After *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003; see http://www.chgosem.edu/pdf/Jennings_fact_sheet_6-3-03.pdf), Jennings has now turned his attention to the study of homoerotic—that is, same-sex love and desire, fulfilled or otherwise—texts of “Ancient Israel,” in fact, in the Hebrew Bible, against the background of ancient Near Eastern and Greek, even Roman, civilizations. The book is written in colloquial language, and, indeed, I found the author’s use of language blunt, clever, entertaining (although at times overbearingly so), and fresh, which is not often the case in scholarly writings.

**Contents and Structure**

A preface and introduction are followed by the four chapters of part 1, “The Love of Heroes,” which focuses on stories about and around David in the books of Samuel. The topics of warrior love between soldiers and their younger companions in arms (ch. 1), an assumed love triangle of Saul, David, and Jonathan (ch. 2), and YHWH as a male (erotic) lover (ch. 3) are followed by reflections about the erotic nature of faith and the Hebrew faith in particular, leading up to the conclusion that “Homoeroticism therefore is the very fulcrum of biblical religion” (76).
Part 2 is entitled “YHWH’s Male Groupies” and follows from this conclusion to discuss the “strange world of erotically charged behavior, not among warriors but among males who seem to be possessed by YHWH’s erotic or phallic power” (77). The male groupies referred to are the “dancing queens” or “sons of the prophets,” with whom Saul is associated as well, often ecstatic and naked and as compared to Dionysus adherents (ch. 5). The 1 and 2 Kings texts about Elijah and Elisha’s resurrection or reawakening of male children by physical means, and Samuel’s night contact with YHWH (1 Sam 3) are followed by reflections about the nonjudgmental and longer-lasting (than that of warriors) homoerotic contents of prophetic behavior (ch. 6: “Boy Lovers”). A discussion of “southern,” that is, Jerusalemite, texts about temple functionaries of fertility rituals (i.e., qedeshim) culminates in a hypothesis that the function of these male “holy ones” in Yahwism entailed hallowed sexual practice (ch. 7: “Holy Hustlers”), a hypothesis that the author himself defines as circumstantial only.

In part 3, “Transgendering Israel,” Jennings moves from homoerotic soldier and cultic cultures, in which same-sex desire has no sense of (derogative) feminization or compromization of the desiring or desired subject’s masculinity, into what he sees as two instances of transgendering or feminization: prophetic treatments of “Israel” or members thereof as metaphorical “women,” including a transgendering in relation to YHWH (ch. 8: “Transgendered Israel’); and Joseph, especially in Gen 37 and 39, as a (wo)man, a “queer” figure mediating gender as well as other life divisions (194; ch. 9: “Joseph as Sissy Boy”).

Part 4 presents final “Questions.” On the question of the law and its objections to homosexuality, in opposition to the pictures emerging from the narratives, Jennings concludes that the prohibitions serve to silence the basically homoerotic nature of a religion whose human-divine love contents is played out between a male god and his male followers (ch. 10). A short chapter (11) examines same-sex groups or attachments among females, viewing Jephthah’s daughter and her companions in the light of Bacchae in Rome and the story of Ruth–Naomi as that of same-sex erotic attachment. An assumption about priority of female homoeroticism and its religious and community value—as in the case of Ruth–Naomi, antecedents of David—concludes the chapter. Chapter 12 (“The Question of Israel and Greece”) contains remarks about homoeroticism in the ancient Near East, including Greece but in fact dealing with Semitic cultures as well. Here the author rightly states that, although the comparison is interesting, there is no reason to assume that ancient Israel accepted or rejected homoerotic values specifically from its neighbors.
An epilogue (‘Jacob’s Wound”) takes the proceedings all the way up to Jesus and Christianity. A bibliography and a mixed index (concepts, issues, some biblical references, authors ancient to contemporary) conclude the book.

Clearly, then, the book’s structure is well organized: an exploration of male homoeroticism and homosexuality in two extended case studies of specifically male cultures: of soldiers and cult, including prophetic bands and human/god relations, in biblical narrative as compared to other ancient cultures; progressing into the shady area of male/female transgender analysis, in prophetic texts and in narrative; then turning back to the law; then a little about female homoeroticism/homosexuality; more about the Israel/cognates question; and a summary. There are many repetitions and cross-references, but these, as far as I can see, are a didactic tool for reinforcing the central message: (male) homoeroticism is not only present in biblical literature but also endemic and natural to this male-oriented culture and a defining trope/reality for the human/divine relations envisaged in it.

What Does Jennings Want?

