

Matthew's Parable of the Eunuchs

By

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In memory of my brother  
Alex Daniel Goolsby  
who loved history and sought justice  
and my grandparents  
Merrell Everett and Nettie Welch Goolsby  
and Daniel and Virginia Ely DeKonty  
who sought first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33)

In honor of my father  
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who got back on his bicycle  
and never ceases to inspire me

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### 1. Primary Sources<sup>1</sup>

#### *a. Bible*

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Deut	Deuteronomy
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
1 Sam	1 Samuel
1 Kgs	1 Kings
2 Kgs	2 Kings
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Jon	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Ps	Psalms
Esth	Esther
Dan	Daniel
2 Chr	2 Chronicles
Mt	Matthew
Mk	Mark
Lk	Luke
Jn	John
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
1 Jn	1 John

#### *b. Septuagint, Apocrypha, and Pseudepigrapha*

4 Kgs	4 Kingdoms (MT: 2 Kings)
Jdt	Judith
Sir	Sirach
T. Jos.	Testament of Joseph
T. Reu.	Testament of Reuben
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the abbreviations and formatting of Sander M. Goldberg and Tim Whitmarsh, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, digital ed. (Oxford University Press, 2015). For classical sources not listed therein, I use Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1940). For early Jewish and Christian sources, I rely on *The SBL Handbook of Style* abbreviations when available, and for Roman legal sources, I follow *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation*, 21 ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Law Review Association, 2020).

c. *Ancient Jewish Literature*

b.	Babylonian Talmud
Josephus	Josephus
<i>A.J.</i>	<i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	<i>Bellum judaicum</i>
<i>Vita</i>	<i>Vita</i>
m.	Mishnah
<i>Meg.</i>	Megillah
<i>Menah.</i>	Menahot
<i>Nid.</i>	Niddah
Philo	Philo of Alexandria
<i>Ebr.</i>	<i>De ebrietate</i>
<i>Ios.</i>	<i>De Iosepho</i>
<i>Leg. 3</i>	<i>Legum allegoriae III</i>
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>De somniis</i>
<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>Special Laws</i>
<i>Roš Haš.</i>	Rosh HaShanah
<i>Sanh.</i>	Sanhedrin
t.	Tosefta
<i>Yebam.</i>	Yevamot

d. *Ancient Christian Literature*

<i>Acts John</i>	Acts of John
Ambr.	Ambrose of Milan
<i>Vid.</i>	<i>De Viduis</i>
Amm. Marc.	Ammianus Marcellinus, <i>Res Gestae</i>
Aug.	Augustine of Hippo
<i>Faust.</i>	<i>Contra Faustum Manichaeum</i>
Chrys.	John Chrysostom
<i>Hom. Matt.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Mattheaum</i>
Clem.	Clement of Alexandria
<i>Paed.</i>	<i>Paedagogus</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata</i>
Epiph.	Epiphanius of Salamis
<i>Pan.</i>	<i>Panarion (Adversus haereses)</i>
Euseb.	Eusebius
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Greg.	Gregory of Nazianzus
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Oratio in laudem Basilii</i>
Just.	Justin Martyr
<i>1 Apol.</i>	<i>Apologia i</i>
Hieron.	Jerome
<i>Comm. Matt.</i>	<i>Commentariorum in Mattheaum libri IV</i>

Orig.	Origen
<i>Comm. Matt.</i>	<i>Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei</i>
Tert.	Tertullian
<i>Mon.</i>	<i>De monogamia</i>

