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This very well written and well-documented book offers a new explanation of the heavily disputed erotic components in the relation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and of David and Jonathan. In an introductory chapter Ackerman warns against an anachronistic use of these stories in the present debate about social acceptance of homosexuality. She adheres to the social constructionist analysis and considers homosexuality as a modern construct of the nineteenth century that cannot apply to the ancient Near East and to the ideology of the biblical writers.

The first major part of her work is then devoted to the epic of Gilgamesh (33–150). Ackerman starts by giving an overview of the content and the formation of the Gilgamesh Epic, emphasizing some differences between the Old Babylonian and the Standard versions (unfortunately, A. George’s new critical edition of the epic was printed too late to be used by Ackerman). Then she turns to the question of how to understand the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Ackerman enumerates all the possible erotic allusions to this relationship in the different versions of Gilgamesh: the wordplays in the meteor and axe dream accounts; the frequent designation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as “brothers”; the wrestling account; Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar’s advances; the deathbed scene in which Enkidu is compared to a bride; and, finally, Gilgamesh’s lament
over his dead friend. Even if many commentators argue that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu should not be understood as sexual in nature, for Ackerman “the presence of homoerotic overtones in some of the Epic’s descriptions … seems indisputable” (81).

This, however, raises a problem of interpretation. Given the fact that an egalitarian sexual relationship is not conceivable in the ancient Near East (indeed, each sexual act necessitates an active [the man] and a passive [the woman] partner), how should one understand the epic’s homoerotic imagery? Ackerman’s answer is to apply van Gennep’s and Turner’s concept of rites of passage to the Gilgamesh Epic. Rites of passage are necessary to accompany the transition from an earlier social structure to a new structure. This transition is characterized by a liminal state or persona whose most defining characteristic is ambiguity. Indeed, there are many indicators for an understanding of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as liminal characters (e.g., Gilgamesh is two-thirds divine and one-third human; Enkidu stands between animal and human, but he is also on the margin between male and female). Gilgamesh’s journey to the end of the world reminds one also of the typically liminal experience of tests and trials. The women of the epic, Shamhat, Ishtar, Siduri (who might be a manifestation of Ishtar), and Utnapishtim’s wife, are also liminal characters of a sort. In this interpretation of the epic as reflecting a rite of passage, it is quite logical to find a sexualized relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that does not conform to the Mesopotamian norms of sexuality. The end of the liminal status is described somewhat differently in the Old Babylonian and in the Standard versions. According to the Old Babylonian version, Gilgamesh is urged to reintegrate himself into society by “returning to the normal and normative behaviours of Mesopotamian society” (131). The Standard version, although it does not reject the advice given by Siduri to Gilgamesh, insists on the fact that Gilgamesh is more than a “normal” human and that he can claim some form of eternal life by creating great monuments of civilization.

After this convincing analysis, Ackerman turns to the biblical story about the friendship of David and Jonathan as related in the books of Samuel (153–231). She starts with the scholarly discussion about the historicity of David, heavily criticizing the “revisionist scholars” and arguing that the Tel Dan inscriptions clearly make a strong case for the existence of a tenth-century David. In my opinion, this somewhat passionate statement is not really necessary for Ackerman’s demonstration. A presentation about the literary formation of the David story would have been more helpful. In contrast to her discussion of the formation of the Gilgamesh Epic, Ackerman does not give much diachronic indications about the composition of the David story. She mentions only the incorporation of the David material in the “Deuteronomistic History,” which she dates,
following Cross, at the end of the Judean monarchy. She also distinguishes in the David-Jonathan material a “primary account” and a “variant account.”

As in her analysis of the relation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Ackerman collects indicators of an eroticized relationship between David and Jonathan, such as the verb רומא in 1 Sam 19:1, the numerous parallels between Michal and Jonathan, the tender farewell encounter in 1 Sam 20:41–42, the frequent bow-and-arrow references, which “may be a part of the text’s homoeroticized imagery” (183), Saul’s anger and diatribe against Jonathan in 1 Sam 20:28–29, as well as David’s lament over the fallen friend (1 Sam 1:19–27). The story quite often also uses the verb “to love” ( הבא), which can nevertheless also be understood in a political sense, as attested by the Near Eastern vassal treaties. Therefore, most commentators argue that the relationship of David and Jonathan cannot be read as sexual in nature, especially since this would contradict the conception of sexuality as expressed elsewhere in the Bible.

To avoid this contradiction Ackerman wonders if the relationship between David and Jonathan should be understood through the concept of liminal characters, as was the case for her interpretation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. But David and Jonathan appear much less as liminal heroes, even if the narrative of their relation integrates some liminal features. Therefore, Ackerman offers another explanation. Following McCarter, McKenzie, and others, she argues that the David story should be understood as royal propaganda whose function is to legitimate David as the rightful king of Israel and Judah. In this context, the relationship with Jonathan—which supersedes David’s marriage with Michal and the “homoeroticized terms that depict David and Jonathan as being like husband and wife, with Jonathan occupying the wifelike role”—furthers “the tradition’s goal of affirming David’s right to the throne over the claims that might otherwise be advanced on behalf of Saul’s descendants” (221–22). For this apologetic reason, the sexual aspects of the story of David and Jonathan were acceptable to the narrators and the audience.

Even if thought-provoking, I find this theory less convincing than Ackerman’s analysis of the Gilgamesh Epic. Why not imagine that the authors of the David story knew the Standard version of the Gilgamesh Epic, as Loyse Bonjour and I have argued elsewhere (Thomas Römer and Loyse Bonjour, L’homosexualité dans le Proche-Orient ancien et la Bible [Essais bibliques 37; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2005])? Ackerman never addresses this question. If the authors of the books of Samuel were familiar with the Gilgamesh tradition, and there is little doubt that they were, one could easily argue that they tried to present David as a Hebrew Gilgamesh. This does not speak against the apologetic function of the history of David’s rise, but it might provide a better understanding of his relationship with Jonathan. In the end, these remarks do not diminish the high quality of
Ackerman’s work, which should be read by all biblical and Near Eastern scholars interested in the heroic traditions.