. 18.
45. Ibid., p. 52.
46. Ibid., p. 50.
61. Ibid., V iv 3–6, p. 140.
64. Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, VI I and n. 1, p. 46.
65. Ferry, *Gilgamesh*, VI i, p. 29.
71. Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death*, p. 35.
75. *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, “haunch.”
81. Ferry, *Gilgamesh*, VI iv, p. 36.
95. Ibid., p. 68.
98. Ibid., X 58–64, p. 85; X 131–137, p. 88.
102. Harris, “Images of Women,” p. 86.
The great Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen, in the late 1920s, was the first scholar to argue that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu should be understood as sexual in nature; and he based this view on two early scenes in the Gilgamesh epic, one describing the unhappy state in Uruk and the other detailing two dreams of Gilgamesh. In the second dream, of an axe, in the Pennsylvania tablet (OBV), Gilgamesh tells his mother, “I loved it and cohabited / with it, as if it were a woman . . . .” Earlier, in the first dream, of a meteor, Gilgamesh’s mother tells him that this symbolism means that someone like him will come and “you will rejoice” and “embrace him . . . ” (both translations by Jacobsen). Jacobsen concluded that this dream symbolism “cannot mean anything but that homosexual intercourse is going to take place between Gilgames[h] and the newcomer.” In fact, the new companion created for Gilgamesh has such “enormous sexual vigor” that after meeting the prostitute Shamhat, he has sex continuously with her for a whole week. What the gods want is for Enkidu to “neutralize” Gilgamesh after they fall in love, and thus restore tranquility to Uruk. Moving to the opening scene, then, where Gilgamesh is oppressing the youth of Uruk, Jacobsen believed that because of Gilgamesh’s superhuman strength and sexual vigor he had been seizing both the sons and daughters of Uruk to satisfy his sexual passion. In fact, sexual vigor was viewed in ancient times as an integral part of being a man and a hero.

However, few subsequent commentators adopted Jacobsen’s interpretation, at least in full and particularly relating to his view of the king having sex with the citizens’ sons. Even Jacobsen, in the mid-1980s, suggested that perhaps Gilgamesh “played much too rough in the game of hockey, popular with the youth of Uruk, bruising them sorely.” Yet, Jacobsen still maintained throughout his long career that Gilgamesh and Enkidu had a sexual relationship. In 1976, he described Gilgamesh’s interaction with Enkidu as ‘a rejection of marriage’ and, quoting psychiatrist Harry Sullivan (1953), he suggested that this was a boyhood friendship with sexual union, one of those loving relationships that young adolescent males sometimes have, that is later followed by heterosexual marriage. However, as Susan Ackerman notes, over the past two decades there has appeared an increasingly renewed interest in Jacobsen’s view of the Gilgamesh and Enkidu relationship as being sexual in nature, as scholars have drawn attention to more and more clues pointing to this in language and imagery in both the Old Babylonian Version (OBV) and the final Standard Version (SV). Neal Walls makes the important point, as well noting a presumption of heterosexism in historical interpretation, “which attributes to authors and literary characters a consistent and normative [expected] heterosexual experience,” which most scholars automatically apply “as they imaginatively reconstruct the worldview of ancient Near Eastern literature.” Yet, many gay men immediately recognize homoerotic desire in the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Indeed, more and more readers today, of diverse identities, conclude that these two heroes were lovers and not simply platonic friends (with no sexual activity between them). Yet, Walls suggests that “same-sex love” is probably the best way to describe this intense friendship, which includes a strong emotional bond and encompasses a broad range of feelings and behaviors, as well as genital contact.
Admiration of male beauty, and preference for same-sex love.  Early in the Epic both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are described as very handsome males.  In the opening scene the narrator draws attention to the “alluring body of Gilgamesh” (Walls), describing him as the most “beautiful, handsomest of men, / . . . perfect” (Kovacs, I 49–50, p. 4).  Later Shamhat the prostitute tells Enkidu that he will find Gilgamesh “radiant with virility, manly vigor is his, / The whole of his body is seductively gorgeous <kuzbu>” (Foster, I 236–237, p. 10).  George translates kuzbu as “graced with charm,” but Irene Winter notes that kuzbu points to a “seductive allure . . . more than just a passive attribute; it is an energy that emanates from the possessor to arouse the observer . . . .” Speiser renders this as “with ripeness gorgeous is the whole of his body” (italics added). Later, after bathing, when Gilgamesh shakes out his long, flowing locks of hair, this is so sensual that the voyeuristic Ishtar immediately wants his “fruit” (Dalley), to enjoy “his sexual appeal” (Walls) and his “sexual prowess” (Gardner and Maier). Foster translates kuzbu as “beauty,” and Ferry as “your semen.” To get to the point, she can’t wait to have sex with him. Shamash the sun god reminds Enkidu of “the handsome Gilgamesh” (George) to whom the prostitute had introduced him. Of Enkidu’s beauty not so much ado is made in the text, although the prostitute Shamhat after a week of lovemaking cries out, “You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god!” (George, I 207, p. 8). Also, the crowd exclaims when they first catch sight of Enkidu, “In build he is the image of Gilgamesh . . .” (George, II P 184, p. 15), which must have pointed to a muscular, Adonis-like form.

As Neal Walls notes, in examining homoeroticism in the Epic of Gilgamesh, it must be remembered that this Epic originated among the privileged male elite of the scribal tradition, since reading and writing were male prerogatives throughout much of human history, including ancient Mesopotamia. Therefore the repeated attention drawn here to male beauty represents homoerotic imagery within an inherently masculine context and androcentric (male-centered) culture. In fact, Gilgamesh’s love for Enkidu might be likened to the gaze of Narcissus, that beautiful Greek youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Gilgamesh responds to Enkidu as to someone who looks very much like himself physically, reflecting the king’s own strength and beauty; and as Jean-Pierre Vernant has noted, narcissistic love leads naturally to homoeroticism.

But more than the glorification of male beauty, there is a preference displayed here for same-sex partnering in the Gilgamesh Epic. Susan Ackerman has noted a concentrated use of the verb “love” (ramu) in three parts of the story. The first scene where ramu is clustered (5 times) is where Gilgamesh has his two dreams, of the rock and the axe (Tablet I), which predict that Gilgamesh will sexually love a male companion to come (Enkidu). The second scene is Ishtar’s marriage proposal (Tablet VI), where the verb “love” appears repeatedly (6 times), but here a negative context where Gilgamesh refuses the goddess’ heterosexual advances. In addition, in this section, the noun “lover[s]” occurs 2 times. The final section where ramu is clustered (12 times) is in Gilgamesh’s addresses (Tablet X) to the barmaid, the ferryman, and the flood-hero, where Gilgamesh relates how much he still loves and misses Enkidu. These scenes vividly contrast loving another male (Enkidu) with not loving the female (Ishtar). Interpreters also have pointed out the striking double use of “caress” (hababu) in Tablet I, which Jerold Cooper holds is “most certainly a euphemism for sexual intercourse,” i.e., to make love, leading to coitus and climax. In the first case, Enkidu took Shamhat the prostitute, and “his passion caressed <hababu> and embraced her”—and with a week-long erection he coupled with her (George, I 193–195, p. 8). Then only a few lines later we have Gilgamesh dreaming that, like a wife, he loved, caressed <hababu> and embraced” his soon-to-appear companion
(George, I 256,267,284,289, pp. 10–11), symbolized by the meteorite (ball) and strange axe (stick), which point to Enkidu’s genitals and to him as a sexual mate. At the same time, David Greenberg points out how in the past meteorites have been viewed as feminine, e.g., the meteorite enshrined at Pessinus in Phrygia (now W Turkey) that was worshipped in Greco-Roman times as an image of the mother goddess Cybele. He also suggests that the “axe . . . strange of shape,” mentioned in the Pennsylvania tablet (George, P 31, p. 102) could have been the double-headed kind that only goddesses or worshippers of goddesses carried in procession and that were probably used and carried by Ishtar’s eunuch priests.27 Piotr Michalowski also suggested that the axe in Gilgamesh’s dream may be a castration symbol.28—not meaning that Enkidu would be emasculated but that he would become Gilgamesh’s passive (feminine-like) sexual partner.

As Neal Walls notes, after Gilgamesh meets Enkidu, he is sufficiently enchanted to forsake his sexual appointment with the new bride, as well as with all future brides in Uruk. In fact, the heroes’ complete disregard now for women as erotic objects contrasts starkly with their previous passion expressed toward women and their exploitation of female sexuality. In fact, the Epic gives the reader only negative images of heterosexual desire, e.g., in Enkidu’s animal-like response to the nude prostitute (doing her duty) and in Ishtar’s fickle passions (deadly and dehumanizing). This stands in contrast to true emotional love, commitment and fulfillment that Gilgamesh and Enkidu find in each other.29 Enkidu’s intense rancor toward Ishtar casts him in the role of a jealous, rival lover; and when he hears that he must die,30 he seems much more concerned about being separated from Gilgamesh than his own death.31 Apart from his closeness to his mother, Gilgamesh’s only other intimate relationship (demonstrated by kissing, embracing, and holding hands) is with Enkidu (Jeffrey Tigay).32 Ackerman points out that the dream imagery, the wrestling match, and the lament scene, all taken together, “suggest that Gilgamesh and Enkidu assume roles as spouselike companions for one another throughout the entire period of time that they spend together, from the moment they meet ‘until death do them part.’”33

**Puns and other wordplays.** A pun in writing involves one word which sounds like and brings to mind a second word, so as to reveal a hidden meaning or sometimes add a game-like or humorous element to the text.34 In 1982, Anne Draffkorn Kilmer drew attention to three puns in the Epic. One involves kisru (meteorite) = kezru (curly-haired prostitute), which appears in Gilgamesh’s first dream. Here, kisru (ball, or meteorite) sounds like kezru, which means literally “a male with curled (dressed) hair” and refers to a prostitute who wore his hair in this distinctive manner so as to advertise his profession.35 Another pun involves hassinnu (axe) = assimnu (sacred prostitute or eunuch in Ishtar’s service) in the second dream.36 Here, the Akkadian word hassinnu (axe) recalls the similarly-sounding assimnu, the “potentially sexless, often passive homosexual” (Leick),37 who may have been a male prostitute in Ishtar’s service (Kilmer, Walls).38 However, other interpreters hold that the assimnu might only have been a castrated musician or dancer who was attached to the cult of Ishtar (Lambert, Dalley), but not a prostitute.39 The two wordplays surely suggest that like a prostitute (kezru) Enkidu would entice Gilgamesh sexually and that like a eunuch (assimnu) he would take on a feminine or ‘emasculated’ role as the recipient of Gilgamesh’s male sexual aggression.40 A third pun involves zikru (“word/speech, double/equal”) = zikru/zikaru (man/male) = sekru (a eunuch in Ishtar’s service). In 1989, Stephanie Dalley pointed out that the use of zikru (word, speech) in the episode where Enkidu is created strongly suggests wordplays with
zikru/zikaru and sekru.\textsuperscript{42} Zikru (speech) is found (note italicization ahead) where Anu father of the gods says to Aruru the mother goddess, “Now, create what Anu commanded,” and so she “conceived within her what Anu commanded . . .” (Foster, I 96,100, p. 6). Yet, zikru is also found in Anu’s instruction that Enkidu should be created as Gilgamesh’s “double” (Speiser, I ii 31, p. 74) or “equal” (Foster, I 97, p. 6), another meaning. Such repetition of zikru also recalls a third meaning of the word (man) as well as the similar-sounding sekru, which Dalley defined as a person “of uncertain sexual affinities [a eunuch-transvestite] who was found particularly in Uruk associated with Ishtar’s cult.”\textsuperscript{43} What is alluded to here, then, is that from the beginning Aruru was instructed to create a male counterpart for Gilgamesh, who also would be an emasculated (passive) partner to fulfill his erotic passions.\textsuperscript{44}

Another wordplay, in the opening scene, involves pukku and mekku (“ball and stick”) = the male genitals. Kilmer pointed out that pukku and mekku, the large wooden ball and long hockey stick that were used in Sumerian games, especially at weddings, probably symbolize “the insatiable energy and sexual appetite of Gilgamesh.” This symbolism is then carried over into Gilgamesh’s two dreams, which include a ball (a meteorite) and a stick (an axe), which Kilmer suggests point to the arrival of “Mr. Ball and Stick” himself, Enkidu.\textsuperscript{45} Jacobsen described this wooden puck as “kidney-shaped,”\textsuperscript{46} which would be even more testicles-like. Such symbolism seems to point unmistakably to a future homoerotic and sexual relationship that will occur between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.\textsuperscript{47}

Sexual allusions also appear in the scene where Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet for the first time, in the wordplays “in front” (= erection) and “foot” (= penis) and also in the progression of emotion and action. The Pennsylvania tablet (OBV) says that when Enkidu enters Uruk seeking Gilgamesh, he “walks [in front]/, And the lass <Shamhat> behind him” (Speiser).\textsuperscript{48} Dalley notes how isaru (“front, upright”) can also mean “penis” and so there is probably a double entendre here (a word with more than one meaning, one of them risqué).\textsuperscript{49} Ackerman suggests that when Enkidu approaches Gilgamesh at the door of the bridal chamber, he may be viewed as “sporting a magnificent erection.”\textsuperscript{50} Also, when Enkidu blocks the door to the bridal chamber with his “foot,” this may be read as another phallic reference, since “foot, feet” was commonly used as a euphemism for “penis” in the Bible and other west Semitic languages.\textsuperscript{51} Furthermore, Gwendolyn Leick notes that references to the “foot,” then to a sudden weakness (“kneeling”), which gives way to tenderness (“kissing”) is “quite revealing” here and may be read as suggesting “a different sort of wrestling [i.e., making love].” Yet, this is presented in such an ambiguous way that it can still be read on the surface as “straight,”\textsuperscript{52} if one does not have the insight to look deeper. However, this sexual symbolism would explain why neither Gilgamesh nor Enkidu exhibit any further desire for women after their meeting. This initial wrestling was soon followed by another kind of intermingling of bodies (sexual union). As Walls notes, “This suggests that their erotic drives are [henceforth] fulfilled in each other, as Gilgamesh’s dreams portend . . . .” Gilgamesh wants only to continue his exclusive friendship with the loyal, passionate Enkidu.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Gender-bending and gender-crossing.} Thorkild Jacobson noted that throughout the Epic the loving, sexual relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu “competes with, and replaces, marriage.”\textsuperscript{54} In this, Enkidu assumes, in general, the secondary, supporting role. After meeting Shamhat, the prostitute clothes the naked Enkidu with part of her female garment (George, II 70, p. 13). Enkidu continues to leave his long locks hanging loose “like those of a woman” (George, I 106, p. 5), thick and luxurious\textsuperscript{55} and blowing in the wind like waving grain.
Gilgamesh imagines making love to his dream symbols of Enkidu “like a wife” (George, I 256,267,284,289, pp. 10–11). Later Enkidu interprets Gilgamesh’s five dreams on their way to find Humbaba (Tablet IV), which was typically women’s activity (remember the Queen Mother’s earlier interpreting of Gilgamesh’s dreams). After Enkidu’s death, Gilgamesh veils his face “like a bride” (George, VIII 59, p. 65). Finally, Gilgamesh rejects the barmaid’s suggestion of (heterosexual) marriage, implying that Enkidu was his wife (Speiser, X Meissner fragment III 13, p. 90); and Enkidu remains the only one for whom Gilgamesh has eyes of love, to the end of the Epic. All these clues suggest that Gilgamesh and Enkidu enjoyed a loving sexual relationship, of the deepest and fullest kind. Furthermore, it is noteworthy is that this relationship is not simply described as male to female, but as husband to wife.

However, there are also (a few) occasions where Gilgamesh is described as displaying what might be labeled feminine characteristics, e.g., when he weeps like “a widow” or a wailing woman over Enkidu’s death — public lamentation typically being women’s activity in ancient Mesopotamia, as well as in Israel (cf. García-Treto, p. 63). Then, he paces back and forth, besides Enkidu’s corpse, like a “lioness” who has been deprived of her cubs (her family). Still, both heroes appear masculine by traditional standards. Repeatedly they exhibit courage, combativeness and honor. Overall, we have here an ‘unorthodox’ relationship of two manly warriors who love each other as male-identifying men, with the line blurred between platonic love and sexual love. Of course, Ishtar the love goddess had already expanded the sexual boundaries by her having made love to human, divine, animal, and bird partners (albeit all heterosexual) to whom she was attracted.

“Brother,” kissing, and controversy over a homosexual reading. It has already been noted in our study of Jonathan and David that the terms “sister” and “brother” are used in various Bible passages carrying an erotic sense and applied to one’s “beloved” or “spouse.” Eroticized uses of “brother” are also found especially in Old Babylonian texts describing the sacred marriage rite in ancient Mesopotamia, which sexually united the king of a Sumerian city-state (like Uruk), with the goddess Inanna (Akkadian: Ishtar), represented by one of her priestesses. In one hymn, the goddess says of her sexual partner (presumably a king), “The brother brought me to his house / Made me lie on its . . . honey bed, / . . . . / My brother of fairest face made 50 times.” In the Gilgamesh epic, after Enkidu has a terrible dream revealing to him that he soon will die, he says to Gilgamesh, “My brother <ahum>, this night what a dream [I dreamed]! . . . ” Then “Enkidu lay down before Gilgamesh, his tears [flowed] down like streams: ‘O my brother, dear to me is my brother! They <the gods> will [never] raise me up again for my brother. [Among] the dead I shall sit, the threshold of the dead [I shall cross,] never again [shall I set] eyes on my dear brother.’” (George, Hittite fragment III? i, p. 55; italics added). Yet, the more frequent label used by both men in the SV is “friend” (ibr u) or “my friend,” which is used to refer to Enkidu by Gilgamesh or the narrator some 41 times in the funeral sequence alone (Tablet VIII). In fact, the Epic uses “friend” incessantly, up to 150 times throughout, to describe Gilgamesh and Enkidu in relation to one another. While neither of these terms proves that the heroes’ relationship was a sexual one, in a homoerotic relationship such words of fondness usually taken on romantic connotations. Enkidu’s “O my brother <Gilgamesh>, dear to me . . . ” (George, VII III? col. i, p. 55) recalls David’s “my brother Jonathan, greatly beloved were you to me . . . ” in his lament (2 Sam 1:26, NRSV). While no text in the Epic says that either Gilgamesh’s or Enkidu’s love “was wonderful, passing the love
of women” (2 Sam 1:26), the way in which their same-sex love blocked out heterosexual love throughout the Epic certainly demonstrates this in deed, if not in word.

Of course, kissing in the ancient Near East could indicate different things: homage paid by an inferior to a superior, respect expressed between equals, or affection implying intimacy and also erotic intimacy. After Gilgamesh and Enkidu kiss (George, II Y 18, p. 17), they become fast friends and thereafter they focus entirely on each other. The prostitute with whom Enkidu was coupling is completely forgotten, as is Gilgamesh’s intended intercourse with Uruk’s latest bride. In fact, this shift is so immediate, Ackerman notes, it is practically impossible not to think that “the Epic means for us to see Enkidu as replacing the young bride as the object of Gilgamesh’s eroticized interest.”

Ackerman notes that, because it “fits so well,” it is hard not to read the mutual kiss of Gilgamesh and Enkidu at the end of their wrestling match as having erotic connotations, as well as the kiss when Gilgamesh is reunited with Enkidu’s spirit, released for a short while from the Netherworld (Speiser, XII 86, p. 98). Holding hands is another physical expression of affection found between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, seen, e.g., when they “take each other by the hand” to discuss Gilgamesh’s dangerous idea to go slay Humbaba (George, II 182–183, p. 18), as they visit the forge to get weapons fashioned (George, II Y 163–165, p. 20), as they go to the palace to seek the Queen Mother’s blessing (George, III 19–28, p. 23), and as they return to Uruk after successfully killing the Bull of Heaven (George, VI 168, p. 54). Yet, Enkidu is also brought into a covenant relationship with Gilgamesh—not exactly like the lifelong ‘marriage pact’ that Jonathan and David make together alone (1 Sam 18:1–4) but in the form of an ‘adoption pact’ in which the Queen Mother adopts Enkidu as her son and also as Gilgamesh’s ‘brother’—in a legal sense, and in a loving sense. The men’s relationship is thereby formalized and cemented by using a conventional legal means that was available. Like the covenant between Jonathan and David, this not only serves as a subterfuge in the social setting but as a convenient literary device to camouflage their same-sex commitment and passion in a story which would not always face a sympathetic audience. Then, like Achilles and Patroclus (the famous Greek hero and his companion in Homer’s Iliad), Gilgamesh and Enkidu flee the crowded city for the privacy of the wilderness (Walls)—on a type of “heroic honeymoon,” where they can sleep together undisturbed in their tent.

Still, controversy has raged over whether a homosexual reading is required here. It is often noted that words like “brother,” “kiss,” and “embrace” can convey nonsexual as well sexual meanings. Also, since interpreters believe that in the ancient Near East it was considered disgraceful for a man to be perceived as a woman or to assume her passive role in sex, it is hard to accept the idea that in the Epic Enkidu would submit himself to such a subservient position and that homoeroticism would play such a major role in a tale that spread so far and wide. David Halpern (1990) argued that Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Achilles and Patroclus, and David and Jonathan were simply examples of “a type of heroic friendship which is better captured by terms like comrade-in-arms, boon [close] companions, and the like,” but not sexual. Gwendolyn Leick (1994) argued that Enkidu’s destiny was to complement Gilgamesh in taking on adventure and winning fame, not in their finding sensual fulfillment in each other’s arms. Martti Nissinen (1998) wrote that the deep friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is expressed in “loving tenderness” but that “the sexual passions seem to subside to the point that one can speak of a ‘spiritual’ love between the two men”—“a homosocial type of bonding, which is often strong in societies in which men’s and women’s worlds are segregated.” Yet, such authors still admit that the Gilgamesh/Enkidu relationship is described using a wealth of homoerotic imagery. Ackerman notes, in fact, that because there is so much more of it than one
would expect in a nonsexual friendship, these homoerotic overtones seem indisputable. Halpern acknowledges that it “is not in doubt” that the double use of hababu (“to caress”), applied to Enkidu’s response to the prostitute and then to Gilgamesh’s response to the dream symbols of his future companion, along with Gilgamesh’s later mourning for the dead Enkidu “like a widow” and his veiling of his face “like a bride,” all point to Enkidu being an object of sexual desire. Leick notes in Gilgamesh’s dreams how kisru/kezru points to a curly-haired male prostitute and hassinnu/assinnu to the “potentially sexless [castrated], passive homosexual” and, more importantly, the “strong erotic feelings” that the rock and axe symbols of Enkidu arouse in Gilgamesh. She also notes the multiple sexual symbolism embedded in the wrestling scene. Nissinen acknowledges that the text suggests “erotic associations,” particularly in Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar’s proposal, in Gilgamesh loving Enkidu “like a wife,” and in his covering of Enkidu’s face “like a bride.” Indeed, Ackerman lists six clues in the Epic that now are widely recognized as strongly pointing to an erotic, sexual relationship: 1. Gilgamesh’s expressions of “caressing” (hababu) and “loving” (ramu) Enkidu “as a wife”; 2. the kisru/kezru wordplay; 3. the zikru,zikaru/sekru wordplay; 4. euphemistic references to sexual arousal and climax in the wrestling match; 5. Gilgamesh’s covering the face of the dead Enkidu “like a bride”; and 6. Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar’s marriage proposal.

**Liminality in the Gilgamesh and David stories?** Susan Ackerman sheds light on both the Gilgamesh/Enkidu and David/Jonathan stories by applying descriptions of the rite-of-passage as formulated by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) and study of the “liminal phase” as expanded by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983). Van Gennep described three phases as part of any rites of passage, which included: (1) “separation” from an earlier social structure; (2) “liminality” (from limen in Latin, meaning “threshold”), a state where the subject exists between the old and the new; and (3) “reincorporation,” when the subject finally arrives at a stable state with new rights and obligations. Although folklorists subsequently tried to construct a universal “monomyth” applying this theory to hero stories around the world, they often sought to read modern ideas (like a search for self) into ancient settings where they hardly applied. Victor Turner and his followers were more successful in applying van Gennep’s liminal phase to certain religious narratives. He came to see the liminal stage as crucial in the process of regeneration or renewal; and this ritual involved not only social drama but communication of something of great importance to the larger community. A character in the liminal phase often experienced “a limitless freedom” beyond what he normally would have had in his social setting. Gilgamesh can be viewed as a liminal character in a number of ways: in that he is betwixt and between (moving from an out-of-control youthful stage to a mature adulthood); in his existence on the margins of society (his sojourn in the wilderness); in his having to submit to a leader’s demands (the gods send him tests and trials, but also help him to overcome them); in the breaking down and blurring of borders (androgy nous males take on female characteristics); and in the resulting revelation of important truths to him and the larger community (one should accept the limitations of human life and the responsibilities of adulthood, which does not mean at the same time that there are not pleasures of civilization that can still be enjoyed).

David may be compared to Gilgamesh, as a liminal character. The rite-of-passage and liminal-phase analysis that shed considerable light on the Epic of Gilgamesh also may be applied to the David and Jonathan story, albeit with more mixed results. Gilgamesh appears on the scene like a “wild bull” oppressing his citizens and being completely “carefree” (George, I
David also appears on the scene (not unruly as Gilgamesh but) as the youngest son and a shepherd lad who spends a lot of time in the wilderness with his sheep, playing the lyre (1 Sam 16:11,18). At the same time, however, it is foreseen that he will become a valiant fighter and eventually king of Israel. Although Gilgamesh is already king, he hardly knows what it means to act like a responsible ruler. Like Gilgamesh is described as “most handsome” and “fair in manhood” (George, I 62,236, pp. 3,9), repeated attention is drawn also to David’s striking beauty (1 Sam 16:12,18;17:42). Gilgamesh’s liminal (betwixt and between) phase begins when he forms a friendship with Enkidu, after which they leave the city to go into the wilderness in search of Humbaba (Tablets IV–V); and Gilgamesh’s liminal phase continues after Enkidu’s death, as he wanders despairingly in the wilderness (Tablets IX–X). In a similar way, David’s liminal phase begins when he forms a friendship with Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1–4), leaving behind his father’s house for good, to live at court or on the run. Here one should not overlook the secret meetings of Jonathan and David in the “field,” where no doubt Jonathan spent many hours alone with David instructing him in the masterful use of the sword and bow (1 Sam 18:4), as well as where they spent other times together (1 Sam 19:3; 20:11,24,35). (Cf. Schroer and Staubli, p. 29) Later, of course, David will wander for more than a decade in the wilderness regions of eastern Judah, being hunted by the haunted Saul (1 Sam 19:12 on, esp. chaps. 23–26). The catalyst then for Gilgamesh entering his liminal phase is Enkidu, the companion upon whom Gilgamesh focuses his attention socially and sexually and who supports, comforts and helps him in countless ways. For David, Jonathan is the catalyst and companion, as they share their hearts, thoughts, fears and flesh; and Jonathan supports, comforts and helps David in every way that he can. There is an egalitarian leveling of status with both pairs, commonly seen in liminal states: Although Gilgamesh is king, he and his companion treat each other more or less as equal comrades in their heroic adventures. Also, although Jonathan is prince and David is subject, Jonathan keeps trying to equalize their relationship, although it does not really become this until their final meeting (1 Sam 23:18). Other interesting comparisons can be made between Gilgamesh and David. Enkidu right before his death calls Gilgamesh “my brother” and “my dear brother” repeatedly, and Gilgamesh often says after Enkidu’s death how much he still loves him. In David’s case, Jonathan said repeatedly early on that he “loved” and “took great delight in” David (1 Sam 18:1,3; 19:1;20:17); then after his death David publicly calls Jonathan “my brother” and “greatly beloved” (2 Sam 1:26). Both pairs kiss (George, II Y18, p. 17; 1 Sam 20:41); they weep bitterly when parting is forced upon them (George, VII, III? i, p. 55; VIII 45, p. 64; 1 Sam 20:41, 2 Sam 1:12); and when one survives the tragic death of the other, he mourns unashamedly, leaving behind a public, soul-wrenching lament (George, VIII 65–188, pp. 65–69; 2 Sam 1:17–27). The gods bring tests and trials upon Gilgamesh, yet at the same time Shamash the sun god helps him to overcome them. In a similar fashion, the Lord God inflicts Saul with an evil, murderous spirit which forces David to flee for his life; yet also the Lord delivers David “from every trouble,” at court and on the run (cf. Psalm 34:4–6, NRSV). Just as trial, fear, and pain mark the route that leads Gilgamesh to become a wise, sensitive and stable leader of his people, so the Lord set out the same kind of path for David to prepare him for the throne of Israel. Of course, there are notable differences between Gilgamesh and David, as well. For example, Gilgamesh remains the aggressive partner throughout his relationship with Enkidu, whereas Jonathan starts out as the aggressive partner but then at the end is presented as the submissive partner. Also, Gilgamesh is not able to end his grieving for Enkidu after his death but wanders off in depression and into the wilderness, living like an animal; in contrast, David is somehow
able to (or feels that he must) move on from his grief to return to the burdens at hand, continuing the struggle which will eventually lead him to become ruler over all of Israel.

**Gendered and sexual language and imagery in both stories.** These two stories display interesting similarities in their use of gendered and sexual language and imagery. For example, feminine language is applied to the more passive partner, as seen in Enkidu depicted as “loved, caressed, and embraced like a wife” (said four times in Gilgamesh’s rock and axe dreams) and in Gilgamesh “covering the face of Enkidu like a bride.” Likewise, David refers to Jonathan in his eulogy as someone whose “love to me was more wonderful, passing the love of women” (italics added in all three cases above), placing Jonathan in a feminine light. The same-sex attraction and bonding is seen more clearly, however, as women in the main character’s life are brushed aside in preference for a male partner. After Enkidu comes, Gilgamesh has no further interest in the daughters of Uruk nor later to the advances of Ishtar, the goddess of love. Likewise, David’s relationship with and marriage to Michal is bracketed, set aside, and made totally irrelevant by his commitment and attachment to Jonathan. After Gilgamesh and David found a male companion, neither shows any sexual interest in women (David no doubt marries Michal for political advantage) until after their time together has ended. Both stories contain homoerotic behavior, although hinted at through the use of coded, ambiguous language, which must be deciphered by going beneath the surface text. When Gilgamesh meets Enkidu, he blocks Gilgamesh from the door to the new bride’s bedchamber with his “foot” (erect penis), which leads to a sport-like wrestling, then later to a sexual wrestling; and so the scene communicates on two levels, what happened (in the square) and what will happen later (in private). In like fashion, there is surface meaning and hidden meaning in the scene where Saul curses Jonathan for not getting married and producing an heir for the throne (1 Sam 20:30). Here the language is loaded with sexual innuendos: with references to a “perverse mother” (really pointing to Jonathan, the perverse son), a “rebellious woman” (that is, Jonathan who doing something that is rebellious), the mother’s “nakedness [genitals]” (alluding to Jonathan’s and David’s nakedness and genital play), “choosing” David (Jonathan taking David as his bed companion), and finally a reference to Jonathan’s “shame” (which points not only to Jonathan’s homosexual inclinations, but to the shame that Saul feels his intimate relationship with David has brought upon him). The sexual activity hinted at in this tongue-in-cheek language and tongue-lashing scene is past and present—not present and future as in the Epic wrestling scene—although the literary character of both scene descriptions is very similar. Also, as Gilgamesh’s beauty causes Ishtar to desire his “fruit” (Ferry: semen), so also David’s “exceeding,” in his parting scene with Jonathan (1 Sam 20:41), in a line that has been tampered with, suggests that all of their kissing, hugging, longing and passion led David to experience a hard-on, and then an ejaculation (with Jonathan not far behind). Also, when death occurs, there is great lamentation and expression of love offered by the partner left behind. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh wails bitterly, he holds Enkidu’s body until it begins to rot, and he calls upon everyone to join his woeful lament. After Jonathan’s death, David calls upon all of Israel to lament the “gazelle” (the beautiful Jonathan) and he declares to all how wonderful Jonathan’s love was to him, surpassing that of any woman (even though David had taken three wives). Gilgamesh eventually will marry two wives and take a concubine (“The Death of Gilgamesh,” SGP, Foster, pp. 142–154, esp. 66–67, p. 152). Likewise, Jonathan will eventually marry (once), and David will take more wives and concubines than one can count on both hands.
Yet, as the ‘feminine’ sexual partner, both Enkidu and Jonathan have important parts to play in the life, education and ascent of Gilgamesh and David, respectively. As Enkidu introduces Gilgamesh into his liminal phase, where he will acquire experience, understanding and maturity so that eventually he will become a wise, productive and beloved king of Uruk, so also Jonathan initiates David into his liminal phase, where separated from his family, Jonathan shelters, nurtures, instructs, and cares for the young David as he begins his perilous, circuitous journey toward becoming Israel’s most beloved king. As Ackerman notes, often with liminal characters borders become blurred (including sexual ones) and characters do not conform to social norms (such as the usual active-passive gender dichotomy). Further, she suggests that the feminization of Jonathan may have served an important purpose for the narrator in 1-2 Samuel, by bolstering David’s right to rule over all of Israel. Jonathan’s acting (or being presented) in a feminine role would be considered by many to be dishonorable, thus disqualifying him from ever ruling as king—just as Meribbaal’s lameness later disqualified him for any such consideration. Because of Jonathan’s woman-like position and wife-like role, he must surrender the claim that he had to the throne. Of course, Jonathan has already willingly handed over his claim to the throne and pledged his allegiance to David, out of love for him and commitment to the Lord’s will. Still, sadly, both Enkidu and Jonathan must die and their partners suffer the searing agony of their loss, before they can go on to realize their divine mission in life and destiny in history.

