

[From the website, Would Jesus Discriminate?]

From our days in Sunday school, many of us are familiar with the Gospel story where Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion. This story is recorded in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10. In Matthew, we are told that the centurion came to Jesus to plead for the healing of his servant. Jesus said he was willing to come to the centurion's house, but the centurion said there was no need for Jesus to do so — he believed that if Jesus simply spoke the word, his servant would be healed. Marveling at the man's faith, Jesus pronounced the servant healed. Luke tells a similar story.

Just another miracle story, right? Not on your life!

Note 18. K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1978), page 16; Bernard Sergent, *Homosexuality in Greek Myth* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1986), page 10.

In the original language, the importance of this story for gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians is much clearer. The Greek word used in Matthew's account to refer to the servant of the centurion is *pais*. In the language of the time, *pais* had three possible meanings depending upon the context in which it was used. It could mean "son or boy;" it could mean "servant," or it could mean a particular type of servant — one who was "his master's male lover." (See note 18.) Often these lovers were younger than their masters, even teenagers.

Note 19. *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Mercer University Press, Macon, 1994), page 554.

To our modern minds, the idea of buying a teen lover seems repugnant. But we have to place this in the context of ancient cultural norms. In ancient times, commercial transactions were the predominant means of forming relationships. Under the law, the wife was viewed as the property of the husband, with a status just above that of slave. Moreover, in Jesus' day, a boy or girl was considered of marriageable age upon reaching his or her early teens. It was not uncommon for boys and girls to marry at age 14 or 15. (See note 19.) Nor was it uncommon for an older man to marry a young girl.

Fortunately civilization has advanced, but these were the norms in the culture of Jesus' day.

In that culture, if you were a gay man who wanted a male "spouse," you achieved this, like your heterosexual counterparts, through a commercial transaction — purchasing someone to serve that purpose. A servant purchased to serve this purpose was often called a pais.

The word boy in English offers a rough comparison. Like pais, the word boy can be used to refer to a male child. But in the slave South in the nineteenth century, boy was also often used to refer to male slaves. The term boy can also be used as a term of endearment. For example, Jeff's father often refers to his mother as "his girl." He doesn't mean that she is a child, but rather that she is his "special one." The term boy can be used in the same way, as in "my boy" or "my beau." In ancient Greek, pais had a similar range of meanings.

Thus, when this term was used, the listener had to consider the context of the statement to determine which meaning was intended. Some modern Christians may be tempted to simply declare by fiat that the Gospels could not possibly have used the term pais in the sense of male lover, end of discussion. But that would be yielding to prejudice. We must let the word of God speak for itself, even if it leads us to an uncomfortable destination.

Is it possible the pais referred to in Matthew 8 and Luke 7 was the Roman centurion's male lover? Let's look at the biblical evidence.

Note 20. For an excellent and thorough discussion of the terms pais and entimos doulos in these two gospel accounts, see Donald Mader's article *The Entimos Pais of Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10*, (Source: *Homosexuality and Religion and Philosophy*, Harland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1998).

The Bible provides three key pieces of textual and circumstantial evidence. First, in the Luke passage, several additional Greek words are used to describe the one who is sick. Luke says this pais was the centurion's *entimos doulos*. The word doulos is a generic term for slave, and was never used in ancient Greek to describe a son/boy. Thus, Luke's account rules out the possibility the sick person was the centurion's son; his use of doulos makes

clear this was a slave. However, Luke also takes care to indicate this was no ordinary slave. The word *entimos* means "honored." This was an "honored slave" (*entimos doulos*) who was his master's *pais*. Taken together, the three Greek words preclude the possibility the sick person was either the centurion's son or an ordinary slave, leaving only one viable option — he was his master's male lover. (See note 20.)

