

Chapter Title: "SURPASSING THE LOVE OF WOMEN": ANOTHER LOOK AT 2 SAMUEL 1:26 AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF DAVID AND JONATHAN

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Book Title: Authorizing Marriage?

Book Subtitle: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions

Book Editor(s): MARK D. JORDAN, MEGHAN T. SWEENEY and DAVID M. MELLOTT

Published by: Princeton University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sr6v.5>

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“SURPASSING THE LOVE OF WOMEN”

ANOTHER LOOK AT 2 SAMUEL 1:26 AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF DAVID AND JONATHAN

Saul M. Olyan

The love of Jonathan for David reported in the biblical text has been the focus of much attention from both nonspecialist commentators and professional biblical scholars. Many nonspecialists, and some biblical scholars, have claimed that texts such as 1 Sam. 18:1–3 and 2 Sam. 1:26 suggest that David and Jonathan shared a homoerotic love, with some arguing that this love was expressed sexually.¹ At the same time, most specialists addressing these texts have ignored or dismissed both sexual and nonsexual homoerotic interpretations. Instead, biblical scholars have often argued that the relationship of Jonathan and David is best understood as a close friendship, with a number of commentators underscoring the political dimensions of the love of Jonathan for David. According to these scholars, the rhetoric of love found in the biblical materials describing the relationship of Jonathan and David is clearly a manifestation of ancient West Asian covenant discourse, in which loyal partners in a political relationship—whether equal or unequal in status—are said to love one another, and refer to one another using the terminology of kinship (e.g., “brother” in parity relationships; “father” and “son” in treaties of unequals).² Though there can be no doubt that covenant discourse has indeed shaped the descriptions of Jonathan’s relationship to David, are the majority of specialist commentators correct to dismiss or ignore the homoerotic interpretation entirely? My purpose in this essay is to explore whether or not the biblical text may also suggest a homoerotic—and possibly sexual—relationship between Jonathan and David alongside the obvious covenant bond attested in both the prose narratives of 1 Samuel and in the elegy of 2 Sam. 1:19–27. The focus of my interest is the curious claim of David’s Lament with respect to Jonathan: “Your love for me was wondrous, surpassing the love of women” (2 Sam. 1:26). At the end of this investigation, I will consider briefly the implications of a homoerotic interpretation of 2 Sam. 1:26 for contemporary debate regarding gay marriages and same-sex unions.

Though rarely recognized by nonspecialists, the covenantal dimensions of the Jonathan/David materials are quite explicit and have been well

elucidated for the most part by scholars in the biblical field.³ 1 Sam. 18:1 states that “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself”; in v. 3, we learn that “Jonathan and David cut a covenant (*berit*) because he [presumably, Jonathan] loved him as himself.”⁴ 1 Sam. 20:14–15 speaks of David’s covenant loyalty (*hesed*) owed to Jonathan and his descendants and v. 17 mentions an oath of Jonathan prompted by his love for David. In David’s speech to Jonathan in 1 Sam. 20:7–8, he uses the language of a subordinate treaty partner in relation to Jonathan, referring to himself as Jonathan’s “servant” (*eved*) and mentioning the treaty context explicitly: “You will be loyal in covenant (literally, “do covenant loyalty”) to your servant, for you brought your servant with you into the covenant of Yhwh.” In contrast, although 2 Sam. 1:19–27, David’s Lament for Saul and Jonathan, does not mention a covenant directly, it speaks nonetheless of Jonathan as David’s “brother,” a treaty term native to the discourse of allies.⁵ The mention of “cutting a covenant” (*karat berit*), “doing covenant loyalty” (*asah hesed*), and the swearing of an oath in the David/Jonathan narratives suggest clearly that the love that accompanies these actions, and even prompts them, is covenant love. Similarly, the use of the terms *servant* in 1 Sam. 20:7–8 and *brother* in 2 Sam. 1:26 also suggests a covenant setting, though the texts apparently disagree on the nature of the treaty relationship between Jonathan and David, with 1 Sam. 20:7–8 casting David as the subordinate partner, and 2 Sam. 1:26 suggesting a treaty of equals.⁶