**Summary.** During the past quarter century ANE scholars have recognized more and more sexual clues in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which point to Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu having a relationship which not only included a strong emotional bond and a broad range of feelings, but genital contact as well (Walls). Also, the strong admiration of male beauty here points to this being a homoerotic story, since it circulated in scribal circles, made up entirely of men, who evidently found pleasure in this. Although the word “love” is repeatedly mentioned, explicit sexual parts and acts are only described by using elusive terms, such as “caress” (= make love to), “ball and stick” (= Enkidu’s genitals), “foot” (= Enkidu blocking Gilgamesh’s path to a heterosexual encounter with his penis), and then the “wrestling . . . weakness . . . kissing” scene (= which points to Gilgamesh later taking Enkidu sexually, then coming, then their kissing). Most telling, however, is the fact that after Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet neither of them exhibit any further sexual desire for women, until after Enkidu dies (i.e., their love is “until death do us part”). Interestingly, these two males in love display a (more realistically) fluid gender flexibility than in ancient male stereotyping, especially as Enkidu wears his hair long (like a woman), interprets dreams (female activity), and is viewed as a “wife” by Gilgamesh (in his early dreams); yet both warriors are male-identifying men, and Gilgamesh also at times displays feminine characteristics (e.g., in his public lament of Enkidu’s death and his pacing like a “lioness”). The fact that Enkidu remains the only one for whom Gilgamesh has eyes of love to the end of the story suggests that they were like a husband and wife, enjoying the fullest and deepest kind of love, sexual and otherwise (Harris). Terms like “brother” and other endearing labels (like “friend”) and references to kissing and holding hands do not always infer an erotic connotation, but in a homosexual relationship they certainly do. Also, Gilgamesh’s mother adopting Enkidu ties the two males together in a lifelong way, as in marriage; and their departure then for the wilderness bring to mind a kind of honeymoon, a time when the two can sleep together undisturbed by prying eyes (Walls). Later, Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar’s marriage proposal and Enkidu’s throwing of the Bull’s private parts up into the goddess’ face portray Gilgamesh as fully satisfied sexually with Enkidu, and Enkidu as a jealous, enraged lover. The
homosexuality here might be explained (by the reader and/or writer) as a kind of liminal experience, passing from a carefree state through trials and hardships to conscientious maturity.

END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 8B
1. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 47.
3. Ibid., pp. 70–73.
6. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, pp. 50–51.
7. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, pp. 12, 14.
8. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 17.
12. Dalley, Myths from Mesopotamia, VI SBV i, p. 77.
15. Foster, Epic of Gilgamesh, VI 6, p. 46; Ferry, Gilgamesh, VI i, p. 29.
17. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 16.
19. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, pp. 72–73.
22. Ibid., VI 44,46, p. 49.
31. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 60.
32. Tigay, Evolution, p. 9, n. 20; Harris, “Images of Women,” p. 86.
34. Foster, Epic of Gilgamesh, pp. xviii–xix.
37. Leich, Sex and Eroticism, p. 266.
40. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 60.
41. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 56; cf. CAD, I, Part II (A), assinnu, pp. 341–342.
43. Ibid.
47. Harris, “Images of Women,” p. 86.
48. Speiser, Epic of Gilgamesh, II v 7, p. 78.
49. Dalley, Myths from Mesopotamia, p. 152, n. 11.
50. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 70.
52. Leick, Sex and Eroticism, p. 266.
53. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 49.
56. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 120.
59. Harris, “Images of Women,” p. 86.
63. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 56.
64. Ibid., pp. 56–57.
65. Ibid., p. 47.
66. Cf. Song of Songs 4:9,10,12; 5:1,2; 8:1; Tobit 5:21; 7:11,15; 8:4.
68. George, Epic of Gilgamesh, VIII, pp. 63–69.
69. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 127.
70. Ibid., p. 67.
71. Ibid., p. 69.
72. George, Epic of Gilgamesh, II Y 18, p. 17.
73. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 67.
74. Speiser, Epic of Gilgamesh, XII 86, p. 98.
75. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 61.
76. Ibid., p. 61.
77. Comstock, Gay Theology, pp. 87–90.
78. Walls, Desire, Discord and Death, p. 61.
80. Ibid., pp. 75–78.
81. Halpern, One Hundred Years, p. 77.
82. Leick, Sex and Eroticism, p. 268.
84. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 81.
85. George, Epic of Gilgamesh, I 193, p. 8; I 256,267,284,289, pp. 10–11.
86. Halpern, One Hundred Years, p. 81.
87. Leick, Sex and Eroticism, pp. 265–266.
89. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, pp. 83–84.
90. Ibid., chaps. 4, 5, 8.
91. Ibid., pp. 88–90.
92. Ibid., pp. 90–95.
93. Ibid., pp. 96–123.
94. Ibid., p. 200.
95. Ibid., pp. 108–121.
98. Ibid., I 256,267,284,289, pp. 10–11; X 68-69,145-146,232-234, pp. 78, 81, 84, etc.
100. Ibid., pp. 213–218.
101. Ibid., pp. 103–105, 121–123.
102. Ibid., pp. 222–223.
Throughout the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world women were generally subordinated to men, just as slaves were subordinated to the free. A woman’s life centered on marriage, children and the home, where domestic tasks were time-consuming—although in the royal court spinning yarn, grinding corn, washing clothes, and the like were done by slaves, and a woman’s life was more leisurely. A wife was expected to remain faithful to her husband, but a man had greater sexual freedom, even where monogamy prevailed. He could take multiple wives (if he could afford them), add concubines (sexual partners not legally married to him, but considered as secondary wives), and also visit prostitutes. While Song of Songs voices deep-seated sexual desires, longings, and frustrations that are part of passionate and romantic love, John Rogerson writes that “probably for the majority of men and woman in human history these types of love have been available only in the form of fantasy and fiction.” Bower and Knapp observe also that “In the ancient Near East the primary purpose of marriage was procreation rather than companionship or mutual support. At a very early period marriages began to be arranged by parents,” by which families could be merged and other social advantages gained. This does not mean that genuine love was unknown, but the males stood on a different level from the females. Also, in patriarchal societies where social life was largely segregated by gender, men often found their emotional satisfaction (and sometimes their sexual satisfaction, as well) with other men. However, most societies stressed heterosexual marriage, in order to assure their continuation, as well as to gain other benefits that children offered, providing men to work in the field and to protect the clan, and women to perform household duties.

**David’s wives before he was crowned king over Judah.** David took ten wives and one concubine who are known by name in the Bible, before and after he became king, along with “more concubines and wives” (2 Sam 5:13) whose names and number are not given. Three of these wives were taken during Saul’s reign: Michal, the first Ahinoam, and Abigail. Michal, Saul’s younger daughter and David’s first wife, was earned by his slaying a hundred-plus Philistines (1 Sam 18:20–27). However, after his marriage, David was often away with his soldiers fighting (18:30) and so may have had little or no opportunity to sleep with his wife. At least, Michal never becomes pregnant. Also, it could very well be that David rejected sexual relations with Michal in favor of his commitment to Jonathan, who intimately loved and cared for him until he had to flee Saul’s court for good (20:42). Saul then marries Michal off to Palti/Paltiel (25:44), a resident of the nearby town of Gallim, in his own tribe of Benjamin, thus erasing David’s royal family tie and claim to the throne. However, Michal resurfaces later when David retrieves her in a political deal made with Abner, commander of the opposing camp (2 Sam 3:12–16). So Michal is led away from her second husband, Paltiel, who truly loves her, “weeping as he walked behind her,” until he is forced to return home (v. 16)—so that David can stuff Michal as a trophy into his harem. The third and last time we hear about Michal is when David accompanies the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and she humiliatedly criticizes the scantily-clad king for exposing his genitals in the public procession (2 Sam 6:12–23). However, Michal was probably less distressed about David’s naked dancing, which her father King Saul had also done in public (1 Sam 19:23–24), than the cold, distant marriage into which she had
been forced and her realization that David would never give her an heir to unite the two royal houses. She could not subjugate her dynastic interests, as Jonathan had done, to the Lord’s call on David’s life. Because of her outburst, David forces Michal to live the rest of her life apart from his presence, childless, and in a more-or-less divorced state.

As a fugitive in the wilderness, David took two other wives, Ahinoam (number 1) from Jezreel and Abigail from Carmel (1 Sam 25:42-43, 2–3). Both towns were located in central Judah, Jezreel about twelve miles southwest of Hebron (and about fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem) and Carmel about seventeen miles south of Hebron. We know little about Ahinoam, David’s second wife, except that she gave David his first-born son, Amnon (2 Sam 3:2), who grew up to be a rash, unprincipled youth. However, nearly a whole chapter (1 Samuel 25:2–42) is devoted to Abigail, describing how through her tact and charm she saved her household from calamity and prevented David from taking matters into his own hands (and committing a needless slaughter), instead of waiting on the Lord for guidance. David is living as a kind of outlaw on the fringe of settled community life in central Judah, trying to keep one step ahead of Saul and his troops, and also facing the difficult logistical problem of feeding all of those who are dependent upon him. When David’s messengers seek help and provisions from Nabal, Abigail’s very rich landowner-rancher husband (v. 2), he treats them with contempt (vv. 9–11). So David angrily organizes four hundred of his men to go punish Nabal (v. 13). When Abigail hears about this, she sets out on her own with a generous supply of food (vv. 14–19). Meeting David, she dismounts and bows to the ground before him, addressing him repeatedly as “my lord” (twelve times in vv. 23–31). She calls herself “your servant” (six times) and takes on herself the blame for her husband’s foolishness, begging for David’s forgiveness. In response, David blesses Abigail for her “good sense” (vv. 32–35). Jonathan Kirsch believes that Abigail had already heard of David’s reputation as a handsome and fit war hero, and she found this “dashing young outlaw more intriguing than her rich but stingy and ill-tempered husband.” Probably David sensed her romantic interest, since he was used to “flirtatious women, and he knew how to flirt back . . .” After Nabal’s unexpected death, probably due to a paralyzing stroke and then ten days later a second, fatal stroke, David sends servants to collect Abigail as his wife (vv. 39–42). Thus, David obtained a wealthy wife who could help finance his army and increase his power base in Judah. Abigail, David’s third wife, gives David his second-born son. He is named “Chileab” in 2 Sam 3:3 and “Daniel” in 1 Chron 3:1. However, since he is nowhere else mentioned in the Bible (even though he would be second in line for the throne), he probably died at a young age.

David’s wives and sons born in Hebron, then in Jerusalem. Two genealogies of David’s family are given in 2 Sam 3:2-5 and 5:13–16, taken from a state archive; and the two halves are united in 1 Chron 3:1–9. Here we are told that by the end of the seven and one-half year period during which David ruled as king in Hebron over the tribe of Judah (2:11) he had six wives and six sons, although Ahinoam (number 1) and Abigail probably had given birth a bit earlier. The wives listed in 2 Sam 3:2–5 included (with their sons’ names added in parentheses): Ahinoam (Amnon), Abigail (Chileab), Maacah (Absalom), Haggith (Adonijah), Abital (Shephatiah), and Eglah (Ithream). Another wife, of course, was Michal, whom David got back in a political deal (3:12–16), although she never bore him any children. Little is known of Haggith, Abital and Eglah, except that each bore David a son. However, Maacah was the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur, a small Aramean (Syrian) kingdom located northeast of the Sea of Chinnereth (later called the Sea of Galilee), which remained an independent state until it was absorbed into Israel.
However, Uriah the Hittite, a member of David’s military elite (“The Thirty,” cf. 2 Sam 23:13–14), would bring. He sent, he took, she came, he lay, she returned. 11:2 Perhaps, this is meant to indicate that David now added more concubines than wives. The omission of the names of David’s new wives (except for Bathsheba) probably indicates that they were of less importance than his earlier wives, whose sons had some chance of ascending dynastically to the throne. It also should be noted that only the names of the sons of his wives are given in 5:14–15, not of the sons of his concubines (cf. 1 Chron 3:5–9). Nevertheless, these countless sons were meant to demonstrate how the great and powerful King David had been blessed in this way. If David continued to bear one son per wife, then the last nine sons named above would suggest that they came from nine different mothers.

Of course, the most well-known of David’s wives is Bathsheba, and her story is told in 2 Sam11–12. Late one afternoon on a spring day, David was walking along the parapet (low wall) of the palace roof when he looked down and saw a young, nude woman move toward a large basin of water, loosen her hair, and begin washing her feet and limbs. Later she was startled by a royal summons to the palace, which she would never have dared spurn, although she was also flattered by it. At the palace, David called for food and wine, and then drew her to his couch for a night of lovemaking. Perhaps David had risen from his afternoon nap in a state of sexual arousal and so, seeing a beautiful, naked woman at her bath on a nearby rooftop, it was lust at first sight (Kirsch). Perhaps, also, now at middle-age (in his fifties), he still wanted to prove he could win the heart of a young, beautiful woman. The powerful verbs tell everything (2 Sam 11:2–4). As Kirsch notes, “The scene is the biblical equivalent of ‘wham bam, thank you, ma’am’: he sent, he took, she came, he lay, she returned” home. However, when Bathsheba becomes pregnant and sends David word (v. 5), he is horrified at the complications that a child would bring. So Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, is recalled from the front and told by David to go “wash your feet [‘genitals’]” and go “to your house [to have sex with your wife]” (vv. 6–8). However, Uriah the Hittite, a member of David’s military elite (“The Thirty,” cf. 2 Sam 23:13–39) does not oblige. With all of his fellow soldiers out in the field, at risk, along with the Ark...
and attacking the Ammonites, he feels that he should be there with them and not at home enjoying himself (vv. 1, 11).\(^7\) Also, an Israelite soldier engaged in a campaign may have been bound by a vow of sexual abstinence, since war was viewed as a holy function (cf. 1 Sam 21:5a).\(^8\) David even gets Uriah drunk, but he will not bend (vv. 12–13). So finally David sends the warrior back to the field with a sealed letter to General Joab, instructing him to place Uriah at the battle front, where he will be killed, and so he is (vv. 14–17). Then, after a week of mourning by Bathsheba, David brings the widow to the palace (v. 27), no doubt feeling that he’s gotten away with his cover-up.\(^9\) Yet Yahweh has seen everything, and before year’s end Nathan appears to condemn David and declare the Lord’s judgment. This is no love story here, writes Cheryl Exum, since David wanted Uriah to assume the paternity of the child and he only marries Bathsheba after all of his plots to get Uriah to go have sex his wife have failed.\(^50\) Even later, when David lies with Bathsheba (and Solomon is born), he did this to “console” her (12:24). Peter Miscall thinks that this consolation was more a sign of David’s desire for another son than affection for Bathsheba.\(^51\)

**Saul’s harem, and one final wife for David.** After the Bathsheba tryst, Nathan brings to David a solemn word from the Lord (2 Sam 11:27b–12:15). He begins with a parable about a rich man who stole a poor man’s only, beloved lamb (vv. 1–6); and then he points his finger at David, declaring, “You are the man!” (v. 7a). He reminds David of how much the Lord has given him: anointing him king, rescuing him earlier from Saul; and then “I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah” (12:7b–8, ESV). The prophet then names David’s sin: murder and adultery (v. 9). Therefore, the Lord declares that “the sword shall never depart from your house” and “I will take your wives . . . and give them to your neighbor . . .” (vv. 10–11, ESV). Fortunately, David still has the moral courage and sensitivity to repent\(^52\) and to cast himself upon Yahweh’s mercy; and the Lord forgives him (v. 13, cf. 24:14). Yet, David is informed that the child of adultery will die (v. 14). What is especially noteworthy here is that it was Yahweh who gave to David Saul’s “wives into thy bosom” (12:8, KJV)—referring to Saul’s wife, Queen Ahinoam (Ahinoam number 2, 1 Sam 14:50), and his one concubine, Rizpah (2 Sam 3:7a, 21:8–14). By ancient practice, a dead monarch’s harem became the property of his successor;\(^53\) but here God declares that he is the one who has given David his court and harem, as well as Israel and Judah.\(^54\)

Near the end of David’s life, when he was old and his body cold, his servants brought in a young, beautiful virgin named Abishag, to “lie in your bosom, so that my lord the king may be warm” (1 Kings 1:2, NRSV). Recruited for the harem, it was hoped that “her young flesh against the king’s chest would revive his flagging spirits.” As it turned out, however, she served more as a nurse than a lover\(^55\) and as a blanket for the aged king, since David “did not know her sexually” (1:4). Some interpreters have viewed Abishag as a concubine,\(^56\) although there is nothing in the text to support this.\(^57\) Nowhere is she referred to as a slave, a handmaid, or a concubine. Rather, the wording “they searched for a beautiful girl throughout all the territory of Israel” (v. 3) recalls the contest that was used to select Esther (Est 2:1–4ff), although here David’s officials made the final choice.\(^58\) Jerome Walsh thinks that the intent was for Abishag to replace Bathsheba, with her beauty invigorating the king.\(^59\) After David’s death, Adonijah requests to take Abishag as his “wife” (1 Kings 2:17), not his concubine.

What can be gained from all of this? David clearly takes numerous wives for political gain. Such was the case with Michal (Saul’s daughter, taken twice), Abigail (widow of the rich Nabal),
and Maacah (princess of Geshur)—and probably also with Ahinoam (to strengthen his legitimate base in southern Judah64). David Payne writes that apart from Bathsheba “most of the other [of David’s] marriages had been political moves,”61 and Walter Brueggemann believes that David continued “the process of sexual politics” in Jerusalem.62 Tied to this, of course, was the view that collecting a large harem added to a ruler’s honor and prestige. David may have taken nineteen wives, along with his concubines. When David fled from Jerusalem, as Absalom’s rebel army advanced toward the capital, 2 Sam 15:16 tells us that he left behind ten concubines “to take care of palace” (2 Sam 15:16, NIV), which may or may not have been all of his concubines. Still, there is evidence to suggest that he felt strong sexual attraction toward some of the women he took, especially Abigail and Bathsheba,63 who are described, respectively, as “clever and beautiful” (1 Sam 25:3) and “very beautiful” (2 Sam 11:2). Yet at the same time, he “sent” for and “took” or “brought” both of them,64 like property, expressing the mindset of his patriarchal society.65 How much interest he had in them apart from producing a sizeable family is not known; there is little evidence that he devoted much time to any of them. Most strikingly, the Lord condemns David for murder and adultery but not for having sex with all of his sexual partners, who were Yahweh’s good gifts given to him (2 Sam 12:8).

Although David had sex with many women, nowhere does the text say specifically that he “loved” any of them. That word is reserved for his feelings for men. David says of Jonathan, “greatly beloved were you to me; your love was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26, NRSV, italics added)—even ranking their love above what David may have felt toward the “beautiful” Abigail (1 Sam 25:3). Later we read that David “loved” Amnon, his first-born son (13:21). Another passage relates (although the word “love” does not appear here) how David “mourned . . . day after day . . . yearning for [the absent] Absalom” (13:37–38, NRSV), his third-born son, who was praised throughout Israel for his remarkable “beauty” from head to toe and his gorgeous, full head of hair (14:25–26).66 J. P. Fokkelman notes “David’s (not too) secret admiration and delight in the fairest in the land [Absalom]” and his viewing him as “his darling son.”67 David expressed no grief when his ten concubines were taken and abused (16:20–22),68 but when Absalom was killed (18:9–15), David mourned and cried uncontrollably for him (18:32–19:4). The only other place where David displays such emotion is over his loss of Jonathan (1:26). All of this can only suggest that David was sensitive to male beauty, that he found bonding with men more satisfying than with women, and that deep in his heart he probably still missed Jonathan (9:1ff) and all that they had shared together, including their sexual intimacy. That David took multiple female partners does not negate the fact that he had a homosexual relationship earlier in his life, during his soldiering days and in a military context (Horner).69 In fact, David seems unable to find anyone to take Jonathan’s place, as he moves restlessly from one female to the next. He has heterosexual sex, to be sure, but seems unable to fill the deepest needs in his heart. He may be momentarily attracted to a woman or bed her to cement a political alliance; but after a son is born, he loses interest. Too bad Jonathan did not survive, to continue giving David the comradeship, warmth and love that had sustained him as a youth through his dark years in Saul’s court.

**Summary.** Surpassing Saul’s harem, with only one wife and one concubine (1 Sam 14:50), David accumulated a sizable harem, taking as wives: Michal (Saul’s daughter, 1 Sam 18:27; 2 Sam 3:12–13), Ahinoam (number 1) and Abigail (from Judah, during his flight from Saul, 1 Sam 25:40–43), Maacah, Haggith, Abital and Eglah (after he became king in Judah, 2 Sam 3:2–5), Bathsheba (after he became king over all of Israel, 2 Sam 11:2-5, 26–27), Saul’s wife Ahinoam.
(number 2) and his concubine Rizpah (1 Sam 14:50; 2 Sam 12:8, 21:8, who automatically became David’s property when he became king over all of Israel), and finally at the end of his life Abishag (to warm his cold body in bed, 1 Kings 1:1-4)—totaling ten wives and one concubine. After David established the capital of Israel in Jerusalem, he “took more concubines and wives, adding more wives besides Bathsheba (his favorite) and Abishag, his end-of-life “bed blanket” but not sexual partner. Yet, if the nine sons born to David in Jerusalem (listed in 1 Chron 14:3–7), apart from Bathsheba’s four sons (Shammua, Shobab, Nathan, Solomon), were born only to wives (v. 3) and each one came from a different woman, as David moved from one wife to another, hopefully to obtain a son from each (as appears to be the case in 2 Sam 3:2–5), this would add nine more wives, now totaling nineteen wives. However, when David fled from Jerusalem in the face of Absalom’s rebellion, he left ten concubines behind to care for the palace (2 Sam 15:16), which may or may not have included all of his concubines. This means that David accumulated a harem of around thirty women. Probably most of David’s wives were taken for political advantage (Brueggemann), beginning with Michal. Yet, David was clearly attracted to Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2–4), and we are specifically told that Abigail was “beautiful,” as well (1 Sam 25:3). Having a large harem of beautiful women increased the prestige of an Oriental ruler (H. P. Smith). Interestingly enough, God tells David that he gave him Saul’s wife and concubine, as symbols of power but also for sexual pleasure if he chose (although they must have been up in years by now). Nowhere does the Biblical text say that David “loved” any of his women (although he was attracted to some of them); instead, his most intense feelings of love seem to have been reserved for men, especially Jonathan, who was “greatly beloved,” more than women (2 Sam 1:26), and then Absalom, his third-born son and fairest young man in Israel, in whom David took a not-too-secret delight (Fokkelman). Multiple female partners does not mean that David did not have a homosexual relationship early in his life (Horner); in fact, it would seem that he never again found a love quite so deep, fulfilling and passionate as that with Jonathan.

END NOTES, CHAPTER 9
5. Rizpah.
13. This Jezreel should not be confused with the town of Jezreel near Mount Gilboa in the north, where Saul and Jonathan were killed, or this Carmel with Mount Carmel in the north on the Mediterranean coast.
14. Note that the pluperfect verb (NRSV: “married”) in 1 Sam 25:43 is translated as “had married” in the NIV, NJB and elsewhere; this verb form probably indicates that David married Ahinoam before Abigail.
22. Hoerth, *Archaeology*, p. 270; Landay, *David*, p. 120.
25. Cf. 2 Sam 15:8.
35. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 859.
41. Ibid., p. 507.
42. Brueggemann, *David’s Truth*, p. 50.
44. Landay, *David*, p. 114.
45. Although this army council was called “The Thirty,” it seems at this point to have included thirty-seven brave military leaders (2 Sam 23:39); cf. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 1091.
54. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 1, p. 84.
63. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 956.
64. Ibid., p. 764.
Turning to ancient Greek history, one finds it divided into the Archaic Period (800–500 BC); Classical Period (500–400 BC); Late Classical Period (400–323 BC), ending with the death of Alexander the Great; and Hellenistic Age (323–30 BC)—this whole period following several centuries after David’s reign in Israel (1005–975 BC). Still, the friendship of David and Jonathan has been compared in the past to that of Achilles and Patroclus in Homer’s *The Iliad* and to that of Alexander and Hephaestion, since both the Hebrew and Greek civilizations shared a “common East Mediterranean heritage” (Gordon). However, note should also be taken of homosexuality that existed in the earlier Mycenaean civilization, centered in Greece (2000–1200 BC) and spread to the island of Crete (cf. the “Chieftain Cup,” ca. 1575 BC). Recently a new study of *The Greeks and Greek Love* (2007) has appeared by James Davidson, a professor of ancient history at the University of Warwick, England, which offers an important reappraisal of Greek homosexuality. This article will present a summary of his ideas, along with references to other scholarly views and Greek texts, to discover what light Greek homosexuality might shed on the Jonathan and David story.

**General interpretative issues.** Davidson writes that although the Greeks were hesitant to detail their intimate sexual acts, many classicists today hold that anal sex was the primary goal in their same-sex relations. For these scholars, an *erastēs* was not a “love-struck admirer” but rather an “aggressive male who pursues and penetrates boys.” This is the wrong emphasis, Davidson claims, for Greek pottery seems to show that what males preferred in the most intimate of sexual situations was intercrural sex (*diamērion* = “through the thighs”), with both figures standing up. Greek Love was not always about sex, but was “all about love, love, love”—although Davidson quickly adds, “I have never met anyone, outside modern Greece, at least, who believes that the [ancient] Greek men just held hands.” Scenes of actual homosexual copulation are exceedingly rare, although numerous scenes display genital touching and imminent rubbing between bodies. In Kenneth Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality* (1978), figure B114 depicts two males engaged in intercrural sex, R243 displays a group sex scene including one male who rubs his penis between the buttocks of two other males, and R954 shows a boy climbing atop another boy, seated and with an erection, for some sort of sexual action. Davidson notes that the last scene looks like a male brothel. Still, a Symposium Scene by the Pedieus Painter (ca. 520–505 BC, Louvre Museum) shows a bearded man anally penetrating a beardless youth, surrounded by multiple scenes of fellatio, and another *kylix* (flat wine cup, ca. 480 BC, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), by Douris, also shows a bearded man penetrating a boy from behind, who has bent over. Further, Jeanne Reames-Zimmerman notes that intercrural copulation, popularly suggested on pottery, is rarely referred to in literature, while the literary evidence portrays same-sex pairs as primarily engaging in anal intercourse. Also, it is difficult to imagine healthy youths always keeping a flaccid penis (as depicted in pottery scenes) as their pursuers fondle them, even though the *erōmenos* was theoretically not supposed to enjoy a sexual encounter with an older male. Moreover, the pottery never shows two males reclining together for sexual activity, although the literary evidence suggests that this was not uncommon. Marilyn Skinner suggests that images of sexually involved men on pottery were
restricted to intercrural scenes because penetration was viewed as dishonoring a free youth. Therefore, these are “ideal” scenes.13 Perhaps intercrural sex functioned as a kind of euphemism for anal sex (Hupperts).14

In fact, Greek Love is one of the “knottiest subjects” a modern historian can tackle.15 Davidson takes the best from Michel Foucault (sexuality is always culture-particular) while rejecting the worst (homosexuality did not exist prior to the 19th century);16 and one of his major contributions in The Greeks and Greek Love is to distinguish between Greek Love or “homosexuality,” strong same-sex desire in ancient Greece, and “Homosexualities,” those “peculiar and specific same-sex ways” that became associated with Athens, Sparta, Crete, Elis, Thebes, and other autonomous city-states and places in the larger Greek world and at different times between the 8th–4th centuries BC—where one finds erōs (sexual desire) displayed variously as self-sacrificing, playful, patriotic, hungry for knowledge, admiring of boyish beauty, whorish, squalid and seductive.17 Foucault argued that Dover showed that, on the one hand, the Greeks “had no notion of it [homosexuality] . . . , and, on the other hand, they had no experience of it. A person who slept with another of the same sex did not feel homosexual. That seems to me fundamental” (Foucault).18 However, people without a word for “green” still distinguished this color from other colors (Davidson); and the ancients knew what “gravity” was without knowing Newton’s term (Boswell).19 Likewise, the Greeks knew what homosexual love was, without the adjective “homosexual.” At the same time, this does not mean that they perceived or experienced gay love exactly like today.20 As John Boswell noted, “[T]he homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy is crude and imprecise,” yet it does “correspond to types of actions and feelings which can be distinguished by this criterion” in human experience.21 In fact, Davidson notes that what is so interesting about all of the forms of Greek Homosexualities, in different places, is how they combine basic elements of ‘ordinary’ homosexuality, including falling in love, pursuing someone, having sex, and becoming a couple in certain cases. Thus the Greeks localized something that was universal, conventionalized something that was natural, and socialized something that was intensely personal.22 Greek Love is difficult to understand because sometimes the ancient texts seem to approve of it, even celebrate it, while at other times they appear very anxious and condemning toward it.23 At first glance it may seem like the superhuman Heracles (Latin: Hercules), who performed the Twelve Labors, and Iolaus, his constant companion, were just best friends, engaged in a brotherly kind of love; yet later Theban same-sex couples take Heracles and Iolaus as models for their own relationships, which are clearly sexual. As Charles Huppert notes, all of the Greek gods (except for Ares, the god of war) fell in love with young men; and Greek mythology also contained numerous stories about heroes and demigods who pursued youths (e.g., Heracles, Laius, Orpheus, Minos, Tantalus, and Meleager).24

**Achilles and Patroclus.** Homer (8th century BC) mentions no nights of passion between Achilles and Patroclus at the Trojan War (ca. 1200 BC); yet much of later antiquity, including Aeschylus (Myrmidons frag. 135-136), Aeschines (Against Timarchus 142), Athenaeus (13, 601A), Plutarch (Erotikos 751C), Philostratus (Epistles 5, 8), Lucian (Amores 54), Athenaeus (13.601), and Martial (11.44), thought that they were lovers.25 For example, Aeschylus (ca. 525–ca. 456 BC) in his tragedy Myrmidons has Achilles rebuking Patroclus for getting himself killed and not showing more “reverence for awesome thighs, oh how ungrateful you proved for kisses thick and fast”—thighs that earlier had been involved in “god-fearing intercourse”
(Aeschylus frags. 135–137 Radt). Then Plato (ca. 429–ca. 347 BC) has Phaedrus say that “Aeschylus talks nonsense when he claims that Achilles was the lover [erastēs]; because he was more beautiful than Patroclus, more beautiful than all the heroes, and still beardless. Besides he was much younger, as Homer says” (Plato, Symposium 180a Nehamas and Woodruff; cf. Iliad 11.785–787). So, the younger Achilles was viewed as the erastēs (pursuing lover), with his attendant the older Patroclus being the erōmenos (beloved one), even though Athenian Greek Love held that the erastēs should always be the older partner.

Although Homer mentions no sexual intimacies, the love of Achilles for Patroclus is central to the plot of the Iliad; and his grief over Patroclus’s death provides the emotionally intense conclusion of the poem. The champion Achilles, miffed at Agamemnon, leader of the Greek expedition to Troy, refuses to fight until his companion Patroclus is killed by the Trojan prince Hector. When Achilles hears of Patroclus’s death, he heaps dust on his head and sobs so uncontrollably that Antilochus, the messenger bringing the news, grabs the hero’s hands for fear that Achilles might kill himself (Iliad 18.19–35). When Thetis, Achilles’ mother, hears her son crying, she comes from the sea depths to see what is wrong (18.36–77); and Achilles tells her, “[M]y dearest companion is dead, Patroclus, who was more to me that any other of my men, whom I loved as much as my own life . . . . [Now] I have no wish to live” (18.81–92 Rieu). Later Achilles says to his dead companion: “Oh, Patroclus, my heart’s delight! . . . How often you yourself, my most unhappy and beloved companion, have set a delicious meal before me in this hut, with speed and skill . . . . Not that I lack it [food]. I lack you” (19.288, 315–317, 320–321 Rieu). Mourning for his “dear companion,” he refuses to eat (19.345–346 Rieu). Then Achilles goes on a rampage (chapter 20) and kills Hector (chapter 22); and returning camp, he hosts a funeral feast to honor Patroclus (23.25–30), and afterward falls asleep. The ghost of Patroclus appears to him, with “the same lovely eyes and same clothes as those he used to wear” (23.64–69 Rieu). He asks Achilles to bury their bones together, which Achilles agrees to do (23.82–85, 94–96). (As Boswell notes, mixing bones together in a funeral urn was normally reserved for married couples.) Then Achilles asks, “But come nearer to me now, so that we can hold each other in our arms,” but when Achilles reaches forth his arms, nothing is there (23.96–99 Rieu). En route to the funeral bier, Achilles cradles Patroclus’ head in his hands (23.136–138), just as Andromache, wife of the slain Hector, will later do with her husband (24.722–724). After the funeral cremation, Achilles began to weep again “for his dear companion whom he could not banish from his mind.” Sleep eluded him, and he “tossed and turned from side to side, always thinking of his loss, of Patroclus’ manliness and spirit” (24.3–7 Rieu). When Thetis appears to Achilles again, she asks, “My child, how much longer are you going to eat your heart out in lamentation and misery, forgetful even of food and bed? It must be a good thing to make love to a woman . . . .” (24.128–131 Rieu, italics added). Here Achilles cannot sleep, “longing for Patroclus’ manliness and spunk [menos]” (24.6–7 Davidson). Davidson notes that while menos in the broader sense can mean “courage, mettle,” a long text by Archilochus (frag. 196a.52 and Solon frag. 9.1) shows that it can also refer to “semen” (in Britain “spunk” is used as a euphemism for “semen”). Scholars have objected, calling such a reading ‘cheap’—yet Thetis’s suggestion, “It is good to have loving intercourse even with a woman” (24.130 Davidson) can only refer to sexual intercourse; and this most logically points back to Achilles’ earlier tossing and turning in bed, yearning for Patroclus’s menos (sexual love). One cannot help but notice Achilles’ constant embracing and touching of Patroclus’s dead body when Thetis finds him, he lies holding Patroclus (19.4); and later he lays his hands
on his chest (23.18), implores his ghost to embrace him (23.96–97), and fondles Patroclus’ head (23.136–137).33

A number of parallels can be seen here between Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship and that of David and Jonathan. Although Homer does not describe the handsome physical features of Achilles (as is done with David, 1 Sam 16:12, etc.), he does mention Patroclus’ “lovely eyes” (23.67 Rieu); and the repeated references to the “godlike Achilles” (1.122, 131; 9.199, 485; 17.402, etc. Rieu) surely point to his superhuman muscular body, just as Gilgamesh earlier was praised for displaying “manly vigor,” being “seductively gorgeous,” and having a “mightier strength” than any other man (1 236–238 Epic of Gilgamesh Foster, p. 10). At least, Plato and Phaedrus (above) saw Achilles as “more beautiful than all the heroes.” Yet, it is only after one in each pair dies that the depth and primacy of their love becomes clear. As W. M. Clarke notes, “Achilles’ grief is hysterical, his breakdown appalling, his sense of loss unhealed and unending . . . .”34 Achilles cries out to the dead Patroclus, “O Patroclus, my heart’s delight! Oh, my misery . . . . [my] beloved companion” (19.288, 315–316 Rieu), and he calls him “my dearest companion . . . whom I loved as much as my own life” (18.80–82 Rieu), which recall David’s tender words in his eulogy spoken to the dead Jonathan, calling him “my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved [na’im, or ‘delightful’] were you to me; your love to me was wonderful” (2 Sam 1:26 NRSV), along with the Biblical narrator’s earlier words explaining how Jonathan “loved him [David] as his own soul [nephesh, or ‘life’]” (1 Sam 18:1 NRSV). Then there is the contrast in both cases of their same-sex love being ‘better’ than heterosexual love—noted when Achilles’ mother urges him to find solace in heterosexual sex while instead he dreams of the sex he had with Patroclus (24.5-7, 128–132), just as David recalls how the wonderful “love” and sex he had with Jonathan surpassed all heterosexual love and sex that he had known (2 Sam 1:26c).