*e. Greek and Roman Literature*

Ael.	Claudius Aelianus
<i>VH</i>	<i>Varia Historia</i>
Arist.	Aristotle
<i>Gen. an.</i>	<i>De generatione animalium</i>
<i>Hist. an.</i>	<i>Historia animalium</i>
<i>Ph.</i>	<i>Physica</i>
[ <i>Pr.</i> ]	<i>Problemata</i>
Ath.	Athenaeus, <i>The Learned Banqueters</i>
Cass. Dio	Cassius Dio, <i>Historiae romanae</i>
688 F 3c	Ctesias (fragments in FGH below)
Curt.	Quintus Curtius Rufus, <i>History of Alexander</i>
Dio Chrys.	Dio Chrysostom
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i>
Diod. Sic.	Diodorus Siculus, <i>The Library of History</i>
Diog. Laert.	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Vitae</i>
Hdt.	Herodotus, <i>Historiae</i>
Luc.	Lucian of Samasota
[ <i>Asin.</i> ]	<i>Asinus</i>
<i>Eunuch.</i>	<i>Eunuchus</i>
<i>Syr. D.</i>	<i>De Syria dea</i>
Mart.	Martial
<i>Spect.</i>	<i>Spectacula</i>
Paus.	Pausanias, <i>Description of Greece</i>
Philostr.	Philostratus of Athens
<i>VA</i>	<i>Vita Apollonii</i>
<i>VS</i>	<i>Vitae sophistarum</i>
Pl.	Plato
<i>Alc.</i>	<i>Alcibiades</i>
<i>Cra.</i>	<i>Cratylus</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>Leges</i>
<i>Phdr.</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Prt.</i>	<i>Protagoras</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Ti.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>
Plin.	Pliny the Elder
<i>HN</i>	<i>Naturalis historia</i>
Quint.	Quintilian
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Institutio oratoria</i>

Stat.	Statius
<i>Silv.</i>	<i>Silvae</i>
Suet.	Suetonius
<i>Claud.</i>	<i>Claudius</i>
<i>Dom.</i>	<i>Domitianus</i>
<i>Ner.</i>	<i>Nero</i>
Tac.	Tacitus
<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annales</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historiae</i>
Xen.	Xenophon
<i>Cyr.</i>	<i>Cyropaedia</i>

*f. Roman Legal Sources*

CODE JUST.	Code of Justinian
DIG.	Digest of Justinian
INST.	Institutes
NOV.	Novels

2. Lexica and Critical Editions

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
BDAG	A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i>
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
CPL	<i>Clavis Patrum Latinorum</i>
FGH	<i>Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker</i>
L&S	Lewis and Short
LCL	Loeb Classical Series
LSJ	A Greek English Lexicon with a Supplement
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version Bible
OCD	Oxford Classical Dictionary
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
TLG	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Graecae</i>

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus introduces three groups of eunuchs in Mt 19:12: eunuchs engendered that way from mother's womb (εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν), eunuchs made eunuchs by people (εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων), and eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven (εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν).<sup>1</sup> With five occurrences of eunuch terminology in one verse—the noun 'eunuchs' (εὐνοῦχοι), three times, the verb 'eunuchize' (εὐνουχίζω), twice—these eunuchs are hard to miss. Yet who they are and why Jesus speaks of them here, and only here, remain obscure.

Exegetes focus almost exclusively on Jesus's words in 19:12c-d: "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" and conclude that Jesus spoke of metaphorical eunuchs.<sup>2</sup> Almost all interpret 19:12c-d in light of the preceding verses about divorce, marriage, πορνεία,<sup>3</sup> remarriage, and adultery (19:3-10). They argue that Jesus encouraged unmarried disciples not to marry, divorced disciples not to remarry, or both.

Such interpretations are not new. North African apologist Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 240)<sup>4</sup> recommended that Christians abstain from sex and marriage. Drawing on the Johannine writings, Mt 19:12, and Paul,<sup>5</sup> Tertullian made the provocative claim that both Jesus and Paul were eunuchs:

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 4, I argue that διὰ in the expression διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν should be translated "in order to gain."

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural quotations come from the NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion of πορνεία occurs in Chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all dates come from the OCD.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian referred to the paraclete texts (Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 Jn 2:1), Mt 19:12, and 1 Cor 7:7-8.

Actually, I shall go beyond this and assert that even if the Paraclete had in our day required complete and absolute virginity or continence (*totam et solidam uirginitatem siue continentiam*), so that the hot passion of lust (*feruorem carnis*) would not have been permitted gratification in even monogamous marriage, not even such legislation could be considered an innovation. For the Lord Himself opened the kingdom of Heaven to eunuchs (*spado*) and He Himself lived as a eunuch (*ut et ipso spadone*). The Apostle also, following His example, made himself a eunuch (*ipse castratus*) and indicated that continence is what he himself prefers. (*Mon.* 3.1 [Le Saint, ACW])

Tertullian utilized terms that unmistakably evoked castration and physical eunuchs, but he did so to encourage an asexual, unmarried lifestyle. He hoped that Christians would emulate Jesus, the more perfect Adam, “in truth a voluntary eunuch in the flesh” (*uolenti quidem tibi spado occurrit in carne*) (*Mon.* 5.7).<sup>6</sup>