The language of love is native to covenant settings, a commonplace not only in biblical texts concerned with covenantal relations but also in extrabiblical West Asian treaties and related correspondence.⁷ In such contexts, *to love* means to establish a covenant bond or to conform to treaty obligations.⁸ Biblical examples of the love idiom used in the covenant between Yhwh and Israel include the command to Israel to love Yhwh: “You shall love Yhwh your god with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart” (Deut. 6:5–6). A second such example is Yhwh’s statement in the Decalogue that he is loyal in covenant to those who love him (that is, to those who keep his commandments) while punishing those who hate him (that is, those who break covenant) and their descendants: “For I, Yhwh your god, am a jealous god, visiting the iniquity of parents upon children to the third and even the fourth generation of those who hate me, but doing covenant loyalty for the thousands, for those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod. 20:6; Deut 5:10). The rhetoric of covenant love is manifest also in texts that describe treaty relationships between kings, between a king and his people, or between other individuals. One example of such a use of love language is the description of David’s loyal treaty partner Hiram, the king of Tyre, as a “lover of David” in

1 Kings 5:15. In 1 Sam. 18:16, all Israel and Judah are said to be “lovers” of David, because he led them in war; in 18:22, it is the servants of Saul who are said to love David. The speech of Joab to David in 2 Sam. 19:7 refers to David’s loyal army as “those who love” him, and to his enemies, led by his rebellious son Absalom, as “those who hate” him. In all of these cases, love means loyalty in the context of a covenant bond, whether it be between a deity and a people, a king and a fellow king, or a king and his army.

The fourteenth century BCE Amarna archive of diplomatic correspondence between Pharaohs Amenhotep III and IV and their allies and vassals illustrates a comparable use of the rhetoric of love in extrabiblical treaty contexts. In a number of Amarna letters, the Pharaoh’s ally King Tushratta of Mittani uses the love idiom to describe his relationship with the Pharaoh, his treaty partner, or the relationship of his forebears with those of the Pharaoh. An example is Amarna letter 17:24–28: “My father loved you, and you in turn loved my father. In keeping with this love, my father [g]ave you my sister.”⁹ In Amarna letter 19:1–2, Tushratta addresses the Pharaoh as “[my] brother, my son-in-law, who loves me, and whom I lov[e],” thereby combining love language with that of brotherhood, as would be expected in a parity treaty context.¹⁰ Similarly, the rhetoric of love is used in the letters of vassals to the Pharaoh, and the love is mutual: Just as the vassal loves his lord, so the Pharaoh loves his vassal. In Amarna letter 53:40–44, Akizzi of Qatna states that he and several other vassals love Pharaoh, their lord; “all of these kings,” writes Akizzi, “are my lord’s servants.”¹¹ Amarna letter 121:61–63 assumes that the suzerain should love his vassal, meaning in this context to act on his behalf against a common enemy.¹² As in the letters of allies preserved at Amarna, *to love* in the letters of vassals means to be loyal to the treaty partner. Other West Asian diplomatic texts of the second and first millennia BCE bear witness to similar uses of the love idiom and other technical covenant language. Correspondence between the Hittite king Hattusili III and the king of Babylon speaks of the kings as “affectionate brothers,” their relationship as “brotherhood,” and their interactions as loving.¹³ In the first millennium BCE treaties of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal of Assyria, vassals swear to love their suzerain, and loyal vassals are described as those who love their lord.¹⁴ In all of these cases, both biblical and extrabiblical, use of the love idiom indicates either the establishment of a political relationship or, more commonly, its perpetuation through the loyalty of participants, as a number of scholars have pointed out.