At the same time, all four heroes on occasion have sex with women. Homer notes this specifically with both Achilles and Patroclus (9.663–668); and David, after leaving Jonathan, will sometimes display strong feelings for women (2 Sam 11:2–5), although he often took wives for political gain; and Jonathan will take a wife after David leaves (2 Sam 4:4), finally giving in to his father’s unrelenting insistence (1 Sam 20:30–31). Achilles never marries (most men under forty in ancient Greece would still have been unmarried);37 instead, Patroclus becomes the center of Achilles’ life, just as Jonathan becomes the center of David’s early life, totally sidelining his wife Michal. Yet, intimate sexual relations between the male partners are only hinted at in subterfuge ways: The distraught Achilles yearned for Patroclus’s menos (semen), while David in his emotional parting scene finally suntelēias magalēs . . . uperebalen (‘exceeded unto a great finale’ [van der Pool], i.e., came to an ejaculation, 1 Sam 20:40 Septuagint). Usually the champion Achilles takes the lead, giving instructions to Patroclus, e.g., to lay out food or run errands (9.202–220, 620–623; 11.611–617), although Patroclus, still a manly warrior, will later fight bravely and give his life for Achilles. In 1 Samuel Prince Jonathan usually takes the lead, although David later shows masterful leadership in obtaining the throne and Jerusalem. Homer appears to have made up a novel name, “Cleopatra,” for Meleager’s wife, which most scholars believe is an inversion of and hidden reference to “Patroclus” (kleopatra = patra-kleo = patroklos). However, in contrast to the lovely “Cleopatra” (9.556) who keeps Meleager (another hero in the Iliad) away from battle for her bed, Patroclus goes out readily to fight in place of Achilles. 38 Likewise, David uses a secretive code-word in his eulogy, sebi (“gazelle,”
2 Sam 1:19, cf. v. 25), which most scholars believe alludes primarily to Jonathan—who was agile in battle, handsome in form, and really the main subject of David’s grief, love and tribute. Of course, there are many differences, as well, between the relationship of David and Jonathan and that of Achilles and Patroclus: The former story gives fewer and briefer details, covering only a few months of sharing time together, and with little evidence of a culture that honored homosexual pairing (yoking). And, with the latter pair, there is no covenant made, no great eulogy recorded, and no calling and preparation of the main character for a larger spiritual mission.

**Other wedded male couples.** Not only did Homer place the devoted intimacy between Achilles and Patroclus at the heart of the *Iliad* (ca. 700 BC), but same-sex couples remained prominent throughout the ancient Greek period. Diocles, from Corinth and victor of the *stadium* in 728 BC (a foot race of ca. 200 meters, the most prestigious event at the Olympics), eloped with Philolaus, his lover from Thebes, to escape his mother’s incestuous passion. This couple may be the oldest known ‘historical’ homosexual couple in Greece. Wedded couples, the oldest manifestations of Greek love, also include Heracles and Iolaus, his little helper, who appear ca. 700 BC together on Boeotian brooches (ornaments fastened to clothing), Boeotia referring to the region around Thebes. Iolaus, pictured both as a youth and a bearded man, helps Heracles especially with the difficult Labor of killing the many-headed, snaky Hydra of the Lerna marshes. Heracles had numerous male lovers (as well as women), although the one most closely linked to him was Iolaus from Thebes. Later, male Theban couples visit Heracles’ tomb and exchange oaths of love and loyalty (Plutarch, *Erotikus* 761d). Iolaus was also offered sacrifices, together with Heracles, at Marathon, a city located ca. 20 miles NE of Athens. Xenophon (ca. 453–ca. 354 BC) spoke of Boeotian men being “yoked together,” using *syzygenetes*, a word for heterosexual “marriage” (*suzeugnumi* = “to yoke together,” *syzygy* = “a yoked pair”). Other same-sex couples include the Athenian city steward Leodamas and “his wife Hegesander” (Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 110–111), the founders of Athenian democracy Harmodius and Aristogiton, and Sappho and her “yoke-mates.” What especially characterized same-sex yoking was the exchanging of oaths, which automatically made these pairs comparable to heterosexual married couples.

In 4th-century Athens, Socrates in *Phaedrus* describes two males who, though they do not take the higher road (of divine love) and instead ‘consummate’ their love and go on “doing this for the rest of their lives,” even after “they have passed beyond it [sex],” because they have exchanged “such firm vows,” they will not be “sent into darkness” in the afterlife, but their lives will be “bright and happy as they travel together . . .” (256b–e). In Crete committed male relationships came into being through an abduction ceremony. In Sparta men contracting a same-sex relationship were responsible for the behavior of their *erōmenoi* (beloveds), which means that these relationships were recognized by the authorities. In Thebes the *erastēs* (lover) often gave his youthful partner a one-and-only gift of weapons at his coming of age. Since opposite-sex marriages were often arranged by families without any wooing or courting, these same-sex weddings, based on falling in love, were more like modern Western marriages. One can see common elements here and in Jonathan and David’s relationship, including the taking over of common words for heterosexual marriage, with *syzygy* (a yoked pair, marriage) and *berit* (a covenant, pact, marriage alliance). Also, as with Greek male yoking, it is Jonathan’s falling in love with David which leads to their sharing life-long oaths and pledges (1
Greek Homosexuality in Athens, in the region of Attica. Usually when scholars write about Greek homosexuality, they focus on Athenian Homosexuality, since so many important literary texts and images come from Attica. First, it should be noted that people in the past, especially before 1800, reached puberty about 4–5 years later than now, with probably diet as a major factor. Also, although the ancient Greeks seemed not to remember birthdates that well, they were an age-class society. According to the Athenian Constitution, written by a pupil of Aristotle, citizenship was given to youths when they “seem to have reached” the age of Eighteen (Athenaiôn Politieia 42,1–2). Scholars have differed over the age of a metrakion (Davidson: Stripling); however, Davidson agrees with Kenneth Dover, S. C. Todd, and Waldemar Heckel that in classical Athens this probably referred to an Eighteen- or Nineteen-year-old. Young males were divided up into: (1) Under-Eighteens: Boys (paides); (2) Eighteens and Nineteens: Striplings or Cadets (meirakia, neaniskoi); and (3) Twenties and older (andres), which included Twenties to Twenty-Nines, and the Thirties and over, the Seniors (presbutai). However, the term pais (boy) could be applied to any male under twenty; and a paiderastês (admirer of boys) was interested in this range. Eighteens and Nineteens were generally considered “not properly bearded,” which meant that they were still smooth-cheeked or they had just begun to show the first fuzz on their cheeks. Unlike the Romans, the Greeks did not shave their beards.

Davidson notes that Greek had a range of words for “love” which sometimes produced a “high degree of ambivalence” and a “minefield of possible misunderstandings,” including philia (intimate love, but Skinner: friendship) and erôs (the love drive). Agape (fondness) could include a sexual relationship, or not. Pothos (longing) was a yearning when the love-object was absent, and himeros (a sudden urge) when the love-object was present (cf. Socrates, in Plato’s Cratylus). Contrasted with Aphrodite, who embodied desire for women, the god Eros had special jurisdiction over Love for Boys; and erôs (wanting the pleasure of something, usually sexual) could knock your life off track, rob you of common sense, and keep you up at night, driving you mad—although in a broader sense erôs was sometimes applied to a hunger for food, dance, sleep or war (cf. Homer). Context was everything. Erastês (plural erastai) often has been translated as “lover” and erômenos (plural erômenoi) as “beloved,” although the former in many cases was only an “admirer” from a distance, and the latter might be completely unaware of an admirer’s devotion. So, an erastês was primarily “one possessed by a driving love,” while an erômenos “was the object of that love.” Socrates explains how a man can be “struck by the boy’s face as if by a bolt of lightning,” while he struggles to maintain his self-control (in Plato’s Phaedrus 254b). A Stripling who responded favorably to an admirer engaged in charizesthai (favoring), which it was right for the Boy to do if his erastês was giving him practical wisdom. The Greeks had loaded words and euphemisms as well, e.g., pugai (buttocks) seems mostly to have been avoided, with hedra (seat) used in its place. Genitals were regularly referred to as the aidoia (shamefuls, discreet). The Greeks also commonly referred to having sex with euphemisms like: mixis (mixing), homilia (associating), plêsiazô (being close), and sunousia (being with). Still, they had direct words like laikazô (to perform...
oral sex), an act which was considered vile and a “pollution.” They had no direct word meaning “to fuck,” although katapugōn (right up the buttocks) could be used to refer to an “ass-bandit.” Every society has its vulgar words for certain denigrated sexual acts—although some individuals, in spite of the taboos, will still be drawn to and indulge in those very same acts.

So, how was Greek Love practiced in Athens? Plato recognized both a “heavenly” love and a “carnal [vulgar, common]” love. There the way of same-sex love was more “elaborate” than in other places, but far “lovelier.” It’s all right to fall in love with a youth, especially if he is noble-born and of high quality; and if an admirer makes a catch, that’s a good thing too—except that sex should not be used for money, political gain, or power (Plato, Symposium 180b–182a). Erastai came in two types: The wolf-pack erastai included those groupies, pests and suitors who competed in their devotions for a Stripling, bringing him gifts, songs and promises, while the Super-erastēs, or chosen one, the Winner, got to accompany his favorite to athletic events as his Sponsor, his publicly-recognized Other Half. The Greeks viewed the erastēs as a victim who couldn’t help himself, because he was so ‘hung up’ on a Stripling. On the other hand, the erōmenos was to remain erotically passive (although some boys were known to flirt, e.g., batting their eyelashes). Related to “favoring” (charizesthai), the beloved was free to respond or not, although a gracious exchange was thought both to reveal and refine the boy’s personality (psyche). He could hug or kiss, or do more in his lover’s arms; yet the main focus for an erastēs should not be simply to get sex with the boy. Foucault tried to distinguish between philia (simply being good friends) and erōs (sex), which Davidson says really makes “no sex in the Greek context, where, of course, sex is conceived in terms of charis [gracious reciprocation].” Still, Striplings were not to become ‘notches on the bedpost,’ and special scorn was heaped on boys who were believed to welcome being penetrated. Of course, loving someone might end up in bed, although sex was nothing that you would ‘note in your diary,’ and there was a reluctance to write about it or picture it. As Xenophon (Anabasis 2.6.28) noted, sex belonged to apane, the realm of the invisible. At the same time, certain laws dealt with matters of modesty and shame, fathers in Athens had slaves called paidagogoi to chaperone their boys outside the home, and in the gymnasium Striplings (Cadets) were forbidden from mingling with the younger Boys, who shared the same training grounds but played at opposite ends. However, at Eighteen, ephebes (“in bloom” = Striplings) had a spectacular coming out at the gymnasium, when they ran a naked torch race (probably a relay race); and afterward they were not so well guarded.

Still, there was no one single mos Graecorum (Greek way); and love and sex did not always follow the proscribed ideal, even in Athens. Although pursued Striplings were to remain passive with an admirer, even Socrates acknowledged that while the Boy thinks about love for his erastēs as “friendship,” his desire “is nearly the same as the lover’s, though weaker: he wants to see, touch, kiss, and lie down with him; and of course, as you might expect, he acts on these desires soon after they occur” (In Plato’s Phaedrus 255e Nehamas and Woodruff). Xenophon relates how Critobulus, the fuzz “creeping down in front of his ears,” was dreamily infatuated with his older classmate Clinias, who in turn had a boyfriend in Ctesippus (Plato, Symposium 4.23.26). Socrates was afraid that Critobulus has kissed Clinias, a dangerous thing to do, but Critobulus’s obsessive erōs for Clinias persists—even though an Athenian younger male was not to become a love-struck suitor. Adult men also sometimes had older boyfriends, as with Isocrates (Socrates’ favorite), well into his twenties, and Lysias (Phaedrus’s favorite), who was
Moreover, 4th century Athenian Homosexuality changed radically, as *porneia* (Davidson: whorishness) arrived in the city, in the form of sex-slaves who served their masters as live-in lovers, handsome cithara-boys of notorious (loose) reputation who with their lute-like instruments and other talents entertained drinking parties, and politicians who had come to power more through their ‘physical talents’ than anything else. As might be expected, these changes provoked much discussion among the philosophers, including Plato, Xenophon, and Aeschines, about what Greek Love should be about. Foucault believed that all of this theorizing about true love, accompanied by a rejection of sodomy, was designed to render the love of boys acceptable by denying what actually happened. Instead, Davidson views this as a “charis crisis,” because sexual favors from male prostitutes and boy slaves now seemed so much more easily gotten. Special scorn was heaped on boys who slept around as common prostitutes, who became increasingly available. One Athenian speech-writer Lysias (ca. 445–ca. 380 BC) in *Against Simon* relates a struggle that went on for years (including everything from stone-throwing to attempted murder) between Simon, who hired an expensive live-in rent-boy (Theodotus), and an unnamed speaker, who later stole (or retrieved) the Stripling away from him. The Athenian statesman Aeschines (389–314 BC) in his speech *Against Timarchus* tells another story of a prostitute, who was bribed to leave his house of prostitution to go live with Misgolas, a wealthy man, who then becomes enraged to find Timarchus out sleeping with some foreigners like a “common prostitute.”

**Greek Homosexualities elsewhere in the ancient Greek world.** Yet Davidson writes, “[T]here was plenty of gay sex in antiquity that did not involve all the song and dance associated with *erōs* in Athens. We can even assume that there was plenty of homo-love and homo-besottedness [falling-in-love] that was less formal and conspicuous.” Casual, informal and ordinary kinds of homosexual love and lust must always have existed “off the radar,” besides those forms known from pottery and literature (just as Egyptologist R. B. Parkinson wrote that this must have been the case in ancient Egypt). Such expressions of passion included relationships between the lowly Greek vase-painters themselves, and between Striplings who pleasured each other on the slopes of Mount Lycabettus (NE of Athens), and with Macedonian soldiers who took boy-lovers along with them on expeditions. In fact, in looking at the historical records, one is amazed at the diversity which marked homosexuality in the larger Greek world—as is further suggested by the examples given below:

**MYCENAE** was a much earlier major city and civilization, in the second millennium BC, centered ca. 30 miles S of Corinth. One legendary pair there included Orestes (the son of Agamemnon, who fought at Troy), who murdered his mother and her lover for killing his father, and Pylades—who the Athenian playwright Euripides (5th century BC) described as “a pair of brothers in loving affection but not born brothers.” Pylades eventually married Electra; but later when Iphigeneia offers to spare Orestes’ life if she can sacrifice his companion, Pylades, Orestes offers his own life instead, telling her that “his life means as much to me as my own.” In turn, Pylades wants to die and be burned along with Orestes on the pyre (Euripides, *Iphigeneia Among the Taurians*, esp. lines 498, 72, 608). Later Orestes and Pylades will be honored especially as heroes in Sparta. Another location of interest is **CRETE**, a large island located ca. 65 miles SE of Greece, where homosexual traditions also appeared earlier, in the second millennium BC (cf. the “Chieftain Cup”). Davidson holds that the famous abduction ritual here marked not so much a coming of age as a path leading to homosexual marriage.
The boy was probably a Stripling, his abductor a couple of years older and a member of a Men’s House, and his “friends” actually the boy’s adult fan-club and guard of honor, who must approve of a suitor and who then accompanied the couple on their two-month trip into the “country;” to assure that the boy was not ‘forced.’ After returning to the Men’s House, the abductor then publicly kissed the boy; and the boy gave him a bronze cup as a symbol of his love and loyalty. Plato speaks of homosexuality as a defining feature of this island (Plato, Laws 636b–d, 835e–842a), and Aristotle held that the Cretan lawgiver instituted same-sex “intercourse [homilia]” as a means of population control (Aristotle, Politics 1272a). These “Famed” youths and their yokemates then formed a special group of beautiful champions who fought in the Cretan army. Later, in the 8th century, SPARTA was an important city-state situated in southern Greece, ca. 65 miles S of Corinth. The Spartans also differentiated between the Under-Eighteens, the Striplings or “Sturdy Boys,” and Male adults or “Bloomers” (Twenties and older). Plutarch notes that the boys were put into herds, sometimes as young as 7, where they played on sports teams; then at 12, they slept together by gang and by company. When it was time for the boys to marry, at their “bodily peak” (Lycurgus), all the boys and girls were put into a dark building and whichever girl a boy laid hold of would later become his wife—although males might go for years sleeping in their barracks and only infrequently visiting their wives at night.

What was a scandal to the Athenians was probably that in Sparta Twenties and over could visit where the Under-Eighteen boys camped and associate with them. Xenophon explains how the youths had one cloak which they wore throughout the year, even in summer. These Boys 12–20 went nude except for their cloaks, which they never took off. Yet, even if a worthy gentleman rolled around with a Boy ‘wrapped up like a present,’ one can expect that this offered little protection. In fact, Cicero (106–43 BC) wrote that the Spartans permitted everything apart from stuprum (seduction, rape, violation, disgrace). In fact, the Greek word lakonizein, meaning “to do it in the Spartan way,” referred to anal intercourse.

ELIS, a city located ca. 75 miles W of Corinth in the region of Achaea, was not as famous as Athens, Sparta or Thebes, but it was a large, wealthy Greek community. There were no “complex manners” nor “pursuit” in Elean Homosexuality, but it was “easy,” because they “aren’t clever at talking” (so Pausanias, in Philo’s Symposium 182b Davidson). Xenophon called what they did “utterly reprehensible”—which might refer to the Elean battalion with 150 pairs of lovers (apparently organized like the Theban Sacred Band), who fought and “slept together” (Xenophon, Hellenica 7.4,13). Yet, Davidson notes also that in Plato’s Phaedo, during the last hours of Socrates (399 BC) in jail in Athens, he is attended by Phaedo, a former male prostitute from Elis, who as a war-captive was forced to “sit in a cubicle” in Athens; but then Socrates turned him to philosophy instead. So, maybe the reprehensible homosexual custom in Elis was male prostitution.

THERA was a city-state located on the island of Santorini, ca. 125 miles E of the southern tip of Greece. Here boys dating back to the 7th century cut inscriptions in deep letters on the mountainside at a sacred sacrificing site. Some are just names, while others record, e.g., that so-and-so “is in love with [eratai] Phanocles.” Often oiphe appears, meaning “to jack off, ejaculate,” as in “Crimon oiphes Amotion” or simply “Euponas oiphed.” Also scribbled is the notation, “Yes, by [Apollo] Delphinios, Crimon here oiphed [so-and-so] . . . , son of Bathycles, brother,” using the term “brother” to refer to his same-sex partner. Davidson believes that the inhabitants of Thera probably imported Spartan homosexuality with cloaks along with other Spartan institutions. SAMOS was an island off the W coast of Asia Minor (now Turkey). Three significant male poets appeared here in the 6th
century BC, including Alcaeus, an independent aristocrat, and two poorer successors who ‘sang for their supper’ at the court of tyrants of Samos. Ibycus from southern Italy earned the title “the most crazy about boys”—although Cicero wrote that “the loves of [all] these three were lustful.” Little remains of Ibycus’s poetry; but one clever fragment survives from his successor, Anacreon (who came from near Ephesus), combining the genitive, dative and accusative cases in: “With Cleopoulou I’m in love, for Cleopulo I am mad, at Cleopulon I stare” (frag. 359). The long-haired Smerdies and the reed-playing Bathyllus look like “toyboys” at the court of Polycrates, a tyrant of Samos. Samos in the archaic period (800–500 BC) must have been “quite a place,” writes Davidson.

THEBES was a city located ca. 30 miles N of Athens, in the region of Boeotia, and it was considered almost as bad as Elis (Plato, Symposium 182b). Here males were joined together in a “yoked pair” (syzygy), in same-sex marriages. A Theban named Pammenes (according to Plutarch) argued that a band of soldiers held together by love (erōs) would avoid anything on the battlefield to feel ashamed in front of one’s beloved. So it was with the Sacred Band (Hieros Lochos), described at length by Plutarch (ca. 46–ca. 120), which was made up 150 pairs of the best erastai and their erōmenoi, who fought valiantly and successfully for forty years until they were wiped out by Alexander the Great at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338. The Theban erastai gave armor and weapons to their beloveds when they reached adulthood (either at 18 or 20). Perhaps the Athenians were scandalized partly because the Theban Band deployed Eighteens and Nineteens alongside bearded men. Yet, the prototype for this Sacred Band appeared a few decades earlier with a battalion of 300 front-row champions known as “reinholders” and “standers-by,” who fought at the battle of Delium in 424 BC, although these warriors fought on foot and not in chariots. THESALY, the homeland of Achilles, was a region that lay NW of Athens in central Greece. One famous ruler, Meno III, who at the end of the 5th century led an expedition of the “Ten Thousand” mercenaries on an ill-fated Persian campaign, even sounded so “good-looking” that a blind man would notice him (so said Socrates). Xenophon later noted that Tharypas, Meno’s favorite (paidika), had a beard while Meno did not; and the historian further complained that Meno surrounded himself with handsome Striplings, as well as associating with Misgolas, who was accompanied by handsome cithara-boys. In other words, both Meno and Misgolas were “rampant homosexuals,” whose “lust is contrasted with the honourable hopeless deviations of Greek love, which Xenophon had trumpeted” (Davidson). Tharypas appears to have been a boy-king of the Molossians (residents of Epirus, a region located to the W of Thessaly in Greece), who went to Athens to study; and then wanting to be fully ‘Greek’ he became the boyfriend of Meno, even though Meno was younger, a Stripling or in his early twenties, when he went off to Persia. MACEDON (Macedonia) was located N of Thessaly, and was the home of Philip II (382–336 BC) and his son Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Philip took Pausanias (I) as his “intimate friend,” then discarded him for Pausanias (II), who mocked the first lover by calling him “effeminate” and “a whore.” A friend of Pausanias I then arranged to have Pausanias II gang-raped by mule-drivers. When Pausanias II complained to the king, Philip did nothing; so eventually the assaulted and insulted lover took his revenge by assassinating the king (Diodorus Siculus 16.3–94). The kings of Macedon, descended from Heracles, seem to have institutionalized boyfriends. These so-called Iolidae were young Striplings who served as the king’s wine tasters and pourers, then later as his “deputies” or seconds-in-command, a tradition probably going back to the 5th century. Moreover, Philip established a special corps called
the Royal Boys, an elite group of Striplings (pictured in the royal Macedonian tombs) who guarded the royal bedchamber and accompanied the king on hunts and to war. This corps seems to have been a breeding ground for intense homosexual relationships and intrigues. Also, Theopompus noted that Macedonian courtiers “took around with them two or three male prostitutes and they served others in the same capacity.” What stands out about Macedonian Homosexuality is its great variety.

**Alexander and Hephaestion.** Athenaeus, a Greek anthologist (ca. 200 AD), summed up what he had gleaned from his reading by saying that “Alexander was insanely fond of boys” (Davidson). The main erotic interest in Alexander’s later life was the handsome Persian eunuch Bagoas, who was among the gifts which Narpazanes, Darius’s chiliarch (second-in-command), gave to Alexander to win his favor. As Curtius (*Historiae Alexandri* 6.5.22–23) notes, Bagoas was “a eunuch of exceptional appearance and in the very flower of boyhood, with whom Darius had had a relationship, and with whom Alexander soon had one . . . .” When Alexander saw Bagoas, his beauty “took Alexander’s breath away” (Worthington). Then, Plutarch tells us, “When Alexander arrived at the palace of Gedrosia, he restored the army with a festival. It is said he got drunk and watched choral competitions. His beloved *erōmenon* Bagoas won in the dancing and he traversed the theater in his costume and sat down beside him. Seeing this, the Macedonians applauded and shouted out, bidding Alexander kiss him, until he embraced him and kissed him deeply” (Plutarch, *Alexander* 67.8). Or, adding another source, Alexander “was so enthralled with the eunuch Bagoas that in the view of the entire theatre he bent back and kissed him deeply, and when the audience shouted approval and applauded, he did as they bid and bent back and kissed him again” (Athenaeus 603b, incorporating Dicaearchus F23 Wehrli).

Yet, the primary love of Alexander’s life was Hephaestion, son of Amyntor, who was one of his father’s Royal Boys, was striking as a youth, and was about the same age as Alexander, although perhaps a year older. Curtius (3.12.16) relates how Alexander and Hephaestion were brought up together, while other sources report on numerous sexual relationships that developed among the Macedonian Royal Pages at the palace boys’ school where upper class youths were trained to become military officers. Hephaestion was “by far the dearest of all the king’s friends; he had been brought up with Alexander and shared all his secrets” (Curtius 3.12.17); and their partnership would endure through all the later hardships of Alexander’s ten-year campaign in Asia. Although none of the ancient sources state outright that Alexander and Hephaestion were lovers, Arrian (1.12.1) describes an occasion in 334 when they publicly identified themselves with Achilles and Patroclus, who in turn were acknowledged to have been lovers by Plato, Aeschylus, and others. When Alexander arrived in Troy, he laid a wreath on the tomb of Achilles, after which Hephaestion laid a wreath on the tomb of Patroclus; and then the two ran a foot race, naked and oiled in the traditional fashion, to honor their dead heroes (Aelian [Claudius Aelianus], *Varia Historia* 12.7; Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* 1.2). In fact, the *Iliad* was Alexander’s favorite literary work. Robin Lane Fox calls this “a remarkable tribute” and adds, “Already the two were intimate, Patroclus and Achilles even to those around them; [and] the comparison would remain to the end of their days and is proof of their life as lovers . . . .” Of course, Alexander and Hephaestion grew up in a time and place where homosexual affairs were viewed as perfectly normal, although the pattern varied from place to place. Diogenes the Cynic, of Sinope, who came to Athens from Asia Minor and lived naked in
a large tub in self-imposed poverty, wrote a letter to Alexander when he was a grown man, in which he accused Alexander of being “ruled by Hephaestion’s thighs [genitals]” (Diogenes, *Epistles* 24), which points to Hephaestion being Alexander’s *erōmenos* (Reames-Zimmerman). Hephaestion once wrote to Olympias, Alexander’s mother, saying “you know that Alexander means more to us [me] than anything” (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheke Historike* 17.114.3); and Arrian (7.14.50) wrote that Alexander, after Hephaestion’s death, described him as “the friend I valued as my own life.”

It was unexpectedly at Hamadan in 324, during a festival celebration, that Hephaestion developed a fever which turned into typhoid; and in a week he was dead. Then, Lane Fox writes, Alexander’s “grief was as uncontrolled as the rumors of it . . . . Some said he lay day and night on the body, refusing to be torn away; others that he hanged the doctor for negligence and ordered a local temple to the god of healing [Asclepius] to be destroyed in mourning. Certainly, he refused to eat or drink for three days after the event . . . .” Also, he also cut his own hair and clipped off the tails and manes of the horses in camp, which had a Persian precedent, but more tellingly recalled the hair Achilles and his companions cut off to honor Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.133–136). Alexander felt the loss of Hephaestion’s love more than anything else in his career. Alexander’s extravagant mourning for Hephaestion is mentioned in a number of sources, and Arrian (7.14.4) and Aelian (7.8) explicitly compare it with Achilles’ mourning for Patroclus. Justin (*Historiae Philippicae* 12.12.11) wrote that Hephaestion was dear to Alexander because of his “beauty,” “boyishness,” and “services,” the last of which could have included sex. In all that Alexander undertook on his Eastern journeys, Hephaestion was always by his side; and Alexander displayed an unflagging trust in and reliance on him. At the time of his death, Hephaestion held the highest title under Alexander, *chiliarch* (grand vizier), having recently taken over as sole commander of the Companion Cavalry.

Davidson notes that modern historians tend to “trivialize” Hephaestion serving as Alexander’s Second: He “may have been no great warrior, but Alexander was warrior enough.” Hephaestion’s great service probably focused on the complex tasks of organization and administration. One cannot help but wonder if Jonathan in the Bible had only lived to serve devotedly at David’s side as his *mishneh* ("second [in command]," 1 Sam 23:17d) whether he might also have played a singularly trusted and invaluable role in helping David during his often troubled reign.

Alexander had at least four sexual relationships with males during his life, with: (1) Hephaestion, whom “Alexander loved most of all” (Plutarch, *Alexander* 47.9–12); (2) Bagoas, the beautiful Persian eunuch; and most likely also (3) Excipinos, a pretty boy (probably a Page) who caught Alexander’s eye and became a kind of replacement for Hephaestion; and (4) Hector, of whom Alexander was very fond and for whom he gave a magnificent funeral when the boy drowned. Yet at the same time, Alexander had as many significant sexual relationships with women, including: (1) Barsine, daughter of the Persian noble Artabazus, which lasted for at least 5 years and produced Alexander’s first child that we know of, Heracles; (2) Roxane, the captive Bactrian noblewoman, who after Alexander’s death finally gave birth to the future Alexander IV; (3) Barsine (II), later named Stateira, the eldest daughter of the overthrown Persian king Darius III; and (4) Parysatis, the youngest daughter of the former Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus—the last two taken as part of the mass marriages Alexander organized in 324 for over ninety of his companions with Persian noblewomen at Susa. Royal polygamy characterized both the Persian and Macedonian courts. Yet, all of Alexander’s
marriages no doubt advanced certain political goals: his marriage with Barsine I may have been offered as a conciliatory gesture to the Persian aristocracy, and his union with Roxane to honor the country of Bactria. The Susa marriages expressed Alexander’s claim to be the successor to both Achaemenid kings, with a desire to integrate the Macedonian and Persian nobilities. Also, in the mass marriages of 324, Alexander gave Hephaestion Darius’s younger daughter (Drypetis) as his wife, because Alexander wanted Hephaestion’s children to be his own nephews and nieces—a “rare and timely insight into the bond between the two men” (Lane Fox).

So, was Alexander “gay,” as Davidson calls him? Reames-Zimmerman notes that he seems to “have comfortably pursued both sexes,” and Worthington notes that “bisexuality was normal for all the Greeks.” Still, at Hephaestion’s death the two had been bosom friends for 19 years, had lived in close quarters on the campaign, and had seen one another daily when not away on independent missions. In terms of affectional attachment, Hephaestion—and not any of Alexander’s four wives—was the king’s life partner. They were probably intimate at some point, although maybe not in the later years. Greek philia could include a sexual component, but extended far beyond that, or an “intense friendship” could just develop a sexual side at some point, with no special note made of it (Reames-Zimmerman).

Of course, it must be said that sexuality in the ancient Greek world differed greatly from that in ancient Israel, relating to the widespread use of bisexual customs in Greek culture, which led all or most of its male citizens (and others) to take up homosexual practices as well as heterosexual ones, along with their distinctive ethical views on all of this. The Israelites did live in male-dominated world (like the Greeks), men in Israel could take more than one female sexual partner, and they could also visit prostitutes which the Law of Moses did not forbid; yet, when homosexual behavior appears in the Hebrew Bible, it is only in violent, degrading contexts (attempted gang-rape at Sodom and Gibeah), with the exception of the Jonathan and David story. Yet, homosexual desire exists in every culture, with some individuals discovering that their primary, sometimes even exclusive, sexual passion is for members of their own sex; and so it should not come as a surprise that homosexual love surfaces at some point in the Israelite record, especially at court and among heroes, which appears so often to be the setting for this in ancient Near Eastern records, as can be seen in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Homosexual attachments appeared in the Greek world also especially in military contexts and among soldiers. Yet, in spite of such different worlds, in ancient Greece and Israel, comparisons can still be found in the expressions of homosexual desire in the Greek texts and in the Jonathan and David story.

Looking back at the material just surveyed, one finds similarity in love language in such expressions as: “beloved companion/greatly beloved” (Iliad 19.315–316, 2 Sam 1:26); “delight/delighted [in]” (Iliad 19.288, 1 Sam 19:1 KJV); “brother[s]/my brother” (Euripides and an inscription at Thera, 2 Sam 1:26); and loving someone “as my/his own life” (Iliad 18.82; 1 Sam 18:1,3, “soul” better translated here as “life”). Alexander also spoke of Hephaestion as “the friend I valued as my own life” (Arrian), this last phrase clearly pointing to a very unique and intense kind of love. Sometimes weapons were given as a gift to a young beloved (at Thebes and pictured on the “Chieftain Cup,” 1 Sam 18:4). Although we are not told of any special pledge that Achilles/Patroclus or Alexander/Hephaestion made to each other, we do know that male couples in Thebes formally bonded themselves together as a “yoked pair” (syzygy), which may be compared to the loving covenant (berit), or kind of marriage alliance,
which Jonathan and David made between themselves (1 Sam 18:3). Various texts draw attention to the special handsome features of certain males, e.g., to Achilles’ “beauty” (Plato), Patroclus’s “lovely eyes” (Iliad 23.67), and David’s “beautiful eyes” and “handsome” appearance (1 Sam 16:12 NRSV). There is a strong reluctance to speak of intimate sexual activity between males, although explicit sexual references sometimes slip through in ambiguous code-words, e.g., in Homer’s mention of Patroclus’s manos (Iliad 24.6, spirit/spunk = semen), in Aeschylus’s reference to Achilles’ “thighs” as well as Diogenes’ reference to Hephaestion’s “thighs” (mēroi = genitals), and in the Bible in the loaded statements ou metochos ei tō (1 Sam 20:30 Septuagint Van der Pool; “you [Jonathan] are a [sexual] partner to” David) and suntelēias megalēs . . . uperebalen (1 Sam 20:41 Septuagint Van der Pool; Jonathan and David held each other until David ‘exceeded to a great finale’ = came sexually). Alexander took multiple wives simultaneously and also had male ‘friendships’—in contrast to Jonathan and David who appear devoted only to each other during their short time together (Michal not withstanding), although David later adds even more wives and concubines than Alexander, many also for political reasons. Jonathan, before his untimely death, envisioned himself one day becoming David’s mishneh (“second,” 1 Sam 23:17), just as Hephaestion actually was appointed by Alexander as his chiliarch (second-in-command). Yet, it was only after the death of their partners that Achilles, David and Alexander gave expression to the true depth and character of their love.

