

D. B. Saddington

## The Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13: Consideration of the Proposal of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., and Tat-Siong Benny Liew

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In an article entitled "Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13" in *JBL* 123 (2004): 467-94, Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., and Tat-Siong Benny Liew maintained that παῖς in the Matthean pericope is the centurion's "boy-love" (p. 478) and that his reluctance to have Jesus come into his house was due to his regarding Jesus as his patron who might "usurp" his place in the boy's affections (p. 484). Neither of these interpretations, however, appears to be supported by the Roman evidence adduced by the authors.

To take the second point first, Jennings and Liew refer to the relationship between the poet Tibullus, his girlfriend Delia, and the general Messalla to illustrate "the patronage system of the Greco-Roman world" (p. 483). They cite *Tib.* 1.1.53-58, where Messalla is a victorious conqueror by land and sea while Tibullus stays at home, enslaved to his Delia; and 1.5.31-34, where Delia has been unfaithful to Tibullus and where he fantasizes that he is having a dream in which he has become a simple farmer and Delia his faithful wife and helpmate. When Messalla visits the farm, she prepares a good meal for him. At no point is there any suggestion that Messalla might replace Tibullus in Delia's affections: the purpose of the poem was to honor Messalla. The simple feast in the countryside is not the typical dinner party in the city of Rome, in which the patron-client relationship often played a role. Tibullus belonged to the upper levels of Roman society; Messalla was one of the most distinguished statesmen of the day; and Delia was a highly sophisticated courtesan. The interchanges between them (the second was outside "reality," and the first just a version of the common Latin metaphor of the poet as soldier) hardly throw any light on the relationship between

a fairly junior officer in a small provincial town, his boy, and a Jewish healer. Patron-client relationships were a peculiarity of late Republican politics that later took on a more social dimension between the wealthy nobility and their hangers-on among the plebs. In these precise forms they did not filter down into the provinces or client kingdoms such as Galilee.

As the authors point out, the word παῖς, used to refer to the sick person about whom the centurion was concerned, can have several senses. (For the sort of personnel available to a centurion, the action of Cornelius, who was a Roman, in Acts 10:7 may be compared. He sent two servants [οἰκείαι] and a soldier [στρατιότης] to approach Peter on his behalf.) In the parallel passage in Luke 7:2 the patient is a δοῦλος, or slave, but an "honored" (ἔντιμος) one, possibly even a steward or slave-administrator, an important member of the household. It is not certain if John 4:46-54 refers to the same incident, but the patient is a υἱός, or son, and the person concerned is not a military man but a royal official (βασιλικός). There may be a hint of status upgrading in these two

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accounts, which makes a suggestion in G. Zuntz's interpretation interesting.<sup>1</sup> He prefers a variant reading in Matt 8:5, χιλίαρχος, which would make the petitioner the commander of a thousand and not merely of a hundred. For chiliarchs being accorded honor in Galilee, see Mark 6:21.

<sup>1</sup> G. Zuntz, "The 'Centurion' of Capernaum and His Authority (Matt. 8, 5-13)," *JTS* 46 (1945): 183-89 = G. Zuntz, *Opuscula Selecta: Classica hellenistica christiana* (Manchester: University Press; Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972), 181-87.

A relationship in the Roman army that might correspond to that of the petitioner and the patient in Matthew is that between soldiers and *calones* or *lixae*. These were sutlers and soldiers' servants, who were, interestingly, given paramilitary duties in times of crisis.<sup>2</sup> But neither this Roman institution nor the parallel passages elsewhere in the Gospels are strictly germane to the authors' proposal.