Though the covenant interpretation accounts well for the love rhetoric in the prose narratives of David and Jonathan and for the use of the term *brother* to describe Jonathan in David’s Lament (2 Sam. 1:26), it does not effectively explain the Lament’s love comparison (2 Sam. 1:26). In this

poem, a dirge probably composed at the time of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, possibly of Davidic authorship, and attributed to David in the prose framework, Jonathan's love for David is compared to the love of women and found to be superior: "Your love for me was wondrous, surpassing the love of women."¹⁵ Though various scholars have maintained that this statement too concerns covenant love, they have not recognized that the comparison is extremely peculiar in a covenant context, given what we know of love comparisons made by treaty partners in other West Asian texts. For love comparisons in treaty contexts are of two types: the covenant love of treaty partners is compared in one of several ways, or covenant love itself is likened to another, analogous love type that, like covenant, requires fidelity. In both types of love comparison, loyalty or disloyalty to the obligations of the covenant bond is the issue that gives rise to comparison in the first place. Yet the comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26 fits neither pattern, though it shares characteristics with both. The fact that it likens Jonathan's love to the love of women—generally understood by scholars to be a reference to sexual or sexual-emotional love—suggests that a noncovenantal interpretation of 2 Sam. 1:26 is likely, one in which fidelity is not the focal issue.¹⁶

The first type of love comparison native to covenant settings likens one treaty partner's love in covenant to that of another treaty partner of the same class (e.g., an ally's love is compared to that of his ally) or compares two different manifestations of a treaty partner's love (e.g., an ally's love for his ally is likened to his love of his ally's predecessor). The comparison may be constructed in one of the following ways: "the love of x is like the love of y," "the love of x is greater than the love of y," or "the love of x for y is greater than the love of x for z." In each example of this type of love comparison, fidelity to treaty obligations is clearly the focus of concern. In Amarna letter 17:24–26, Tushratta, the king of Mittani, states the following concerning the relationship of his father to the Pharaoh, his treaty partner: "My father loved you, and you in turn loved my father."¹⁷ This statement illustrates one type of comparison mentioned, as the love of each partner is comparable. The following examples illustrate another type, in which the love of one partner for his ally is said to be greater than his love for his ally's predecessor. In Amarna letter 19:12–13, Tushratta states that the Pharaoh, his treaty partner, has loved him ten times more than he loved his (Tushratta's) father.¹⁸ In Amarna letter 26:30–34, Tushratta, writing to the Egyptian queen mother, states that he demonstrates ten times more love for her son the king than he did for her dead husband, his predecessor.¹⁹ In these and other cases, the love of a king in a treaty context may be likened to the love of a fellow king, his ally and treaty partner, or different manifestations of a king's covenant love may be com-

pared. The comparison may suggest equality of love or superiority of love, but the thing compared is always another example of covenant love.²⁰

The second type of love comparison attested in covenant settings likens covenant love to another love type to which it can be compared because the latter type also requires fidelity. This kind of love comparison is associated in particular with descriptions of a metaphorically female Israel’s relationship to her (male) god. Thus, according to Jer. 2:2, the love of Israel for Yhwh during her early days was like the love of a young bride for her husband:

I remember the loyalty (*hesed*) of your youth
 The love of your betrothal
 Your following me in the wilderness
 In a land not sown . . .

The defining characteristic that each love type has in common is fidelity; this is the focus of the comparison and what makes comparison possible. Israel is likened to a young bride precisely because Israel was loyal in covenant in her “youth,” according to Jer. 2:2, just as an idealized young bride is loyal to her husband and does not stray.²¹ Hosea 3:1 is similar in its comparison of Hosea’s love for an adulterous woman to the love of Yhwh for a disloyal Israel that worships other deities, thereby violating covenant obligations: “Go, love a woman who is loved by another and who is an adulteress; [it is] like the love of Yhwh for the children of Israel. As for them, they turn to other gods and are lovers of raisin cakes.” In this example, the basis for the comparison is disloyalty rather than loyalty, but as with Jer. 2:2, Israel’s loyalty to Yhwh, or lack of same, finds an analogue in the loyalty or disloyalty of a wife to her husband. Just as an adulteress lacks fidelity to her husband, so too does Israel with respect to her god. A third example of this type of love comparison is found in Amarna letter 24:121–123. Here it is said that the love of allies for one another ought to be like the love of a person for his patron god: “As man loves Shimige on seeing him, so do we want, between us, to love one another.”²² In this instance, as in the others, fidelity is the basis for the comparison: the loyalty (= love) of human treaty partners for one another ought to be like the loyalty (= love) of a worshiper for his patron deity. In each of these examples, the two types of love that are compared are similar, and therefore comparable, because fidelity is expected to characterize each love type.