Yet alongside such readings of Mt 19:12, there existed another interpretive stream. As early as the second century, some followers understood Jesus’s words as a recommendation for castration. Apologist Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) wrote about a young Christian who requested permission from the Alexandrian prefect Lucius Munatius Felix (r. 150 – 154) to have his testicles cut off (*1 Apol.* 29).<sup>7</sup> Felix denied the petition. In the third century, exegete Origen of Alexandria (c. 184 – c. 255) argued against Christians who castrated themselves on the basis of Mt 19:12 (*Comm. Matt.* 15.1-5). He attributed their literal interpretation to a fundamental failure to understand the intention of scripture. Origen granted that there are not a few (ὀλίγος) plausible (πιθανότης) arguments to interpret all three castrations (i.e., 19:12a, 19:12b, 19:12c) as physical, which some teachers advocated in their treatises, but he refused to elaborate or refute the teaching point by point for fear that some might find encouragement to become eunuchs.<sup>8</sup> Roughly sixty years after Origen’s death,<sup>9</sup> church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c.

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<sup>6</sup> When I do not list the translator of a non-biblical primary source in brackets, the translation is mine.

<sup>7</sup> On dating Felix’s prefecture, see P. A. Brunt, “The Administrators of Roman Egypt,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 65 (1975): 145. On dating the *First Apology* to the late 150s, see Timothy David Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 20n45.

<sup>8</sup> The Latin translation, the *Vetus Interpretatio*, possibly written in the sixth century, omits the lines about Origen’s decision not to expound the teaching and his reasoning. See Ronald Heine’s comments on this translation and its reliability in Ronald E. Heine, *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*. trans. Ronald E. Heine (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> The date of *Ecclesiastical History* is uncertain. The first edition came out between 303 and 314. R. W. Burgess, “The Dates and Editions of Eusebius’ *Chronici Canones* and *Historia Ecclesiastica*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 48, no. 2 (1997): 483-86, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/48.2.471>. Its final form has a *terminus ad quem* of 324. Michael J. Hollerich, *Making Christian History: Eusebius of Caesarea and His Readers*, ed. Christopher A. Beeley, Christianity in Late Antiquity, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 7.



260 – 339) famously claimed that as a young man, Origen castrated himself (*Hist. eccl.* 6.8.3).<sup>10</sup>

Even early church leaders sought castration. When over two hundred bishops convened for the First Council of Nicaea in 325, they responded decisively to the issue of clerical castration in Canon 1:

If anyone in sickness (νόσος) has undergone surgery at the hands of physicians (ὑπὸ ἰατρῶν ἐχειρουργήθη) or has been castrated by barbarians (ὑπὸ βαρβάρων ἐξετεμήθη), let him remain among the clergy (κλήρος). But if anyone in good health has castrated himself, if he is enrolled among the clergy he should be suspended, and in future no such man should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this refers to those who are responsible for the condition and presume to castrate themselves, so too if any have been made eunuchs (εὐνουχίσθησαν) by barbarians or by their masters (δεσπότης), but have been found worthy (ἀξιόω), the canon admits such men to the clergy.<sup>11</sup>

Evidently some clergy elected castration for non-medical reasons. From Canon 1 we may draw five other inferences about clerical castration in the early fourth century. Some clergy received castration as a medical treatment for illness. Second, castration was associated with enslavement; slaveholders and foreigners (βάρβαρος)<sup>12</sup> conducted castrations. Third, some castrated slaves and/or freedmen served as clergy.<sup>13</sup> Fourth, the bishops' decisions about enrollments and promotions demonstrate that they found self-selected castration for non-medical reasons unacceptable, although they did not explain why. Finally, castration, particularly self-castration, was a matter of great importance to them. The canon's placement as first in a list of twenty suggests that the bishops were at least as concerned to prevent clerical castration as they were to establish an appeal process for excommunications (Canon 5) and to determine who had authority to administer the Eucharist (Canon 18). Notably, they did not address the issue of castration among the laity. The bishops' expectation that clergy exemplify Christian morality might explain their focus on existing and aspiring clergy.

Later that century, Bishop Ambrose of Milan (c. 340 – 397) also raised self-castration in

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<sup>10</sup> Some scholars have accepted Eusebius's claims; in Chapter 4, I will challenge them.