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END NOTES, SUPPLEMENT 9A

5. Ibid., p. 478.
6. Ibid., pp. 36, 122.
7. Ibid., p. 115.
8. Dover, Greek Homosexuality, figures B114, R243, R954.
10. Johnson and Ryan, Sexuality in Greek and Roman Society and Literature, plates 7-8; Skinner, Sexuality in Greek and Roman Society, fig. 3.17, p. 102.
11. Skinner, Sexuality in Greek and Roman Society, fig. 3.16, p. 102.
16. Ibid., pp. 138–139.
17. Ibid., pp. 467–468.
34. Ibid., p. 392.
38. Ibid., p. 259.
41. Ibid., p. 381.
42. Ibid., p. 475.
44. Ibid., pp. 476, 381.
45. Ibid., pp. 477, 349.
46. Ibid., pp. 457, 460, 509–510.
49. Ibid., p. 332.
50. Ibid., p. 476.
52. Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love*, fig. 54, p. 481.
53. Ibid., pp. 479–481.
54. Ibid., pp. 72, 81.
55. Ibid., pp. 72, 74–75.
56. Cf. Ibid., p. 71.
57. Ibid., p. 78.
58. Ibid., pp. 80–81.
60. Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love*, p. 11.
61. Ibid., pp. 12, 67.
64. Ibid., pp. 24–26, 612.
65. Ibid., p. 67.
68. Ibid., pp. 52–53.
69. Ibid., pp. 120–121.
70. Ibid., pp. 118–119, 60–62.
71. Ibid., pp. 418–419.
72. Ibid., p. 24.
73. Ibid., pp. 29, 31.
74. Ibid., pp. 45, 47.
75. Ibid., p. 162.
76. Ibid., p. 53.
77. Ibid., pp. 37, 115.
78. Ibid., pp. 470, 69.
79. Ibid., p. 482.
80. Ibid., p. 467.
83. Ibid., p. 88.
84. Ibid., p. 64.
86. Cf. Ibid., p. 454.
88. Ibid., p. 35.
89. Parkinson, “‘Homosexual’ Desire,” pp. 74–76.
91. Ibid., pp. 381–382.
92. Cf. Ibid., pp. 381–382.
93. Ibid., p. 473.
94. Cf. Supplement 2B.
96. Ibid., pp. 307, 308–310.
97. Ibid., pp. 309, 312.
98. Ibid., p. 310.
100. Ibid., pp. 316–317.
101. Ibid., p. 319.
102. Ibid., pp. 316, 327.
103. Ibid., pp. 317, 333.
104. Ibid., pp. 333, 327.
108. Ibid., p. 346.
110. Ibid., p. 349.
111. Ibid., pp. 334–335.
112. Ibid., p. 335.
113. Ibid., pp. 410–411.
114. Ibid., p. 411.
115. Ibid., pp. 412–413.
116. Ibid., p. 490.
117. Ibid., p. 413.
118. Ibid., pp. 349–350.
119. Ibid., pp. 349, 352.
120. Ibid., p. 350.
121. Ibid., pp. 469, 350.
122. Ibid., p. 360.
123. Ibid., pp. 361–363.
126. Ibid., p. 367.
127. Ibid., pp. 368–369.
128. Ibid., pp. 366, 379.
129. Ibid., p. 371.
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CHAPTER 10
The Debate Continues

In this study, chapters 1 (Introduction) through 9 (David’s Women), plus Supplements 2A (Homosexuality in Ancient Egypt) through 8B (The Epic of Gilgamesh, Part 2), originally were written and appeared on The Epistle website,¹ article by article, between March, 2005 and November, 2006. This chapter, then, turns to focus on scholarly literature that has appeared from 2005 on, debating whether or not Jonathan and David were lovers. The most extensive article appearing in English since 2005 which argues that Jonathan and David did not have a homosexual relationship is “Observations on the Relationship between David and Jonathan and the Debate on Homosexuality” (2007) by Markus Zehnder (a professor of Biblical studies at Ansgar School for Theology and Mission, in Kristiansand, Norway). This text, expanding on an earlier article in German (1998),² sought in part to refute an article by Silvia Schroer (a professor of OT at the University of Bern, Switzerland) and Thomas Staubli (a professor of OT at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland) that first appeared in German (1996)³ and then was translated under the title “Saul, David and Jonathan—the Story of a Triangle? A Contribution to the Issue of Homosexuality in the First Testament” (2000). Schroer and Staubli presented textual evidence from the Bible and history to support the view that David and Jonathan were sexual companions.⁴ Referring to Zehnder’s first article in German, NT theologian Robert Gagnon (2001) called it the “definitive refutation of a homophile [homoerotic] reading of the text,”⁵ while the ancient historian Jean-Fabrice Nardelli (2008) described his 2007 text as a “deeply misleading paper” and an ‘overly skeptical attempt’ to show that 1–2 Samuel contain no positive evidence to support a homosexual reading.⁶

Jean-Fabrice Nardelli (a classicist at the University of Provence, in SE France) has produced two books related to this subject. Le motif de la paire d’amis héroïque à prolongements homophiles: Perspectives Odyséennes et Proche-Orientales (2004) discusses the homosexual pairing of certain heroic friends in the Odyssey (Telemachus and Peisistratus) and in the Bible (David and Jonathan). Then in Homosexuality and Liminality in the Gilgamesh and Samuel (2007), he further compares the relationship of David and Jonathan with that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh and also offers a critique of Susan Ackerman’s When Heroes Love (2005), along with other historical and literary evidence. In this later volume Nardelli writes that now only a “dwindling consensus” of scholars fail to see the homoeroticism in these two texts.⁷ Further, in a new Appendix IV, which Nardelli has written to be included in the second edition of this book (a draft of which was received in advance by this writer), there is included a critique of Zehnder’s article. Susan Ackerman (a professor of religion and women’s and gender studies at Dartmouth College, in Hanover, NH) sought in When Heroes Love to shed new light on Jonathan and David’s relationship not only by comparing the Samuel text with the Gilgamesh epic but also by applying anthropological rite-of-passage theory from Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) and Victor Turner (1920–1983), which describes a “liminal phase” that may be identified in various religious stories and myths, i.e., an ambiguous between-and-betwixt period in which the hero moves through tests and trials to emerge transformed with a new self-awareness and ability to make a significant contribution to his community.⁸ Nardelli draws attention to another important volume, L’homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible (2005), which he calls a ‘fine contemporary study’ in which the authors “unpretentiously tackle the passages relevant to same-sex dealings in the Old

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Testament and main related civilisations without allowing any preconceived agenda to obscure
the vision they offer . . . .” In this volume Thomas Römer (a professor at the College of France
in Paris, and of OT at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland) and Loyse Bonjour (a
theologian) find that in both the Gilgamesh epic and the Samuel story a ‘range of references
appear to conjugal [marriage] metaphors and to erotic images which point to the vital
complementary nature of the two partners’ in each case.10

Schroer and Staubli, and Zehnder’s analysis. Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli in their
article “Saul, David and Jonathan—the Story of a Triangle?” (2000) begin by proposing that
“David and Jonathan shared a homoerotic and, more than likely, a homosexual [sexual]
relationship. The books of Samuel recount the love of [these] two men with utter frankness.”11
Yet they note how recent interpretation, plagued by the ideology that heterosexuality is “natural”
(and homosexuality is not), still strives to defend itself “against the assumption which the text
itself nearly compels us to make, namely, that it speaks of a homosexual relationship.”12
Then they stress two important points: (1) The existence of a regulation in ancient Israel did not
mean that reality on the ground always matched what the law demanded. (2) Also, just because
a man had heterosexual relations does not mean that he could not also have felt strong
homoerotic attraction.13 They note how Jonathan’s response, when he sets eyes on (the
handsome) David, appears “like a bolt out of the blue” (cf. 1 Sam 18:1) and also how Jonathan’s
‘delight’ in David (19:1) recalls Shechem’s earlier ‘delight’ in Dinah (Gen 34:19), where the
same Hebrew word (kaphets) clearly refers to sexual delight.14 They suggest that Jonathan’s
asking David to “go out into the field [sadeh]” (1 Sam 20:11) points to a place where lovers
sometimes go when they want to be alone, just as in Song of Songs 7:11, where the maiden
whispers, “Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field . . . .” (KJV). Although the love of
Jonathan and David became public knowledge, it was not lived out openly; and a similar kind of
situation is seen in Song 8:1, where the maiden wishes that her lover was her brother so that she
could kiss him in public, without criticism.15 With regards to Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30),
Schroer and Staubli write, “The issue here is not only the political scandal of a royal son
betraying father and kingdom for the sake of a stranger, but also the effrontery of this
homosexual love,” which brings shame on Jonathan’s mother as well as on himself. Relating to
David’s aside spoken to Jonathan in his eulogy (2 Sam 1:26), Schroer and Staubli note how
lovers in Egyptian love lyrics sometimes referred to each other as ‘brother’ and ‘sister.’ The
lovers in Song of Songs are also described as “delightful/lovely,” using the Hebrew root n’m,
(Cf. Song 1:16, 7:7, and 2 Sam 1:26)16—which the King James Version renders as “pleasant” in
these three references. Jonathan and David’s friendship was like that of Achilles and Patroclus,
where there was a brotherhood in arms, a comradeship of unconditional faithfulness, and also an
erotic side, since the Greek terms erastēs (lover) and erōmenos (beloved) were applied to them
by ancient Greek authors.17 The writers of the David narrative were probably aware of the
Gilgamesh epic (a fragment of which was unearthed at Megiddo in central Palestine), where the
friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are described in “explicitly homosexual motifs.” These
two men kiss, embrace and touch each other; and later Gilgamesh mourns for his dead comrade
in a way very similar to how David mourns the loss of Jonathan.18 Schroer and Staubli also
note how the Philistines came from a Mediterranean culture “which took homosexuality for
granted,” particularly in the military and in the academy.19 No doubt the Philistines “cultivated
relationships among men” also, and therefore when the David stories were written down, “it was
no scandal that a King David had matured through such relationships.”20 Schroer and Staubli
also raise the question of whether David might have had an earlier sexual connection with Saul, their emotional relationship appearing to have “a lot to do with love, passion and jealousy.”

Zehnder’s article “Observations on the Relationship between David and Jonathan and the Debate on Homosexuality” (2007) seeks to refute Schroer and Staubli’s claims in a long (48 pages), technical piece, many arguments of which will be examined more closely in the two supplements that follow this chapter. At the end Zehnder finds no clear evidence in 1–2 Samuel which shows that David and Jonathan had a “homosexual” relationship, which he defines in term of “genital stimulation.”

In an extended linguistic discussion, Zehnder notes the main shades of meaning that various key words in the Jonathan and David story display throughout the Bible; and then he argues that these words should not be expected to carry unusual shades of meaning, especially a homosexual meaning, relating to Jonathan and David. Such a strict beginning assumption would never be used in the study of literature in general, since it disregards Schroer and Staubli’s important advice that any word’s precise definition must always be “context-dependent.” However, in this manner Zehnder tries to automatically remove any homosexual meaning that might be perceived in important words in the Samuel story, as with: *ahaba/aheb* (love/to love), *kaphets* (to desire or delight in), *nashaq* (to kiss), *na’im* (pleasant), *ak* (brother), *gadal/higdil* (to grow large or enlarge), *bakar* (to elect or choose), *berit* (covenant), *qeshet* (bow), and *qashar* (to tie or bind). Writing about David’s reference to Jonathan’s love in his eulogy, Zehnder holds that this was simply an emotional and spiritual love, or if more, simply a “poetic hyperbole or ornamentation”—completely ignoring Jonathan’s initial response to seeing David (lightning-quick, like falling-in-love, cf. 1 Sam 18:1, so Schroer and Staubli).

Zehnder holds that one cannot make comparisons between Song of Songs and 1–2 Samuel because the final form of the latter may have preceded the former—failing to recognize that language in Song of Songs, in either case, was not necessarily novel but was probably already in common use. In fact, Zehnder acknowledges that Song of Songs and Samuel were “more likely . . . composed or revised at a similar time in Israel,” during Solomon’s reign. In the end, many of Zehnder’s arguments are highly tenuous, hypothetical and speculative; and he fails to refute most of the points made in Schroer and Staubli’s article. Zehnder does note correctly, however, that direct evidence proving that homosexuality was a “common practice” among the Philistines is lacking in available archaeological and literary records.

**Zehnder, and Nardelli’s analysis.** In an “Introduction” (pp. 128–130) and “Some Clarifications” (pp. 130–137), Zehnder notes different views that scholars have held in interpreting Jonathan and David’s relationship; he defines “homosexuality” and notes the difficulties in identifying this in history; and he discusses the Levitical ban (Lev 18:22, 20:13). Then, in his main section, “Remarks on the Relationship between David and Jonathan . . .” (pp. 138–167), he includes lengthy discussions of both semantic [word] uses and narrative issues. As already mentioned, Zehnder expends extensive energy to assert that homosexual meanings cannot be attached to any words here, which can only carry commonly used shades of meaning found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Also, Zehnder repeatedly draws attention to key words in the David story that are used in other OT contexts to convey *spiritual* or *political* meaning, and then he asserts that Jonathan’s and David’s feelings and actions are meant to reflect God’s (spiritual) love or they derive from political motivation. He continues the old assumption that Jonathan’s gifts symbolized the handing over of his right to the throne to David (1 Sam 18:4),—even though Steven McKenzie has noted that “it is hard to believe that Jonathan would give up his future to someone he had just met,” as well as that David would reveal his dark
secret (Samuel’s anointing of him to be the next king of Israel) to the heir apparent. In the narrative section, Zehnder downplays the references to David’s beauty, insists on David having an erotic relationship with Michal but only a friendship with Jonathan, and holds that a homosexual relationship could never have been part of Yahweh’s plan to bring David to the throne of Israel. In the fourth section, “The Canonical [Bible-wide] Context” (pp. 167–170), Zehnder contends that a homosexual reading does not fit with the Levitical ban, with David and Jonathan both marrying, and with the larger portrayal of David as Israel’s ideal king. In the fifth section, “Evidence from Other Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations” (pp. 170–173), Zehnder accepts Staubli and Schroer’s evidence for Patroclus and Achilles having a sexual relationship, but dismisses the Gilgamesh epic as having “perhaps only very implicit [implied]” homoerotic connotations and as not relevant to the Jonathan and David story. Finally, in his “Conclusions” (pp. 173–174) Zehnder writes that “a (homo)sexual element does not correspond to the text,” that the Samuel story “does not provide clear, unambiguous indications” that Jonathan and David had sexual relations, and that “a presumed hidden message” can only be read into the story. David and Jonathan only shared an “emotionally rich and profound . . . non-sexual relation[ship].”

In general, Jean-Fabrice Nardelli in his Appendix IV material faults Zehnder for bringing a “tunnel vision” to his word studies and not allowing for any “ambiguity” or variation from “the unproblematic shade[s] of meaning that they possess elsewhere in the O.T.” He notes how Zehnder argues that because nowhere else in the OT the verb aheb (love) refers to homosexual desire, the probability of this occurring in 1 Sam 18:1 and 20:17 is “very low.” Yet, Nardelli agrees with Graeme Auld (2004) that what the pair first pledged to was only a “covenant based on love at first sight.” Zehnder tries to remove the sexual overtones of boshet (shame) in Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30) again by applying “his usual statistical trick,” while Nardelli counters that there was certainly much more to Saul’s insult here than just blowing off steam. Nardelli agrees with David Tsumura (2007) when he notes that the Israelites would have viewed any sight of the genitals as disgraceful, but he disagrees with Tsumura’s outlook that political treason makes better sense as the cause of Saul’s anger than homosexuality. In fact, Nardelli writes that the beginning part of Saul’s outburst could well be translated as “you’re a mama’s son [Jonathan], and in love with David,” and indeed the words “perverse/wicked” (‘ava) and especially “nudity/genitals” (‘erva) are highly charged “with overtones of iniquity and sexual indecency.” Nardelli also criticizes Zehnder for failing to learn anything from Nissinen (1998) and from Ackerman (2005) in terms of what was involved in same-sex relationships in the second and first millennia BC, and ignoring the degree to which sexual genders were constructed in a hierarchical way in virtually every corner of the ancient world—for Zehnder writes that “even in antiquity a same-sex relationship was not at all reduced to aspects of domination (or even exploitation) or active and passive roles.” As Nardelli points out, ancient people viewed themselves not as “heterosexual” or “homosexual,” but rather as expected to take the proper active or passive role in sex. In fact, Nardelli views what Zehnder offers as ancient Near Eastern evidence as simply “crude, derivative” and of little significance; and he calls his discussion here “very brisk and perfunctory [superficial].” Nardelli also criticizes Zehnder’s view of Jonathan as only a “commodity” introduced into the story by Yahweh to advance David, describing this as an “attempt to import simplicity and order” into a story that is “highly complex.” How Jonathan’s actions are meant to fit into the overall narrative remains “controversial” because of the “cloudy, largely opaque characterization” that the narrator gives.
him in 1 Samuel, a point that Zehnder misses. Zehnder “reads too much into the divine favour
given to David,” although this is a basic theme in the Bible and in Samuel. 50

**Ackerman, and Nardelli’s analysis.** Susan Ackerman in *When Heros Love* (2005) looks
for liminal (betwixt and between) indicators in both the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Rise of
David, which “found throughout the Gilgamesh narrative can illuminate the [Samuel] text’s use
of erotic and sexual imagery,” which otherwise remains difficult. 51 She explains that in the
liminal state categories are inverted and suspended and social borders are blurred and crossed. 52
In the Epic, she sees a feminized Enkidu as a liminal character, 53 Gilgamesh and Enkidu together
facing trials in the wilderness as passing through liminal space, 54 and the divine revelation given
to Gilgamesh as a liminal reward. 55 Turning to Samuel, Ackerman writes that David’s liminal
phase begins in full when he flees into the wilderness, 56 and yet Jonathan and David’s
relationship at court also “takes place wholly within liminal time and liminal space,” since
Jonathan “is over and over depicted as wifelike in relation to David.” 57 Moreover, this
“feminization of Jonathan within a homoeroticized context” is treated as an acceptable and
“wonderful” thing (2 Sam 1:26). 58 Ackerman agrees with Schroer and Staubli in viewing
Jonathan’s love for David as homoerotic 59 and Saul’s insult of Jonathan being sexual as well as
political. 60 Ackerman notes how David “repudiates his marital relationship with Michal in
favor of his relationship with Jonathan,” 61 and she sides with Saul Olyan in viewing David’s
comparison of Jonathan’s love to that of women in his eulogy as “extremely peculiar in a
covenant context,” leading one inevitably to a “sexual or sexual-emotional interpretation” of that
love. 62

Zehnder holds that “Ackerman’s description of both David and Jonathan as liminal
characters . . . has certainly much to recommend it,” but then Zehnder leaves the matter with no
further comment, other than to say that this does not require that the pair be homosexual. 63 For
extended analysis, one must turn to Nardelli, who begins by noting that Ackerman proves Robert
Gagnon (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 2001) wrong in his claim that Jonathan and
David’s relationship “was completely asexual,” 64 not to mention the fact that “one grows tired of
being told by him [Gagnon] that there is no room for same-sex love in the Holy design . . . .” 65
Also, because Gagnon is so unaware that ancient same-sex love and present-day homosexuality
are not the same thing, his work “has little authority.” Instead, Nardelli notes that David and
Jonathan provide a clear illustration of “heroic homosexuality,” as seen also in the Gilgamesh
epic and in many archaic Greek examples. 66 Those who assert that Jonathan and David’s same-
sex attachment is only an anachronism (something later read back into history) or simply a
hyperbole (Middle Eastern exaggerated, emotional language) fail to account convincingly for
various aspects in the 1 Sam 20:30-31 text. 67 Also, Nardelli believes that there are limitations to
the application of anthropological symbolism, as used by Ackerman, as a guide to explaining the
ambiguous sexual markers found in ancient narratives. 68 Turner’s liminal rites-of-passage
model, where anything can happen, opens the door for too much imagination and over-
simplification, when particulars can and should be explained in other ways that are rooted in
ancient culture. 69 For example, Ackerman views Enkidu’s long, loose-hanging hair as
androgynous and feminine and therefore liminal, 70 while Nardelli counters that his abundant
body hair and long locks were simply meant to present Enkidu as a handsomely virile figure, the
very “epitome of masculinity.” These features, while “supremely attractive like those of
women,” were not meant to imply that the giant was womanlike. 71 Also Ackerman views
Gilgamesh as a liminal figure because he appears like an “almost helpless dependent when he
beseeches his mother to interpret his two dreams” which foresee Enkidu’s arrival—yet Nardelli notes that women in ancient times were more highly respected as dream interpreters than men. Yet, there are authentic liminal (rite-of-passage) features here which Ackerman notes, e.g., when Enkidu interprets Gilgamesh’s dreams, since dream interpretation was viewed as a woman’s function. Yet, in the Samuel story one must be cautious about calling Jonathan “feminized” because here the young David really “does nothing save accept the other man’s love,” and after Jonathan and David become lovers, who can say who was penetrator and who was receiver in this ‘gay couple’? One can agree that Jonathan and David were lovers without having to press them into being the “top” and the “bottom.” What may be more accurately observed, Nardelli points out, is how the pair’s relationship evolves from David viewing himself as Jonathan’s “servant” at the second covenant-making (1 Sam 20:7-8) to David finally viewing the prince as his “brother,” or equal, in his eulogy (2 Sam 1:26). In the end, Nardelli judges that “the greatest part of the specifics addressed there [in Ackerman’s analysis of the Jonathan and David narrative, pp. 165–194] is sound,” although he is less satisfied with her analysis of the Gilgamesh epic along liminal lines.

In summary, then, from 2005 on, the debate about whether Jonathan and David were lovers has only intensified, with the conservative theologian Zehnder contributing the most technical article to date arguing that their love was only an emotional, spiritual love. At the same time, Römer and Bonjour, Ackerman, and Nardelli have pointed out that the widely disseminated Epic of Gilgamesh demonstrates that same-gender love between male heroes was widely acknowledged and accepted in the ancient Near East. And just as there are multiple, semi-hidden clues in the Epic which ancient Near Eastern scholars now widely read as pointing to Gilgamesh and Enkidu sharing a conjugal (marriage-like) and intimate (sexual) relationship, so the Jonathan and David story contains similar clues that can and must be recognized as sexual markers. These signposts, taken all together (if not individually conclusive) show that this pair of heroes at Saul’s court became sexual companions, most clearly revealed in Saul’s outburst and David’s eulogy. And just as these sexual clues are an integral part of the Epic, so homoerotic details in the Samuel story should not be ignored or ‘explained away’ by convoluted and contrived arguments, but must be given their due place in the Jonathan and David story.

Zehnder’s writing displays many flaws, not the least of which is his dismissal of the Gilgamesh epic as an important comparative source. His strained linguistic approach fails to understand that words sometimes can carry unusual, even novel, shades of meaning; and he fails also to appreciate the unique importance of a word’s context in determining its precise meaning. He seeks to import political and spiritual meaning into various words where there is no contextual support for this; and in the process he flattens and diminishes his characters as fully complex human beings. Overall his arguments tend to be strained, tenuous, and speculative. Ackerman produced the first book in English entirely devoted to exploring parallels between the Gilgamesh epic and the David story, although she herself acknowledges that rite-of-passage theory does not apply as well to the latter story as to the former. Schroer and Staubli, Ackerman, Römer and Bonjour, and Nardelli have added much solid and illuminating historical and exegetical evidence, not blinded by heterosexist prejudice (heterosexuality is natural and homosexuality is not) to show that, based on the most careful reading of the Biblical text and survey of related historical evidence, Jonathan and David did share a homosexual, as well as an intimate, relationship during David’s early years.
END NOTES, CHAPTER 10

1. http://epistle.us/, see “Homosexuality and the Bible,” then “Jonathan and David Series.”
5. Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice, p. 146, n. 233.
10. Römer and Bonjour, L’homosexualité, p. 100.
12. Ibid., p. 22.
13. Ibid., p. 23.
15. Ibid., p. 29.
17. Ibid., p. 34.
18. Ibid., pp. 35–36.
19. Ibid., p. 33.
20. Ibid., pp. 35–36.
23. Ibid., pp. 140, 144, 147, 152, etc.
26. Ibid., p. 140.
30. Ibid., pp. 140, 144, 145, 147, 153, 156, 162, 166.
31. Ibid., pp. 162–163.
32. McKenzie, King David, p. 80.
34. Ibid., pp. 166–167.
35. Ibid., pp. 167–169.
36. Ibid., p. 171.
38. Nardelli, “Appendix IV,” added note for p. 27, n. 37; p. 84.
40. Auld, Samuel at the Threshold, p. 94; and Nardelli, Homosexuality and Liminality, p. 51, n. 66.
41. Nardelli, “Appendix IV,” added note for p. 27, n. 36, last line; p. 82.
42. Tsumura, First Book of Samuel, p. 520; and Nardelli, “Appendix IV,” added note for p. 27, n. 36, last line; p. 82.
43. Nardelli, Homosexuality and Liminality, p. 27, n. 36.
44. Nissinen, Homoeeroticism, pp. 128–134; and Ackerman, pp. 47–87.
45. Nardelli, “Appendix IV,” added note for p. 27, n. 37; p. 84.
47. Nardelli, Homosexualität und Liminalität, p. 5, and n. 4.
48. Nardelli, “Appendix IV,” added note for p. 27, n. 37; p. 84.
52. Ibid., p. 104.
53. Ibid., pp. 106–108.
54. Ibid., pp. 108–111.
55. Ibid., pp. 115–117.
56. Ibid., pp. 203–204.
58. Ibid., p. 221.
59. Ibid., p. 173.
60. Ibid., p. 187.
61. Ibid., p. 178.
64. Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice, p. 154.
65. Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice, p. 164; and Nardelli, Homosexuality and Liminality, p. 2, n. **.
68. Nardelli, Homosexuality and Liminality, p. 3.
69. Ibid., p. 16.
70. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 106.
72. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, p. 105.
74. Ackerman, When Heroes Love, pp. 119–120; Nardelli, Homosexuality and Liminality, p. 20.
75. Nardelli, “Susan Ackerman,” online p. 3.
77. Ibid, p. 58.

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Nardelli, Jean-Fabrice. Personal correspondence with the author.


Interpretative Issues in the Debate

Markus Zehnder, in his article “Observations on the Relationship between David and Jonathan and the Debate on Homosexuality” (2007) begins by noting four general scholarly views that have been offered relating to their relationship, namely that: (1) this was a homosexual (sexual) or at least a homoerotic relationship; (2) although the narrative does not speak openly of a homosexual encounter, the text does contain elements that would allow for such an interpretation; (3) this relationship was neither homosexual nor homoerotic but only portrays an extraordinarily loyal friendship; and (4) a “queer reading” of the text takes the interpreter’s self-identification as a gay person as the starting point for reading the story, usually viewing this as a homosexual relationship.1 Relating to the last group, Zehnder notes that while some GLBT interpreters are more interested in advancing a gay liberation agenda than trying to better understand what the original writer(s) intended to convey, others in this category follow a more traditional approach, such as Gary Comstock in Gay Theology without Apology (1993). Zehnder also offers the valuable reminder that every interpreter is “driven by some agenda” (a life view and initial assumptions), although still one’s primary goal should be to try “to understand any ancient text as much as possible within its own historical and cultural setting . . . .”2

Jean-Fabrice Nardelli also commends Comstock, and adds that he is “substantially right” in describing the camouflaging nature of Jonathan and David’s first covenant.3 Still, Nardelli faults Comstock for not viewing Jonathan as a more problematic (complex) figure, even though he rightly notes that Jonathan “stands by his man for love, not gain.”4 At the same time Nardelli contends that writers like Comstock, by promoting Jonathan as an exemplary model for gay people today and by using a “preaching” method, do scholarship a disservice when sentimentality replaces a more detached, socio-historical approach. Still, rather than to say that the Jonathan and David story should not be related to the historical suffering of homosexuals (so Walter Dietrich),5 Nardelli advises that it is better to search for those same-sex acts and attachments which might have been condoned in the ancient Near East and in Israel, e.g., as in the bonding between warriors and their boy-companions (so Theodore Jennings).6 Too bad, Nardelli notes, Jennings’ evidence presented for warrior-chiefs selecting beautiful boy-companions “amounts to so little . . . .” Still, one wonders whether royals with homosexual tendencies might not have preferred beautiful youths as attendants in general, e.g., as appears to have been the case with the Royal Boys pictured in Greek royal Macedonian tombs.7 Nardelli mentions David Greenberg’s section in his book on “The Love of Warriors,”8 where he explains how the hero in heroic poetry needed a companion with whom he could unburden his heart and share his ambitions, dangers and glory.9 One cannot help but recall, in this regard, how Jonathan’s early armor-bearer (1 Sam 14:1-14), whether he was particularly handsome or only had the general bloom of youth, seemed to fulfill this role, showing that he was “much more than a caddy” (Klein).10 At least, the handsome good looks of Joseph the slave of Potiphar (Gen 39:6b), of David the lyre-player of Saul (1 Sam 16:12), and of Daniel and the other Hebrew youths selected for service in Nebuchadnezzar’s court (Dan 1:4) are specifically noted in Scripture, although attention is rarely drawn to male beauty in the Bible. However, the main focus in this supplement will be to evaluate the interpretative methodology of Markus Zehnder in
his 48-page article, which falters in six main areas: (1) in his approach to taboo subjects and definition of homosexual terms; (2) in his (non) utilization of comparative sources, especially the Gilgamesh epic; (3) in his definition of words and interpretation of Biblical passages in general; (4) in his understanding of the nature of Biblical sexual language and taboo expression; (5) in his view toward Jonathan and David’s relationship within the larger Samuel narrative; and (6) in his connection of their relationship to the Levitical ban (Lev 18:22).

1. Approaching taboo subjects and defining homosexual terms. Despite Zehnder’s apparent interest in neutral, text-based research, one cannot help but wonder at the implications of his uneasiness in approaching taboo topics in the Bible and in related scholarship, as shown when he turns to discuss ‘avoiding the mixture of excrement and semen’ as one explanation for the Levitical ban (“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman,” Lev 18:22), the possible allusion to Jonathan’s phallus and sexual gifts in the suggestive title “[The Archer’s] Bow” which David gave to his funeral ballad sung especially to honor the deceased Jonathan (2 Sam 1:18ff), and that David ejaculating may be what is implied in the ambiguous, damaged and strange Hebrew which most literally translates as: “David exceeded” (1 Sam 20:41 KJV) or came to ‘a great finale’ (Septuagint) in their emotion-filled parting scene. For even though Zehnder’s highly technical article here was written for scholars (it includes many untranslated or untransliterated Hebrew terms), he feels compelled to reduce the type size for these sections in the main text to 8 point (footnote size), so that readers might skip over these sections, for prudery’s sake.11 In this regard, one recalls Erich Bethe’s observation a century ago (1907) about how the intrusion of moral evaluation, the “deadly enemy of science,” had corrupted the study of Greek homosexuality. Then Kenneth Dover went on to note in the Preface to his Greek Homosexuality (1978) how homophobia still persisted into the twentieth century, with many scholars continuing to ignore the evidence and true sexual implications of the original Greek texts. He noted, “I know of no topic in classical studies on which a scholar’s normal ability to perceive differences and draw inferences is so easily impaired [as with homosexuality],” but then he confided, relating to his book, “I am fortunate in not experiencing moral shock or disgust at any genital act . . . .”12 Yet homophobia, heterosexism and sexual ignorance still hold sway in a large swath of modern Biblical research, while one searches for those interpreters who are able to bring a detached outlook and non-homophobic mindset to rigorous Biblical scholarship and who are willing to let interpretation, even when it deals with taboo subjects, go wherever the textual evidence seems most plausibly to lead.

Zehnder rightly notes that homosexuality is difficult to identify in historical research, since a “kiss” in one culture might generally be viewed only as a sign of friendship, while in another culture it might carry a quite acceptable quasi-sexual meaning.13 Yet it should also be noted that a kiss between two males might mean very different things in the same culture, depending upon the individuals involved. A kiss might very well be an erotic one in a highly-homophobic culture, or only a simple sign of friendship in a sexually-liberated one. The individuals involved in each instance must be carefully studied. Zehnder rightly observes that sexual passion is a basic human drive and that one cannot claim that strong same-sex desires, passions and acts did not exist in the past.14 He also rightfully cautions that “the actual [sexual] situation ‘on the ground’” in ancient times could have been “much more complicated” than scholars sometimes recognize.15 James Davidson in The Greeks and Greek Love (2007) has described how same-gender love and sex was displayed in an amazingly diverse range of forms in the
ancient Greek world, beyond the ideal espoused in Athens; and he also believes that casual, informal and “ordinary” kinds of homosexual lust and acts must always have existed “off the radar,” beyond the data that have survived in the historical records.

