



## Dandy Discipleship: A Queering of Mark's Male Disciples

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*While conventional readings of the Bible unambiguously presume the normativity of heterosexuality and binary categories of gender, this article challenges such modern assumptions by purposefully and strategically re-reading three Markan discipleship texts "sexually." By combining a socio-rhetorical approach with queer and gender criticism as informed primarily by the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, the re-readings attempt to penetrate through existing homophobic and erotophobic interpretations. Particular attention is also given to the ways in which the gender and sexuality of the male disciples has been constructed and can be problematized in both the world behind the text and the world in front of the text.<sup>1</sup>*

The male disciples in Mark make an interesting case study for queer and gendered hermeneutics because of their ambiguous portrayal. What are we to make of the often flawed followers of Jesus who, within dominant imperial discourses regarding ancient Mediterranean gender, appear hopelessly short of achieving their masculinity? How too might we queer the text, so that in the production of meaning our interpretations are not constrained by oppressive constructions of gender and sexuality?

This article seeks the liberation of the Markan text: firstly, from homophobic and erotophobic<sup>2</sup> interpretations, both conscious and unconscious, that work within the unacknowledged assumptions of heteronormativity; and, secondly, from interpretations that assume, again usually unacknowledged, that gender and sexuality is binary and essential. These two presuppositions underlie most conventional readings of Mark; however, they limit the text in a number of ways. On the one hand, they are anachronistic with regards to ancient Mediterranean understandings of gender and sexuality, and, on the other, they ignore contemporary queer and gender theorists such as Butler (1990) who, for example, considers gender as a performance measured against a set of culturally determined norms. Such readings are, in fact, not only perpetuated by essentialist interpretations dominant within both "hardcore" traditional and conservative Christianity, but constitute social reality itself which can be further articulated as the heteronormative meta-narrative.

Internalized reading guided by the tradition of biblical interpretation is often unconscious to the point that readers of the Bible do not even notice they are constantly interpreting what they are reading. This article reads the male disciples attentive to issues of masculinity and masculine sexuality in both Western culture and the cultures that surrounded the text's production. This involves the identification of possible interpretative avenues previously obstructed or overlooked by the erotophobia and homophobia present within existing interpretive practices by purposefully reading the texts *sexually*. The interpretations that I offer are as much a challenge to the limitations and indeed the ethics of conventional reading strategies as they are a fruitful provision of meaning. The task at hand involves a re-reading of three selected texts concerning the male disciples as presented in the Gospel of Mark (1:16-20; 9:33-37; 14:43-52) by combining queer and gendered hermeneutics with socio-rhetorical criticism. The interpretations are not exhaustive in their exegesis, but rather seek to see what might emerge when approached from this particular hermeneutical perspective. First, however, I outline some insights regarding queer theory and the New Testament, and offer a brief description of how gender discourses functioned within the ancient Mediterranean. These discussions should assist in providing a foundation for the subsequent interpretations.

#### *Situating an Ideological Position—Queering the New Testament*

Of those biblical scholars who have explored the application of queer and gender theory, and more recently masculinity studies, many have begun to expose the strange relationship that exists between sex, the Bible, and its interpretation. Although there is a risk of domestication through its definition, Jagose (1997) writes that "queer theory describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire" (p. 3). In other words, queer theory locates and exploits the incoherencies that normalize heterosexuality, but moreover, by demonstrating the impossibility of any "natural" sexuality, it calls into question the apparently unproblematic terms of "man" and "woman." Moore (2007) notes that queer theory enables biblical scholarship to move beyond the increasingly tired debates on biblical texts that apparently deal with homosexuality into a totally different task of problematizing the concept of homosexuality itself. Similarly, Punt (2006) argues that a queering of New Testament texts goes beyond and even challenges homosexual liberationist readings that argue for gay and lesbian inclusion by focusing on the power dynamics of gendered and sexual constructions at work within the text and its reception.

While issues of normative gender and sexual behaviors have been intrinsically tied to biblical interpretation by conservatives and liberals alike, many interpreters feel uncomfortable about the deliberate queering of the text. Stone (2008), however, observes that substantive interpretations often serve a heteronormative function. Like many reading strategies that go against the grain of traditional interpretation, a queer hermeneutic expects to be met with suspicion and distrust. In analyzing the contemporary contestation of gender and sexuality with regards to the developments in hermeneutical theory (basically the shift from historical recovery/authorial intention to reader-oriented approaches), Martin (2006) argues that the Bible simply cannot be used to prohibit or prescribe particular

gender or sexual behaviors, for the text has no agency of its own and predominantly reflects the voice of the reader. Textual meaning, he suggests, is inseparable from hermeneutics and rhetoric. Martin encourages readers to forego the dominant practice of textual “foundationalism,” in which the Bible is used to justify our own points of view, and instead take responsibility for the ethical consequences of particular interpretive moves.

