

# **RAW MATERIAL**

## **STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY**

**James E Miller**

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**Chapter 14**

**Eunuchs and Genealogies**

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## Eunuchs and Genealogies

### Eunuchs

There are three heroes of the Bible who served as eunuch officials in the courts of the great empires, Daniel, Mordecai and Nehemiah. To these we might add Daniel's companions, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah as well as Ahikar from the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical book of Tobit 1:21; 2:10. Two of these eunuch officials had Biblical books named for them. Also Ahikar had a popular collection of proverbs named for him, the Wisdom of Ahikar, now preserved only in fragments. Mordecai was known for his cousin, Esther the queen. Ahikar attempted to leave his inheritance to his nephew – who turned out to be unworthy of that inheritance. The tragedy of Ahikar and his nephew Nadab are hinted in Tobit 11:18 and 14:10.

Although the Bible texts are not so blunt as to state it openly, we surmise that these seven heroes of the faith were eunuchs. We know they were not Babylonian or Persian aristocrats, yet they held high positions in the empires of Babylon and Persia. Such positions did not go to foreigners who had heirs. Unlike most Biblical heroes, these seven had no wives or children, though Mordecai and Ahikar were raising the child of a relative. The first chapter of Daniel describes how the young Judahite aristocrats were trained under the chief palace eunuch. Though the book of Daniel nowhere declares that Daniel was one of these eunuchs, that seems to be his training in this book. If we read these men as eunuch officials we probably are understanding the intent of the books which declare their deeds.

When imperial governments such as Babylon and Persia raise foreigners to official status, they tend to be eunuchs. Eunuchs have no children of their own who might inherit the status of their fathers, thus protecting the aristocratic privilege of the Babylonian or Persian aristocrats.

A eunuch cannot be a patriarch. But this does not stop eunuchs from trying to pass on privilege to their families. We have noted how Mordecai was raising his cousin and Ahikar was raising his nephew to be his heir. The book of Nehemiah begins with a visit from Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah. This brother was accompanied by other Judeans, indicating that this "brother" was a blood-relative of Nehemiah. Though the term "brother" had been used to denote fellow nationals, the contrast with "other Judeans" implies that Hanani was at least the cousin of Nehemiah, if not a son of Nehemiah's father.

And Nehemiah took special interest in his entire nation, not merely his immediate relatives. He shares this trait with Mordecai and Daniel. Notably, Mordecai warns Esther to hide her nationality (Esther 2:10,20), including her relationship to Mordecai. Presumably the imperial governments did not want their eunuchs promoting the interests of their various nationalities, or their families, so Mordecai passed his cautious attitude on to Esther. Only at the desperate end did Esther dare to reveal her nationality, and that to the king alone. This makes it even more significant that Nehemiah dared to plead openly for his nationality before the emperor.

Isaiah 56 speaks of eunuchs and foreigners in Judah who find themselves outsiders to the covenant, and the prophet assures eunuch and foreigner alike that there remains a place for them within the kingdom and within the worship of the one God of Israel. The implication was that eunuch and foreigner alike were treated as outsiders to the covenant. They had no secure place among God's people, a situation which the prophet was proclaiming defunct. Even as they became part of someone else's empire, the prophets of Judah made sure the people understood that their God was trans-national. Beginning with the strangers and eunuchs in their midst, the covenant was extended to cover all outsiders.

The term for eunuch is *saris* (סַרִּיס). Apparently eunuchs were part of the royal courts in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah before the exile. Before the Babylonians made them into eunuchs, the royal houses of Israel and Judah had a few eunuchs of their own. Two or three of these eunuchs threw the queen-mother Jezebel to her death at the bidding of Jehu (2 Kings 9:32-33). It is only natural that the queen would be attended by eunuchs. Another palace eunuch, Ebed-Melek, fished Jeremiah out of the cistern where the king imprisoned him because Ebed-Melek feared for the prophet's life (38:7-13).

Some instances of "eunuch" may refer to a type of palace official regardless of testicular status. For instance, Jeremiah 34:19 describes *sarasim* taking part in a ritual with royals and priests. If castrati were excluded from such a ritual then *saris* would not indicate castrati only. However, we may not be certain that castrati were always excluded. Also, Ebed-Melek is not described in a eunuch-specific role. However, the two or three *sarasim* who were with Jezebel do sound like they had a classic eunuch role. Reservations aside, in almost all cases we should be confident that castrati are indicated by the term *saris*.