Exceptions to don’t cross the gender boundary – What exception(s) might have been allowed or overlooked in Israel is an interesting question, since two nationally recognized heroes (such as Jonathan and David), particularly if they married at some point, might have fallen into this ‘exception’ category. Other men who lusted after other men may have vented their urges in violent rape scenes, or furtively, guiltily indulged their passions in hidden places. As Mary Douglas notes, male dominance can be “contradicted by other principles such as that of female independence,” (Douglas, Purity and Danger 1966, p.142) or one might add, overpowering homosexual desire.

Zehnder defines a “homosexual” relationship in his paper as one “between two persons of the same sex who engage in actions that in some way or another, consciously and willingly, include genital stimulation” (italics added). However, Alfred Kinsey (1948), who focused on “the number and sources of male orgasms” in his study of American male sexuality in the 1930s and 1940s, noted that “an individual who is erotically aroused by a homosexual stimulus without ever having overt relations, has [also] certainly had a homosexual experience.” Indeed, Károly Mária Kertbeny, the German-Hungarian writer and political activist (and not a physician or scientist, it might be noted) who invented the term Homosexualität (“homosexuality”) in 1868, applied it to men who were sexually attracted to other men rather than to women, not limiting it only to men who had touched another man’s genitals. Even David Halperin, a leading American proponent of Michel Foucault’s view that the term “homosexuality” comes laden with modern psychiatric, psychoanalytic and sociological meanings and therefore should not be applied to pre-nineteenth-century historical contexts, still acknowledged that the word “homosexuality” began as a purely simple descriptive term—referring to “a sexual drive toward persons of the same sex”—which, in fact, was the “secret of its success” and usefulness. Yet not only a “sexual drive,” this phenomenon often has been framed in terms of homosexual love, as can be seen with the many pre-nineteenth-century authors of gay love poems which are included in The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature (1998). Would one define a “heterosexual” relationship only as one in which genital contact had occurred, dismissing all of those aspects of falling-in-love, longing, daydreaming, courting, sacrifice for love, and so on, that can occur between a lad and a lass before consummation? Zehnder’s definition requiring “genital stimulation” presents a too-rigorous measuring rule. He would thus dismiss Jonathan’s intense attraction felt toward the handsome David when they first met (1 Sam 18:1) as well as Jonathan’s later daydreaming about the young hero (19:1). Zehnder no doubt wants to raise the bar so high that at the end he can claim that there was ‘nothing homosexual’ between Jonathan and David—and so, even though the Samuel text contains subtle but solid sexual clues, it is not surprising to find that Zehnder in the end concludes that the pair ‘did not have a sexual relationship,’ matter closed.

Also, Nardelli reminds us that ancient peoples indulged in same-gender sexual practices without viewing themselves as being “homosexual,” for they were concerned primarily with the proper active or passive role for each gender rather than with whether a person might be primarily or wholly attracted sexually to members of his or her own sex. Yet at the same time,
this does not mean that some individuals in ancient times were not aware of their basic gay or lesbian orientation, even if there was no label for this—just as manic-depressive psychosis (cf. Saul, 1 Sam 18:8-12), sinistromanual (being left-handed, cf. Judg 3:15, 20:16), transgender (one “who holds a spindle,” a man who prefers women’s work, 2 Sam 3:29 NRSV), and ophthalmia (inflammation of the eye, possibly inflicting Paul, Gal 4:13-15, 6:11) were known in Biblical times, without the modern terminology. In this regard, Aristophanes’ mythological explanation in Plato’s Symposium is interesting, of how double-humans in the world were originally heterosexual, lesbian, or gay, so that when Zeus cut these rebellious creatures in half, there were left individuals who sought to find completion and fulfillment, some in heterosexual, some in lesbian, and some in gay-male sexual relationships. Therefore, when a male falls in love with another male and the two feel that they have found in each other their “other half,” they want to spend the rest of their lives together, enjoying sexual pleasure and each other’s company (Plato, Symposium, sect. 189-193, esp. 191-192). Although this does not fully explain the diversity of sexual desire and behavior (Halpern), still it does mark those extreme poles between which human sexual behavior appears, as Kinsey discovered and articulated in his studies. Returning to Jonathan and David’s relationship, it would be wiser and more realistic to ask whether the two showed any evidence for feeling a strong sexual attraction for one another, which deepened over a period of time and to which they were strongly committed, whether or not it can be proved when and how they had sex—although genital activity along the line would not be surprising.

2. Utilizing comparative sources, especially the Gilgamesh epic. Zehnder notes that although many Greek philosophers had no difficulty connecting deep spiritual love with homosexual relations, he claims that “the situation was different in Mesopotamia and Egypt”—even though the Egyptian royal manicurists Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, who were buried together at death in early Egypt (their tomb dated ca. 2400 BC)—and whom Zehnder even mentions, but without comment—offer a clear example of the most devoted form of love a gay couple could have, even extending into eternity. As Nardelli notes, the tomb of these two court servants provides evidence that homosexual behavior could exist between males of roughly equal status and age and also that a certain freedom toward this must have existed during the Fifth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom period. Nardelli finds no objections to a gay reading of the relationship of the two male occupants of this tomb, as proposed by Greg Reeder (2000), since other interpretations fail to adequately explain the evidence. Their holding hands and embracing, while unique between two men pictured in ancient Egyptian tombs, was common between a husband and wife. In fact, a reference in the manicurists’ tomb to ‘fathers and mothers’ of the pair (Nigel Strudwick) makes it impossible to hold that they were simply blood-brothers. Moreover, with regard to the Egyptian account of Neferkare and Sisene (the pharaoh and his general-favorite), Nardelli points out that although this story was meant to disclose political corruption and moral depravity, it was also intended to be read as describing a homosexual relationship. Also, while most versions of the Seth and Horus tale present Seth as the initiator who tries to penetrate the backside of Horus, in other versions the younger Horus becomes the initiator, showing that ancient Egyptians could conceive of their gods trading sexual roles in bed. In fact, Nardelli notes, the time is ripe for a new, all-encompassing reexamination of homosexuality in ancient Egypt.
One of the largest holes in Zehnder’s interpretative balloon is his refusal to recognize the relevance and importance of the Gilgamesh epic as a guide in helping to interpret homosexual language in the Samuel text on the Rise of David (1 Sam 16:1–2 Sam 5:10). Zehnder mentions the epic with only two lines, then quickly moves on. In contrast, Thomas Römer and Loyse Bonjour describe, in L’homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible (2005), how ‘totally possible’ it is that the editor of Samuel knew of the Gilgamesh epic, which was widely disseminated during the Neo-Assyrian Empire (ca. 934–ca. 626 BC) when the material in Samuel was being assembled; and fragments of the Epic have been found at Meggido (where there seems to have been a settlement during David’s reign). Moreover, on the methodological question as to whether it is valid to make comparisons between two texts which come from different epochs and cultures, one must remember that from the 3rd millennium on Mesopotamian culture greatly influenced all peoples living in the ancient Near East. Israel did not develop in a vacuum. Therefore, it is interesting to note that both the Gilgamesh epic and David’s rise focus on two pairs of heroes: A skilled warrior of a lower class appears in front of a king or crown prince, who is strongly attracted to him; and then both pairs go to live at the royal court, which would only have been possible if there was a great intimacy between them. Near the beginning of the epic, the prostitute Shamhat tells the newly-created Enkidu, “You will love him [King Gilgamesh] like your own self,” and then when Jonathan meets David, we are told that the prince “loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam 18:1 NRSV) or “as himself” (NEB). Then the male partners in each case develop a profound attachment, with an exclusiveness which no one else can break—neither the goddess Ishtar in Gilgamesh’s case nor the princess Michal in David’s case. In both stories, one member in the male pair is described fondly as “my brother,” indicating something continuing and enduring; and also one member is spoken of in feminine terms: Gilgamesh is told that he will love and ‘caress’ his companion-to-come “like a woman,” and David later speaks of how Jonathan’s love for him was wonderful, “surpassing the love of women.” There is less intimacy revealed in the David story, although probably the term “desired” (kaphets) or “delighted much in” (KJV) in 1 Sam 19:1 conveys an erotic, even sexual, dimension. Finally, the moving eulogies of both Gilgamesh and David, expressed after the death of each one’s companion, clearly indicates that the deceased was much more than just a confidant or ally. In fact, it is at this point that the grieving partner indisputably expresses the loss of a love which he felt for no one else and which he will never forget. What is clear is that the ancient Near East had no difficulty accepting an intimate and erotic relationship between two males—and could not this have been true in Israel, as well? Römer and Bonjour note that one need not get hung up here on such texts as Gen 19 or Lev 18 and 20.

Nardelli notes that although the Standardized Version (SV) is the one most often consulted for the Gilgamesh epic, A. R. George (2003) has provided evidence showing that Enkidu moved from being Gilgamesh’s buddy servant or slave to becoming his closest friend and lover even in some of the oldest Sumerian forms of this myth. Andrew George points out that the “most poignant expression” of Gilgamesh’s love for Enkidu in the earlier Sumerian poems is found where the great king Bilgames (Akkadian: Gilgamesh) lies on his death bed, and the father-god Enlil appears to him in a dream, telling him that at last it is time for him to make his journey to the land of the dead. There his loved ones wait for him, Enlil explains, including “your precious friend, your little brother, / your friend Enkidu, the young man your companion. / . . . [Y]our own one will come to you, your precious one will come to you.” (Death of Gilgamesh, 11.185-191).
Bilgames M 110-111 George). 48 George notes that since there is no doubt that the “precious one” here refers to Enkidu, the love that they shared was not an invention of even the Old Babylonian version, but goes back to the original Sumerian poems. 49 Also, George’s translation of Tablet XII of the Standard Babylonian epic (SV) reads differently in certain respects from other versions: Here, when Enkidu is unable to return from the Netherworld where he has gone to try to retrieve Gilgamesh’s hockey ball which has fallen there, Gilgamesh cries out to the gods; and finally Father Ea instructs the hero Shamash to open a chink (crack) in the Netherworld, so that the shade (spirit) of Enkidu might emerge (XII, lines 55-83). 50 Then as Gilgamesh hugs and kisses the ghost of Enkidu, Enkidu calls for both of them to sit down and weep, for he explains: “‘[My friend, the] penis that you touched so that your heart rejoiced, / grubs <maggots> devour [(it) . . . like an] old garment. / [My friend, the crotch that you] touched so your heart rejoiced. / it is filled with dust . . . ’” ‘[Woe!]’ said [Gilgameš,] and <he> threw himself prostrate [in the dust]” (XII, lines 87-101). 51 An earlier Sumerian version refers to Enkidu as “‘The one who handled (your) penis (so) you were glad at heart . . . .’” (Bilgames and the Netherworld, lines 247-250). 52 Nardelli notes, no wonder Enkidu becomes Gilgamesh’s “bride” in his eulogy (VIII, line 59). 53 In fact, Nardelli holds that Gilgamesh covering his friend’s face “like a bride” along with his earlier rejection of Ishtar’s marriage proposal in favor of Enkidu’s love carry the most weight in portraying the pair in a homosexual relationship. 54 In most cases, however, the needs of the ancient narrator in the Gilgamesh epic were best served by ambiguity and by avoiding explicit homosexual references. 55

Related to Greek sources, Zehnder acknowledges that “homoeroticism of some sort or another played a relatively important role in ancient Greek society, especially in the form of paiderastia [love of boys],” and that many Greeks were able to connect homoeroticism with deep spiritual love. Yet, Zehnder seems unaware of Nardelli’s Le motif de la paire d’amis héroïque à prolongements homophiles: Perspectives Odyséennes et Proche-Orientales (2004), which inspects closely a homosexual relationship in the Odyssey, between Telemachus and Peisistratus. Homer’s Odyssey relates how Odysseus (Latin: Ulysses), the gentle king of Ithaca (an island off the W coast of Greece), is not eager to join the Greek expedition to (and ten-year siege of) Troy, but he finally does so after his son Telemachus is born. However, after Troy falls for Odysseus’s wooden horse trick and is defeated, various misadventures befall some of the Greeks trying to return home. Although Nestor, king of Pylos (a city on the SW coast of Greece), arrives home safely, Odysseus wanders for ten years around the Mediterranean Sea. When Telemachus visits Nestor, seeking news about his father, the old king tells him that while some Greeks have returned home safely, he has heard nothing about Odysseus. Then accompanied by Peisistratus, Nestor’s son, Telemachus travels to Lacedaemon (Sparta, in S Greece), where King Menelaus tells him that, yes, his father is still alive. 57

In the Penguin Classics English translation (2003) of the Odyssey, one reads more specifically that after Telemachus was received by Nestor, who had fought with Odysseus at Troy (3.98-101, p. 30), the king “arranged for . . . Telemachus to sleep at the palace itself, on a wooden bedstead in the echoing portico [colonnaded porch], with the spearman Peisistratus, that leader of men, next to him,” who was Nestor’s unmarried son still living at home. Then the king and queen retired to the back of the house (3.396-403, p. 37). The next morning the beautiful Polycaste, Nestor’s daughter, “bathed Telemachus . . . and rubbed him with olive oil, [and] she gave him a tunic and arranged a fine cloak around his shoulders, so
that he stepped from the bath looking like an immortal god” (3.465-469, p. 39). Later, Nestor lends Telemachus a chariot with swift horses to go and visit Menelaus; and Peisistratus “got in beside him, took the reins in his hands” and urged the horses forward (3.474-483, p. 39). When the pair reached Lacedaemon (4.1, p. 41), Menelaus and his queen are delighted to see Odysseus’s son (4.134-154, pp. 44-45). When night falls, Telemachus suggests to Menelaus, “But come, let us retire for the night to find pleasure in sweet sleep” and again the young men “spent the night in the forecourt of the palace, while Menelaus slept in his room at the back of the high buildings and the lady Helen of long robes lay by his side” (4.294-305, p. 48). Now after Telemachus had stayed with Menelaus for quite a while, one night the goddess Athene came and “found Telemachus and Prince Peisistratus lying in the great Menelaus’ portico.” Peisistratus was asleep, although Telemachus was awake and the goddess warned him that he must not linger but hurry home, for his mother was being pressured to remarry and he might lose his inheritance (15.1-20, p. 195). So “Telemachus roused Nestor’s son from his sweet sleep with a kick and said, ‘Wake up, Peisistratus . . . let’s be on our way . . .’” (15.43-45, p. 196). However, Peisistratus persuaded Telemachus to wait until morning, and then Menelaus delayed him further with gifts and a meal. Later, as their chariot drew near to Pylos, Telemachus said to Peisistratus, “We may well claim that our fathers’ friendship makes a lasting bond between us. Besides which, we are of the same age and this journey will have served to bring us even closer together. So I beg you . . . not to take me past my ship, but put me down there and so save me from being kept at the palace against my will by your old father’s passion for hospitality. I must get home quicker than that” (15.196-201, p. 200). So Telemachus left Peisistratus to explain to his father what would be perceived as a serious breach in etiquette.

Jean-Fabrice Nardelli’s commentary on this story is illuminating: The princess bathing the nude Telemachus shows that the Greek youth is not at all embarrassed by being seen in the nude and suggests also that he probably slept in the nude with Peisistratus. This intimacy is reinforced by the way in which Telemachus awakens Peisistratus in the middle of the night after Athene’s appearance—with a kick of his foot (15.44). Nardelli notes that such an intimate gesture ‘makes it clear that they have done more than just sleep side by side’ on Menelaus’s vestibule porch. Their “pleasure in sweet sleep,” twice noted (4.295, 15.43), suggests more than simple, ordinary sleep—rather ‘a supremely sweet and almost divine event, like sleep after physical love,’ which they had shared before Athene later finds them ‘stretched out side by side.’ Earlier King Nestor had viewed Peisistratus as a suitable bed companion for Telemachus, to honor him as well as his father, since Peisistratus was still unmarried and the lads were equal in age, social standing, and family status. In fact, Nardelli writes that the Homeric nudity in bed, the act of giving Telemachus a bed companion, and parallels between the two boys going to bed and the host and hostess going to bed (both in the palaces of Nestor and of Menelaus) make it difficult to read Telemachus and Peisistratus’s relationship as anything other than ‘romantic and sexual.’ Another aspect worth noting is the fact that this could hardly be called a pederastic relationship, between an erastēs (older lover) and eromenōs (younger beloved), since Peisistratus was not a pais (teenager) but rather old enough to be characterized as a good lancer and leader of warriors (3.399-400; Rieu: “spearmen [and] leader of men”); and later he has to take over for Telemachus’s lapse in etiquette in not returning to properly say goodbye to King Nestor and thank him for his hospitality. So, this was a homosexual pairing of two young heroes of the same age and status for a short period of time, with no disapproval.
expressed (in fact, with full approval given) by the family adults at hand. Overall, one should also notice in this account how intimate homosexual relations are only referred to with oblique, indirect and vague clues, to which the reader must be alert and sensitive, or their presence and significance will be missed.

3. Defining words and interpreting Biblical passages in general. Zehnder’s typically strained approach to defining words and interpreting passages can be seen in his discussion of the Hebrew verb “to love” (aheb, H157). First, Zehnder notes that out of 141 uses of this term in the Hebrew Bible, 27 are between man and God and 54 are between human beings, with only 30 instances where “a sexual component . . . [is] included or at least possible,” and with no (indisputable) applications made to homosexual love. He argues that the statement “all Israel and Judah loved David” (1 Sam 18:16 NRSV) cannot be interpreted “in a way that includes the erotic dimension” —although earlier Hans Hertzerg (1960) suggested that David “takes hearts by storm, and everyone falls for him . . . captivated by David’s irresistible appearance.” Also, Herbert Lockyer (1991) asks, what young woman would not be attracted to a virile, athletic, youthful, handsome hero? And men also are not immune to the good looks of handsome heroes, even if they do not consciously acknowledge it. Schroer and Staubli (2000) noted similar wording between Jonathan and David and the pair of lovers in the Song of Songs:

In 1 Samuel 18:1 (NKJV) one reads that “Jonathan loved him [David] as his own soul [nephesh; GNB2: ‘as himself’],” and in Song of Songs 1:7 the maiden speaks of her beloved as “you whom my soul [nephesh] loves [GNB2: ‘you whom I love’]” and later she searches for “him whom my soul loves” (3:1,2,3,4 NRSV; GNB2: “the one I love,” “my lover”), revealing her sexual passion. Yet, Zehnder noted that the syntax (grammatical relationship) of nephesh (“my soul” or “whom I love”) and aheb (“loved” or “loves”) in these Samuel and Song passages differs; and instead he holds that 1 Sam 18:1 is more like Yahweh’s command in Lev 19:18: “[Y]ou shall love [aheb, H157] your neighbor as yourself [kamov, H3644]” (Lev 19:18 NKJV). However, nephesh does not appear in this last verse; and more importantly Zehnder fails to recognize that the intent and context of 1 Sam 18:1 and Lev 19:18 could not be more different. Rabbi Hillel (early 1st century AD) summed up the meaning of the entire Torah, or Law, as “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow,” and Rabbi Akiba (mainly 2nd century AD) declared Lev 19:18 to be “the great principle of the Torah.” In contrast, 1 Sam 18:1 is not concerned with a fundamental or comprehensive principle, but rather with simply noting the surprisingly intense emotions that overcame Prince Jonathan when he first cast his eyes upon the beautiful David, an encounter that is most simply explained as Jonathan ‘falling in love’ with David, as if lightning had hit him “like a bolt out of the blue” (Schorer and Staubli).

Moreover, Zehnder argues that the frequency with which the Hebrew noun for “love” (ahab, H158) is applied to non-sexual affection between Yahweh and his people “leads to the question” as to whether Jonathan’s “love” for David should not also be interpreted in the same way, “which would mean that Jonathan’s love not only has a human dimension but also a theological one”—and therefore a homosexual or homoerotic connotation “is even less probable.” However, with regards to God intervening in human history (here in providing Jonathan to help and protect the very vulnerable David), it would be well to remember theologically that Yahweh in the Bible does not always think and act as humans expect, even as he explains to Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (Isa 55:8 NRSV); and only a few verses later Yahweh invites God-fearing
eunuchs to come pray with others in “my house” (Isa 56:4-5,7), in clear contradiction of Deut 23:1. In Genesis one is surprised (even shocked) to see Yahweh, who earlier seemed to call one man and one woman to come together to bear children to fill the earth (Gen 1:27-28, 2:22-23), choose Jacob and his two wives and their two female slaves—who traipse alternatingly in and out of Jacob’s bed—to produce God’s chosen people, the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 29:21–30:24). Later, when Samson falls in love with Timnah, a Philistine woman whom he wants to marry but his parents protest because she is a foreigner, the narrator explains that “His father and mother did not know that this was from the LORD; for he was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines” (Judg 14:1-4b NRSV). Then there is the prophet Hosea, whom the Lord instructs to marry a “whore” (Hos 1:1-3 NRSV) or “prostitute” (LB), to get Israel’s attention and to speak to them. In the Gospel of Matthew, the reader is amazed to find included in Matthew’s genealogy for the Messiah (through Joseph his adoptive father’s line, Matt 1:1-17) such tainted characters as Tamar, who dressed up like a prostitute to become impregnated by her father-in-law Judah, and so then gave birth to the twins Perez and Zerah (Gen 38), and also Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute who lived in Jericho (Josh 2). Also included are Ruth, who would become the great grandmother of David (Ruth 4:18-22), although she was of Moabite lineage which sprang from incest (Gen 19:30-35) and the Moabites were later specifically banned from joining the assembly of Israel (Deut 23:3-6), and also Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife, whom David took in adultery and then did away with her husband, although she would later give him Solomon as a son (2 Sam 11). One might also remember that Jesus’ mother got pregnant before she was wed. It is both dishonest and diserving to try to remove everything from the Bible which doesn’t look ‘quite right’ and which, here in the case of Jonathan and David, reduces the humanity of its characters, who lived like the rest of us in a very messy and complicated world. As Walter Dietrich (2007) notes, even though the Bible treats David with “respect and sympathy,” it also reveals him “as fallible and tempted” and “in his weakness and suffering, as a true human being.”

Also, it should be noted that Zehnder can be very selective in his presentation of evidence, omitting significant details that would weaken his case. For example, he does note numerous terms that are found both in 1 Sam 18:1-3 (which describes Jonathan’s love for David) and Gen 44:20,30 (which describes Judah’s deep but non-sexual love for Benjamin, the youngest son of his favorite wife), including aheb (“to love”), nephesh (“soul, life, heart”), and qashar (“to tie or be bound to”). Yet at the same time, Zehnder ignores Schroer and Staubli’s comparison of Jonathan’s love (1 Sam 18:1-3) to Shechem’s very-sexual love for Dinah (Gen 34:3,8), where also we find the same words used (aheb, nephesh), although kashaq (H2836, “bound [to]) is used in Gen 34:8 in place of qashar (H7194, “tied/bound [to]”) in 1 Sam 18:1. However, another parallel word here is kaphets (H2654, “delights [in]”), found both in Gen 34:19 and in 1 Sam 19:1. When turning to David’s comparison of Jonathan’s love to the “love of women” in his eulogy (2 Sam 1:26), Zehnder struggles to find ways to avoid the obvious, straightforward meaning here—that both references refer to sexual love—first by calling this reference “poetic hyperbole or ornamentation” and then by suggesting that the latter part may simply refer to a mother’s (chaste) love for her children, an idea that got tacked onto the Latin Vulgate translation of 2 Sam 1:26 ca. 400 AD. Or, Zehnder continues, if this passage includes a reference to wifely sexual love (which in a footnote he finally acknowledges “seems the most likely”), then he holds simply that the reference to Jonathan’s love must just simply be different (only friendship love), although nothing in the text supports such a divided (non-sexual, then
4. Understanding the nature of Biblical sexual language and taboo expression. Another major flaw in Zehnder’s article is his apparent ignorance of how sexual terminology (especially the sexual euphemism) is used in the Hebrew Bible. Sexual euphemisms are general words which on occasion are given special sexual meanings; and by their very nature, they appear only rarely in the Bible (so throw out Zehnder’s statistical counts to find probable word meanings). This matter is made worse by the fact that most English translations simply transfer over the vague general meaning, or sometimes substitute one euphemism for another euphemism (e.g., note “hand” and “manhood” below), so that the real, literal meaning of a euphemistic Hebrew word still remains obscured and many colorful examples of frank language go unnoticed. In fact, some sexual euphemisms only appear once in the Hebrew Bible, as with: (1) “hand” (yad, H3027), used to refer to the “penis” in Isa 57:8 (cf. NRSV, footnote) or to Israel’s lovers’ “manhood” (UNASB); (2) “feet” (regel, pl. raglehim, H7272), used once to refer to the vagina in Deut 28:57 (KJV and ESV: a baby born from ‘between her feet’) and once to signify a marriage proposal in Ruth 3:7 (where Ruth at night uncovers Boaz’s ‘feet’ = genitals); and (3) “touch” (naga, H5060), used once to refer to ‘molesting’ men in Gen 26:11 (NIV). However, the verb “to laugh, play” (tsakaq, H6711) is employed a number of times as a sexual euphemism, but in each case calling for a different shade of meaning, including: (a) “caressing” in Gen 26:8 (NIV, UNASB; or NJB: Isaac ‘fondling’ his wife); (b) to “indulge in revelry” in Exod 32:6 (NIV, referring to the Israelites in the Golden Calf incident) or “an orgy of drinking and sex” (GNB2); and (c) possibly molestation or masturbation in Gen 21:9 (Ishmael touching the genitals of the infant Isaac, or his own private parts).81 Frank but limited references to other taboo subjects are also found in the Bible, referring to: (1) masturbation and other ‘emissions of semen’ outside the womb, in Lev 15:16,32; 22:4 (NIV, NRSV), (2) night emissions specifically mentioned in Deut 23:10 (NIV and NRSV: “nocturnal emission”), and (3) interrupted coitus in Gen 38:9 (NRSV: in the process of having sex with Tamar, Onan got up and “spilled his semen on the ground”). In 1 Kings 12:10 Rehoboam arrogantly boasts that his little finger is larger than his father King Solomon’s phallus (mottnayim, NRSV: “loins”); and Ezekiel 23:20 speaks of lovers of old whom Israel had in Egypt, “whose members [lit. ‘flesh’ = penises] were like those of donkeys, and whose emission [lit. ‘issue’ of semen] was like that of stallions” (NRSV). In Ezek 16:25 the prophet also mentions women in Israel who “hast opened thy feet [vaginal]” to every passerby (KJV); and then later he speaks in symbolic language of Samaria and Jerusalem (i.e., the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel) who had sought lovers among the handsome Assyrian soldiers, dressed in blue uniforms and mounted on horses, who ‘fondled her virgin bosom’ (Ezek 23:1-8, esp. v. 8 NRSV; i.e., breasts) and ‘bruised her teats’ (v. 3, KJV). Teresa Hornsby (2007) takes Ezekiel’s reference in 16:17 to Israel as a woman “who made for yourself male images, and with them played the whore” (NRSV) as referring to a woman who made phallic images and then used them to masturbate herself.83 Ezekiel’s language preached to the exiled Jews in Babylon must have sounded downright obscene and vulgar.

Nor are Biblical authors shy about mentioning other intimate and taboo subjects.84 Numerous references are made to the apparently common practice of Israelite males to urinate against a building or city wall, i.e., who “pisseth against the wall,” as David derogatorily refers to those men in Judah who refuse to help support him and his men on the run and whom he plans...
to kill (1 Sam 25:22,34 KJV). Later this phrase even appears in Divine prophecies given to Ahijah against Jeroboam I (1 Kings 14:1-10, esp. v. 10), to Jehu against Baasha (1 Kings 16:1-13, esp. v. 11), and to Elijah against Ahab (1 Kings 21:20-22, esp. v. 21)—declaring that not one male descendent of the houses of these despicably evil kings, in the northern kingdom of Israel, would survive the Lord’s judgment. However, these references must be read in the King James Version, since other English translations clean up the vulgarity in the Hebrew, simply reading, e.g., “I will cut off . . . every male” (1 Kings NRSV, cf. NIV) or “I will destroy all of your sons” and “not let a single one of your male descendant survive!” (LB). Yet, note what the Hebrew really says, in the KJV: “I will cut off from Jeroboam him that pisseth against the wall . . . and will take away the remnant [of his house] as a man taketh away dung, till it all be gone” (1 Kings 14:10 KJV). David on the run comes upon King Saul alone in a cave ‘uncovering his feet,’ probably defecating (1 Sam 24:3 KJV); and earlier (Judg 3:24) Eglon king of Moab is described as “covering his feet” (KJV), locked in his private chamber, which probably means that either he was “relieving himself” (NRSV, NIV) or masturbating (Hornsby). When officers from Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, come to Jerusalem, they threaten the inhabitants there that if they do not surrender, they will end up later, in a siege, to starve and “eat their own dung and drink their own urine” (Isa 36:1-12, esp. v. 12 NRSV; and cf. 2 Kings 18:27), when the Assyrian army finally attacks Jerusalem. In fact, this happened earlier when Ben-hadad, king of Syria, laid siege to Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom; and starvation within the city led to the eating of dove’s dung and even to cannibalism, as some women planned among themselves when to boil their young sons for food (2 Kings 6:24-29). The Hebrew Scriptures contain repeated warnings against having sex with animals (bestiality), even mentioning the women (Ex 22:19; Lev 18:23, 20:15-16; Deut 27:21), while at the same time there was no ban in the Law of Moses against Israelite men visiting common prostitutes (Hornsby), who always appear to have been readily available (Gen 38:15-16; Judg 11:1, 16:1; Prov 6:26, 7:10-12, 29:3; 1 Kings 3:16-28, 22:38; Jer 5:7) and who perhaps were considered necessary in order to protect the virginity of brides in Israel (Wink). Also, Hornsby holds that Joshua’s scouts, who visited Rahab’s house of prostitution in Jericho on a spy mission “and spent the night there” (Josh 2:1-2 NRSV), most likely slept with her before she learned of their mission and helped them escape. Israelites readily sacrificed their children on pagan altars to the god Molech (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5; Ezek 16:20-21, 20:31, 23:37; Ps 106:38; 2 Kings 17:17, 21:6; 2 Chron 28:3). Also one finds David, Israel’s greatest king and one of the most spiritual persons in the Bible (witness his many psalms), blithely holding up and counting 200 Philistine foreskins before King Saul and his court, without the slightest bit of embarrassment (1 Sam 18:27 NIV); and later he leads the procession bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem dressed only in a high priest’s ephod, so short that everyone could see his royal genitals swinging as he danced (2 Sam 6:14-15,20)—and both of these acts are unabashedly and uncondemningly put into the official record. All of these examples are given merely to show that the Bible is a very earthy, as well as spiritual, collection of writings. The Israelites frequently spoke quite frankly about things that offend modern ears; and yet these details are part of their holy Scriptures. Certainly, two Israelite men falling in love, hugging and kissing each other passionately, and having sex out in the field is not out of place in such a context, nor should we be surprised that the Biblical editor of 1-2 Samuel seem unperturbed about mentioning a homosexual relationship that developed at court between two admired national heroes.
5. Jonathan and David’s relationship in the larger Samuel narrative. Zehnder rightfully points out that Jonathan and David’s love is only “one among several elements that are of importance for David’s ascension to the throne,” and he adds, their relationship must be viewed in terms of its telos (ultimate goal) and “must not be detached from this general movement of the plot.” Then he mentions a sequence of “covenants” that are “cut” in 1-2 Samuel, including pacts made between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18:3, 20:16, 23:18); between Abner, earlier Saul’s general, and David (2 Sam 3:12-13); and between the elders of the whole of Israel and David (2 Sam 5:3). Zehnder also mentions a sequence of those who are said to “love” David, including: Saul (1 Sam 16:21), Jonathan (18:1,3), Michal (18:20,28), Saul’s servants (18:22), and all the people of Israel (18:16). Although Zehnder apparently intends to demonstrate here that all of these covenants and expressions of love were ‘political’ and meant to help get David to the throne, it must be noted that Michal’s love was clearly sexual and that Jonathan’s pact with David was clearly of an “intensely personal kind” (Thompson)—and indeed berit (“covenant,” H1285) can refer to a marriage commitment (Prov 2:16-17, Mal 2:14) just as well as to a political treaty (Gen 21:27, 1 Kings 5:12). Moreover, Jonathan’s covenants with David would be most unusual if they were political loyalty treaties, since such treaties never have the stronger party giving themselves as a “free gift” to the weaker party, a person or people of lower status (Nardelli). Nardelli agrees with Ackerman that the strong erotic language in David’s elegy points to the pair being “vastly more than mere bosom friends,” even though this might have been primarily concerned with ‘exalting David’s personal qualities’ as he ascends to the throne (Vermeylen). In the end, Zehnder’s references to covenants and expressions of love in no way prove that Jonathan and David’s initial love pact did not spring from the prince’s strong sexual feelings for David.

As Walter Dietrich notes, we are dealing here not simply with a political pamphlet (just to support the legitimacy of David’s rule and dynasty) but with great narrative art, which calls for us to bring to it a “careful, thoughtful, and critical reading of the text.” What we find here is a dialectic (interplay) between divine election and rejection, between human and divine will, and between good and evil. Dietrich also notes “the absence of theological argumentation and reflection” in the Rise of David narrative, except for the relatively frequent injection of Divine aid given to David. The writer allows for David to be introduced in different ways. He “did not intend to compose a smooth, one-dimensional portrait of David and his rise; rather he emphasized its many facets and the depth of meaning behind them.” The Lord’s use of Jonathan’s passionate feelings for David must have seemed far less unusual to David (because so many people were attracted to him) than, e.g., the Lord’s sending him off on the run for a decade or so, sometimes only a few steps ahead of Saul and his troops. Zehnder goes too far when he presents “YHWH as the Ultimate Cause of the Events” in David’s early life, without allowing for human elements. For example, did Yahweh cause David to marry Michal, which accomplished nothing (1 Sam 18:20–19:17)? Did the Lord cause David to visit and lie to the high priest Ahimelech, asking him for food and a sword, which led to the deaths of so many priests and other innocent people (21:1-6, 22:11-19)? Did the Lord put the idea in David’s heart to fight with the Philistines against his own people (29:1-3, 6-8)? No. Instead the Bible presents us with a complex and sometimes “bewildering” mix of human action and divine action, and room must be made for both (Madvig). As Römer and Bonjour note, Jonathan’s feelings for David are not a minor part of the narrative, even though in the end the prince cannot abandon his father, which in antiquity would have been an unprecedented act. As Fokkelman notes, we
see how important Jonathan is by the space given to him and the extended stories; and he is always there at strategic points in David’s early life, confirming his rise to the throne, in word and gesture. Yet, God does his overarching work in the messy arena of human drama, to bring about his own ends; and why couldn’t a homosexual love affair also be part of this story? In fact, as Saul Olyan notes, David is often presented as a “nonconformist,” seen in his aside addressed to Jonathan in his eulogy as well as when Absalom dies and King David becomes consumed with grief over the loss of his strikingly handsome son, rather than congratulating and thanking his brave soldiers who have just put down Absalom’s fierce rebellion (2 Sam 18:31–19:8).  