<sup>11</sup> *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 1 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 5-6. I will discuss additional clerical legislation in Chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> During the late Republican Period and the Principate, βάρβαρος referred to a foreigner, typically someone who did not have Roman citizenship or who lived (or was born) outside Roman borders. For example, a βάρβαρος could refer to someone from Persia, Gaul, or, often in the case of a self-made eunuch, Phrygia. Johannes Wienand, "Barbarians," in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, ed. David G. Hunter, Paul J.J. van Geest, and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Later in this chapter, I will explain why I use 'slave' and 'enslaved' synonymously in this dissertation.

his treatise *On Widows*, yet like Origen, he was reluctant to discuss the matter (13.76 [PL 16:285-286]). Ambrose complained that some men who took the sword to themselves (*se ipsos ferro utuntur*) considered it a virtue (*virtus*). Unlike what the majority (*plerique*) believes, he asserted, no one should castrate (*abscindere*) himself. Those who do will not be able to gain a victory and crown (13.77).

Throughout antiquity, prominent Christians like Justin, Tertullian, Origen, the Nicene bishops, and Ambrose who promoted a metaphorical interpretation of Mt 19:12c-d contended with other Christians who took Jesus's words literally, as a recommendation for castration. From the second century until today, in writing and practice, church leaders, theologians, scholars, and adherents have taken a decisive position for or against a literal interpretation of Mt 19:12c-d. Because even the earliest Christians were sharply divided on how to interpret Jesus's words, contemporary interpreters so far removed in time and place should be cautious before taking one position over the other.

The more I researched this verse, its broader narrative and historical context, and its history of interpretation, the more convinced I became that the major interpretative challenge is not determining whether the Matthean Jesus spoke about literal or metaphorical eunuchs. The more fruitful work is determining *how* to interpret these eunuchs within the gospel's narrative and historical context. That is the primary goal of this dissertation.

I interpret Mt 19:12 as a parable about the kingdom of heaven. Like other Matthean parables, Matthew's<sup>14</sup> eunuch verse is enigmatic, imparts hidden knowledge, expects an active response, involves eschatological reversals, relies on repetition and parallelism, presents a disturbing element, and ends with a surprise. Jesus's words about eunuchs would have been jarring to audiences in the Roman Imperial world, where becoming a eunuch was a costly proposition for any male, but they make sense in the world of the texts—foremost Matthew's, where Jesus speaks in parables and encourages self-amputation and self-abnegation of his loyal followers. As I will argue, all three groups of eunuchs help the evangelist prioritize πίστις<sup>15</sup> to

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I refer to the redactor of the First Gospel as Matthew and the (first) evangelist. I make no claims about who the redactor was, but I do use masculine pronouns. Although it is possible that a woman redacted the First Gospel, it is unlikely as few women received an elite education. See, however, Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's Therapeutae Reconsidered* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> There is a focused discussion of πίστις in this chapter.

God and his kingdom at the expense of traditionally configured human households.

Eunuchs who were engendered that way from mother's womb help Matthew discourage child production in favor of spiritual procreation. With the inauguration of the messianic age, making disciples supersedes making babies. Eunuchs who were castrated by people for enslavement remind Matthew's audiences of the necessity of loyal service to elites, kings in particular. Self-made eunuchs demonstrate remarkable loyalty to the kingdom of heaven: some acted decisively to prevent themselves from engaging in πορνεία or adultery (μοιχεία); others became eunuchs to devote themselves fully to the kingdom of heaven.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The current one introduces the project. In "Scope and Methodology," I explain my focus on the Matthean narrative and the evangelist's early audiences and outline my methodological approach. I make a case for interpreting Mt 19:12 as a parable in "The Eunuch Verse as a Parable." The third section, "πίστις Terminology," clarifies Matthew's use of πίστις terms and my use of loyalty, faithfulness, and cognates for πίστις. "Eunuchs and Castration in Antiquity" provides an overview of eunuchs, castration, and terminology, introduces stereotypes and beliefs about eunuchs, and discusses anti-castration legislation. The final section, "Misrepresentations of Ancient Jewish Perspectives," addresses several common, incorrect scholarly depictions of ancient Jewish perspectives on eunuchs.