How is the comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26 similar to the two types of love comparison characteristic of treaty contexts and how does it differ from them? First, it should be noted that the comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26 shares a “love of x is greater than the love of y” structure with some of the comparisons that liken the love of one treaty partner to that of another of the same class. And like comparisons of covenant love to an analogous

love type, 2 Sam. 1:26 likens one type of love (Jonathan's love for David) to another (the love of women). That said, one must also observe that 2 Sam. 1:26 does not compare the love of one treaty partner to that of another of the same class. Rather, it likens Jonathan's love to "the love of women," an expression generally understood by scholars to be a reference to sexual or sexual-emotional love.²³ If 2 Sam. 1:26 were concerned with covenant love, we might expect it to say something like "your love for me was wondrous, surpassing the love of other brothers" (= partners in a parity treaty), or "surpassing my love for you." Such formulations would compare the love of treaty partners of the same class (e.g., the love of other allies for David or that of David himself for Jonathan). This kind of comparison would make sense in a context in which parity treaty language is used elsewhere in the same verse of the relationship in question ("my brother Jonathan"). Also, unlike comparisons of covenant love with another love type, the two love types of 2 Sam. 1:26 do not share a basis for comparison if Jonathan's love for David refers to covenant love. For in other examples of this type of comparison, covenant love is likened to another kind of love sharing a central characteristic: fidelity to a set of obligations. An example of this, as noted earlier, occurs in Jer. 2:2. There, Israel's love for Yhwh in its early days is like the love of an idealized young bride on account of the fidelity common to both types of love. In 2 Sam. 1:26, however, Jonathan's love for David is compared not to another love type that is characterized by fidelity, but apparently to the experience of sexual or sexual-emotional love with women as a class. Were we to translate the Hebrew *ahavat nashim* as "the love of wives" instead of "the love of women," it seems at first blush that one could make a case that fidelity to obligations is at issue, since the wife must not commit adultery, and men such as David had multiple wives.²⁴ But even comparison to "the love of wives" would be odd in a human covenant context such as this, given that the relationship in question involves two men, that male-female love as constructed in biblical and other West Asian texts consistently has a sexual component, even if it is only potential, and given that male-female love is typically hierarchical in its casting, in contrast to the fraternal covenant language found elsewhere in the verse, which suggests parity.²⁵ Thus, there are serious difficulties raised by understanding the Hebrew expression *ahavat nashim* as "the love of wives," and by arguing that fidelity to obligations is the basis for the love comparison. It is more plausible to translate the expression "the love of women," as virtually all commentators and translations do, and investigate possible bases for the love comparison other than covenant loyalty. The comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26, though it shares characteristics in common with both kinds of love comparison made in treaty contexts, differs from both types

in important ways. Though it uses love rhetoric, it is likely not a statement about fidelity to a treaty.

To what, then, might the love comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26 refer? It seems impossible to ignore the potential significance of the sexual or sexual-emotional interpretation of the expression *the love of women*. As mentioned earlier, this understanding is commonplace among scholarly commentators on this passage, and certainly seems defensible, though the expression itself occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ As is frequently observed, the Hebrew root *to love* (*ahav*) and its derivatives can have a sexual or sexual-emotional meaning in certain contexts, particularly when associated with the relations between men and women. Hosea 3:1 is an excellent example of the sexual usage (“Go, love a woman who is loved by another and who is an adulteress”), as is 2 Sam. 13:1, 4, 15, verses that describe, using derivatives of the root *to love*, the sexual desire of David’s son Amnon for his half sister Tamar, whom he violates. In 1 Kings 11:1, Solomon is said to have “loved many alien women,” with a list of foreign wives and concubines following. The association of *love* and eroticism or sex in biblical descriptions of the relations of men and women is equally true of the few texts that describe a woman as the lover rather than the object of love. Prov. 5:19 speaks of a man’s wife as “doe of love” and advises: “Let her breasts satisfy you at all times / With her love, may you be intoxicated always.” Even if an emotional component is evident in such love, as it certainly is in a text such as 1 Sam. 18:20, which describes the love of Michal for David, the sexual component remains ever-present, at least potentially if not explicitly.²⁷ If “the love of women” refers to the sexual or sexual-emotional love women offer a man, the comparison of Jonathan’s love to it suggests that the two types of love have something in common, a basis for comparison. Because it seems as though fidelity is not likely to be that basis, the sexual or sexual-emotional component of love itself could well be. Like love comparisons of the covenant type, those of the sexual or sexual-emotional type are attested in biblical materials. An example is Gen. 29:30, where Jacob’s love for Rachel is compared to his love for Leah in a manner not unlike the love comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26: “He came also to Rachel and he loved Rachel more than Leah.”²⁸ Thus, the elegy may be suggesting through its comparison that Jonathan’s love for David was of a sexual or sexual-emotional type and that it was more wondrous than the same such love David had experienced from women.