Saul Olyan notes that “it is not at all clear” that a tenth century writer “would have been particularly bothered by a homoerotic meaning of the love comparison of 2 Sam 1:26,” since what was important was to show that David was not responsible for the death of Saul and his family, in his attempt to unite the nation.  

Yet, in David’s eulogy his comparison of Jonathan to women (and so feminizing the prince) serves to bolster’s David’s masculine image, since as Römer and Bonjour note, in the ancient Middle East a sexual relationship was always thought of in terms of active and passive roles, the latter only viewed as appropriate for women, eunuchs, and male prostitutes (and the like). Perhaps the editor thought that 1 Sam 1:26 could serve the purpose for those who were familiar with Jonathan and David’s intimate court relationship of assuring them that David was still ‘a real man’ and thus fully qualified to become king of Israel. As Römer and Bonjour note, the story of David’s Rise is more than a love story; and in the light of the editor’s overarching goal (to support David’s legitimate rise to the throne), he may have felt it served his purpose best to obscure certain erotic elements of their relationship in the text. The overall purpose here was not to present two gay icons (symbols), a modern idea, although the Bible still describes these two men in a sexual relationship. To leave a record of how David actually rose to become Israel’s greatest king was very important; and Jonathan’s love for David partly explains how God provided for this. How lucky we are not to be left simply with the terse account of the Chronicler on Saul’s reign which, after a genealogical list, only notes that the Philistines fought against Israel and then Saul died because “he did not keep the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse” (1 Chron 9:39–10:14, esp. 10:13-14 NRSV).  

6. Jonathan and David’s relationship and the Levitical ban. Zehnder reads the Levitical ban as applying to any man who ‘makes another man the object of male sexual desires,’ which would condemn then, under penalty of death, any male who simply confessed to having erotic feelings toward another male. Yet as Nardelli points out, the wording in Lev 18:22 is “very narrow and very precise,” addressing only an Israelite man having anal intercourse with another male; and this close textual reading is widely shared by other Levitical interpreters, including: Erhard Gerstenberger (1996), Saul Olyan (1997), Martti Nissinen (1998), Jacob Milgrom (2000), Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000), and L. William Countryman (2007). This ban does not include “other forms of homosexual activity” (Carmichael), such as kissing, caressing, cuddling, or even masturbation, since in the Law any seminal flow outside of the womb required only bathing and laundering (Lev 15:16-17) and even mutual masturbation did not plant semen inside another body. Nor is lesbianism mentioned here (although women are included in the bestial ban which follows, 18:23), perhaps because Israelite men could hardly
conceive of sex without a male being present. In short, any reading of the Levitical ban as “a blanket prohibition on all sexual interaction between males or even between females” goes far beyond what it [the Biblical text] actually says (Countryman).

The ban in Lev 18:22 and its punishment in 20:13 stipulate that, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination [to’eba]” (18:22); and if an Israelite man does this, then both parties “shall be put to death; their blood is upon them” (20:13 NRSV). Now Robert Gagnon views to’eba (H8441, “abomination”) here as pointing to something that is “particularly revolting.” However, the Egyptians applied this term to shepherding as a trade (Gen 46:34) and to eating with the Israelites (Gen 43:32), perhaps because the latter did not shave their body hair (Radmacher), and in other OT passages it is applied to such things as remarrying a wife whom one had earlier divorced or using dishonest scales in business dealings (Deut 24:4, 25:13-16), or having an arrogant look, telling lies, or creating family discord (Prov 6:16-17, 19)—therefore this word in itself cannot be viewed as conveying any more intense emotion than one might feel toward someone who bears an arrogant look. In fact, to’eba is best understood as simply referring to something considered ‘offensive’ to another (Waltke).

Nor does the death penalty here (Lev 20:13) mark this as the most “severe” kind of transgression (so De Young), since elsewhere in Leviticus this penalty is also applied to adultery (20:10), cursing one’s parents (20:9), and blaspheming God (24:16)—actions hardly viewed today in the West as capital crimes. Indeed, we have no record of a death sentence for ‘a man laying with a male’ ever having been carried out by Israelite or Jewish authorities (Bamberger). Zehnder contends that Lev 18:22 is a “moral” issue rather than a “cultic” (ritual) issue, although Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000) view the Levitical ban as not concerned about homosexuality between two consenting partners but rather with upholding a heterosexual ‘norm’ (issues of “pure” and “impure”), under which violent homosexual acts, such as are described in Gen 19 and Judg 19 (gang rape), would be condemned. William Countryman (2007) views this also as a purity (unclean) issue.

Zehnder holds that when Saul imagines that David did not appear for the New Moon festivities at court because he was “unclean” (1 Sam 20:26), this probably relates to the Levitical ban—although David could just as well have become unclean by touching a dead animal found lying in the field (Lev 11:24-25), eating from the corpse of a ‘clean’ animal, which alive was permitted for food (Lev 11:39-40), or experiencing a night emission or masturbation (Lev 15:16). In fact, in Saul’s subsequent outburst over Jonathan and David sleeping together (1 Sam 20:30) the king never recalls or mentions the Levitical ban, which would have greatly buttressed his condemnation. In the end, however, the question is beside the point, since David really stayed away from Saul’s court because he feared that Saul might kill him (1 Sam 20:1,6-7). In fact, Jonathan and David also show no awareness or memory of the Levitical ban as they repeatedly make their love covenants “before the LORD,” seeking his full blessing and continued help in their commitment and lives envisioned together (1 Sam 20:8,13-17; 23:18). Furthermore, the editor of David’s elegy (2 Sam 1:19-26, esp. v. 26) is “not significantly bothered by an [David’s] homosexual admission” (Nardelli), although no doubt in order to bolster his own masculine image David portrays Jonathan here in the feminine role, as a ‘woman,’ as a wife.
Zehnder mentions various rationales that interpreters have frequently suggested as laying behind the Levitical ban, including: cultic concerns (preventing the visiting of male cult prostitutes?), “the waste of ‘seed’ [semen]” which “endangers procreation,” avoiding the mixture of two defiling substances (semen and excrement), preventing the transgression of gender roles which could cause a male to lose his “manly honor,” and preventing disturbances of “the internal peace of the community” (a concern which Zehnder calls “paramount”). Yet, he also notes difficulties with various of these rationales, e.g., not being sure (or at least explaining) what “cultic context” means here, noting that numerous sex acts which ‘wasted male seed’ were not banned in the Law (such as sex with a pregnant or barren wife, or masturbation), and pointing out further that heterosexual anal intercourse was not banned. Yet Zehnder’s belief that the main purpose here was to prevent internal community strife is greatly weakened by the fact that the Law of Moses never banned polygamy in Israel, even though the Genesis record shows that this often created family strife (Gen 21:8-14, Gen 29:30–30:24). Also, the Law never prohibited men from visiting secular prostitutes (Countryman) and, in fact, allowed both female and male non-cultic prostitutes to exist in Israel (Deut 23:18, Hornsby). Then Zehnder’s connection of the Levitical ban to the Gen 1:27 command to “Be fruitful and multiple, and fill the earth” vs. a human ‘failure to procreate’ must be rejected, because there is no interest in Israel (or the Levitical law) in its enemies growing more populous; instead the focus here rests only on God’s promise that he would make Abraham and his seed “exceedingly fruitful” (Gen 17:6, Lev 26:9). Moreover, Zehnder’s argument that the Levitical ban was given to prevent “a confusion of the created order,” i.e., that male and female were created anatomically for each other (the ‘pole in a hole’ argument) misreads Gen 1-3, which was intended only to provide etiological stories to explain why things are the way they are (e.g., where nature and life came from, why childbirth is painful, why life is hard, why men rule over women, etc.), and variations from the dominate pattern are not addressed (Bird). Gen 1-2 was not even read by the Israelites as limiting marriage to one man and one woman. Also, the idea promoted by some conservative commentators that one cannot reflect the divine image (Gen 1:27) until one marries (so De Young) sure makes it hard on John the Baptist, Jesus the Messiah, and Paul the Apostle!

Zehnder argues that even if Jonathan and David shared a homosexual or homoerotic relationship, one cannot use this to ethically evaluate (or support) “homosexual behavior” or even “homosexual inclination” in our cultural setting. Yet at the same time, Zehnder is ready and anxious to apply the ancient Levitical ban to all gay people today, even though Lev 18:22 and 20:13 are clearly rooted in a time and place very different from our own. Moreover, Zehnder shows his ignorance of biological sexual-orientation research, which has shown that sexual desire-choice comes not from the groin, but from the brain. As Jo Durden-Smith and Diane deSimone (1983) noted many years ago in their book *Sex and the Brain* (1983): “In humans, monkeys, rats, guinea pigs, birds—practically everywhere we look in nature—the quantities of sex hormones available to the fetus during critical periods of early development stamp into the developing brain a variety of masculine and feminine sexual and social behaviors—usually, but not always, in accordance with the genetic sex.” Therefore some people are born with a homosexual orientation, while others feel like they have been given a body of the wrong gender (transsexuals). Stanford University biologist Joan Roughgarden (2004) and London psychologist Glenn Wilson and psychobiologist Qazi Rahman (2005) fully agree, noting further that genetic factors (e.g., that may cause sexual receptors not to function as
usual) can also influence a person’s sexual development. In fact, Roughgarden believes that by several months after birth an individual’s gender identity (whether aligned with his or her genital form or not) is organized; and some individuals’ sexual orientation is immutably (unchangeably) set, while others’ sexual desire may shift later on. It is sad when theologians speak with such dogmatism, while also out of such ignorance.

Summary. Markus Zehnder is an example of a scholar whose homophobia, blind-sightedness, and ignorance of biological research on sex prevent him from joining the increasing number of interpreters who now recognize that the Jonathan and David narrative presents a story involving homoerotic love, commitment and intimacy. Still many heterosexual Bible scholars bring a prejudiced, naive and simplistic view of homosexuality (as well as of sex) to their studies, not recognizing, e.g., that individuals with a dominant sexual attraction toward members of their own sex can be found in every time and place. GLBT interpreters are able to provide a certain corrective insight here, although some may be more interested in ‘reading into’ rather than digging out a deeper understanding of what the ancient Biblical texts actually say. Although fitting into the latter class, Zehnder falls prey to sloppy interpretative methodology by not recognizing the primary importance of context in determining a word’s meaning, if uncertain. His statistical counts turn ridiculous when one realizes that sexual references always appear infrequently in Bible and often in elusive and oblique ways, the meanings of which must be ‘teased’ out of the Hebrew text—a process made more difficult by translations which often replace explicit language in the Hebrew with ‘non-offensive’ English terminology, probably thought to be more suitable for public reading and private devotion. Another major flaw is Zehnder’s failure to recognize the importance of other texts in showing how homosexual motifs were handled in ancient Near Eastern literature (e.g., with coded language, elusive references, and hidden meanings) and not to bring this understanding to bear on interpreting the Jonathan and David text, where numerous similarities in word and style exist. In the Bible one finds not infrequent references to intimate, taboo subjects (body parts and intimate acts), reminding the reader that the Bible is not only an inspiring, spiritual book, but also a very frank, earthy record of a people who often said, did and recorded things that can appear quite coarse and improper to modern readers. Indeed, the Bible is as realistic as life itself (one of its endearing features)—and there is no reason why a homosexual relationship between two males, especially in the ancient tradition of heroic male lovers who lived together at court, could not find a place in the official record.

Inexplicably the Biblical story mixes human action and divine action in a way so that the Divine plan is accomplished and yet not by obliterating human free will in its rich variety of expression.


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Susan Ackerman (2005) points to six places in the Jonathan and David story where she believes “eroticized or sexual language and imagery” are potentially present and which should be given special consideration in determining the nature of their relationship, including: Jonathan and David’s first meeting (1 Sam 18:1–4); Jonathan’s mediation with Saul on David’s behalf (19:1–7); the events leading up to David’s permanent flight from Saul’s court (20:1–42); Saul’s expressed anger over Jonathan’s relationship with David (20:30–34); Jonathan and David’s last meeting and third covenant (23:15–18); and David’s lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:19–27).

Previously Tom Horner (1978) emphasized these points: Jonathan “obviously being smitten” by David who was “magnificent in bodily form,” their making “a lifelong pact openly,” their meeting secretly and kissing each other at their parting, and especially Saul’s insult and David’s lament.

Then Markus Zehnder (2007), drawing on points made earlier by Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000), listed eight Biblical references in the Jonathan and David narrative as most important: “Jonathan loved him [David] as his own soul” (1 Sam 18:1); “Jonathan took great delight in David” (19:1); their going “out into the field” (20:11); “Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him” (20:17); “you [Jonathan] have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness” (20:30); “they kissed each other” (20:41); and David in his aside to the deceased Jonathan calling him “my brother” and confessing that “your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26, NRSV).

However, for our review of narrative issues that have become the focus in current debate, these are grouped under the following headings: David’s beauty and Jonathan’s response (1 Sam 16:12, 18; 17:42; and 18:1; 19:1; 20:3, 17); Saul’s sexual insult hurled at Jonathan (20:30–31); Jonathan’s eclipsing Michal and also possibly Saul (18:1–20:42 and 16:18–23); Jonathan and David’s parting scene in the field (20:41–42); the progression of the three covenants (1 Sam 18:3–4, 20:16–17, 23:17–18); and David’s eulogy and aside directed to Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17–27, esp. v. 26).

**David’s beauty and Jonathan’s response.** No sooner is David introduced into the narrative than attention is drawn to his “remarkable beauty” (Jennings), for we are told that “he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (1 Sam 16:12, NRSV). He was a “bewilderingly beautiful boy” (M. Samuel), the kind who would only grow up to possess an even more “compelling physical beauty,” like a “fairy-tale prince” (Kirsch) and to eventually become “an icon of sensuous male attractiveness” (Houser). The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* is probably correct in interpreting “ruddy” (admoni, H132) to mean that David had both reddish hair color and skin complexion, since these two physical traits appear together. However, then repeated emphasis is drawn to his striking appearance, when a servant informs King Saul that David as a prospective lyre-player is “good-looking” (16:18, NJB) and the narrator has Goliath also noticing that David has an “attractive appearance” (17:42, NJB). Fred Dobbs-Allsopp (2006) notes that the Israelites were “well acquainted” with physical beauty, routinely described in the OT with words using the root *yph* and meaning “beauty,” “beautiful,” and “to be beautiful,” e.g., David is said (16:12) to have had especially “beautiful eyes” (yapheh ‘ayinim, H3303, H5869). Also, he suggests that *tob ro‘i* (H2896, H7210) in the same verse, meaning “pleasing appearance” (Strong) or “handsome” (NRSV), probably points to David having a
“strong appearance”—presumably a body that looked rugged, muscled, lean, firm, and in good shape physically.

However, Markus Zehnder holds that the separation by a whole chapter of the description of David’s beauty (1 Sam 16:12, 18) from the description of Jonathan’s love (18:1, 3) weakens the connection of these two ideas—although he overlooks the narrator’s third reference to David’s beauty in 17:42, a mere sixteen verses before the giant-slayer and the crown-prince make their first pact. Also, interpreters have often compared the bond between Jonathan and David as military heroes with that of other ancient warrior pairs, such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and Achilles and Patroclus, even though Jonathan’s great, final military victory (over the Philistines) is described in 1 Sam 14 and David’s surprising, initial military victory (over Goliath) does not appear until chapter 17. In fact, as Jean-Fabrice Nardelli (2007) notes, it is no coincidence that both the Gilgamesh epic and the Samuel story emphasize the “physical attractiveness of their main hero,” and “the son of Jesse looks perfectly fit to catch the eye of [P]rince Jonathan . . . .” In Greek mythology, in two out of three of the earliest appearances of Zeus and his cupbearer Ganymede an emphasis is placed on Ganymede’s kallos (“physical beauty,” L870), which linked male beauty to male desire and not unexpectedly elicited an erotic response from the supreme god. Still, there is a noticeable “discretion” shown in the Ganymede stories toward mentioning same-sex love directly; and a similar reluctance explains why there are no words in the Jonathan and David narrative that would clear up any ambiguity about the precise nature of their relationship. The epic poets of Archaic Greece, who felt no uneasiness about homosexuality, still preferred “not to be forward about it in their songs,” but were “content with innuendoes [allusions] about the extreme physical beauty of the beloved.” In the same way, the narrator of 1–2 Samuel no doubt wished to avoid any description or display of physical intimacy between Jonathan and David, instead offering non-verbal gestures like Jonathan’s implied ‘striptease’ before David when the prince disrobes and hands all of his clothes and arms to David, in the making of their first covenant (1 Sam 18:4).

Indeed, Jonathan’s initial falling-in-love with David is described in a very circumspect way: “When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul [nephesh] of Jonathan was bound [qashar] to the soul [nephesh] of David, and Jonathan [ahab] loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam 18:1, NRSV)—which the Revised English Bible renders more clearly as “Jonathan had given his heart to David and had grown to love him as himself.” Then “Jonathan made a covenant [berit] with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (18:3, NRSV), or “each loved the other as dearly as himself” (REV). Joel Green (2006) notes that nephesh (H5315) refers to the “whole person as the seat of desire and emotion,” to the “entirety of one’s being,” and not to a divine, immortal soul (psychē, G5590), separate from the body, as later conceived by Plato (Phaedo 62b). John Goldingay (2006) explains further that a “covenant” (berit, H1285) was “a formal commitment made by one party to another party, or by two parties to one another,” and its seriousness was “normally undergirded by an oath” taken “before God and/or before other people.” The formal pact which Jonathan made with David here was clearly one made of love; and although the prince took the initiative, it was viewed by both him and David as being a “sacred covenant” made between them before the Lord (20:8). Now Zehnder writes that while qashar (H7194, Strong: ‘to tie, to bind, or to conspire’) may point here to a strong emotional attachment, there is “simply no hint of a homosexual or homoerotic connotation,” but rather “what is underlined is the political connotation.”

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Sam 22:8 where, after David fled, Saul complained that all of his servants had “conspired” (qashar) not to tell him that Jonathan had “made a league” (karat, H3772, literally “cut [a covenant]”) with David (1 Sam 22:8, KJV; cf. J. Green). Yet, as Steven McKenzie (2000) notes, it is hard to believe that Jonathan would give up his kingdom to someone he had just met and also join with him in a conspiracy against his father. Zehnder also argues that Jonathan’s being “bound” to David in the first covenant (18:1) really meant on a deeper level that the prince was bound to God’s plan to transfer Israel’s ruling house from Saul to David—although this does not explain the spontaneous intensity of Jonathan’s feelings for David, which appear like “a [lightning] bolt out of the blue” (Schroer and Staubli), nor our being told repeatedly how Jonathan “loved” David (1 Sam 18:1, 3; 20:17) and ‘delighted’ in him (19:1), nor why Saul’s later outburst is so “extremely sexually charged” (Ackerman).

Yet, Zehnder contends that no mention made of David’s responding to Jonathan’s feelings of love “deemphasizes its emotional component”—although he forgets the disgrace and shame that were widely attached in the ancient Near East to any male who became the subservient recipient of another male’s sexual acts (Nissinen), which in itself could completely explain David’s silence. Then surprisingly, Zehnder suggests that Jonathan may have been attracted to David as a surrogate for his “cold father,” which may point to a “homoerotic or homosexual dimension” in his relationship with David. Whatever the case, Mark George (1997) views the first covenant as amorous, noting that “Jonathan’s emotional reaction to David at their first meeting . . . explicitly situates their relationship near the homosexual end of the spectrum,” although it also serves social ends. Graeme Auld (2004) writes that “the early mention of Jonathan’s immense love for David is a little out of place in 18:1; [yet] its main function here is probably to make it more understandable why Jonathan would make a covenant with David and give him his robe and weapons,” i.e., this was “a covenant based on love at first sight.”

Teresa Hornsby (2007) observes, “It is difficult not to see homoeroticism just below the surface in this passage [1 Sam 18:1–4]. If the description of love [here] had been about a woman and a man, no one would think twice about romantic intent.” Jonathans’s feelings for David are mentioned again in 1 Sam 19:1, which notes that “Jonathan took great delight [kaphets, H2654] in David” (NRSV). Now Zehnder points to numerous OT passages that speak of Yahweh’s taking “delight” in David (2 Sam 15:26, 22:20 = Ps 18:19) and in Solomon (1 Kings 10:9, 2 Chron 9:8) and argues that Jonathan’s delight in David should be connected to God’s delight in David (1 Sam 13:14), i.e., the prince simply wanted to do the Lord’s will. However, G. Johannes Botterweck (1986) writes in the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (1986) that kaphets in 19:1, used along with ahab (“to love”) in 18:1–4, “stands on the fringes of eroticism—although at the same time he maintains (arbitrarily) that between men this must refer only to “friendship,” while between a man and a woman it can point to ‘sexual desire’ (Gen 34:19; Est 2:14; Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4). Yet Schroer and Staubli (2000) clearly see in this word and statement the “erotic character of Jonathan’s affection” for David. Ackerman (2005) reminds us also that “love” and “delight” frequently occur together in sexual passages in the Bible (see Botterweck references above). As Fred Dobbs-Allsopp (2006) points out, physical beauty was something in which the ancient Israelites could clearly “delight.”

Saul’s sexual insult hurled at Jonathan. If Jonathan’s homosexual desire steams beneath the surface in 1 Sam 18:1–4 and in 19:1, then his passion is fully exposed in Saul’s explosive outburst described in 1 Sam 20:30, where he shouts at Jonathan: “You son of a perverse,
boshet (‘shame’), and to the shame [boshet] of your mother’s nakedess [‘erva’]? (1 Sam 20:30, NRSV).

Zehnder acknowledges here the sexual connotation of ‘erva (“nakedness” = genitals, H6172); yet he claims that there is only one place in the OT where boshet (“shame,” H1322) is associated with sex, in Hos 9:10. This verse recalls an incident at Shittim in the wilderness when Israelite men ran off to have sex with Moabite women, who then led them to bow down to worship their gods (Num 25:1–2ff). However, when Hosea speaks of these earlier Israelites “consecrating themselves to a thing of shame” (Hos 9:10), this shame refers not to their sexual activity but to the local god himself (NJB footnote, UNASB footnote) or to his “shameful idol” (NIV, NLT). Still, in the background was the ancient Israelites’ inappropriate sexual coupling; and Hosea earlier in his scroll (book) denounces Israel in his day for visiting prostitutes at harvest time, when Baal was worshipped (Hos 9:1).

Returning to Saul’s outburst, Zehnder holds that it was Jonathan’s plotting with David as the king’s enemy that brought “shame” upon the prince and also upon the woman who had given him birth. Zehnder even suggests that people hearing this outburst might have wondered if Jonathan was really Saul’s son or whether the queen had conceived him in an adulterous affair—although King Saul would hardly have had any interest in bringing such a bastard son of the queen to the throne.

Zehnder also writes that nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is bakar (“to choose,” H977) used in an erotic way; so for it to be used in this sense, or even in an emotional sense, in this verse is “rather unlikely.” What Jonathan really had “chosen,” Zehnder advocates, was not David as a romantic partner but rather as Yahweh’s election (choice) to be the next king of Israel, since the largest number of appearances of the verb bakar in the OT refer to Yahweh selecting someone for a divine task (49 out of 162 uses, according to Zehnder).

Yet, Zehnder’s views on both boshet (“shame”) and bakar (“to choose”) are difficult to maintain. First, relating to boshet (H1322), it should be noted that in the Bible nakedness was generally viewed as “an exposure of the most shameful kind” (Gorman). Moreover, apart from Hos 9:10, other OT passages connect “nakedness” and “shame,” although they use various Hebrew synonyms for “nakedness” (‘erva, H6172; ‘erya, H6181; and ‘erom, H5903) and for “shame” (boshet, H1322) and “to be shamed or ashamed” (bosh, H954; kalam, H3637). For example, Micah 1:11 describes the future state of the inhabitants of Shaphir (a town in Judah, although its exact location is unknown) when Yahweh’s judgment falls upon them. Then, although the name “Shaphir” means “beautiful,” captives will be led from this town “in nakedness [‘erya] and shame [boshet]” (Micah 1:11, NRSV). Also, nakedness and shame are linked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, who before the Fall were “not ashamed” (bosh) of being “naked” (‘erva, Gen 2:25), but who after the Fall felt “naked” (‘erom) and so ashamed that they covered their genitals with fig leaves (Gen 3:7, 10–11). Also, in a Deut 25:11 ban on any woman reaching out to help her husband in a fight by “seizing his [opponent’s] genitals [mebushman]” (NRSV), the word mebushman (H4016) is plural for bosh, and thus the phrase here may be translated literally as “seizing his shames” (Patai). Then later, during King David’s reign, Hanun (a new king of the Ammonites) scornfully mistreated David’s envoys, who had been sent to him with an offer of peace, by cutting off the rear of their robes so that their buttocks were exposed, before sending them away “feeling greatly ashamed [kalam]” (2 Sam 10:1–5). Raphael Patai also points out that ‘uncovering the nakedness’ of various family members in incestuous relationships condemned in Lev 18:6–16 (KJV) certainly pointed to this as a shameful uncovering, even though no word for “shame” appears explicitly in the text.
Nardelli notes that although Zehnder tries to remove the sexual overtones from boschet ("shame") here in Saul’s outburst with his “usual statistical trick” (counting the numbers of different translated meanings given various Hebrew words in the OT), the Israelites would have viewed any sight of the genitals as “disgraceful.”

Being naked was all about exposing the genitals (Hornsby) or the buttocks (2 Sam 10:1–5).

Relating to bakar (Jonathan’s “choosing” David), the sexual innuendoes in Saul’s outburst must not be overlooked. Also, although the classic Hebrew Masoretic text here uses the verb bakar (Strong: ‘to choose,’ H977), the much older Greek Septuagint text uses the noun metochos (meaning ‘partner or companion,’ G3353). Therefore Samuel Driver (1913) and other scholars have held that the original word here was kbr (kaber, ‘companion, associate, partner, or friend,’ H2270) instead of bkr—-the original written Hebrew lacking signs for vowel sounds—although Tom Horner (1978) believed that bkr may originally have been vocalized as bakur (‘young man, chosen one, bridegroom,’ H970). However, Nissinen notes that kaber does not necessarily point to an intimate sexual partner; and in fact all of the words suggested here are broad enough to point either to a sexual or nonsexual partner. In the end, it is the general sexual context of Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30) that must determine the precise meaning here, whichever word is chosen to go along with the Hebrew words for “nakedness [genitals]” and “shame.” Jonathan’s ‘irregular’ sexual connotation here may be sensed in the Douay-Rheims translation (Challoner revision, 1749–1752), which reads, “Thou son of a woman that is a ravisher of a man [who has seized him sexually], do I not know that thou lovest the son of Isai [Jesse] to thy own confusion . . . ?” and in George Lamsa’s Aramaic translation (from the Peshitta, 1933), which reads, “O you rebellious son, do I not know that you are delighted in the son of Jesse to your own shame . . . ?” (1 Sam 20:30)—because of the references here to sex and shame.

Moreover, the curious beginning and ending parts of Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30) refer to Jonathan’s mother, Queen Ahinoam (14:50), who gave King Saul most of his children (although a concubine, Rizpah, also bore him two sons, 2 Sam 21:8). In fact, the opening phrase, “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!” (NRSV) or ‘O son of a deserting woman’ (Septuagint, Van der Pool), in the Hebrew is generally understood by scholars to be “quite vulgar” (Youngblood) or “foul-mouthed” (Hertzberg), and so it has been rendered in modern colloquial slang as “You bastard!” (TEV) or “You son of a bitch!” (Jobling, Hornsby). Nardelli (2007) explains that Saul begins his insult with “(you) son of a deviant (or: undisciplined) slave (girl),” before he hits Jonathan with his rhetorical, emphatic question (“do I not know . . .”), revealing that he does indeed know that Jonathan has “chosen” the son of Jesse in a sexual way. It’s like Saul is saying, “You’re a mamma’s son [or: momma’s boy], in love with this David . . . .” As Rick Brentlinger (2007) points out, Saul is not really characterizing the queen here, but is directing his “vicious slur” to Jonathan, the one really guilty of sexual offenses. Daniel Helminack (2000) agrees, that “shame” and “nakedness” in Saul’s outburst point to a sexual liaison between Jonathan and David, which Saul and the whole court knew about; and he views the first part here as essentially labeling his son “a faggot.” Yet, to the ideas of nakedness = genitals and sexual shame in Saul’s outburst here is added illicit sex.

Returning to the main (and central) part of Saul’s insult, Rabbi Steven Greenberg (2004) explains that Saul belittles Jonathan because the prince seems disinterested in his own welfare, he refuses to compete with David for honors, and he also has an “unmanly love” for the man
who just might take away his throne from him. In short, Jonathan is “in love with David.” The language of Saul’s insult “clinches the argument that Jonathan’s love for David cannot exclude the sexual. . . . Saul is not offended by a platonic friendship, but by his [son’s] . . . naked love of David.” In fact, Saul’s strange throwing of his spear at his son may be read as a way of saying, “If you want to be penetrated by a man, then I will penetrate you!”

Christopher Hubble (2003) agrees, that Saul here is informing Jonathan that he knew about his sexual relationship with David, which he considered shameful. Even Walter Dietrich (2007) writes that, besides the conspiracy plot which the king suspects Jonathan and David have made (and suffering from a severe persecution complex), “Saul almost explicitly accuses Jonathan of sexual dependence on David (20:30),” which could be a ‘homosexual friendship.’

In fact, Theodore Jennings (2004) notes that it has never been explained clearly how Jonathan’s friendship with David would actually bring David closer to the throne or deprive Jonathan of his succession unless “Jonathan is so smitten with David that he could refuse him nothing, even preeminence in the kingdom.” Even Martti Nissinen, who is skeptical that Jonathan and David were lovers, asks, “What could Saul have seen as so shameful in an ordinary friendship of his son and the young man under his care?”

Yet, Steven Greenberg writes, “The story would make most sense if Jonathan were [was] gay, but David was not.”

**Jonathan’s eclipsing Michal and also possibly Saul.** Nardelli commends Susan Ackerman (2005) for admirably showing how Michal’s marital dealings with David echo her brother Jonathan’s covenant dealings with David; and then the princess is completely eclipsed by the prince, showing that Jonathan consistently meant more to David than his new wife. As Ackerman notes, twice in 1 Sam 18 we are told that Jonathan “loves” David (18:1, 3) and the same with Michal (18:20, 28); and both enter into a covenant relationship with him (18:3–4 and 18:27). Yet, while Michal loves David and gets him as a husband (18:27), still we find that Jonathan “greatly delighted” in David (19:1, UNASB) and the latter two share secret meetings out “in the field” (19:2–3; 20:11, 35). When David returns to the capital city (Gibeah) desperately seeking help, it is not Michal whom he seeks out, but Jonathan (20:1); and it is Jonathan and David, not Michal and David, who share a passionate parting scene, with prolonged kissing and weeping, before David flees for good (20:41–42). Ackerman concludes, “Jonathan is not only the structural equivalent of a wife to David, but a wife who supplants one of his sisters,” squeezing Michal entirely out of the picture. Therefore, she views the two men’s relationship as “analogous to a marital relationship.” Other interpreters have described them as “joined in a marriage covenant” (Hubble, 2003), a kind of “husband” and “wife” (Jennings, 2005), and “a gay couple” (Nardelli, 2007). Yet, Zehnder argues that to suggest that Jonathan replaces Michal as David’s “marriage partner” because Michal disappears from text after David flees from their apartment to escape arrest (19:18) is to “read too much into the text.” He does acknowledges that there “really are points” of “close parallelism” in the narrative between Michal and Jonathan, who are both said to “love” David (1 Sam 18:1, 3; 18:20, 28) and to help him escape Saul’s murderous intentions (19:1–6, 19:11–17). Yet Zehnder maintains that while Michal’s feelings were erotic, Jonathan’s were only of friendship. And even if Michal was replaced by Jonathan, “which is in fact possible,” he admits, this does not mean that Jonathan and David had a sexual relationship. Furthermore, Zehnder states that in the Hebrew Scriptures “it is always the male dominant partner who is said to love [ahab or a related word] somebody”—although he forgets how 1 Sam 18:20 records that Michel “loved” (NRSV) or “fell
in love” (NJB) with David, and how Song of Songs speaks of the Shulammite woman ‘loving’ (1:7; 2:5, 7; 3:1, 2, 3, 4) or having ‘love’ (5:8, 7:12, NIV) for the king, her sexual partner.

Römer and Bonjour (2005) also note how the love of Jonathan for David is so strong that not even Princess Michal’s love for David can separate him from Jonathan; and Van Seters (2009) notes that nowhere are we told that David loved Michal, in stark comparison to Paltiel who is broken-hearted and beside himself with grief when later she is taken from him (2 Sam 3:12–16), to be returned to David, to bolster himself as Saul’s successor. Nardelli remarks that Zehnder often “leaves caution aside for dogmatic assertions in the very places where the former was most needed,” e.g., when he asserts that in the imbalance of parts played by Jonathan vs. Michal during David’s stay at court the narrator simply means for us to focus on the unexpected (David’s friendship with Jonathan) rather than on the normal (a husband having sex with his wife). In other words, Zehnder argues that no mention is made of David sleeping with Michal in 1 Sam 18–19 simply because everybody knows that he was—even though nowhere in the text is there any indication that David had any interest in marrying Michal beyond moving closer to the throne. As Rick Brentlinger points out, Jonathan and David were clearly “closer in spirit, more intimately in love, and more committed to each other than were Michal and David.” David and Michal’s barren marriage certainly looks more like a political alliance than a love match. His marriage to Michal is mentioned (1 Sam 18:20–28) and then is ignored, the focus resting instead on Jonathan and David’s great love for each other.

