

law" could just as well have been the mother of Peter's "woman." We must always keep in mind the inevitable conservatizing trend in the Gospels, written one or more generations after Jesus' death.

Traditionally the best supporting text in the argument in support of celibacy is Matthew 19:9-12:

I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery. The disciples said to him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry. But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.

It is not plausible that Jesus is promoting castration here, but many have been persuaded that this is a metaphorical call to celibacy. If it was a call to celibacy, it is peculiar that none of his disciples paid any heed to the teaching following Jesus' death. Paul points out that he and Barnabas are alone in traveling without female companions. (1Cor 9:5)

Some who think this is a call to celibacy believe it to be a point of similarity between Jesus and the Essenes who practiced a form of partial celibacy. Other commentators propose this saying as a poetic defense of monogamy, the argument being that men who renounce divorce make themselves eunuchs, in effect, if the marriage fails. This rather strained interpretation has received little support. If accepted it would be the only clear advocacy of monogamy in the Bible, and in this instance a rather severe form of monogamy.<sup>88</sup>

L. William Countryman offers the most persuasive reading of this text and he turns the traditional interpretation on its ear. He argues that this is not a sexual teaching at all, but rather an assault on the patriarchal family. He first notes that the context is one in which Jesus has deprived the male of his privileged patriarchal prerogative of divorcing his wife to marry another. Jesus equates such a move with

88 See W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1982, pp. 1-10; William E. Phipps, "Did Jesus or Paul Marry?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Fall 1968, p. 741; Fuchs, *op. cit.*, p.240; Quentin Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven (Mat. 19:12)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 30 (1968), pp. 335-58.

adultery. His disciples respond saying that if such is the case it is better not to marry. The cutting issue here is Jesus' encroachment on male authority in the family, and thus in fact an assault on the cornerstone of the family itself.

The eunuch is the one kind of male who is incapable of being a patriarch. Some eunuchs are indeed sexually competent, but none are reproductively competent. It is the patriarchal position in a family that eunuchs were universally deprived of rather than sexual gratification itself. As Countryman says, "Jesus was acknowledging, then, that his prohibition of divorce effectively dissolved the family and made eunuchs of all men, for it deprived them of the authority requisite to maintain their patriarchal position and keep their households in subjugation to themselves as the unique representatives of their families." Thus what appears on the face of it to be a teaching advocating an ascetic sex ethics actually appears to be a teaching which subverts the entire hierarchical institution called family.<sup>89</sup>

The data on Jesus' life and teaching on sex and marriage is therefore inconclusive, but it suggests that of a rabbi<sup>90</sup> who was both well immersed in mainstream Judaism, and at the same time one who was at points critical of accepted religious opinion of his day, to a revolutionary degree.

## XII

In Matthew and Luke Jesus is portrayed as tolerant of a pederastic relationship between a centurion and his "boy." Scholars believe the story is part of a common source document (Q), or oral source shared by Matthew and Luke.

A centurion there had a slave (*doulos*) whom he valued highly (or who "was very precious"); this slave was ill and near to death. Hearing about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders with the request that he would come and save his slave's life. They approached Jesus and pressed their petition earnestly: "He deserves this favor from you," they said,

89 L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, p. 176.

90 To refer to Jesus as a rabbi is somewhat anachronistic in that the office was not as clearly formed as it is today. See Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, pp. 30ff. However, as Peter Brown put it, "anachronism is an easy ghost with which to frighten historians." *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*, p. 250.

"for he is a friend of our nation and it is he who built us our synagogue." Jesus went with them; but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends with this message: "Do not trouble further sir; it is not for me to have you under my roof, and that is why I did not presume to approach you in person. But say the word and my boy (*pais*, literally "male child") will be cured. I know, for in my position I am myself under orders, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; to another 'Come here,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this he marvelled at the man, and turning to the crowd that was following him, he said, "I tell you, nowhere, even in Israel, have I found faith like this." And the messengers returned to the house and found the slave in good health." (Lk 7:2-10)

The slightly different Matthean version (8:5ff) refers in each instance to the boy as "boy" (*pais*), not "slave" (*doulos*). "Boy" in Greek connotes a catamite or youth in a homosexual/pederastic relationship in the Greco-Roman world. These relationships were socially acceptable and not uncommon in that culture. At their best they were seen as mentor/protégé relationships which, in addition to being physically sexual, inducted the youth into the world of men. The boy would not be trained to become a lifelong or adult homosexual at his maturity, but would typically assume his place in the world as a heterosexual (or perhaps bi-sexual) male. This public acceptance of pederasty, an institution which the Romans inherited from the Greeks, was accompanied, however, by a measure of public anxiety. Effeminacy and submissiveness, for example, were viewed with contempt. Roman aristocratic families increasingly protected their young men by law from such assignments. Hence the pederastic relationship was increasingly assigned to slaves, who had no social reputation to lose.<sup>91</sup>

The practice of pederasty was, therefore, in decline early in the Christian era and was ultimately destroyed by Christendom, although it emerged curiously in another rather sublimated form in later monasticism. When the Gospels were written the practice was very much alive. Plutarch, the Greek biographer, who traveled widely and taught in Rome, was born about a decade after Jesus was executed. He discusses in his *Dialogue on Love* the question whether the love of boys is

<sup>91</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*, Vol. III, Robert Hurley, trans., New York: Pantheon Books, 1986, p. 189.

superior to the love of women, a critical question of the day. The tradition of the Greeks held the love of boys to be superior. The main argument deprecating the love of women was that such love was little more than a natural or animal inclination. The love of boys, on the other hand, was seen as the love of those who had a capacity for reason in their maturity. Pederasty was a part of the male world's denigration of women and an instrument for inducting young men into that mythology.