The following interpretations, therefore, are pragmatically based on the assumptions of queer theory that the emergence of modern categories of sexuality and gender have shaped us immensely as readers. Conventional readings of biblical texts are prone to lock subjects (both readers and characters within a text) into one category of sexual desire, presumably heterosexual. Dominant readings exclude “deviant” sexualities or masculinities as a result of unconsciously imposing modern filters of normative sexuality and gender onto ancient texts. Moreover, we tend not to recognize certain forms of intimacy within particular texts as we have already presumed their non-existence. These conditions suppress the possibility of erotic and other textures, distorting and reducing our interpretive capacity. What then are the possibilities for interpretation when we refuse to swallow the erotophobic and homophobic interpretations of traditional “hardcore” Christianity? Is there a way to redeem the text for a more subversive but ultimately positive construction of masculinity for contemporary readers?

One approach to redeeming the text is proposed by the queer theologian Althaus-Reid (2001; 2003; 2006), who challenges conventional Catholic understandings of gender, sexuality, and patriarchy through the assertion of often outrageous claims that both shock and laugh at normative gender and sexual stereotypes. The Western Christian tradition, she argues, has desexualized theology through regulating “decency hermeneutics” to the point where the body has been completely removed from such discussion. Her solution to erotophobia is to deconstruct and then reconstruct language indecently, in order to provoke our ingrained assumptions of decency.

Althaus-Reid also proposes that we read the Bible *sexually* in a way that exposes our oppressive patterns of decency. This involves “seeing” the text in a new light that might challenge existing sexual narratives. Through the telling of sexual stories, we open our eyes to different networking strategies and sources of empowerment by shifting our attention to the margins. Citing Plummer she writes: “Sexual stories perform some social ordering, register changes, tensions and have a political role to fulfill, apart from their narrative structures” (2001, p. 132). They involve liberating the text, and indeed ourselves, from constrictive prescriptions of gender and sexuality that work to undermine and oppress our identities. Even heterosexuality, like sex, is an unstable category, which as a compulsory system itself is abnormal. Althaus-Reid writes:

Sex may be perceived as potentially chaotic, as the field of ambiguities and unruly life and theology has to struggle to put sex into tidy compartments, each one with a name, a color, a function, and a positive or negative symbol at the door. If theology discovers that in reality there are more sexual behaviors than compartments, identities are essentialised. (Althaus-Reid, 2001, p. 132)

The re-reading task at hand, rather than merely tolerating difference, is an active attempt to transform our interpretations from constrictive notions of binary and essentialist portrayals of gender and sexuality. As a straight but not narrow reader of the Bible, I desire to move towards a way of reading that goes beyond the relatively impotent toleration of masculine and queer deviancy, to one that embraces it as a force for liberation.<sup>3</sup> Althaus-Reid herself makes a point of circumventing the ethic of toleration; a category based on certain normative principles that decide what should or should not be tolerated. Toleration, she insists, merely works to reinforce abnormality. Only by dissolving the limits between tolerable and intolerable might we encounter positive transformation. This stresses the importance of telling and retelling queer interpretations rather than simply tolerating difference, and hence affirms the importance of this article.

### *The Socio-sexual Background*

Because socio-rhetorical criticism investigates both inter-textual and social and cultural phenomena, it is necessary to indicate some of the overarching gender discourses that were present during the first-century against which the following texts will be read. As Robbins (1996) suggests, awareness of common social and cultural topics can assist the interpreter in avoiding ethnocentric and anachronistic interpretation (p. 75). How was masculinity and/or male sexuality constructed in the world of the Bible? Liew (2003) argues that an investigation into ancient masculinity, although influenced by contemporary interests, is not an anachronistic endeavor, primarily because masculinity was a major preoccupation within the ancient Mediterranean (pp. 93-97).<sup>4</sup>