If David’s Lament suggests that Jonathan’s love for David is of a sexual or sexual-emotional type rather than a covenantal type, why would treaty terminology (“my brother, Jonathan”) be used by the poet in the same verse of the composition? As I have observed, the language of brotherhood and the love idiom are at home together in covenant discourse, as are love comparisons that make a statement about fidelity. In fact, the use of frater-

nal terminology before the love comparison in 2 Sam. 1:26 sets up the reader to expect a love comparison focused precisely on the issue of loyalty in covenant, but such does not come to pass. It may be that the poem's author (David?) drew purposefully on the vocabulary and rhetorical conventions of treaty discourse in an intentionally subversive way, manipulating such familiar forms to communicate an unexpected and even startling observation about Jonathan's love: Although the two were bound by a parity treaty, there was more to their relationship than simply a covenant bond. The suggestion that covenant idioms were manipulated in order to communicate such an assertion is strengthened by the observation that David is portrayed as a nonconformist and even a manipulator of ritual and social conventions in the prose narratives about him. One example of this is his behavior at the death of his infant son, described in 2 Sam. 12:20–23. Having undertaken petitionary mourning rites in an attempt to save his child's life, David, upon hearing the news of the child's death, abandons his mourning posture and, through a series of ritual reversals, returns to quotidian life, baffling his servants by so doing. When confronted by his courtiers about his nonconforming ritual behavior, he answers their query in a way that suggests that he believes mourning after death to have no purpose whatsoever, because the dead cannot be brought back again. And because it has no purpose, he refuses to meet social and ritual expectations by enacting it. A second example of David as ritual and social nonconformist is 2 Samuel 19, the narrative describing the aftermath of his army's vanquishing of Absalom, his rebellious son, and Absalom's followers. Instead of rejoicing with the army, as is expected after victory, David privileges his own, private feelings, mourning the death of his son. David reverses this nonconforming ritual behavior only after he is warned that he will lose the army's support entirely if it continues. In 2 Sam. 3:31–37, like 2 Sam. 1:19–27 a part of the apologetic "History of David's Rise,"²⁹ David manipulates mourning rites to achieve political ends at the death of Abner. I acknowledge that it is odd indeed to find anything subversive or even unconventional in a dirge such as 2 Sam. 1:19–27, characterized as much of it is by idealization of the dead and conventional, gendered imagery.³⁰ Nonetheless, verse 26, however it is interpreted, departs from convention, and David is portrayed as a manipulator of ritual and social norms in the "History of David's Rise" and other narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel, particularly norms associated with mourning. In short, whether or not David authored the dirge attributed to him, its manipulation of treaty discourse is not inconsistent with the portrayal of David's ritual behavior in the narratives describing his career.

A number of scholars have pointed to alleged impediments to a homoerotic and sexual interpretation of 2 Sam. 1:26, and I shall consider these presently. Markus Zehnder, followed by Steven L. McKenzie, argued that