As per his own and repeated declarations, Jennings wishes to set the record straight, especially for persons of (Judeo-)Christian persuasion who are taught that the Bible’s message concerning homosexuality, latent or actual, is wholly negative as per the law. He attempts to demonstrate this through rereading certain clusters of biblical texts after Mieke Bal’s “countercoherence” model, that is, against the grain and, in this case, in line with Queer theory (xi). His basic assumptions are that (1) the Hebrew Bible is astonishingly “open” and nonjudgmental about human sexuality in general, hence also about homoeroticism (apart from the law); and (2) that homoeroticism is a natural phenomenon, in the sense that it exists in every society. Most of the texts he counterreads are clustered in the books of Samuel and Kings, but not all. His conclusions, as might be expected, are far-reaching and radical.

Assessment

That homosexuality stands in opposition to the basic commandment to humanity to “be fruitful and multiply,” hence re-create itself, is a cliché. That severe prohibitions against homosexual behavior would feature in precisely the literature that is interested in propagating “the family” as a basic unit of self-procreating and re-creating society (Priestly literature? but not only) is once again no surprise. That a basically male (god) //male (human) religion whose secret and hidden witnessing symbol is male circumcision has homosexual or homoerotic contents is, once again, no great surprise (although I miss this in Jennings’s book; no entry for “circumcision” in the index, either). So far so good,
and therefore the attempt to “set the record straight,” by drawing on narrative and prophetic materials as against the law, and on comparative materials, is not new but certainly commendable, as is the wish to make things easier for people of faith. The wish, the intentions, are really honorable and worthy. And the premises, at least for some, can no longer seem scandalous. Or can they? Personally, I welcome any book that would discuss sexuality in the Hebrew Bible from a socially responsible and inclusive angle, especially those displaying partisan politics, as this one does.

But further, everything remains problematic. Yes, I would admit that some of the readings offered here attributing homoerotic or homosexual behavior or emotions to various male characters or figures in the Hebrew Bible are possible, against the backgrounds outlined above. But are they probable, against the basic “humanity re-creates itself” ideology? Are they feasible? Are they the only logical or possible ones? My own answer is, not really. A few examples will suffice here, without going too much into details.

Part 1 deals with David stories. The assumption is that there is a strong homoerotic content in warrior culture, as a background, and that there is a love triangle Jonathan–David–Saul. Now, this is of course a possibility. As is the possibility that Saul’s depression is caused by an age-inspired jealousy or by a clinical condition (psychic illness). Who could tell? I cannot, and I do not think that Jennings can, not with certainty. Is David so loving as Jennings claims, time and again? My impression is that David is loved, yes, but never loves in return. So speculation reigns. Possible, yes; true or false, difficult to “prove.”

Part 2, the resurrection of the two (near) dead boys by Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17 and 2 Kgs 4, respectively) is indeed problematic, not least because of its physicalities. However, does it amount to a “(Res) Erection” (99), awakening a boy through manipulating him sexually, thus giving him life and potency (104)? Hmmm. It can also be a miracle by contiguity; in any event, it is a miracle, so must it have a “natural” explanation?

With regard to part 3, already in Genesis Rabbah for Gen 39 Joseph is presented by the Jewish sages as an effeminate fop, and his attraction for persons of both genders has been widely noted, from the Aramaic Targum to Alice Bach and Mieke Bal. Does this make Joseph into a eunuch (186)? Does his robe/tunic (ketonet) define him as a transgender because it is also the name of the garment worn by virgin princesses in 2 Sam 13, moreover by a raped female princess (178), and therefore his brothers are enraged by his gender transgressing, his transvestite character or behavior, on top of his dreams?

I could go on. I could note that a lesbian link between Naomi and Ruth has been suggested before but is here taken further afield here in the service of a higher reality or destiny.
And so forth. But I can also stop here, overlook many fanciful comments that are perhaps possible, who knows, but not probable, and summarize.

In my opinion, this book is not grounded in Queer theory or any other theory of human sexuality, although it does mention some bibliographical sources (and omits others, important ones, in and outside biblical studies or classical studies; e.g., look in vain for Foucault or Stephen Moore or Virginia Burrus in the bibliography or index). Its counterreadings do not lead up to a “countercoherence,” as Jennings hopes very early in his work. The basic assumption—homoeroticism is present in biblical cultures and not always as negatively presented as in the law—is correct but not novel. The readings themselves are often flawed by overlooking details, and, although frequently possible, they are certainly not decisive and too often whimsical or plain unlikely. This is a brave attempt that goes for the overkill, to its own detriment. I am sure it will be popular.