Interest in the subject of masculinity has seen the recent publication of two significant books in New Testament studies, namely, a collection of essays in *New Testament Masculinities* (Moore & Anderson, 2003), and an exploration of Jesus' masculinity in *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Conway, 2008). Both books attempt to understand what masculinity meant at the time of the New Testament and then apply these insights to observe how various characters' masculinity is constructed. While there can be a tendency among some interpreters to assume that culture during the period of the composition of the New Testament was static and homogenous, Conway and the majority of contributors to *New Testament Masculinities (NTM)* seem aware of the polyphonic nature of cultural discourses and are at pains to resolve tensions between simplistic and multifaceted readings of culture. In the end, however, they are forced to simplify in order to say anything about masculinity at all (see, for example, Conway, 2008, pp. 9-10). Gleason stresses this point in his response chapter found at the end of *NTM*, in which he questions by whose standards are we to assess Jesus' masculinity? Borrowing from the work of classicists, the contributors tend to focus on Greek and Roman gender ideologies with little to say about the more culturally specific construction of gender in Aramaic-speaking Palestine (Gleason, 2003, pp. 325-327). This would also be true of Conway who places Jesus predominantly in dialogue with constructions of Roman imperial masculinity. Of course, the production and early consumption of Mark's gospel has traditionally been located among a gentile audience, and so I do not necessarily see this as a major setback for this kind of reading of the Markan text. Moreover, the investigations of both Boyarin (1992; 1993; 1995) and Satlow (1994;

1996; 1998), who have written at considerable length on ancient rabbinic constructions of masculinity, show considerable similarities to Greco-Roman constructions, at least as far as some of the overarching discourses are concerned.

Investigations into the dominant discourses of ancient masculinities often draw upon the insights of Laqueur (1990) who argues that before the emergence of modern society, to be a man or a woman was not a category of biology, but rather was to hold a social rank or to assume a cultural role. He observes in antiquity a “one-sex model” of sexual difference, in which women and men were both placed on the same sliding gender scale, with the most masculine man at the top and women at the bottom. It was possible for men to slide down into the feminine realm and women to move up into masculine space. As such, the boundaries between the sexes were highly political and rhetorical. Within the ancient Mediterranean “Roman imperialism aggressively imposed itself as a triumph of masculinity, dominating conquered nations as women or effeminate males” (Burrus, 2007, p. 8). Within the ideology of the elite class, perfect masculinity formed the apex of the social hierarchy, and so was intimately linked to status. Those considered “true men” were positioned above all others, including slaves, women, boys, foreigners, and men who assumed a passive role in sexual relations (Conway, 2008, p. 36).

Conway suggests that it was not enough to be born a male, even a free male Roman citizen. It was also required, in line with Butler, that one *act* the part of a man. This included assuming the active role in private sexual relations, as well as in public life (pp. 21-22). Williams (1999) writes that, with the exception of Western culture, very few cultures have offered blanket condemnations of sexual practices between men, although restrictions and qualifications usually exist. He observes that within Roman society, homosexual relations were acceptable within certain contexts and configurations, such as the active/passive distinction (p. 17). While the assertion of an active masculinity was valued, however, such a role required the careful display of control and restraint in regards to passions and the treatment of others. Acting as a man involved the avoidance of excess of any kind, notwithstanding opportunities for manly displays of courage (Conway, 2008, pp. 21-30).

It is worth noting that the more social-scientific approaches to ancient masculinity taken by Conway, the various contributors to *NTM*, and the scholars of ancient (rabbinic) Jewish masculinities, mostly only *describe* the ways in which gender is constructed, and tend not to provide appropriate critiques of such constructions. In a recent article, Moore (2007) admits that the current investigation into biblical masculinities has made little direct use of queer theory, instead drawing from scholarship in the classics that deal with codes and conventions. Although their research is crucial for an understanding of ancient masculinities, a narrow focus can potentially lead to the re-inscription of patriarchy and gender norms, particularly if coupled with textual “foundationalism.” Therefore, I would insist it is ethically necessary to combine the reading of socio-sexual textures with an ideological hermeneutic of liberation such as the queering of the text, in order to problematize the instability of masculinity and expose the ways in which conventional and dominant interpretations presuppose a heteronormative function.

### *Fishing for Men (1:16-20)*

This foundational discipleship text traditionally referred to as “the call of the disciples,” which I have more erotically re-titled “fishing for men,” provokes the queer imagination in a number of different ways. First of all, it challenges conventional spiritualized interpretations that focus on the existential response to Jesus in a merely religious sense that neglect aspects concerned with the renegotiation of social identity. Many interpreters suggest that the text functions as some sort of universal paradigm in which the religious ideal is a total break from one’s former life in order to follow Jesus (see, for example, Healy, 2008, pp. 42-44). This emphasis not only filters out the inclusion of women who do not feature here, but also overlooks the counter-cultural and erotic textures that tear apart our ideas and ideals of appropriate spaces for masculine homosociality (Sedgwick, 1985). From the beginning, it should intrigue us that Jesus seems to be in favor of enticing and hanging out with a number of other men. What is it about the erect rods of the male fishermen that lures Jesus to them?<sup>5</sup> Likewise, what is it about Jesus’ look and commanding voice that urges these men to immediately come for him? I start here with a queer retelling of the short text, before considering some of the justifications and implications.