Scholars interpret the first two groups as literal eunuchs. Discussion of Mt 19:12a and Mt 19:12b is often parenthetical. Many studies of Mt 19:12 include no discussion of the first two eunuch groups.<sup>16</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 seek to fill this gap. In Chapter 2, I argue that congenital eunuchs help Matthew build a case against child production. On historical, narrative, and exegetical grounds, I contend that these eunuchs were conceived *as* eunuchs. Congenital eunuchs

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<sup>16</sup>Carmen Bernabé, "Of Eunuchs and Predators: Matthew 19:1-12 in a Cultural Context," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 33, no. 4 (2003): 274-76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014610790303300402>; Margaret Davies, *Matthew* (Sheffield, GB: JSOT Press, 1993); Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); J. David Hester, "Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X05057772>; William A. Heth, "Unmarried 'for the Sake of the Kingdom' (Matthew 19: 12) in the Early Church," *Grace Theological Journal* 8 (1987); Halvor Moxnes, "Jesus in Gender Trouble," *Cross Currents* 54, no. 3 (2004); Donald Senior, *Matthew*, ed. Victor Paul Furnish, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998); Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew, Paideia*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010); Rick Talbott, "Imagining the Matthean Eunuch Community: Kyriarchy on the Chopping Block," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.2979/FSR.2006.22.1.21>; Craig A. Evans, *Matthew, New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 341-42; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew, Sacra Pagina*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991); John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel*, Theological Inquiries, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1979).

make sense in Matthew's larger narrative where human fathers are displaced and where human conception, birth, nursing, and infants are associated with death and destruction. Matthew's Jesus encourages his followers to make disciples, not babies, in light of the kingdom of heaven's arrival.

The vast majority of eunuchs in antiquity were castrated by someone else, not by choice but forcibly. In Chapter 3, I argue that eunuchs who were castrated by people should be interpreted as current or former slaves. Eunuchs often worked at the highest levels of kingdoms and were valued for their πίστις. Matthew's audiences were probably familiar with the trope of the "king's most loyal eunuch." The eunuchs of 19:12b represent a particular kind of enslavement for Matthew's receptive listeners, who themselves should serve God as good and loyal slaves.

For centuries, Jesus's words about self-made eunuchs would have shocked early Christians. They would have envisioned *galli*, fervent male worshippers of the goddess *Mater Magna* (Great Mother) or one of her counterparts. In popular accounts, *galli* castrated themselves in a frenzied state to demonstrate their loyalty to the goddess.<sup>17</sup> Chapter 4 places Matthew's self-made eunuchs in this historical context. It also places them in their larger Matthean context, where Jesus expects his followers to do whatever is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven, no matter the cost, and to subordinate all other relationships. Loyalty must be to God. Whereas the first two groups did not choose to become eunuchs, the third group made that momentous decision. They acted decisively to prevent themselves from engaging in πορνεία or adultery and/or to demonstrate their undivided loyalty. They anticipated the rewards of the kingdom of heaven and embraced the opportunity to become eunuchs of the heavenly king.

There is no dedicated literature review chapter; instead, a selective history of interpretation of each group of eunuchs occurs in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively.<sup>18</sup> The layout of these chapters is straightforward. I introduce the argument, then answer the following two questions sequentially:

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<sup>17</sup> It is impossible to know how many *galli* actually castrated themselves or had themselves castrated. Focused discussion of *galli* occurs in Chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup> Interested readers should also consult Gary Brower, "Ambivalent Bodies: Making Christian Eunuchs" (PhD diss, Duke University, 1996). Brower has provided extensive coverage of Mt 19:12's reception history. His dissertation has been overlooked by most scholars.

1. How have commentators, both ancient and modern, interpreted Mt 19:12(a, b, or c-d)?
2. How might Matthew's early audiences have understood this group of eunuchs?

Chapter 5 offers concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

This dissertation seeks to fill three gaps in contemporary scholarship: scant attention to the first two groups of eunuchs, minimal engagement with eunuchs in the LXX, and insufficient consideration of the costs and rewards of becoming a eunuch in Matthew's late first-century world and in the world of the text, where Jesus trains his followers to anticipate and endure the costs of serving his father in heaven in expectation of eschatological rewards. This dissertation also seeks to enlarge the scholarly orbit around Mt 19:3-10 (i.e., marriage, divorce, *πορνεία*, remarriage, adultery) to encompass the remainder of Mt 19 and other crucial links to Mt 19:12 (e.g., 5:27-32; 13:1-23; 18:1-10).

### Scope and Methodology

My primary focus is Mt 19:12 within its broader narrative and historical context in the late first- and early second-century Roman Empire. It is certainly possible that the historical Jesus spoke these words about eunuchs, or said something similar (perhaps in Aramaic), decades before the gospel's redaction. However, this is not a study of the historical Jesus. Whether Mt 19:12 originated with him, oral tradition, the first evangelist, or some combination, I do not seek to determine the original source as I believe it cannot be determined.