The meager data in the centurion's story does not permit us to conclude with certainty that his relationship with his boy/slave was a pederastic one. However, readers or hearers of the story in the first century would unquestionably conclude, given the language that is used, that the centurion was a pederast and his boy a catamite. Luke reinforces that impression by characterizing the boy as "very precious" to him.

The various English translations tend to obfuscate. The King James Version never translates "boy" at all, substituting the more benign "servant" for both "slave" and "boy" in each case. The Jerusalem Bible follows suit. The Revised Standard Version translates "boy" as "servant" in Matthew, but "slave" as "slave" in Luke, except at verse 7 where it translates "boy" as "servant." The New English Bible translates "servant" for both "slave" and "boy" in Luke, but in Matthew translates "boy" as "boy." None of the accepted English translations consistently follows the Greek text.

Thus a free translation of Luke should read: "A centurion there had a slave, a catamite who was very precious to him..." This supports a picture of Jesus as one who was tolerant of such relationships, a picture that is congruent with the rest of the New Testament. However, it is not enough to say that Jesus was merely tolerant of this apparent pederastic relationship. More than that, he was deeply impressed with the centurion's capacity for self-reflection on the ambiguity of his role as a soldier, as one under orders and who also gives orders. Jesus marvelled at him. "Nowhere, even in Israel, have I found such faith."

That such an interpretation of this text would surprise the modern reader simply demonstrates the gulf that separates the world of the early Jesus movement from the modern world, particularly in the arena of sexual values.

In Mark 14:50-52 we find another account that does not fit well into modern assumptions. Following the last supper, Jesus is arrested:

Then the disciples all deserted him and ran away. Among those following was a young man with nothing on but a linen cloth. They tried to seize him; but he slipped out of the linen cloth and ran away naked.

The account is enigmatic and troublesome to modern commentators. Most suggest the young man was the narrator himself, Mark, who was presumably roused from his bed at home and dashed out half-dressed to see about the confusion surrounding Jesus' arrest. However, the sexual innuendo in the account cannot be so lightly dismissed. The hearer of this account is in fact more likely to associate the young man's dress, or lack thereof, with the last supper that took place earlier in the evening. After all, the last supper hardly resembled anything close to a modern formal sit-down dinner. Jesus himself was undressed at some point, according to the Gospel of John 13:4-5:

[Jesus] rose from the table, laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, tied it round him. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with a towel.

If Jesus was undressed at some point in the evening, the half-naked young man becomes less surprising.

Jeremy Bentham, the 19th century moralist, proposes in the context of commenting on English sodomy laws, that this episode reflects a homosexual liaison, or boy prostitution.<sup>92</sup> Bentham speculates that the stripling may have been a rival to John, the disciple "whom Jesus loved," the implication being that Jesus and the beloved John were homosexual lovers. Bentham argues that the linen cloth over his otherwise naked body was a badge of his profession as a boy prostitute, but he does not give his source for this. Bentham's proposal is speculative, but cannot be lightly dismissed. The tradition holds that Jesus had some kind of special and affectionate relationship with John, but it would not need to be homosexual in the modern sense. That a boy prostitute would be drawn to Jesus, aside from any role John played, and might even have come offering his services, is certainly congruent with all the other marginalized persons who were drawn to Jesus.

Until Bentham's interpretation is better substantiated, that the linen cloth over a naked body was a homosexual prostitute's badge, we do not have to be limited to a homosexual interpretation of the story.

92 For a discussion of Bentham, see Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th Century England*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 278ff.

There is good reason to doubt that the last supper itself was an all-male gathering. Recent biblical scholarship has offered some compelling arguments to the effect that Jesus had women disciples who were expurgated from the written Gospels. The "Twelve" (male) disciples themselves may have been a retrospective creation for organizational purposes in a patriarchal culture. The lists themselves appear contrived. If women were present, the last supper would take a different tilt than it is normally given.

Just prior to the last supper, Matthew and Mark report that an unnamed woman anointed Jesus with oil, also at supper, though this one is placed in Bethany. (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9) The (male) disciples object. Matthew and Mark have Jesus saying, obviously in retrospect, that the oil massage was "in preparation for burial."

All in all we have a very sensuous picture of Jesus whose body, in whole or in part, was rubbed with oil shortly before his execution. This picture is at least reminiscent of the woman who rubbed oil on Jesus' feet after washing them with her tears. (Lk 7:36ff).<sup>93</sup> Further, Jesus himself undressed to wash, and perhaps massage with oil his disciples feet, perhaps men and women. Footwashing carries overtones of sexual intimacy even in the most stylized and formal re-enactments, and the last supper was hardly a liturgical event. Given this context, the half-dressed young man is no longer so incongruous.

All this sensuous attention to the body does not quite add up to a modern American orgy. But it assuredly does demonstrate at least an appreciation for and a loving care for each other's bodies in the circle of Jesus' intimates, a care that is quite alien to the modern Western middle class.

Subsequent ecclesial practice has so ritualized the washing of feet, the oil massage, and the last supper, that the sensual and possibly sexual aspects of those events in their original form are obscured from our awareness.

### XIII

Any attempt to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of Jesus' attitudes, behavior and teaching about sex and marriage must deal with the fact that all the information available has been filtered through an

93 And may be another version of the same event.