A second piece of evidence is found in verse 9 of Matthew's account. In the course of expressing his faith in Jesus' power to heal by simply speaking, the centurion says, "When I tell my slave to do something, he does it." By extension, the centurion concludes that Jesus is also able to issue a remote verbal command that must be carried out. When speaking here of his slaves, the centurion uses the word *doulos*. But when speaking of the one he is asking Jesus to heal, he uses only *pais*. In other words, when he is quoted in Matthew, the centurion uses *pais* only when referring to the sick person. He uses a different word, *doulos*, when speaking of his other slaves, as if to draw a distinction. (In Luke, it is others, not the centurion, who call the sick one an *entimos doulos*.) Again, the clear implication is that the sick man was no ordinary slave. And when *pais* was used to describe a servant who was not an ordinary slave, it meant only one thing — a slave who was the master's male lover.

The third piece of evidence is circumstantial. In the Gospels, we have many examples of people seeking healing for themselves or for family members. But this story is the only example of someone seeking healing for a slave. The actions described are made even more remarkable by the fact that this was a proud Roman centurion (the conqueror/oppressor) who was humbling himself and pleading with a Jewish rabbi (the conquered/oppressed) to heal his slave. The extraordinary lengths to which this man went to seek healing for his slave is much more understandable, from a psychological perspective, if the slave was his beloved companion.

Thus, all the textual and circumstantial evidence in the Gospels points in one direction. For objective observers, the conclusion is inescapable: In this story Jesus healed a man's male lover. When understood this way, the story takes on a whole new dimension.

Imagine how it may have happened. While stationed in Palestine, the centurion's pais becomes ill — experiencing some type of life-threatening paralysis. The centurion will stop at nothing to save him. Perhaps a friend tells him of rumors of Jesus' healing powers. Perhaps this friend also tells him Jesus is unusually open to foreigners, teaching his followers that they should love their enemies, even Roman soldiers. So the centurion decides to take a chance. Jesus was his only hope.

As he made his way to Jesus, he probably worried about the possibility that Jesus, like other Jewish rabbis, would take a dim view of his homosexual relationship. Perhaps he even considered lying. He could simply use the word *duolos*. That would have been accurate, as far as it went. But the centurion probably figured if Jesus was powerful enough to heal his lover, he was also powerful enough to see through any half-truths.

So the centurion approaches Jesus and bows before him. "Rabbi, my . . .," the word gets caught in his throat. This is it — the moment of truth. Either Jesus will turn away in disgust, or something wonderful will happen. So, the centurion clears his throat and speaks again. "Rabbi, my pais — yes, my pais lies at home sick unto death." Then he pauses and waits for a second that must have seemed like an eternity. The crowd of good, God-fearing people surrounding Jesus probably became tense. This was like a gay man asking a televangelist to heal his lover. What would Jesus do?

Without hesitation, Jesus says, "Then I will come and heal him."

It's that simple! Jesus didn't say, "Are you kidding? I'm not going to heal your pais so you can go on living in sin!" Nor did he say, "Well, it shouldn't surprise you that your pais is sick; this is God's judgment on your relationship."

Instead, Jesus' words are simple, clear, and liberating for all who have worried about what God thinks of gay relationships. "I will come and heal him."

At this point, the centurion says there is no need for Jesus to travel to his home. He has faith that Jesus' word is sufficient. Jesus then turns to the good people standing around him — those who were already dumbfounded

that he was willing to heal this man's male lover. To them, Jesus says in verse 10 of Matthew's account, "I have not found faith this great anywhere in Israel." In other words, Jesus holds up this gay centurion as an example of the type of faith others should aspire to.

Jesus didn't just tolerate this gay centurion. He said he was an example of faith — someone we all should strive to be like.

Then, just so the good, God-fearing people wouldn't miss his point, Jesus speaks again in verse 11: "I tell you, many will come from the east and the west [i.e., beyond the borders of Israel] to find a seat in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs [i.e., those considered likely to inherit heaven] will be thrown into outer darkness." By this statement Jesus affirmed that many others like this gay centurion — those who come from beyond the assumed boundaries of God's grace — are going to be admitted to the kingdom of heaven. And he also warned that many who think themselves the most likely to be admitted will be left out.

In this story, Jesus restores a gay relationship by a miracle of healing and then holds up a gay man as an example of faith for all to follow. So consider carefully: Who is Lord — Jesus or cultural prejudice?