However, Theodore Jennings suggests that Saul’s words in his outburst (1 Sam 20:30) could be interpreted as a reproach on Jonathan who had slept with David, who earlier had slept with Saul, who then in turn had slept with Jonathan’s mother, the queen. This view that David earlier had been King Saul’s bed companion might be anticipated when Saul first summoned David to become his lyre-player, and we read: “And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he [David also] became his armor-bearer” (1 Sam 16:21, NRSV, italics added). In fact, Saul was so enamored of his new servant that he sent word “to Jesse, saying, ‘Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor [ken, H2580] in my sight’” (16:22, NRSV). Now although ken (‘favor, delight,’ H2580) is usually used in the OT without any romantic or erotic connotation, sexual interest may have existed where it is applied to Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 2:13) and certainly relating to King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther (Est 5:8, 7:3, 8:5, KJV). One also suspects that when David tells Jonathan that Saul knows that he (David) has found “favor” (ken, 20:3, RSV) with the Prince—which has been translated also as Saul knows “that you like me” (NRSV) or “how much you like me” (GNB2, CEV)—this could well refer to their romantic connection. Returning to when Saul first meets David, the armor-bearer (nose keli, H5375, H3627) in the ancient Near East was a personal attendant of a king or a warrior who performed (supportive) functions related to warfare; and Jonathan’s earlier relationship with his armor-bearer shows that this could be a very “devoted, personal relationship” (1 Sam 14:6–14, cf. Kelle). As Saul’s armor-bearer David would accompany the king to the battlefield, and as his lyre-player he most likely remained with him during night, to ease the king’s troubled mood whenever “the evil spirit” came upon him (1 Sam 16:24, NRSV). It does not take too much imagination, then, to see this handsome youth eventually joining Saul in bed, as Wallace Hamilton pictures it in his novel David at Olivet (1979).
Jennings thinks that this view helps explain Saul’s outburst (1 Sam 20:30) more than being just a reference to Jonathan and David’s sexual involvement; and “it goes far in helping to explain the extravagance of Saul’s jealousy,” which causes him to “lash out at his heir” and even try to kill Jonathan by throwing a spear at him.\(^6\)—although Saul’s uncontrollable outbursts must be related, at least in part, to his mental illness. Yet, Jennings believes that Saul’s jealousy had ‘a strong sexual undertow.’\(^7\) Jennings is not the first interpreter to wonder whether Saul had a sexual relationship with David before he and Jonathan became a pair. Earlier David Greenberg (1988) speculated whether Saul, when he learned that Jonathan and David had become intimates, could not have become jealous of his son; and his “explosive outbursts” reveal not only a fear of David’s growing popularity, but also a “sexual jealousy runs through the narration like a red thread.”\(^7\) Silvia Schroeer and Thomas Staubli even titled a 2000 article “Saul, David and Jonathan—the Story of a Triangle?” and in it they proposed that “since nowhere in the narrative is Saul’s relationship to David recited without emotion, it is worthy of consideration whether the relationship of these men with each other does not have a lot to do with love, passion and jealousy.”\(^7\) Then Jennings carries this view further, envisioning that when David stepped out to fight Goliath, the Philistine giant saw only a “pretty boy,” the chief’s “boy-toy.” If Saul had taken David as his “boy-companion,” then Jonathan would have appeared later as a (despised) rival for David’s affections, after David killed Goliath (1 Sam 18:1–4). Yet, little did Saul realize that his jealousy and madness would only serve to drive David even more so into Jonathan’s protective arms.\(^7\)

Later, after David has gone on the run and is being chased by Saul and his troops, he is given an unusual opportunity to kill Saul, when the king goes to “relieve himself” alone in a cave where David and his men happen to be hiding. However, David does not harm the king, as his men urge (1 Sam 24, esp. vv. 3–7); and Jennings believes that this is because David still has ‘feelings’ for Saul, even though this represents a “picture of a love relationship gone sour.” Although David cuts off a corner of Saul’s robe in the dark cave to later show the king that he could have killed him but did not, he “was stricken to the heart” (24:5, NRSV)—a “rather extreme reaction,” Jennings writes, which may point to David’s inability to kill his former lover. Jennings also sees an “emotional charge” in David calling Saul “my father” (24:11) and Saul, in return, calling David “my son” (24:16).\(^7\) However, as one of the Lord’s anointed himself (by Samuel), David surely would have viewed it as important to set an example by not killing Saul, another of the Lord’s anointed (by Samuel). Also, the term “father” could simply be a label of honor ascribed to a ruler (e.g., as with “the father of Tekoa” and “the father of Ziph,” titles applied to the rulers of these Judean towns, cf. 1 Chron 2:24, 42) or the name may simply recall that David was still Saul’s son-in-law (Youngblood)\(^7\)—although we cannot be sure at what point Saul remarried Michal off to Palti (Paltiel) son of Laish (1 Sam 25:44). Also, at least on one occasion in the Bible “son” was used to express a subject’s subservience to his ruler, when Ahaz (Jehoahaz), king of Judah, seeks help against a foreign attack, from Tiglath-pileser III, calling himself the Assyrian king’s “servant” and “son” (2 Kings 16:7). Jennings also goes too far in seeing a sexual element in the second occasion where David has opportunity to kill Saul but does not (1 Sam 26), related to the statement: “Saul lay, with Abner” in the camp (1 Sam 26:5, NRSV).\(^7\) The real meaning here is made clear in the Living Bible translation, which reads, “King Saul and General Abner were sleeping inside a ring formed by the slumbering soldiers” (26:5), i.e., Abner was sleeping next to Saul to personally take charge of guarding the king’s life, which had earlier been put at risk (1 Sam 24). Jennings also suggests that just as
Saul had earlier taken David as his armor-bearer, so Jonathan does the same—although nothing in the text following 18:1–4 supports this, and this seems much too lowly a position for the new national hero of Israel, who soon is appointed by Saul as commander-in-chief over his army (1 Sam 18:5).

Still, the fact that Saul loved David “greatly” (me’od, H3966, 1 Sam 16:21) should be not be overlooked, since this is the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where “loved [him] greatly [me’od]” appears—and what does this signify? We read that Isaac “loved” Rebekah (Gen 24:67), Jacob “was in love with [the beautiful] Rachel” (Gen 29:18, NIV), Shechem “loved Dinah” and laid with her (Gen 34:2–3), Samson “fell in love with” Delilah (Judg 16:4, NRSV), Elkanah “loved” Hannah (1 Sam 1:5), Michel “was in love with David” (1 Sam 18:20, NIV), Amnon son of David “fell in love with” Tamar (2 Sam 13:1, NRSV), Solomon “loved” many foreign women (1 Kings 11:1), and King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) “loved Esther more than all the other women” (Est 2:17, NRSV)—and in each of these cases “loved,” “fell in love with,” or “was in love with” translates the verb ahab (H157). So, certainly both amplified statements Jonathan “loved him [David] as himself” (1 Sam 18:1, 3, UNASB) and Saul “loved him [David] greatly” (1 Sam 16:21, NRSV, italics added in both cases) could point to ‘falling in love with’—as the Greek poet Theognis (ca. 500 BC) reminds us, even Zeus, “king of the immortals, once longed for Ganymede, / snatched him, brought him to Olympus and made him / a god with the lovely bloom of boyhood” (“Second Book,” lines 1346–1348). As David’s virile beauty mesmerized Jonathan, so also perhaps it had hypnotized Saul. Just as Jonathan’s ‘love’ for David was immediate and intense (giving him all the clothes off his back and his precious weapons), so also was Saul’s ‘love’ for David (who immediately appoints him not only as his lyre-player but his armor-bearer, and then sends word to his father that he wants to keep David by his side). As Steven Greenberg (2004) notes, “both father and son seem smitten with David.” Yet, the evidence for Saul and David being bed companions early on is not as solid and sure as that for Jonathan and David, where the prince’s falling in love with the young hero is followed by Saul’s sexually-charged outburst, David’s romantic eulogy confession, and other clues which seem to point to the two sharing a (homo)sexual relationship. Still, historical records do provide examples of numerous ancient Near Eastern monarchs who took male bed companions, including: Gilgamesh, king of Urek; Neferkare, pharaoh of Egypt; Zimri-lin, king of Mari; Hammurabi, king of Babylon; Polycrates, king of Samos; Meno III, king of Thessaly; Darius III, king of Persia; and Alexander the Great (D. Greenberg, Davidson); and surely there were many other cases which are simply not known to us. So if Saul wished to demonstrate his royal power by fulfilling every whim, even along this line, this would not be surprising.

Jonathan and David’s parting scene in the field. Schroer and Staubli draw attention to the “field” (sadeh, H7704, or “open country”), where Jonathan and David meet repeatedly, as a place of hiding and refuge and also as a place where sometimes lovers go to be alone. Three times the Bible tells us that Jonathan and David met together secretly “in the field”: after Jonathan brokered a peace with Saul on David’s behalf (1 Sam 19:2–7a, esp. v. 3), when Jonathan and David disappear to make their second covenant (20:1–23, esp. v. 11), and for their intensely emotional parting scene prior to David’s flight (20:35–42, esp. v. 35). Zehnder acknowledges that when Jonathan says to David, “Come, let us go out into the field” (1 Sam 20:11, NRSV), this may recall a passage in Song of Songs where the Shulammite woman says to her male partner, “Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields . . .” (Song 7:11, NRSV),
no doubt both for secrecy and love-making. Yet he also notes that “to go out into the field” was everyday language that could mean many different things. So he holds that all that Jonathan and David really sought was a secret place to meet for “political and security reasons,” where they could talk about things which would be considered treasonous (i.e., Jonathan’s support for David as Israel’s next king), if overheard and reported back to Saul.81 Jonathan and David’s kissing in the parting scene (1 Sam 20:41) “does not have erotic connotations,” Zehnder maintains, but was simply a social convention, a sign of parting between two brothers-in-law.82 Susan Ackerman also is unable to accept Schroer and Staubli’s idea that Jonathan invites David to go out into the field for lovemaking, along with conversation,83 although it is alone in the field at their parting where we find them kissing, embracing, and weeping (20:41). As Nardelli writes, it is “not impossible” to view the field as providing a good place for an “amorous escapade.” Going outside to make love is well-attested in other cultures, e.g., Nardelli recalls a humorous episode involving Sophocles, the Athenian playwright, who took a boy outside the city walls to have his way with him, but then found afterward that he had been robbed of his himation (outer garment, L829). So when Jonathan invites David to go out into the field with him to make their second covenant (1 Sam 20:11), the reader who is alert to the sexual nature of their relationship may well remember that “this is the kind of place where lovers are free to have their way.” Later, David’s statement in his eulogy about how “pleasant [na‘im, H5276]” Jonathan had been to him (2 Sam 1:26) suggests that there were times when they were alone and they shared their physical passions.84 Furthermore, since Horus and Seth in various versions of the ancient Egyptian story could alternate sexual roles, we need not label David or Jonathan as exclusively “the top” or “the bottom” (Nardelli).85

But what specifically happened at their parting? We read: “In the morning [the next day after Saul’s outburst] Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David” (1 Sam 20:35, NRSV); and after shooting a ‘far’ arrow as a sign to David that it was not safe for him to return to court (20:22) and sending his young aide back to the castle (20:40), then “David rose from beside the stone heap [J. Green, literally: ‘from beside the south’ (of something)] and [came to Jonathan and] prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more [footnote: ‘Meaning of Heb uncertain’ at the end]” (1 Sam 20:41, NRSV). As Teresa Hornsby (2007) notes, “Two men holding each other, kissing and weeping, is not an image we expect to find in the Bible,” and yet here it is.86 Still, the Hebrew ending ‘ad david higdil (H5704, H7132, H1431) is even more puzzling, which the KJV translates as “until David exceeded” (20:41). Actually the older Septuagint Greek text here uses the verb ‘uperballō (‘to overshoot, to surpass, to outdo, or to exceed,’ L1860) instead of gadal (‘to grow, to become great, or to grow long,’ H1431), which at first might seem to support the ‘exceed’ translation. Yet, the Greek text at the end of this verse translates in full as: ‘And each kissed his dear one, and wept over his dear one, unto [or ‘until,’ heōs, L2193] of a great David exceeded’ (1 Sam 20:41, Van der Pool). The incomplete “a great . . .” points to a climax of some kind that happened at the end between these two men who were so “dear” to each other, although the ending, as it now stands, is “incomprehensible” (Hertzberg) and “something is missing” (Ackroyd), which may have been editorially “deleted” (Greenberg) because of its sexual nature. Hertzberg believed that the Hebrew originally read ‘ad david taklit gedola, meaning “until David grew large [to] completion [H8503].”87
Now Zehnder argues that **higdil** here, in the hiphil (causative) form of **gadal**, appears only twenty-two times in the Bible (besides 1 Sam 20:41) and nowhere else does it have a sexual connotation. Also, if this pointed to David having an ejaculation, then why doesn’t the text suggest the same for Jonathan? Zehnder believes that David’s ‘exceeding’ being separated from the pair ‘kissing’ by their ‘weeping’ weakens the case for reading the ending in a sexual way—although one surely should envision these emotions not as occurring in a strict sequence but rather as building up simultaneously. Also Zehnder asks why the author did not use a more sexually-explicit term here, like **raglehim** (H7272, “feet” = genitals, cf. Ruth 3:7) or a verb like **yada** (H3045, “to know [sexually],” cf. Gen 19:5, Judg 19:22) or **shakab** (H7901, “to lie down with [sexually],” cf. Lev 18:22, 20:13)?

Zehnder seems unaware of how reticent ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean writers were to speak openly about sexual acts between men (cf. the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*). Although some commentators interpret the Hebrew ending here in a temporal way, (e.g., Fokkelman: “They wept together, David the longer”),

**Nardelli** asks, “Should not [rather] the ‘great climax’ indicated in the Greek [Septuagint] allude to something sexual between the two men?” Why not read this as “until David has enlarged” or had an “erection”? Earlier Saul wondered whether David was “unclean” (1 Sam 20:26), which could refer to a bodily discharge like a seminal emission.

Nardelli also notes that only rarely do ancient Greek texts speak of homosexual intercourse without either being cryptic (obscure) or dealing with abusive situations. Thomas Römer and Loyse Bonjour deny that Jonathan and David are a homosexual couple, yet still they believe that there is too much homosexual evidence in the Samuel text for the pair not to have been lovers at some point. In their parting scene, words are simply inadequate to express their grief. They do not know how to articulate the connection between them, which has passed beyond the bounds of camaraderie into the realm of being lovers.

Rembert Truluck (2000) reads **gadal** here as meaning that David “was satisfied,” relating to his “great and overwhelming emotions” and his “[p]hysical love and affection,” although sex between them is “neither required or ruled out by this use of **gadal**.” Walter Dietrich (2007) notes that David who so far has never said or shown that he loved anyone—is he modest, self-centered or cold-hearted?—finally in the parting scene shows emotion, and what intense emotion it is. (Yet, one might also suggest that David, in his subservient, perilous situation, had simply kept his intimate thoughts and feelings to himself, especially related to being in a sexual relationship with another man.) Dietrich notes another time when David is described as losing control of his emotions, after his son Absalom is killed and he breaks down weeping and wailing loudly (2 Sam 18:29–19:4),

this time over the loss of his long-haired, attractive son (14:25–26) to whom he was closely attached. Rick Brentlinger (2007) notes how initially in the parting scene the “farmboy David” bows down to Jonathan, his social superior. Of course, this was standard protocol for any citizen coming into the presence of royalty (cf. 1 Sam 24:8, 2 Sam 9:6), although one might view David’s bowing three times here as probably more an expression of his love for the prince and of his grief, than simply paying homage. Brentlinger holds that **gadal** here may refer either to “overwhelming emotions or to becoming sexually aroused, or to both.” It could refer to a sexual encounter, although this cannot be based on this verse alone. Yet, when one considers the **trajectory** of the story—the loving relationship which these two men had, revealed in their repeated love pacts, along with the sexual content of Saul’s outburst—the larger picture points to something “far more than just a close, nonsexual friendship.” Would it be out of character for these two guys, who are sexually in love with each other and who now
kiss and weep, locked in each other’s arms, to want to share each other’s intimacy one more time? Was their kiss simply a “lightly brushing [of] both cheeks” in a traditional Middle Eastern fashion? Hardly. Instead we should think of the Shulammite’s cry for her lover: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine . . .” (Song 1:2, NRSV). As David Greenberg (1988) notes, the Hebrew Bible underwent extensive editing before reaching its final form—and explicit homosexual references could easily have been deleted or changed by its editors. Nevertheless, “homophilic innuendoes [gay-positive hints] permeate the story.”

Progression of the three covenants. After David had brought Goliath’s head to King Saul and had spoken with him for a short while (in his tent at the campsite?), then Jonathan (led David to his own tent and) “made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul [cf. REB: ‘had given his heart to David’]. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe [me’il, REB: ‘cloak’] that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor [maddim, REB: ‘tunic’], and even his sword and his bow and his belt” (1 Sam 18:3–4, NRSV). Perhaps Jonathan had watched his father tenderly dress the young man in his armor (maddim) and helmet (17:38) and give him his sword (17:39), but now he wanted to show David a greater love. The word maddim (H4055) always appears in the plural in Hebrew, although it often carries a singular meaning; and basically it refers to a piece of ‘clothing or garments’ of various kinds, sometimes armor (Strong). Now Zehnder follows the old line of reasoning, derived from William Moran (1963), which interprets Jonathan and David’s first covenant as a kind of ancient Near Eastern loyalty treaty, made sometimes between two equal partners and sometimes between an overlord and his vassal servants, and also calling upon a deity to witnesses the pledges made. However, Graeme Auld (2004) notes that we really do not know what Jonathan and David agreed upon in this first covenant, except that it was “based on love at first sight.” Stanley Grenz (1998) resists calling Jonathan and David’s covenant a “marriage” because it was not a public ceremony but only “a private declaration of loyal, committed friendship.” Yet, while this was a private pact (made in Jonathan’s tent), still it marked the beginning of a life-long commitment made by two people (till death do us part), with pledges of love made before the Almighty, which set these two men apart in a special category (“greatly beloved,” 2 Sam 1:26), even if only in their own eyes.

Nardelli (2007) notes that although Jonathan acts like a suzerain (sovereign or lord) in his devotion to preserving David’s life, this was not a loyalty treaty where the weaker party swears an oath to serve the stronger party. Although Jonathan the prince is much higher in social rank than David the lyre-player, even with the latter’s triumph over Goliath, the wording in 1 Sam 18:1–4 is “too intensely personal and sentimental” to be viewed as a political loyalty treaty. Also, such a treaty came from an adjuration (a command), whereas Jonathan and David’s covenant was freely made on both sides. Then, a loyalty treaty never had the stronger party offering himself as a free gift to the weaker party. Therefore, Nardelli concludes that it is more reasonable to view Jonathan and David’s first pact as a “marriage covenant,” although this was not for exterior eyes to see and even the two participants themselves probably viewed it originally as a kind of “brotherly alliance,” which then evolved over time. Marriage in the Bible was considered a form of covenant, ratified by an oath (Mal 2:14). Nardelli also notes that this first covenant gave Jonathan and David a certain “stamp of social respectability,” which “could otherwise not have been conceived by the archaic Israelite mind.” Of course, their love
was “a radical departure from acceptable norms,” and yet it was “more important in their own eyes than peripheral heterosexuality.” Here we have a successful “cover-up” placed on Jonathan’s “crush” on David, which later would be taken over and used in Davidic propaganda to advance nation-wide support for David’s ascent to the throne of Israel.108

Zehnder interprets Jonathan’s gifts not only as “a sign of friendship” but as a ‘symbolic investiture,’ recognizing that David would one day become king; and he compares 1 Sam 18:1–4 to 2 Kings 11:10.109 Zehnder even claims that Jonathan’s gifts were a sign that “the donor is ready to give his life for him [David]”110—even though Jonathan is not well-equipped to protect David minus his weapons, and he never leaves his father to support David. As to the 2 Kings 11:1–12 passage, the event related here happened some 180 years later in Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel) and had to do with some “spears and shields that had been King David’s” (v. 10), which the priest Jehoiada found in the Temple and then gave to some guards loyal to Joash, the young heir-apparent, to protect him until he could be officially installed as king. While 1 Sam 18:3–4 clearly says that Jonathan’s gifts were given to David because he loved him, nothing in 2 Kings 11 suggests that these later weapons were given as a gift or sign of love; they were simply used to protect the prince for a short while until he could be crowned king. Furthermore, the “covenant” given to Joash (v. 12) was not a loyalty treaty, but a copy of the Law (Radmacher).111 In other words, the content of these two passages is very different, and no significant comparison can be made between them.

Mark George (1996) viewed Jonathan’s stripping scene in the making of the first love pact as a ‘stepping out of his body’ to give David his ‘social bodies’ (family-wise as son of the king and political-wise as the heir-apparent)112—although Nardelli judges that George invests Jonathan’s gifts with “too much symbolism” here and of the wrong kind.113 Prince Jonathan surpasses his father by giving David all of his clothes and weapons at hand, including his robe and maddim (armor or tunic) and belt, and his sword and bow. Yet, he does not give David a helmet; and one must question whether he gave David any chest armor, as well, since if Jonathan was tall like his father (who stood “head and shoulders taller” than anyone else, 1 Sam 10:23), his armor would not have fit the younger, smaller David (“just a boy,” 17:33) any better than his father’s armor had (17:38–39). Moreover, since Saul seems to have removed Jonathan from active military duty, one cannot be sure that Jonathan even had brought armor along with him, although he still kept his sword and bow nearby. Therefore, maddim here (18:4) most likely refers not to armor but to Jonathan’s “tunic,” a knee-length, short- or long-sleeved garment (Matthews) that was worn next to the skin. (Jonathan would have had to take off his belt or sash [kagor, H2290] in order to take off his tunic.) So Jonathan’s gifts probably left the prince naked (Römer and Bonjour); and in this exceptional, spontaneous gesture, it can be held that Jonathan is “showing himself off” (Nardelli).114 Why otherwise was it necessary for him to completely undress in front of David, which seems to be the case?115 In fact, because clothing served as “social markers” in ancient times, defining a person’s social role and status (Matthews), in ancient Near Eastern tradition a man of high rank would never have stripped off his clothes and given them to another man—unless perhaps he was stricken by love. Therefore, Jonathan’s gifts must reveal (along with a certain political significance) both personal affection and an erotic interest in David (Römer and Bonjour).116 Rabbi Steven Greenberg (2004) also notes how “Jonathan takes off his vestments and weapons” here and then explains how his “act of dressing the young David in his own princely attire when they first meet expresses both
Jonathan’s instantaneous love and his wish, conscious or not, to divest himself of his royal identity. Saul is right. Jonathan is unconsciously in league with David.” He is “in love with David.” And the erotic nature of his dressing David in his own clothes is hard to explain away.\textsuperscript{117} Teresa Hornsby (2007) adds: “It is difficult not see homoeroticism just below the surface” in 1 Sam 18:1–4, and Jonathan’s gifts seem “excessively abundant.” He gives David his most prized and necessary possessions: his robe (his royal coat-of-arms) and his weapons (his favorites), which on occasion must certainly have stood between him and death.\textsuperscript{118}

In the second love-pact we read that “Jonathan made a covenant with David, saying, ‘May the LORD seek out the enemies of David.’ And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life” (1 Sam 20:16–17, NRSV). Nardelli holds that it is more likely that “by his love” here refers again to Jonathan’s love (rather than to David’s), which was so evident in the first covenant (1 Sam 18:1–4).\textsuperscript{119} Yet Zehnder holds that this second covenant reveals no love affair, but simply expresses Jonathan’s concern for the protection of David from Saul’s persecution\textsuperscript{120}—although this does not account for Jonathan’s instantaneous falling-in-love described in 1 Sam 18:1, the fact that Jonathan thereafter took “great delight in David” (19:1), the repeated expression of “love” recorded in 20:17, nor the sexual heat of Saul’s outburst (20:30). Nardelli questions whether the second pact may be considered a political loyalty treaty either, since Jonathan binds himself to David as the inferior party, even though he continues his role as his protector.\textsuperscript{121} In the third pact, then, Jonathan and David “made a covenant before the LORD,” agreeing that when David became king, Jonathan would serve as his “second” \textit{[mishneh, H4932] at his side} (1 Sam 23:17–18, NRSV). Zehnder contends, “In this chapter, the personal–emotional aspect of this relationship is totally absent”\textsuperscript{122}—although the content of the third pact surely portrays a deep, profound, and special closeness between these two companions. It should be expected, of course, with Jonathan visiting David at his camp, where he is surrounded by all of his rebel outlaws (22:1–2), that the prince’s words and actions would be circumspect and restrained. Still, the fact that Jonathan has made this perilous journey at all to seek out David, willing to face Saul’s murderous wrath if ever he found out about this visit and risking attack by David’s nervous guards (23:3), speaks volumes about Jonathan’s longing to see David again. Nardelli notes that in this third covenant Jonathan not only fully recognizes that David will one day become the next king of Israel, but now he makes a new covenant with him for the future, in which he envisions David as the lord and himself as his loyal servant. Yet the statement here is quite remarkable: “I shall be next to you” (cf. NLB, ESV) or “second to you” (cf. NJB), not as a co-regent but as your “double” or “alter-ego,” on a personal footing, as your “beloved” (Nardelli). Egyptian equivalents of the Hebrew word \textit{mishneh} include \textit{y-n-mrw} (“favorite, protégé”) and \textit{mrw-tj} (“beloved, favorite”), which translators understand to refer to a “beloved.”\textsuperscript{123} As Christopher Hubble (2003) notes, David and Jonathan formed a “beautiful partnership” which they intended to last a lifetime. It was “a loving and committed union,” with an “unrestrained and honest devotion the two young men share [even] in the face of intolerance and persecution.”\textsuperscript{124}

\textbf{David’s eulogy and aside directed to Jonathan.} At the end of David’s eulogy (2 Sam 1:19–27), written and sung to honor the departed Saul and Jonathan, David’s heart cries out: “I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother; / you were most dear to me; / your love for me was wonderful, / surpassing the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26, REB). Zehnder does note that the
most striking and powerful line of David’s aside here is “your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (NRSV). Yet he argues that David’s “erotic” love for women must be distinguished from Jonathan’s only “deeply emotional” love for David, and the categories ‘friendship’ and ‘intimate love’ can and must be distinguished here—showing that Zehnder has little awareness of how closely friendship and eroticism could blend together in ‘Greek love’ and also in ancient Near Eastern texts that speak of homosexual love. Zehnder also writes that ancient Near Eastern marriages generally were not entered into from a preceding emotional attachment but rather for “other, far more practical and mundane reasons.” Yet, in another place in his text, Zehnder recalls Jacob who ardently sought and obtained Rachel as his wife, because he was so determined and was “in love” with her (Gen 29:18, NIV). Although marriage did customarily involve a young man’s father making a contract with the prospective bride’s father (which included the paying of a bride price), this does not mean that some men were unable to do this on their own and marry women to whom they were greatly attracted. For example, Esau runs off and marries two Hittite women (Judith and Basemath, Gen 26:34–35), which displeased his parents, Isaac and Rebekah; and then later he married another Hittite woman and also a Hivite woman (Adah and Oholibamah, Gen 36:2), although Isaac did not want his sons to marry Canaanite women (28:1). Judah also apparently ran off, fell in love with, and married a Canaanite woman (Shua or Beth-shua, Gen 38:2, 1 Chron 2:3). On the other hand, Samson forced his devout parents to arrange a marriage with a Philistine woman in Timnah with whom he had fallen in love, although they did not approve of her (Judg 14:1–10). What to do with ‘willful’ sons? Also, any Israelite man (who could afford it) was free to take second and third wives, where presumably they had more freedom to select a bed partner for their attractiveness (as well as fruitfulness). Note, for example: Gideon, who had many wives (Judg 8:30); Caleb, a descendent of Judah, and his second wife, Jerioth (1 Chron 2:18); Jerahmeel and his second wife, Atarah (1 Chron 2:26); Ashhur and his second wife, Naarah (1 Chron 4:5); Mered and his second wife (1 Chron 4:17–18); Shaharaim, who after he divorced his first two wives, then married Hodesh and Hushim (1 Chron 8:8–11); David and the beautiful Abigail (1 Sam 25:3, 39–42) and especially Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2–5, 27). Solomon must have been attracted to some of his seven hundred wives (1 Kings 11:3), as he was to the dark-skinned Shulammite woman (Song 1:1–2, 5, 12–17); and Rehoboam had eighteen wives (2 Chron 11:21). On one occasion Benjaminite men were allowed to abduct Israelite women dancing before the Tabernacle at Shiloh (Judg 21:20–21), each one carrying off for a wife whomever caught his eye. Also, Israelite men could take one or more concubine(s) to whom they were attracted, probably without parental assent, including: Nahor, Abraham’s brother, and Reumah (Gen 22:24); Abraham and Keturah (1 Chron 1:32); Eliphaz, Esau’s son, and Timna (Gen 36:12); Caleb and Maacah (1 Chron 2:48); Manasseh, Joseph’s son, and his Aramean concubine (1 Chron 7:14); Gideon and his concubine (Judg 8:31); the Levite priest of Ephraim and his concubine (Judg 19:1ff); Saul and Rizpah (2 Sam 3:7); David with numerous concubines (2 Sam 5:13); Solomon with three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3); and Rehoboam with sixty concubines (2 Chron 11:21). Sexual hormones being the powerful motivators that they are, marriages resulting from physical attraction rather than cool parental choice may not have been as unheard of in ancient Israel as Zehnder suggests, not to mention the taking of concubines. At least, Song of Songs sings the praises of falling in love, erotic passion, beautiful bodies, and sex in the fields. Besides, Jonathan and David in their unusual love pact saw no need for following heterosexual protocols, including getting parental consent or paying a bride price.
Looking closely at David’s aside to Jonathan (1 Sam 1:26), Ackerman notes that David “perceived Jonathan to have loved him in a way analogous to the sexual-emotional way in which a woman (or wife) would love a man, and it implies also that David returned that love, finding it to be something ‘wonderful,’ in fact more wonderful than the love he had received from the women with whom he had been sexually involved” (i.e., Abigail and Ahinoam). Saul Olyan (2006) notes how David’s use of the word ‘love’ in his aside, rather than squaring with the use of this word in ancient Near Eastern political treaties, actually “subverts” the loyalty treaty idea, with David’s “unexpected and even startling observation about Jonathan’s love” which was “sexual-emotional” in nature. “[T]here was more to their relationship than simply a covenant bond,” and viewing a sexual involvement here is “strengthened by the observation that David is often portrayed as a nonconformist and even a manipulator of ritual and social conventions,” which can be seen, e.g., when he abruptly stops weeping when he receives news that Bathsheba’s first, sickly child has died (2 Sam 12:18–20). Römer and Bonjour note that in the end both the Samuel story and the Gilgamesh epic speak of a profound relationship between two men, of a kind in antiquity that sometimes appeared between two male heroes, especially noted at a royal court. David’s eulogy expresses the loss of a love which he feels for no one else and a sense that he will never forget his departed companion and their love. Moreover, the conjugal metaphor here (comparing their love to that between a husband and a wife) points not only to the complementary nature of their relationship but also to its sexual expression.

