

The Beloved Disciple of John 13:23 and Greek Pederasty

In the description of the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel, we read that “one of his students, whom Jesus loved, was reclining in the lap of Jesus” (ἓν ἀνακείμενος εἰς ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς, John 13:23). The phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ should be translated “in the lap” and not “on the breast” or “bosom” as it is in many standard English versions of the New Testament: it is unlikely that κόλπος meant “breast” or “bosom” here (Howell 1980 comments on this “common mistranslation of κόλπος”); furthermore, in the other uses of the phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ in Greek, the preposition ἐν does not refer to resting “on” the surface of something, but rather to being “in(side)” something (see the common use of this phrase in a geographical sense to mean “in(side) the bay”). Once ἀνακείμενος...ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ is translated as “reclining in the lap,” the intimacy of the physical relationship between the student “whom Jesus loved” and his teacher, taken together with what we know about the ubiquity of pederasty in elite Greek and Roman culture and its close association in Greek culture with education, suggests that at least some of the Gospel’s ancient readers would have understood the relationship between Jesus and his beloved student as pederastic. This reading of John 13:23 is supported, first of all, by the sexualized uses of the phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ in Classical and Hellenistic Greek. For Classical Greek we have the scene in Aristophanes *Ecclesiazusae* where a young man says to a young woman, “I want to be in your *kolpos*, trading blows with your ass” (963-5); Henderson 1991 has convincingly argued that Aristophanes is using *kolpos* in a double sense here, to mean both “lap” and “vagina.” In the *Septuagint*, the phrase is frequently associated with marital love, in the common expression “to be in the lap of one’s husband” (Deut. 13.7, 28.54, 2 Kings 12.8)

or, less often, “the lap of one’s wife” (Deut. 28.56). Its use in John 13:23 assimilates the beloved student to a wife. The connotations of ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ become even clearer, when we consider the use of the name Encolpios or Encolpos in Roman imperial culture, a name clearly derived from the phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ and meaning “the one in the lap.” The Latin literary evidence for this name (Petronius *Satyricon*; Martial 1.31, 5.48; Pliny *Ep.* 8.1; *Vita Alexandri (Severi)* 17.1), the majority of which comes from the same period in which the Fourth Gospel was composed (the late 1st or early 2nd century AD), makes it clear that Encolpios/Encolpos was a common name in elite Roman circles in the imperial period for a *puer delicatus* or beloved male slave. The most famous bearer of this name from antiquity is the narrator of the *Satyricon*, but the two poems of Martial make the pederastic connotations of the name particularly clear: Martial prays that Encolpos, the slave and *amor* of a centurion named Pudens, may develop facial hair slowly; once he can grow a beard, the young slave will have passed the ideal age for the beloved in a pederastic relationship undertaken according to Greek models. Elite Roman readers, fluent in Greek, who read the phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ in John must have instantly associated it with the common slave name Encolpios/Encolpos and its unmistakable sexual connotations. Although the erotic interpretation of John 13:23 has an old and distinguished pedigree—one of its most eminent proponents was the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, in the third volume of his *Not Paul, but Jesus* (ch. 13, §2)—it has failed to achieve wide currency, not to mention acceptance, among New Testament scholars and Classicists. With almost no exceptions, recent commentaries on the Fourth Gospel pass it over in complete silence. One of the reasons this interpretation has been unconvincing is that none of its adherents (Tilborg 1993, Jennings 2003) has investigated the use of the

phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ in Classical and Hellenistic Greek or the name Encolpios/Encolpos in Roman imperial culture.

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