the statement about Jonathan’s love in 2 Sam. 1:26 is best characterized as “poetic exaggeration” (“dichterischer Übertreibung”), not intended to be understood in a literal, possibly erotic, sense.³¹ Though Zehnder did not provide an argument directly in support of this assertion, McKenzie defended it by drawing on Zehnder’s later assertions regarding the whole complex of materials about David and Jonathan: “Homosexual acts were condemned in Israelite law (Lev. 20:13). So David’s apologists would hardly have described him as homosexual or included a piece that described him that way.”³² Aside from McKenzie’s problematic projection of contemporary, Western categories on the ancients (“homosexual”/“heterosexual”), a practice that has been well critiqued by others,³³ his assumption that (all?) homoerotic acts were condemned by Israelite legal tradition and his argument that, therefore, David’s apologists would not include a text such as 2 Sam. 1:19–27 if it suggested a sexual relationship between David and Jonathan, are unconvincing for a number of reasons. First, unless one is reading the biblical text canonically, something a historian does not do, one cannot make a case that the surviving biblical legal corpora in general oppose same-sex sexual acts between males; only Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 voice any opposition. And furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, these laws, which are part of the Holiness legislation and date very likely to a period long after the composition of 2 Sam. 1:19–27, only oppose anal intercourse; they have nothing at all to say about other potential sexual acts between men.³⁴ In contrast, earlier legal materials, such as the “Book of the Covenant” (Exod. 20:22–23:33) or the legal collection in Deuteronomy 12–26, do not even touch on the issue of homoerotic sexual acts. Therefore, McKenzie’s argument that David’s apologists would have been reluctant to make use of a text that included a homoerotic statement because of Lev. 20:13 lacks cogency. For it cannot be shown that any community in Israel ever opposed all homoerotic sexual acts, nor is it evident that consensual anal intercourse between males was proscribed by any circle before the Holiness School interdicted it at a time likely long after the composition of David’s Lament.³⁵ In short, it is not at all clear that the tenth-century BCE apologists responsible for the “History of David’s Rise” would have been particularly bothered by a homoerotic meaning of the love comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26. What is clear, however, is that a central priority of the apologists responsible for the “History of David’s Rise” is to show that David was innocent of the deaths of Saul, Jonathan, Abner, Eshbaal, and other Saulides who stood in the way of his ascent to the throne.³⁶ Inclusion of the Lament underscores the narrative’s insistence on David’s innocence with respect to Saul’s and Jonathan’s deaths. Not only does David not serve the Philistines in battle against Israel at Mt. Gilboa, he and his men mourn publicly at the report of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and Israel’s defeat, in effect switching sides and declar-

ing an affiliation with Israel and Saul rather than with Achish of Gath, David's overlord, and the other Philistines.³⁷ The Lament functions in its immediate narrative context almost like a proof text for David's true loyalty to Saul and Israel: he mourned for them, as allies do, and even composed this lament on their deaths.³⁸ In a word, the inclusion of the dirge by the apologists responsible for the "History of David's Rise" cannot be used in a convincing way to determine the meaning of the love comparison of 2 Sam. 1:26, because the lament as a whole so beautifully serves the apologetic purposes of the compilers, no matter what v. 26 may suggest. Any conclusion drawn about the meaning of 2 Sam. 1:26 must therefore emerge out of an analysis of the statement itself.

If David's Lament suggests that a homoerotic and possibly sexual relationship existed between Jonathan and David, what are the implications for contemporary debate over gay marriages and same-sex unions? Marriage and marriage-like unions generally assume sexual relations of some kind, and the laws of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, as well as other biblical texts, have been cited by various religious conservatives as an impediment to state and community recognition of same-sex unions or gay marriages. I have argued elsewhere on philological grounds that the laws of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 prohibit anal intercourse specifically; they have nothing to say about other forms of same-sex sexual activity between men and nothing whatsoever to say about such activity between women.³⁹ If this interpretation is correct, then the Hebrew Bible, even read canonically as a single work, only limits rather than proscribes sexual relations between men, and allows them between women. Such a reading of biblical law opens up the possibility of justifying the blessing of gay marriages and same-sex unions in religious contexts that embrace the authority of the Hebrew Bible in some sense, because the sexual activity normally associated with such marriages or unions would not necessarily violate scriptural law. In addition, a homoerotic relationship between Jonathan and David, especially a sexual one, would provide an example in the biblical text itself of the sexual-emotional linking of two men in a context free of condemnation, though not a direct model for a formalized union or marriage, as the ancients in question apparently had no notion of such a coupling. For such a direct model one must look elsewhere than in the biblical text.⁴⁰