While cruising the seashores of Galilee, Jesus began his ministry by fetching a number of seemingly attached men to join his cohort of male admirers. He saw Simon and his brother Andrew fishing in their boat, and as soon as Jesus invited them to accompany him in his quest to fish for more men, they dropped their rods and joined him. Shortly after, Jesus discovered James and John in their father’s boat mending their fishnets. Upon enticing them, they immediately left their father and their livelihood, to elope with the alluring Jesus.

Thanks to the work of liberation hermeneutics, this doublet has been read in light of its obvious counter-cultural rhetoric. According to Myers (1988), for example, Mark pays considerable attention to the social location of this episode; the fishing trade is accurately represented, and the disciples are shown to abandon all socio-economic responsibility. Such a paradigm for conversion, of course, is absurd in reality; the point, suggests Myers, is to illustrate that “discipleship involves a reordering of socio-economic relationships” (pp. 132-133). If Jesus’ call to discipleship is this radical, could we also take it to mean a reordering of socio-sexual relationships? As one’s livelihood is an integral component of one’s identity, Jesus’ instruction, according to Punt (2006), “is unexpected, singling out young men and encouraging them to leave their households (along with their livelihood, work and inheritance) which provided them with both a sense of being and social position and function” (p. 35). By eloping with Jesus, both pairs of disciples abandon the values of a dominant culture by acting against traditional familial relations and performing the construction of an alternative, better way of life—that is—the forming of a fawning group of male admirers.

Such thinking is not entirely unique. In discussing his construction of the historical Jesus, Moxnes (2003) argues that the calling to discipleship narratives should be read from a spatial perspective rather than a temporal perspective (pp. 97-98). From a temporal perspective, the pericope lends itself to interpretations centered on “conversion” which are influenced by a modern construction of history-

based progress and change (i.e., “before” and “after”). From a spatial perspective, however, the call involves a transition from conventional to unconventional space, thus exposing the queer but semi-inclusive nature of becoming part of Jesus’ group.

But more than this, by plunging into the group and thereby abandoning their families in such a counter-cultural way, the disciples relinquish a significant component of masculine performance. The male role in the household, according to Moxnes, was “identified with that of the householder as overseer, father, husband, supplier of resources, person responsible for his house and its inhabitants, and so on” (pp. 95-96). To be presented as lacking a house, therefore, deprives Jesus and his admirers of the role of either a householder, or as sons of the household. The disciples appear infatuated enough with Jesus to forego this part of their masculine identity. In other words, they leave their rods behind. The very act of moving away from secure familial attachments meant surrendering to widespread imperial discourses asserting the importance of male headship and the relative impotence of falling outside these conventional institutions.

To shift back to our world, we might like to think about how masculine space is constructed in contemporary society. Dominant culture would assert that sporting environments or perhaps male bonding in a fishing boat, are generally safe places for male homosociality. It’s not “gay” for men to be with other men so long as it’s in a safe space. The desire to contain male homosocial performance within a strict setting links to Butler’s (1990) observations regarding the discursive gendering within the architecture and space of a social environment. Why is it that the close proximity of men in some contexts is deemed acceptable or safe and in other contexts unsafe or even indecent? I think of the slang term “cockfest” used to describe a social gathering in which men far outnumber women. Homophobia manifests itself over men and society to designate even non-sexual and purely platonic groupings of men in certain spaces as potentially dangerous. However, Jesus challenges his admirers to leave their boats which have previously constrained them to a certain socio-economic and socio-sexual status. Their actions are thus transgressive of the dominant culture’s ideas about appropriate groupings of men. The immediate response to Jesus’ enticing invitation deliberately breaches these boundaries in a way that would have disrupted the cultural sensibilities of those around them. In order for the text to have a similar effect on us, we ought to read it *sexually* in a way that exposes this indecency.

It is worth noting that contrary to the insights of feminist biblical scholarship that has identified a number of examples of female discipleship within Mark’s gospel (Kinukawa, 1994, 2001), “hardcore” Christians involved in a conservative backlash against such inclusive moves often insist on the primacy of the twelve male disciples. It is also worth noting that gender inclusive versions of the Bible that render “fishers of men” (*halieīs anthrōpōn*) as the more bisexual “fishers of people” are sometimes accused of distorting the text’s “truer” meaning (see, for example, Poythress, 2000). By drawing greater attention to the maleness of the disciples and/or by excluding women as disciples entirely, however, these discourses accentuate the queer observation that Jesus calls his male admirers to forego a definite masculine space in favor of a counter-masculine, and even suggestively homoerotic, space. As Martin (2006) writes, “[Jesus] seems to enjoy the company of his male disciples a bit more than some would think ‘normal’” (p. 96).