It remains unclear whether the patient was a soldier or a servant (or a son). But, as the authors point out, the Greek word *παῖς* can mean the junior partner in a homosexual relationship— hence their suggestion that *παῖς* here means a “boy-love” in a “pederastic relationship” (p. 468). To bolster this interpretation they point to factors in the Roman army that promoted homosexuality. They quote the Roman ban on soldiers marrying, but the ban operated mainly as a status determinant and in the area of inheritance law. Soldiers might, and did, form customary unions and raise families while on service; however, from a legal point of view, the relationship was not a proper marriage (*iustum matrimonium*), nor the partner a “wife,” and the children were illegitimate.<sup>3</sup> This applied to Roman citizens serving in the legions. The soldiers serving in Judea at this time were not legionaries but auxiliaries.<sup>4</sup> Auxiliary unions were officially acknowledged: after twenty-five years of service, an auxiliary was granted Roman citizenship not only for himself but for his children as well and, in addition, *conubium*, or a legally valid relationship, with his partner.<sup>5</sup> The implication of the citation of the ban on marriage seems to be that homosexuality was more prevalent in Roman than in other armies, but at least ancient Greek armies seem to have been more given to it than the Romans.

The authors also suggest that centurions were particularly prone to homosexual relationships, but the instances they quote are of centurions (and other officers) raping adolescent boys (and girls) in actual warfare or forcing themselves on unwilling young recruits. In fact, the only case they quote of a possible long-term relationship between a centurion and his *amor*, or love, is in a satirical poem by Martial (*Epigr.* 1.31), where, however, there is no evidence of the centurion's concern for the youth, as in Matthew. The point lies in the surprise use of a reli-

gious dedication to refer to the evanescence of adolescent beauty.

But it is the basic irrelevance of the proffered analogies to the passage in Matthew that is the least convincing aspect of the article. The centurion is portrayed as a Roman.

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He is called a “Roman centurion.”<sup>6</sup> He shares “Roman attitudes” (p. 491). “We have been talking about the centurion and the Roman military in this paper” (p. 493 n. 65). As noted above, however, the soldiers stationed in Judea in the first century C.E. were non-Roman auxiliaries, not legionaries. Moreover, the incident took place not in Judea but in Galilee, which at the time was a nominally independent kingdom of the Herodian Antipas. Client kings of the time certainly modeled their armies on that of Rome. For example, in that of Nabataean Arabia (against whom Antipas fought after the death of John the Baptist) chiliarchs and centurions appear.<sup>7</sup> Antipas himself used this terminology.<sup>8</sup>

All that can be definitely said is that the centurion in Matthew was a Gentile: his actual ethnicity cannot be determined.<sup>9</sup> He may have had a homosexual relationship with his *παῖς*— who can tell? But that he might have is not supported by suggestion that his behavior was similar to that of upper-class society in Rome itself or to that of officers in crack regiments stationed at key points on the frontiers of the empire. One needs rather to know how captains in the armies of the petty kings of the East thought and behaved.

D. B. Saddington  
dbsadd@languages.wits.ac.za  
University of the Witwatersrand,  
Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> See R. Feig Vishnia, “The Shadow Army— the *Lixae* and the Roman Legions,” *ZPE* 139 (2002): 265-72.

<sup>3</sup> See S. E. Phang (whom the authors quote), *The Marriage of Roman Soldiers (13 B.C.–A.D. 235): Law and Family in the Imperial Army* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), esp. 197ff.

<sup>4</sup> See D. B. Saddington, “Roman Military and Administrative Personnel in the New Testament,” *ANRW* II.26.3 (1996): 2409-35, here 2413.

<sup>5</sup> See Phang, *Marriage of Roman Soldiers*, 3, 53ff.

<sup>6</sup> Except for one case in an important frontier army, the centurions assigned sensitive political tasks to whom the authors refer (p. 484 n. 47) come from the elite Praetorian Guard in Rome itself.

<sup>7</sup> See D. F. Graf, “The Nabataean Army and the *Cohortes Ulpiae Petraeorum*,” in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East (Kraków Colloquium, 1992)* (ed. E. Dabrowa; Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1994), 265-305, here 279, 289.

<sup>8</sup> For Antipas's army, see Saddington, “Roman Military,” 2412-13.

<sup>9</sup> For the many different peoples who might be passing through Judea at the time, see the list of those in the audience during Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:9-11).