Related to David’s calling Jonathan “[my] brother [ak, H251],” Zehnder argues that this term is used only once in the Hebrew Bible with an erotic sense (Song 8:1), although he also notes that “sister” is used five times in Song of Songs to refer to the king’s beloved (4:9, 10, 12; 5:1, 2). Still, with the manner in which whispered rumors and juicy gossip usually circulate in court circles, surely the closeness and intimacy of Jonathan and David’s relationship did not remain a secret for long. In fact, it may have been through such gossip or servant reports that Saul learned that Jonathan was showing ‘special’ attention to and probably having sex with David (1 Sam 20:30). Zehnder may be correct in saying that David’s words to Jonathan in his eulogy could have been understood in a non-sexual way (by some hearers), including the term “brother,” but this does not mean that there were not some, especially with connections to the court, who did not know better and who would have recognized immediately the real sexual meaning of David’s words addressed to the departed prince. Olyan believes that David’s application of the term “brother” to Jonathan (2 Sam 1:26) was part of treaty covenant language, although it also appears to have been used in “an intentionally subversive way.” Nardelli notes that interpreting “brother” in any text is very difficult, because this term was commonly used in ancient brotherhood ties without necessarily inferring a sexual connection. Therefore, based on the appearance of this term alone, it is “highly tricky” to distinguish between ‘blood brothers’ and ‘intimate pals.’ Still, Nardelli calls it “astonishing” to find David ranking the “love of a pal” (“my brother”) higher than female love. Striking too is his statement that “you were very sweet [na’im, H5276; NRSV: ‘beloved’] to me,” for na’im used with the perfect (past) tense appears only here and in Song of Songs 7:6, where the king’s beautiful beloved is also called na’im. Also, hassebi (H6643), appearing at the beginning of David’s eulogy (2 Sam 1:19), which has been translated as “Your glory [O Israel]” (NRSV) or “The beauty [of Israel]” (KJV), really is meant to refer to Jonathan (Fokkelman, Youngblood, Cartledge, Nardelli) and so identifies the prince as the primary focus of this poem. Then related to “The [Archer’s] Bow,” the title given by David to his eulogy song, Zehnder notes that the great
majority of uses of qeshet (“bow,” H7198) in the Hebrew Bible clearly refer to the military weapon; and in only three cases may a sexual connotation be considered (Gen 49:24, Job 29:20, 1 Chron 8:40).\footnote{The first and second verses here might refer poetically to the sexual vigor of Joseph and of Job, while the third passage speaks of “men who were mighty warriors, bowmen, having many sons and grandsons, one hundred and fifty” (RSV), which might describe the hyper-sexual activity of Ulam’s sons—although such a connection is somewhat speculative, as Zehnder notes.\footnote{If the title (“The Bow”) of David’s eulogy was intended to be a sly reference to Jonathan’s phallus and sexual prowess, this is hard to prove definitely—although still some interpreters are intrigued by the Bow title, such as Rabbi Steven Greenberg (2004), who suggests that Jonathan’s arrow-shooting practice preceding the pair’s parting scene marks their encounter as being “strongly homoerotic, if not sexual.”\footnote{At least, it cannot be denied that the bow and arrow appear repeatedly as masculine phallic symbols in ancient Near Eastern literary texts (Hillers).\footnote{Whatever the case here, Steven Greenberg concludes, “[T]he narrative description of Jonathan and David’s relationship in the Books of Samuel is guardedly but surely erotic.”\footnote{Summary. The ancient Greeks preferred not to write openly about sex between men but rather focus on the physical beauty of a male hero, which then anticipated male sexual desire and erotic response; and the same may be said of similar Mesopotamian references. The lack of a recorded response on David’s part to Jonathan’s “love” before the prince’s death can most reasonably be explained by the shame that was universally attached in ancient times to any male who became the recipient of homosexual passion. If the terminology in 1 Sam 18:1–4 would have been applied to a man and a woman, no one would have questioned for a moment that it expressed erotic attraction; and the love between David and Jonathan is so great that nothing, not even the love of Princess Michal, can separate them. Ample OT evidence shows that shame was frequently associated with nakedness and the genitals; and the ambiguous “choosing [David]” or becoming his “companion” in Saul’s insult must be read as a homosexual reference, because of its clear sexual context. The pair’s repeated secret meetings alone in the “field” (away from the castle) certainly suggest that they had found a secret place where Jonathan could become “greatly beloved” to David (2 Sam 1:26), in physical union. Also, ‘ad David higdal, literally “until David exceeded” in the Hebrew (KJV) or ‘came to a great climax’ in the Septuagint Greek (van der Pool), points to something beyond prolonged kissing and weeping; and the damaged ending suggests that something was deleted from it or changed, arguably an original reference to David’s sexual arousal and relief in Jonathan’s arms (and then the latter’s response). Finally interpreters are beginning to realize that the first covenant says nothing explicit about a political loyalty covenant, and it is highly unlikely that David revealed the dangerous and dark secret of his royal anointing to the Prince when they first met—although Jonathan sensed early on David’s remarkable gifts and God’s blessing upon his life; and perhaps he also envisioned in David a way to escape the constraining burdens of kingship. In any case, Jonathan removes all of his clothes and places them tenderly on David (who first has to undress), so that both of them get a good look at the other. By the second covenant, however, Jonathan senses that David will probably one day become king; and by the third covenant he has designed a way to remain by his side when he does come to throne, as his beloved companion. Most clearly in David’s final words to Jonathan (2 Sam 1:26) his comparison of the prince’s love for him to that of women points to an undeniable, passionate sexual–emotional bond between them.}}
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CHAPTER 11
Conclusion

David would not have told his dangerous secret to Prince Jonathan – Prior to the first pact, Samuel, who was at odds with Saul (1 Sam 15:35) and who came under false pretense to Bethlehem (to sacrifice a heifer to the Lord, 16:1–3) but really to anoint David as the next king of Israel (16:13), must have warned Jesse, his family and David not tell anyone about this, since if word reached King Saul this could very well lead to all of their deaths, for treason. David would hardly have revealed such a dark, dangerous secret to the Prince when they first became close friends; and as Saul’s former lyre-player, David had not forgotten the king’s unpredictable fits of evil madness (16:14, 16, 23). Still, Jonathan could see that David was destined for great things; and since Saul had apparently removed Jonathan from active military duty after his troops had shown an allegiance to the prince over their king (1 Sam 14:24–45, esp. vv. 43–45), Jonathan could have envisioned the divinely-blessed giant-slayer as the new military ‘saviour’ of Israel—and yet a leader who lacked and needed fine weapons for warfare, since only Saul and Jonathan in Israel were allowed by the Philistines to have swords and bring them to their metalsmiths to be sharpened (1 Sam 13:19–22). Moreover, perhaps the free-spirited Jonathan didn’t really relish the thought of one day taking up the heavy, confining burdens of kingship and David presented him a way out, if they could become close friends so that the prince was not killed in the transfer of the throne to another family. Or, perhaps Jonathan was simply willing to give up the throne for the man he loved. Other royal heirs have turned away from the throne for romantic reasons, such as Frederick the Great (1712–1786) of Prussia who at the age of 18, before he became king, tried to run away with a beloved lieutenant friend, or Edward VIII (1894–1972), king of Great Britain and Ireland, who abdicated after only 325 days of reign, so that he could marry a divorced Catholic woman with whom he had fallen in love.¹ More important, J. P. Fokkelman (1986) warns against taking what we know about the outcome of David’s story as the “starting point” for our understanding of the making of the first covenant, since at this time “it is not at all self-evident that the hero’s career will terminate in [his] succession to the throne.” In fact, at times it will look like David “has one foot in the grave, in terms of power and political opportunities,” with Saul’s intent and attempts to kill him. Some interpreters seem to think that Jonathan had “clairvoyant intuition” here, able to see ahead to David’s reign; yet Fokkelman writes, more realistically the prince only had eyes of faith able to perceive “the enormous potency in David’s actions” and so he “reacted with gestures full of symbolism,” which do not become explicit until the making of the second covenant (1 Sam 20:14–17).²

The nature of the “field” where Jonathan and David secretly met – Sadeh (H7704) refers to the “open countryside,” which could refer to any area outside a walled city (or castle?), including either cultivated land or uncultivated areas.³ In Jonathan and David’s case, the “field(s)” where they met must have been within waking distance of Saul’s castle (1 Sam 19:3) and, for their parting, an open space probably owned by the king (where Jonathan could freely practice his archery undisturbed, 20:35) which also offered a place or places to hide (20:41), although the Hebrew in the latter verse only says that David came “from beside the south [of something],” NRSV; cf. J. Green). Jonathan probably did not do archery practice in a grain field (where it would be hard to retrieve his arrows), but rather in a plain, although perhaps grassy,
spot. English translations usually identify David’s hiding place as a kind of “stone heap” (Moffatt, RSV, NRSV, ESV), “mound” (NEB, NJB, REB, CEV, NAB), or “stone pile” (cf. GNB2, NLT)—although other translations stay closer to the Hebrew text with simply “a place toward the south” (KJV), “the south edge of the field” (LB), or “the south side” (UNASB). So, where might Jonathan and David have found a hidden place to meet, near Saul’s castle? Perhaps in a grain field if the grain was tall and near harvest time (1 Sam 6:13), or perhaps under the shade of a large tree (1 Sam 21:6), or even better in a cave in a ridge on Saul’s property, which would have offered them a secluded, cool place to talk and relax in the heat of the day. At least, caves are very common in the sandstone and limestone deposits of Palestine, were used for storage as well as burial places (Harrison). Abrahám’s burial “field” purchased for Sarah near Mamre (ca. 18 miles south of Jerusalem) contained trees and a cave (Gen 23:17–18). Yet, caves also were used as hiding places, e.g., by the “five kings of the Amorites” at Makkedah (ca. 18 miles west of Jerusalem, Josh 10:5, 16); by the Israelites when they were attacked by the Midianites (from the south, Judg 6:2); by Saul’s soldiers between Michmash (near Saul’s capital) and Gilgal (near the Jordan River), fleeing from the Philistines (1 Sam 13:4–6); by David hiding from Saul (in Adullam’s Cave, ca. 17 miles southwest of Jerusalem, 1 Sam 22:1–2); and by a hundred prophets hidden by Obadiah from King Ahab of Samaria (in the north) in two caves (1 Kings 18:4).

**VIEWS FAVORING J&D WERE HOMOSEXUAL**

Comstock writes, “I do not doubt that homosexuality was not socially accepted during most of biblical times. I do assume, however, that some people desired same-gender affection and sexual contact.” Jonathan Kirsch reminds us that we should not be blind to the “earthiness and ribaldry [vulgarity]” that is part of the Bible, and “nowhere are these qualities more extravagantly on display than in the biography of David.”

**THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN A HOMOSEXUAL COUPLE**

J. P. Fokkelman (1986) writes that one cannot claim that “Jonathan and David were most definitely not gay.” Walter Brueggemann (1990) writes that David, in his eulogy, speaks of Jonathan’s physical Attractiveness (KJV: “pleasing”) and elemental devotion (KJV: “wonderful”); and together these words point to a “peculiar and precious bonding.” Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1993) note that “it is quite possible that Jonathan could have been bisexual,” although their love went unconsummated. Jens Weizer (1995) writes that Jonathan and David’s relationship “was no gay relationship,” and yet “in a certain sense it was perhaps on the way being just that.” David Jobling (1998) writes, “Nothing in the text rules out, and much encourages the view that Jonathan and David had a consummated gay relationship.” A. A. Anderson notes (1989) notes that the language of David’s eulogy may suggest a homosexual interpretation, the general attitude of the OT would seem to contradict this. Yet, as Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli (2000) note, one can never understand everything
that went on Israel simply applying Biblical law (e.g., Lev 18:22, 20:13); rather one has to consider Israel’s larger cultural context and influences, including, e.g., the Epic of Gilgamesh which clearly contains homoerotic motifs.

THEY WERE A HOMOSEXUAL COUPLE
The Monk of Malmesbury (ca. 1326?) compared Edward II’s love Piers to that of Jonathan for David and Achilles for Patroclus.

David Damrosch (1987) writes that with Jonathan it was “love at first sight,” a love that was familial (as between brothers), political (offering loyalty to David), and erotic (romantic and homosexual). Their friendship “has clear overtones of a relationship of husband and wife,” suggesting even a “quasi-marriage.”

Their relationship in the text is developed “far beyond anything that would have been required simply to assure the audience that David and Jonathan were close friends,” meaning that it has both “political expression and erotic overtones.”

Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1993) write that Jonathan and David’s having a homosexual relationship “finds many anchor points in the text.”

John Boswell (1994) noted how early gay Christians found a “hallowed tradition” for their same-sex love in the story of Jonathan and David.

Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1993) note that not a few interpreters have read Jonathan’s “love” as a symbol for political commitment, borrowed from ancient treaty language and a “highly prejudicial decision.” Instead, as Steven McKenzie (2000) points out, “it is hard to believe that Jonathan would give up his future as king to someone he had just met.” Fewell and Gunn see Jonathan ‘striping’ for David in the first covenant,

and Jonathan Kirsch (2000) even “flirting,” as he puts his clothes on the naked David.

Jonathan Kirsch (2000) notes that much energy has been expended to explain away David’s declaration of love for Jonathan in his eulogy, which suggests an undeniable homoerotic subtext.”

Jonathan is passionately smitten with love for David on the very first day they meet. The “passion in David’s elegy cannot be overlooked, and its plainspoken references to love between men cannot be so easily explained away.” Finally in his eulogy “David openly declares the passion he felt toward Jonathan.” Here there is an “undeniable homoerotic subtext.”

Susan Ackerman (2005) notes that there is no reason why Jonathan’s “love” for David cannot, and should not, refer here to a “homoeroticized relationship.”

Jonathan’s bracketing Michal’s relationship with David points to the men have having a marriage-like relationship. “Brother” could be used by one male to refer to another male as “the object one one’s sexual desire.”

THEY ENTERED INTO A LIFE-LONG LOVE PACT
Johannes Pedersen (1926) believed that when Jonathan gave David his clothes and weapons, David was “imbued with his essence” and shared “in his very being.”

William McKane (1963) held that through this they ‘became one flesh.’

Hans Hertzberg (1964) held that by giving David his clothes, Jonathan gave him himself.
Gary Comstock writes (1993) that David was Jonathan’s ‘fellow lover,’ and their original pact was made simply to “love each other and keep each other safe.”

Barbara Green (2003) holds that “love” in 1 Sam 1:26 implies covenant as well as personal commitment; and also the sexual element is strong, as well. Jonathan seems “oddly praised” here since what is missing it what one would expect: some reference to the prince’s unceasing efforts to help David.

THEY HAD SEX

George Henry wrote (1955) that Jonathan and David definitely had a sexual relationship, with the love-struck Jonathan the aggressor and David the unreservedly responsive recipient, although for David this would be a passing phase.

Raphael Patai (1960) noted that the homosexual love of Jonathan and David is described with the same terms and phrases used to describe the (sexual) love of a man and woman, and David’s lament exudes the same spirit that pervades Plato’s Symposium.

Hans Hertzberg (1960) notes that the Hebrew as it stands in 1 Sam 20:41 is “incomprehensible,” and Peter Ackroyd notes that “something is missing here,” and so one must turn to the older Septuagint, which reads “‘until [David] grew large [to] completion.”

J. P. Fokkelman (1986) sees Jonathan and David sharing a love “that is stronger than death,” and when they have to part, they come “in[to] each other’s arms” and “enact their own version of Song 8:6”—which speaks of a love with “passion [with] flashes of fire, a raging fire” (NRSV).

Tom Horner (1978) writes that Jonathan and David not only had a “homosexual relationship,” but David was the prince’s “intimate [bed] companion.”

Samuel Terrien (1985) holds that Jonathan’s loving David with his “whole being” (nephesh) points to an “erotic aspect” in their friendship.

Warren Johannson (1990) renders “you have chosen / are a companion of” David, in Saul’s insult, as “you are the darling of the son of Jesse, to thine own shame . . . .” He also holds that ‘ad higdil in the parting scene points to David’s having an ‘erection, and ejaculation,’ and becoming the active partner, over which the editor drew a “discrete veil” of vagueness.

Erhard Gerstenberger (1996) points to how David in his eulogy declares that Jonathan’s love was more valuable to him that that of women, expressing emotions of great joy and bliss; and he notes how David, along with his later heterosexual relationships, could also have cultivated a (sexual) relationship with another man in his life, which has left its traces in the text.

David Jobling (1998) writes that Saul’s referring to Jonathan’s mother’s genitals in his insult brings Jonathan’s choice of David into the sexual realm; in fact, maybe the king is trying to place the blame for Jonathan’s homosexual inclination and behavior to the queen. Because of David’s comparison of Jonathan’s love to that of women in his eulogy, it makes sense to see here “a gay relationship in which Jonathan takes a female role.”

Silvia Schroer and Thomas Stabuli (2000) hold that that “David and Jonathan shared a homoerotic, and more than likely, a homosexual [sexual] relationship.” Jonathan is struck by love for David, when he first meets him, like “a bolt out of the blue”; they probably go “out into the field” to have sex, as well as talk, and Saul’s insult later shows that he is upset both about the “political scandal” and “homosexual love” in Jonathan’s attachment to David.
Susan Ackerman (2005) notes that Saul, in his insult, “perceives his son’s misdeed to be sexual as well as political.” Clearly, homoerotic love is expressed in David’s lament. Ackerman notes that with “such highly eroticized language and imagery” as is found in David’s lament and elsewhere in the story, it is “impossible in many respects not to interpret the text’s depiction of their relationship as sexual in nature,” even if this does not conform with how male-male sexual relationships are condemned elsewhere in the Bible.

Saul Olyan notes that the phrase “love of women” is usually understood as a reference to sexual-emotional love. 

NOTES

Summary of conservative views and their rebuttal – Earlier arguments against Jonathan and David sharing a homosexual relationship offered by Stanley Grentz (1998), William Webb (2000) and Robert Gagnon (2001) tended to include the following arguments: (1) The love language in 1 Sam 18:1, typical of ancient Near Eastern political treaty terminology (between either an overlord and his vassals, or between two rulers of equal standing), expresses the prince’s loyalty given to David as the next king of Israel’s, while his gifts (18:4) symbolize his transfer of the office of heir-apparent to David (just as Saul tearing Samuel’s robe symbolized the loss of his kingdom, 1 Sam 15:27-28), although Jonathan loved David like all of the Israelites loved their new hero and there was a genuine heart-felt commitment here. David’s use of “your servant” (20:3) and his bowing before Jonathan (20:41) also convey political overtones. (2) Jonathan and David both married and fathered a child or children. (3) The Levitical law (Lev 18:22, 20:13) strongly forbade homosexual relations, under the penalty of death; and therefore it is unlikely that a Bible writer would include homosexual details in his record. (4) There is nothing homosexual to be seen in two men kissing in the Mid-East (1 Sam 20:41), and men in ancient times shared a high level of devotion to one another without it being sexual. (5) Saul in his insult only shames Jonathan for his support of David’s ascendancy, thereby jeopardizing his own princely right. (6) David in his eulogy, by saying that Jonathan’s love was better than that of women (2 Sam 1:26), meant only that David received more selfless kindness from the prince than from the women in his life, or this may be dismissed as poetic hyperbole. The term “brother” (2 Sam 1:26) probably points to David being Jonathan’s brother-in-law. Gagnon rejects homosexual behavior because it is “a violation of the gendered existence of male and female ordained by God at creation.”

Response – Brentlinger (2007) – In ancient times, some warriors were heterosexually married while also having a male lover. It is also possible that David was bisexual, experiencing attraction for both men and women. We should not be surprised that both Jonathan and David marry, which was one of the expected duties of royalty. Yet, this in no way diminished their love for and devotion to each other; and David remains true to his covenant to Jonathan ever after his death.

Dietrich (2007) – The fact that David and Jonathan both had wives does not mean that earlier they could not have shared a homosexual relationship. Give the general negative attitude toward homosexuality in the ancient Near East, it would be very difficult to assume that the narrators meant to describe them as a homosexual couple, if they intended to present a positive
description. Since “love” has many meanings, it is difficult to determine what the nature of their relationship was. 69

Hornsby (2007) – A common misconception holds that a person only has desire for one gender. However, in the ancient world we know that a ruler often had a wife, might also take a mistress and a young male lover, as well. One of the lessons we should take home from the story of Jonathan and David is that men who marry may father children may also harbor sexual desires for other men. 70

Over and over Zehnder resorts to sophistry (the display of clever but faulty and weak arguments) and speculation (pulling loose straws from other distant, not really-related OT passages), rather than seeking a neutral-minded, textual-based, and carefully-argued interpretation. In fact, he violates four fundamental principles of Biblical interpretation: (1) The specific context is most important in determining the precise meaning of any word. (2) Strong interpretative points have real roots in the passage itself. (3) The simplest explanation is often the best one, over convoluted hypotheses. (4) Sometimes common-sense observation of human nature today can shed light on social actions in ancient times.

Conclusion

DID SAUL AND DAVID HAVE A SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP? – Notes

Jennings (2005): When David steps out to fight Goliath, the Philistine giant sees only another “pretty boy,” a chief’s “boy-toy” perhaps, and not someone to be taken as a serious warrior. Of course, it can be held that Saul’s earlier relationship with David soured because of his great success as a warrior and his resulting popularity. Yet, also, if Saul had taken David as his “boy-companion,” Jonathan may have appeared as his rival for David’s affections, after they met (1 Sam 18:1-4). 71 So it is Saul’s jealousy and madness that drives David (partially, at least) into Jonathan’s arms. 72

Relating to Saul’s insult, it is never explained clearly how Jonathan’s friendship with David will bring David closer to the throne or deprive Jonathan of his succession, unless “Jonathan is so smitten with David that he could refuse him nothing, even preeminence in the kingdom.” The most remarkable statement here is that Jonathan’s relationship with David is somehow to “the shame of your mother’s nakedness,” the latter regularly associated with the sexual act. Lev 18:7 reads, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother” (NRSV). Jonathan has not laid with his mother sexually, of course; but perhaps by ‘uncovering David’s nakedness’—if David had slept previously with Saul—would have the implication of ‘uncovering Saul’s nakedness,’ as well as well as that of his mother, the queen. 73 Jennings thinks this makes than if just Jonathan and David were sexually involved. Jonathan’s disgrace lies not only in his ‘dressing-down,’ but in the way his private sexual affair has become public knowledge. This also goes a long way to help explain the extent of Saul’s lashing out at David. 74 In other words, Saul’s jealousy has “a strong undertow.” 75

Relating to Saul’s life being spared by David (1 Sam 24, 26), these chapters underscore the loyalty of David to the king and the irrational character of Saul’s murderous rage. However, the first episode seems far more intimate and emotionally charged than the second. 76 The scatological humor of Saul squatting in the cave to defecate, while David sneaks up to cut off part of his robe would surely have elicited laughter from the ancient audience. Jennings sees
“far more emotional charge” in the relationship between David and the king in the first story, than in the second. 77 Here David calls after the king as he leaves the cave (1 Sam 24:7-8), whereas the second encounter take place more in the public arena (1 Sam 26:13). 78 It is here, in the first encounter where David calls Saul “my father” (24:11) and Saul calls David “my son” (24:16). In the second encounter, David calls Saul only “my lord” (26:18), while three times Saul calls David “my son” (26:17,21,25).

Brentlinger (2007) – Nothing in the text where it says that “Saul loved him [David] greatly” (1 Sam 16:21) specifically points to a romantic, sexual attraction. 79 Saul brings David to court – Moran pointed to Saul’s ‘loving’ David as a symbol of political loyalty 80 but as Robert Gordon wrote, it is unnecessary to read “political or legal commitment” into 1 Sam 16:21, where 81, where we read that, where David appeared Saul for the first time, “Saul loved him greatly, and be [David] became his armor-bearer” (1 Sam 16:21, NRSV), besides his lyre-player (16:16-18).

Probably Saul has more than one armor-bearer, cf. NIV: “one of his armour-bearers.” 82

Schroer and Staubli think that Saul also might have had a sexual relationship with David, based on the text “Saul loved [the young David] greatly” in 1 Sam 16:21 (NRSV). 83

Jennings suggests that Saul’s references to the nakedness of Jonathan’s mother may relate to Lev 18:7-8, which states that a man who ‘uncovers the nakedness’ (genitals) of his father also ‘uncovers the nakedness’ (disgrace) his mother, who lies with the father. Could therefore the reference to the nakedness of Jonathan’s mother in Saul’s insult (1 Sam 20:30) be interpreted as a reproach on Jonathan, who had slept with David, who earlier had slept with Saul, who then had slept with Jonathan’s mother? 84 Earlier David Greenberg saw a “homophilic innuendo” (homosexual hint) in the Biblical statement that when Saul first saw the young, handsome musician David, he “loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer” (1 Sam 16:21 NRSV). 85

Schroer and Staubli also saw with Saul, David and Jonathan a possible “[love] triangle,” writing that since nowhere in the Bible is Saul’s relationship to David described without emotion, it is worth considering whether the three of them might have been bound together by ties of “love, passion and jealousy.” 86

Jennings proposed that after the old king Saul took on the “pretty youth” (David) as his “boy-companion,” Jonathan, the king’s eldest son and a proven warrior, appears as his competitor; and then as often happens with jealousy-in-love, Saul ends up driving David into the protective arms of Jonathan. 87 ME: A more simple reading of Saul’s insult, however, would be that Jonathan by having sex with David had simply brought shame on himself, as well as on the woman who bore him.

In a later episode in the wilderness, where David has opportunity to kill Saul, defecating by himself in a cave, but does not (1 Sam 24), Jennings sees an “emotional charge” that suggests a “picture of a love relationship gone sour.” David cuts off a piece of Saul’s robe in the dark cave, but then “was stricken to the heart” (24:5 NRSV), an “extreme reaction,” Jennings holds, which may point to David’s inability to kill his former lover. 88 He notes the “emotional charge” of David calling Saul “my father” and Saul calling David in return, “my son” (1 Sam 24:11,16). Yet, as one of the Lord’s anointed himself, one can understand how David would have felt it important to set an example by not killing another of the Lord’s anointed. Also, the
term “father” could be a term of honor ascribed to a ruler (cf. “the father of Tekoa” and “father of Ziph,” titles given to the rulers of these two Judean towns, 1 Chron 2:24, 42) or simply recall the fact that David was still Saul’s son-in-law (Youngblood). Jennings also goes too far in seeing a sexual element in the statement that “Saul lay, with Abner,” (1 Sam 26:5 NRSV, italics added). The true intent here is made clearer in the LB, which notes that “King Saul and General Abner were sleeping inside a ring formed by Saul’s slumbering soldiers” (26:5), a measure intended to guard the king’s life, which had already been put at risk (chap. 24). Jennings suggests that earlier, as just as Saul took David as his armor-bearer, Jonathan does the same—although this seems much too lowly a position for one who has just killed the giant Goliath; and the acclaimed national hero is right away appointed by Saul as a commander “over the [whole] army” (18:5).

Dietrich (2007) – When David spares Saul’s life in the cave, we “cannot know why he was weeping—deep emotion, gratitude, desperation, or anger,” although he is obviously overwhelmed.

Greenberg, D. (1988) – David Greenberg holds that “sexual jealousy runs through the [Samuel] narration like a red thread.” There could have been (homo)sexual references in the text that were deleted by later editing, yet still “homophilic innuendoes permeate the story” of Saul and David and Jonathan.

Use of sexual language in the OT – Most interpreters fail to recognize how the ancient Hebrew writers wrote about sex in a manner that was both blunt and direct, as well as often elusive and ambiguous. Homosexual gang-rape, daughters getting their father drunk then lying sexually with him (Gen 19), incest of various kinds, sex with a menstruating woman, visiting sacred male prostitutes, having sex with an animal (Lev 18:6-23), a male lover’s “fruit” (love-making) that is sweet and weakening, a man sucking a woman’s breasts, and sneaking off to have sex among the bushes and grapevines (Song 2:3, 7:7-8,11-12) are only a few examples of frank sexual topics included in the Bible. However, also, euphemistic language abounds, as seen in “thigh” (Gen 24:2), “feet” (Ruth 3:7b-9), “hand” (Isa 57:8b, NRSV) and “nakedness” (Lev 18:6) used to refer to the male genitals (Bandstra and Verhey). In fact, ‘erva (nakedness) used throughout Lev 18:6-19 points specifically to uncovering another’s genitals for sexual play and union—and so certainly the reference in Saul’s insult to the “nakedness” of Jonathan’s mother (really referring to Jonathan) in 1 Sam 20:30 clearly must also be read as pointing to sexual play and union going on between the prince and David. The phrase “great of flesh” is used to describe the Egyptians’ huge phalluses (Ezek 16:26, cf. Zimmerli, Allen, Greenberg). “An accident at night” (Deut 23:10, J. Green) referred to a nocturnal emission.

Further, intimate sexual words are often omitted from the text, and must be supplied by the reader to really understand fully what is going on. For example, Rehoboam boasts that he will be more oppressive than his father Solomon, saying, “My little finger shall be thicker than my father’s loins [= penis]” (1 Kings 12:10, KJV; word in italics not in the Hebrew). Since Hebrew has a perfectly good word for “finger” (etsba, #676, “finger, toe, digit,” Strong; e.g., Ex 8:19; Lev 4:6; Deut 9:10; Isa 2:8), one has to wonder why the word was omitted here. Most likely Rehoboam held up an obscene finger gesture in place of the spoken word, as implied also in Isa 58:9 —thus making his reference to genitals even more potent. Where Onan “spilled it on the ground” (Gen 38:9, KJV), we have to fill in the missing “it” (semen), as Onan pulled his
organ out of Tamar’s vagina so that he came on the ground. Of course, the Hebrew had a word for “seed, semen” (zera, #2233); still there seems to be a hesitation here about describing what happened. What Canaan “had done” to the drunken Noah in his “nakedness” Noah (Gen 9:22,24-25) is conspicuously absent from the text, but seeing (ra’a, #7200) and “nakedness” (’erva) and the drastic curse suggest that something sexual occurred here—which was later removed from the original text, as being too offensive (von Rad, Cassuto, Nissinen). 100

**Ancient texts speaking of sensitive (homo)sexual elements in camouflaged ways.**

Great insight has been offered to those wishing to better understand the Jonathan and David relationship through breakthroughs that has made in identifying (homo)sexual elements in the “friendship” of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, in their great epic. In both stories there is an emphasis on male beauty, on the “seductive allure” (Irene Winter) and ‘gorgeous ripeness’ (E. A. Speiser) of Gilgamesh’s look, on his muscular body and the sexual appeal of his hair. Enkidu is also described as handsome, although much less is made of this. In a similar vein, in 1 Sam 16-17 David’s body and hair have a sensuous appeal; and although no mention is made of Jonathan’s appearance, although if he took after his father (9:2), he would have been good-looking, as well.

It has been noticed in the Gilgamesh epic how coitus is indicated by using the verb “caressed” (habahu), in statements which speak of Enkidu “caressing” the prostitute and of Gilgamesh dreaming of “caressing” his companion who will soon appear. 102 Later when Enkidu blocks the bridal chamber which Gilgamesh is about to enter with his “foot,” interpreters now hold that this word (as in Scripture) really is a euphemism for Enkidu’s stiff penis, which blocked the door, although the text presented this in such an ambiguous way that it can still be read (by those who are not alert to catch such loaded references) on the surface as “straight.” 103 Likewise, it would not surprising (and is probably the case), in the Samuel story, that David’s acknowledgement to Jonathan that Saul knows that ‘you like me’ (1 Sam 20:3) means that he is passionate in love with him, that Saul’s statement that Jonathan has “chosen” David to his shame (20:30) refers to their sleeping together, and David ‘exceeding’ at the final parting (20:41) refers to David’s having a final sexual encounter with Jonathan before they must part. In other words, in all these cases the words have a double meaning, a inoffensive surface meaning and also a deeper, more intimate meaning. It is most likely that hasebi (“beautiful gazelle”) at the beginning of David’s lament is not only a reference to all the brave warriors of Israel who lost their lives, but more specially also a reference to Jonathan, David’s beloved; and that there is a chance (although this is more speculative) that the title “Song of the Bow” is not only to a common masculine symbol of the bow and arrow, but more alludes to the prince’s genitals, which can shoot its arrows of love (semen) into David’s heart.

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ABBREVIATIONS

General

AcOr  Acta Orientalia, Copenhagen, Munksgaard, etc.
AD  Anno Domini, after the birth of Christ, the Christian Era
AOAT  Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ASORDS  American Schools of Oriental Research Dissertation Series
ASORMS  American Schools of Oriental Research Monograph Series
BA  Biblical Archaeologist, Atlanta
BC  Before the birth of Christ, before the Christian Era
Biblica  Biblica, Rome
CBQ  Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Washington, DC
Exp  Expedition, Philadelphia
GTJ  Grace Theological Journal, Winona Lake, IN
Hermes  Hermes, Weisbaden, Germany
HSS  Harvard Semitic Studies
IDBS  Keith Crim, ed., Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume, 1976
IJGL  International Journal of Greek Love, 1966
JBL  Journal of Biblical Literature
JEA  Journal of Egyptian Archaeology, London
JHS  Journal of Hellenic Studies, London
JNES  Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Chicago
JSB  Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., Jewish Study Bible (Tanakh Translation), 2004
LXX  Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures
MPM  Marco Polo Monographs, Warren Center, PA
NT  New Testament
OT  Old Testament
SAOC  Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization
SBLDS  Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
Shofar  Shofar, West Lafayette, IN
WTJ  Westminster Theological Journal, Philadelphia


VT  *Vetus Testamentum*, Leiden, The Netherlands

WA  *World Archaeology*, London

**Translations of the Bible**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Translation Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Amplified Bible, 1965</td>
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<td>ESV</td>
<td>Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2001</td>
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<td>GNBOT</td>
<td>Good News Bible: Old Testament, 1976</td>
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<td>KJV</td>
<td>Holy Bible, commonly known as the King James Version or the Authorized Version, 1611</td>
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<td>Lamsa</td>
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<td>LB</td>
<td>Living Bible, 1976</td>
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<td>Moffatt</td>
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<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible, 1960</td>
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<td>NEB</td>
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Books of the Bible

**Old Testament:**
- Gen (Genesis)
- Exod (Exodus)
- Lev (Leviticus)
- Num (Numbers)
- Deut (Deuteronomy)
- Josh (Joshua)
- Judg (Judges)
- Ruth
- 1 Sam (1 Samuel)
- 2 Sam (2 Samuel)
- 1 Kings (1 Kings)
- 2 Kings (2 Kings)
- 1 Chron (1 Chronicles)
- 2 Chron (2 Chronicles)
- Ezra
- Neh (Nehemiah)
- Est (Esther)
- Job
- Ps (Psalms)
- Prov (Proverbs)
- Ecc (Ecclesiastes)
- Song (Song of Songs (Canticles))
- Isa (Isaiah)
- Jer (Jeremiah)
- Lam (Lamentations)
- Ezek (Ezekiel)
- Dan (Daniel)
- Hos (Hosea)
- Joel
- Amos
- Obad (Obadiah)
- Jonah
- Mic (Micah)
- Nah (Nahum)
- Hab (Habakkuk)
- Zeph (Zephaniah)
- Hag (Haggai)
- Zech (Zechariah)
- Mal (Malachi)

**Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books**
- Tobit
- Judith
- Add Est (Additions to Esther)
- Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon)
- Sirach (Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach)
- Baruch
- 1 Esdras (1 Esdras)
- 2 Esdras (2 Esdras)
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Bruce Gerig held a bachelor’s degree (B.A. in Bible and theology) from Fort Wayne Bible College in Indiana and a master’s degree (M.F.A. in art studio and history) from Indiana University, and studied also at Washington University (St. Louis) and at Columbia. Moving to New York, he joined Columbia University Libraries in 1971, where he held varied positions in Acquisitions Services, until his retirement in May, 2006.

Mr. Gerig held many layperson leadership positions, including serving on the boards of directors, in three different MCC congregations in the New York metropolitan area – at Alpha and Omega MCC, MCC Hispana, and Christ the King MCC. In the past, he has attended evangelical, Pentecostal, Methodist, Episcopal, and interdenominational churches.

Mr. Gerig spent many years researching the Bible for himself and for the many ministries he was involved with and when investigating the Biblical account of Jonathan and David, he was shocked to discover how few Bible scholars investigated this special relationship between the two men of the Bible who loved each other, especially since one of them would become the King of Israel and the Jewish people.

Mr. Gerig was born May 27, 1936 in Fort Wayne, Indiana and passed away May 29, 2012 in New York City.