If read *sexually*, the text not only challenges a biblical basis for so called “traditional family values,” but it suggestively undermines the presumed heterosexuality of both Jesus and his followers, thus exposing the limitations of our implicit heteronormative assumptions. This lends itself well to queer theory’s breaking apart of the supposed normalcy of compulsory heterosexuality. The irony, of course, is that within traditionally conservative interpretive communities these texts are seen as anything but queer. In fact, the likely response to such an “indecent perversion” would be one of repugnance and outrage. Yet, intriguingly lurking behind the patriarchal agenda of such communities, there exists a homoerotic undertone that favors the liberation of the text from a constrictive heterosexist bias.

### *Whose is the Greatest? Measuring Manhood (9:33-37)*

This Markan text involves the retelling of an argument between the disciples over who is the greatest. Conventional interpretations tend to read along with the grain of the text: Jesus offers a corrective that reverses normalcy (namely, the first will be last and the last will be first). He then uses a child to illustrate this paradoxical logic; whoever welcomes the child is said to welcome Jesus. What conventional interpretations often miss is that while a reversal of values supposedly takes place, the hierarchical structure that measures manhood remains intact, thus allowing the dominant discourse that “greatness” is central to securing one’s masculinity to reassert itself.

I recall a scenario from when I was about seven that occurred in the boys changing room for the school community pool in which one boy was hassled for possessing an abnormally large penis. Peculiarly, as we were to grow immersed in Western society, subjected to dominant discourses concerning male bodies and a hegemonic masculinity reinforced by the popular media, pornography, and numerous “small penis” jokes, our preconceptions about penis size would be reversed. The contestation and negotiation of penis size is an obsession of modern society; disclosure of such affirms one’s (or one’s partner’s) “greatness” and “status” among other men. For these reasons, it seems fitting to re-read this Markan text *sexually* as a squabble among Jesus’ admirers over the size of their members. Again, I start with a queer retelling of the text before discussing some of the associated issues.

When they came to Capernaum Jesus asked his admirers, “What were you squabbling about on the way?” There was an embarrassing silence, for they had been comparing with one another to find out whose was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called his disciples, and said to them, “Whoever admires me the most will have the least, for truly I tell you, size doesn’t matter; it’s what you do with it that counts.” Taking a little one in his hand, he said to them, “Whoever is open to one such as this is also open to me, and whoever is open to me is open to the one who sent me.”

According to Liew (2003), competition was valuable within the ideals of ancient Mediterranean masculinity and Mark often employs language to reinforce a Jesus who aggressively asserts himself in public competition whether with the Jerusalem authorities or by way of rhetorical performances (pp. 105-106). In line with Butler’s proposal, gender is not simply established by having the correct genitals, but rather by the actions one takes to secure such a status. Therefore, it is

not surprising that the disciples initially compete for primacy in order to secure their place as “true men” on the hierarchical gender axis. Nor is it surprising that Jesus is forced to quickly dismiss their potentially threatening contest, given his role as maledom within this all male cohort. Indeed, the conduct Jesus often calls for in his admirers is that of submission and servitude. On Laqueuer’s (1990) gender axis, of course, this desire to emasculate his disciples is effectively a request for their transgenering; as Liew writes, “being ‘slavish’ was a synonym for being ‘womanish’ for all practical purposes” (p. 106). What, then, is the argumentative texture at play behind Jesus’ “preference for the small,” and what agenda does it seek to serve?

On the one hand, Jesus’ instruction works to bolster his authoritative control and masculine standing over the seemingly wayward disciples. Liew, for example, contends that the conflicts between Jesus and the disciples (in addition to conflicts between Jesus and the Jerusalem and Roman authorities) work to uphold Jesus’ masculinity. Because the protagonist will eventually suffer an emasculating death, the disciples have the upper-hand in achieving their masculinity. As such, Mark is at pains to bolster Jesus’ performance by repeatedly identifying the disciples’ failure always in comparison to Jesus’ corrective instruction or action in order that he is not upstaged (pp. 106-107). This view is strengthened by the observation that the measuring manhood text is placed next to one of the passion predictions (9:30-2) explaining the emasculating fate associated with the career and cause of the Messiah; namely, death at the hands of Roman imperial forces by means of a penetrative crucifixion.