A special case is Genesis 37:36 where Joseph is sold to a *saris* of pharaoh named Potiphar.

As Potiphar had a wife we might conclude that he was not an eunuch and here *saris* was a term for an office. However, in light of his wife's behavior toward Joseph, it might be that Potiphar was indeed an eunuch and his marriage served some legal or political function. In fact, this might be an intentional ambiguity of the Joseph story. By the end of the story the reader might be expected to wonder, was Potiphar a castrato after all? We may be more sure of the book of Esther which uses *saris* many times, usually about the men who guard and tend to the emperor's wives and wives-to-be. In Esther a *saris* is indeed a castrato.

### Eunuchs and Genealogies

In 2 Kings 20:18 the prophet warned Hezekiah that Babylon would conquer Judah and force many into exile. Some of the exiles would be taken to be eunuchs in the imperial courts of Babylon, like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, Mordecai, Nehemiah and Ahikar. We may be certain that these *sarisim* are castrati. Those most likely to become eunuchs were those of the royal line. In other words the heirs of the throne of David, the descendants of Hezekiah, probably ended up as eunuchs in exile. But the royal heirs of David were not the only members of David's house. Beginning with David and Solomon the kings of Judah had multiple wives and many sons. By the exile there were several families which belonged to the house of David but which were not royal. During the exile some were probably made heirs of the throne, and from these heirs came Zerubbabel.

We do not know what happened to Zerubbabel. He disappears from history abruptly, and some historians believe he was removed forcefully by a suspicious imperial government. If so, his heir would need to be yet another member of David's house. The genealogy of Zerubbabel's heirs probably had variants as significant as those in his ancestry.

Due to the exile we could expect shifts in the legal inheritance, for destructive events surrounded Babylon's exile of Judah and the restoration of Yehud as a Persian province. It is precisely such shifts between legal and biological inheritance which are often used to explain some of the discrepancies between the genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3 (Gundry 17), and these explanations date back to the church fathers, if not before (Marshall 158-159).<sup>1</sup> Even in 1 Chronicles

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<sup>1</sup> This explanation surfaced early in English Bibles. Tyndale's 1526 translation of Matthew's genealogy has the following note. "Say not mathew leveth out certeyne generacions,

3:17-19 evidence is found which indicates a levirate marriage behind Zerubbabel's legal and biological parents (Williamson 57). Whether or not the reader finds it imperative to reconcile the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, with good reason we may suspect inheritance anomalies in the royal line of David from the exile on.

Mordecai and Ahikar attempted to ameliorate their eunuch status by raising close relatives as their own children. If we consider Nehemiah as one such eunuch, he attempts to raise the entire province of Yehud as his children. And this eunuch who cannot contribute to a genealogy takes almost an obsessive interest in the genealogies of his fellow returnees. Repeatedly this eunuch requests and demands that God notice and remember the deeds of Nehemiah – for he has nothing else he can leave behind. He cannot make a biological contribution to his people, so he vigorously makes such contributions as he is able.

#### New Testament Eunuchs

The attitude of Nehemiah is very different from that which we find in Matthew 19:12 where the eunuch status seems to be something of value. Elsewhere in the New Testament the eunuch status seems to be incidental, carrying neither positive nor negative value. The eunuch status of the Ethiopian official may add color but does not contribute materially to his story in Acts 8. In Matthew 19 the “eunuch” receives positive value.

In Matthew 19:12 “eunuch” does not necessarily mean castrato, but rather it is used to indicate celibacy. Castrato or not, the eunuch of Matthew 19 does not sire children or reproduce himself, but remains childless. This is acceptable in the New Testament because the New Testament ethos does not place value on reproduction. Instead the New Testament family is the church and reproduction is through evangelism by which gentiles are adopted into the family of God.

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he describeth Christes linage from solomo, after the lawe of Moses, but Lukas describeth it accordyng to nature, fro nathan solomos brother. For the lawe calleth them a mannes childe which his broder begatt of his wyfe lefte behynde hym after his dethe. Deu. xxv.c.”