On the other hand, the argumentative texture of the text seems to want to undermine prevailing imperial discourses that see “greatness” as central to the performance of any worthy masculine identity. Understood this way the text reads as subculture rhetoric that subverts the dominant Roman imperial culture through the re-appropriation of its hyper-masculine values. Conway (2008), for example, argues that much of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples, although using the language of submission, is intended to heighten their masculinity, perhaps through a redefinition of terms. Jesus begins by addressing those among his admirers who want to be great and those who want to be first. This use of subculture rhetoric, insists Conway, concerns those who want to win the masculinity contest of the Greco-Roman world to achieve supremacy over others. It links Jesus to popular discourses found in wider imperial culture that use the language of slavery and service to promote particular ideologies of kingship (see, for example, Seeley, 1993). Appropriating parts of established rhetoric of the literate elite is itself an effective means of resistance to the dominant ruling powers. Jesus’ statement calls attention to the ruling elites’ failure to live up to their own ideals (Conway, 2008, pp. 99-100). Rather than inverting the Roman ideology of leadership, Mark presents Jesus as a truer embodiment of imperial leadership, and as a result, masculinity.

The problem with both these agendas, however, is that they still assert the idea that hegemonic-masculinity, or at least Jesus’ masculinity, is something desirable that needs to remain intact. While the text might function as a critique of imperialism, it does not undermine the embedded belief that winning the masculinity contest is still a crucial task. Whether the criterion for greatness is flaccid or erect, it feeds from a subjection to widespread regulating discourses asserting that masculinity itself is an essential component of one’s identity. Dominant

discourses are so pervasive that attempts at redefinition often merely re-establish their dominance over us. For instance, while the phrase “size doesn’t matter” attempts to negotiate power away from a dominant discourse, McKee (2004) argues that its predominant embodiment within satire does not reverse but hardens the discourse that large penises are desirable. This text about measuring manhood functions in a similar way: in the process of negotiating power away from imperial might, it still affirms the discourse that hegemonic masculinity is of utmost importance.

The measures of masculinity are complex and often contradictory. Jesus’ supposed corrective to his admirers is itself a means of establishing control and power over his own destiny, which, as an expression of masculinity, silences and emasculates the disciples. Even if the text is read at a literal level in which a reversal of values actually takes place, the subtext that greatness and therefore hegemonic masculinity is something desirable is not rejected but in fact confirmed. From a queer perspective, this calls for a careful reading against the grain of the text, in order that oppressive androcentric and imperial ideals are not re-inscribed onto our own context.

#### *The Pash of Judas and a Streaker’s Nuddie Run (14:43-52)*

One does not have to go far to find erotic textures present in what is traditionally titled “the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.” Not only does it contain a scandalous kiss between two men, but it concludes with a young man whose entire body is exposed during the struggle to escape. The text begins with the arrival of Judas accompanied by a crowd that intends to arrest Jesus. The irony can be seen in the signal by which Jesus is identified, namely, an intimate embrace. While the entire text, including the disciples’ decision to flee, has implications for their masculinity, I focus here on the erotic texture of the betraying embrace and then consider the identity of the mysterious naked youth. Once again, I start with a queer retelling of the text before discussing its interpretive repercussions.

Immediately, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd of men with shackles and whips eager to restrain Jesus. The betrayer had said, “The one who I will kiss is the maledom; restrain him and lead him away.” When Judas came, he approached Jesus, said “master,” and pressed his lips up against him. Then the crowd laid their hands on Jesus and tied him down. After an initial struggle his admirers deserted him and fled. Shortly after, a boy escort wearing nothing but a cover of cloth was admiring Jesus. As the crowd of men tried to grapple him, however, he dropped it and streaked off naked.

The pash of betrayal by Judas is conventionally read as an “innocent” kiss of greeting, used by rabbis and their pupils as a sign of respect. Donahue (2002), for instance, writes:

The action was most likely a ‘peck’ on the cheeks, similar to greetings used in the Middle East today. The ‘holy kiss’ (*philēma*) became a customary greeting and sign of affection in the early church. Whether either of these practices illumines the kiss by Judas is debatable and really not important. The point is that Judas’ kiss is a cynical device to insure that the ‘crowd’ will arrest the right man: Jesus. (Donahue, 2002, pp. 414-415)

But is the kiss really not that important? Suppose it was not Judas who kisses Jesus, but was a female character, say Mary Magdalene. What kind of interpretive speculation might then occur? Would Donahue still consider it just a (harmless and therefore decent) peck on the cheek? Martin (2006) suggests that the popular imagination has often envisioned Jesus in a heterosexual relationship, but has seldom understood his sexuality as ambiguous even though the gospels are relatively silent about it. He notes that such interpretations fixate on Jesus' supposed celibacy, sexual temptations, or actual relationships, but are always dominated by assumptions of heterosexual normativity (pp. 93-94). Thus, it would seem, conventional interpreters are so locked into categories of heterosexual normativity that even the possibility of homosexual desire or eroticism within the text is completely disregarded. In this sense, the Judas kiss is a "text of terror" for men; the intimate act is so subversive that it can only be read through decency hermeneutics that completely desexualize it in order that it is made safe.

If we remove our erotophobic and homophobic "blinkers," however, and perceive the kiss as something fuller, perhaps conveying intimacy of considerable intensity, then Judas' choice of action to betray Jesus becomes that much more remarkable, and as a result, shocking. Indeed, Witherington (2001) writes that the verb *kataphileō* used in verse 45 means to kiss with *every show of affection*, thus making the betrayal that much more treacherous and inexplicable (p. 381). The anxiety caused by any suggestion of homoeroticism within the text, however, inhibits our appreciation of the irony behind such an intimate embrace and, therefore, reduces our appreciation for the scandal of such a betrayal.

The re-reading of this text *sexually* and therefore indecently should not really shock us as much as it probably does. By all measures, the text itself is inherently indecent as it describes what the Christian tradition has deemed one of the most scandalous events in human history. Judas, one of the twelve of Jesus' innermost male admirers, betrays not only the one he is supposed to love, but also the savior of humankind. If this is the case, then surely the more intimate the kiss the more treacherous and ironic the offense becomes. These evocative layers of meaning are lost within decency hermeneutics that, for fear of any suggestion of homoeroticism, presuppose that the pash was merely a peck.

Attached to the end of the betrayal pericope is mention of a young man (*neaniskos*) wearing nothing but a linen cloth (*sindona*), who, once caught by the crowd, loses his garment and runs away naked. Although not explicitly linked to the twelve, the youth is identified as a follower of Jesus, who resists the temptation to flee with the other disciples. The text is puzzling for conventional interpreters because it associates an unnamed and suggestively erotic youth very closely with Jesus. Moreover, the text only appears in Mark, which has led to the de-sexualized tradition that John Mark wrote himself into the text. Because this apologetic interpretation has been largely dismissed (Donahue, 2002, p. 417; Myers, 1988, p. 368), it leaves open suggestions as to the identity of the young man, especially given the erotically-charged texture surrounding his brief appearance.

Jennings (2003) describes the text as potentially homoerotic or at least of gay interest. He cites Bentham who suggests the young man was a boy prostitute (*cinēdus*). This is established through two cultural intertexts: firstly, the way the text draws attention to the nudity of the youth not only suggests he is the object of

homoerotic attention, but also places him in relation to the institution of prostitution; and, secondly, Bentham argues that the garment (*sindona*) is wrapped loosely around his body in order to entice those around him.<sup>6</sup> The men who laid hands on him and the garment, suggests Jennings, regard both the boy and the cloth as a prize (pp. 109-110).

Jennings acknowledges the lack of evidence available to substantiate a link between wearing a *sindona* and being a prostitute. He does, however, offer another point of interest, namely that the Evangelist deliberately employs the term *gymnos* to talk about the naked body rather than *sōma* as found in Paul when talking about the naked baptized body (1 Cor 12:12-44). This, he argues, would have conveyed all kinds of additional homoerotic connotations for Mark's implied first-century gentile readers as the word is a derivative of gymnasium, known in classic antiquity for its links to pederasty. The social environment of the gymnasium promoted this cultural practice by offering men a place to meet young boys. Nissinen (1998), for example, notes that in gymnasiums boys performed their physical exercises naked which doubtlessly eroticized the atmosphere and induced a male gaze (p. 65).

Although the actions of the boy escort within his brief appearance seem favorable (he continues to follow [*akolouthein*] Jesus after the other admirers have fled), his social status according to Greco-Roman customs was likely marginal. Nissinen writes that the structures of sexual relationships were hierarchically regulated according to normative masculine ideals. As such, a homoerotic relationship with a slave or prostitute disgraced only the passive partner who would have enjoyed little social respect. Although the profession was tolerated within Roman imperial society, it was constructed in a way that supported the assertion of an active masculinity at the expense of emasculated individuals (pp. 72-73).

Again, the implications for re-reading this young man *sexually* should not really shock us as much as it probably does. When the crowd of "chief priests, scribes, and elders" (14:43) attempt to restrain him, he drops his cloth and flashes them. For the ancient Jews, exposure of the penis was an offense before God (Satlow, 1997, p. 431). Yet we seem blinded from recognizing such insults because the youth's nakedness gets covered up by safer scholarly discourses about eye-witness verification, angels, and ambiguous symbols for discipleship. The reign of homophobia and heteronormativity implicit within our hermeneutical filters inhibits the many possibilities of meaning-making with the biblical text. While most interpreters are quite content to believe that Jesus associated with female prostitutes and other disenfranchised members of Greco-Roman society, we seem to want to resist the idea that he might have also fraternized with male prostitutes. Intriguingly, however, if we identify this naked youth as a boy escort it seems to affirm the conventional notion that Jesus' group of followers included an unconventional assortment of individuals. Just as it was considered inappropriate for an honorable Jewish man to consort with tax-collectors and sinners, it was also indecent to be associated with prostitutes. Such a re-reading demonstrates that our interpretive imaginations are considerably obstructed by substantive heteronormative interpretations, that queer hermeneutics allows us to see the text in the different light, and consequently, take ethical responsibility for particular interpretive moves.

## Conclusion

The above interpretations demonstrate that the selected texts are more than just “pure” narratives devoid of erotic content, and that they can be read in a way that is not only *sexual* but also convincing. Indecent hermeneutics challenge interpreters to explore new possibilities within a text. While there is no pretension that reading *sexually* is the only legitimate means of interpretation, such readings are important if we are to recognize the way texts function to construct reality. This is especially the case for the disciples in Mark’s gospel, who are often read by many interpreters as a manifesto for contemporary discipleship. The Markan disciples, just like the Bible itself, are sites for contestation in the contemporary church. Whether or not readers interpret the discipleship themes in a programmatic way, we must take seriously the context of the disciples, who themselves are subject to discourses from both their own socio-sexual culture, and values unconsciously imposed on them from today. Questions about the undeclared hermeneutical presuppositions of readers must be asked if we are to become more ethical readers. Consequently, the point of the above three interpretations is not to establish a new orthodoxy of meaning, but rather to challenge our underlying presuppositions regarding gender and sexuality; namely, that sexuality is predominantly understood in categories of heterosexual normativity, and that gender is assumed to be essential and binary rather than socially constructed.

Reading the text attentive to these issues can have tangible effects upon the target culture. Socially conservative political rhetoric, for instance, constantly conjures up images of the 1950’s nuclear family as a biblically supported ideal. Yet, my re-reading of the discipleship calling narratives (1:16-20) undermines such discourse by showing that Jesus and his disciples sought to leave behind conventional practices of familial and social identity. Moreover, discourses regarding greatness and humility become confused when read isolated from concerns of the cultural negotiation of masculine and imperial notions of endowment and status.

The queer imagination deliberately transgresses normalcy in order to destabilize. My interpretations are focused on uncovering conventional obscurities, but the ultimate goal is for the reconstruction of the biblical text in order that it is a redeeming text for all, rather than just redeeming for some. As the influence of identity politics becomes more difficult to ignore, we have the ethical responsibility to ask questions of power and control when it comes to biblical interpretation, no matter how transgressive it might seem. Normalcy, as an ideological means of control, obscures our perception of reality. Therefore, it is necessary that interpretations which disturb our sense of normalcy are continued in order that the biblical text is liberated and may also continue to liberate its readers.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> "Erotophobia," as employed by Jennings (2003), refers to a fear of physical and personal intimacy that has established itself in dominant reading strategies.

<sup>3</sup> I should note that my reading strategy is a unique contribution in that the vast majority of queer interpretations of biblical texts have so far only been published by openly gay men. Krondorfer (2007a; 2007b) has noted the relative heterosexual silence in dialogue with and response to gay men's studies and religion; the issue is that gay theology and queer hermeneutics, now established as legitimate fields of inquiry, might become "ghettoized" as sub-disciplines for gay men only. As I will demonstrate, however, queer theory offers interpretive tools for anyone who seeks to seriously challenge the oppressive binary constructs of gender and sexuality.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the limitations of article length and my desire to work more extensively with the Markan text, however, I restrain myself from engaging in a long-winded

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discussion pertaining to ancient Roman and Jewish masculinities, and rather draw together some of the key observations.

<sup>5</sup> While I am fully aware of the potential anachronisms with the idea of fishing rods in the first century, the imagery is too good to resist and graphically demonstrates my point made later that by leaving their rods behind the disciples abandon a significant component of their masculinity.

<sup>6</sup> The garment, in fact, is not properly clothing at all, but rather a kind of sheet—the same used to wrap Jesus' body.

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