I am more interested in the likely reception of the Matthean Jesus's words by early audiences. Because the gospel's provenance is uncertain, I make several inferences about these audiences.<sup>19</sup> The first is that they comprised both Jews and Gentiles, the evangelist's addressees.<sup>20</sup> Matthew's frequent mentions of biblical figures, events, and locations (e.g.,

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<sup>19</sup> There is no consensus on location, but Syrian Antioch is often proposed. See, e.g., Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Sheffield, GB: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 15-16.

<sup>20</sup> Scholars continue to debate the issue of appropriate translations for Ἰουδαῖος and cognates. I use only 'Jew' and 'Jewish' and find convincing Adele Reinhartz's argument that "[t]he term Jew is more precise [than Judean] because it signals the complex type of identity that the ancient sources associate with the Greek term *ioudaios* and also because it allows Judean to retain its primary meaning as a geographical designation, so useful when discussing, say, the inhabitants or topography of Judea. The term is more ethical because it acknowledges the Jewish connection to

Abraham, Noah and the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jonah) would have resonated with Jewish listeners. The evangelist drew on characteristic biblical images (e.g., shepherd, vineyard), extensively quoted and cited biblical texts, and famously used ten fulfillment quotations.<sup>21</sup> Matthew explained Jesus's genesis, life, work, death, and resurrection through biblical texts. For example, he used quotations from Isaiah to present Jesus as God's chosen and beloved servant (12:18; cf. Isa 42:1), a great light who announces the kingdom of heaven to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death (4:15-17; cf. Isa 9:1-2 [LXX 8:23-9:1]), a healer and exorcist (8:16-17; cf. Isa 53:4<sup>22</sup>), and an advocate of justice and hope for Gentiles (12:17-21; cf. Isa 42:1-4).<sup>23</sup> Isaiah helped Matthew show Jewish audiences who Jesus is, what he does, and why he does it.

Yet the First Gospel also appealed to Gentile audiences, who embraced it at least as early as the second century. From locations across the Roman Empire, prominent second-century Gentile teachers and apologists frequently cited Matthew: Justin Martyr and Valentinus<sup>24</sup> in

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this period of history and these ancient texts, and also because it opens up the possibility, indeed the necessity, of confronting the role of the New Testament in the history of anti-Semitism." Adele Reinhartz, "The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity", ed. Timothy Michael Law and Charles Halton, *Jew and Judean: A Marginalia Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts* (Los Angeles, CA: Marginalia Review of Books, 2014), 10. For discussion of the larger terminological debate, see the responses elicited by Reinhartz's article in *Jew and Judean: A Marginalia Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts*, (Los Angeles, CA: Marginalia Review of Books, 2014). See also Daniel R. Schwartz, *Judeans and Jews: Four Faces of Dichotomy in Ancient Jewish History* (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 2014). A tragic example of the substitution of 'Jew' and 'Jewish' with 'Judean' occurred in 1930s and 1940s when some German scholars sought to erase Jesus's Jewish background and depicted him as actively opposed to Judaism. See the groundbreaking work of Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> They are also referred to as formula quotations: Mt 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10. William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew. Volume 3: Commentary on Matthew XIX-XXVIII* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 1997), 573-77. Scholars disagree about the number. Nicholas Piotrowski, as one example, adds three additional formula quotations that do not begin with πληρόω. Nicholas G. Piotrowski, *Matthew's New David at the End of Exile: A Socio-Rhetorical Study of Scriptural Quotations* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2016), 31-32. See also Richard Beaton, *Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22-34.

<sup>22</sup> Mt 8:17 may or may not be a loose translation of LXX Isa 56:3; it is very close to the MT. For discussion, see W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Volume 2: 8-18*, International Critical Commentary, (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 1991), 37-38; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005), 361-62.

<sup>23</sup> The term prophet (προφήτης) occurs thirty-seven times in Matthew, including four explicit references to Isaiah (3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; cf. 13:14; 15:7) and two to Jeremiah (2:17; 27:9).

<sup>24</sup> There are few biographical details. Irenaeus claims in *Against Heresies* (3.4.3) that Valentinus was in Rome at the same time as the bishops Hyginus (136-140), Pius (140-155), and Anietus (155-166). Noted by Ismo Dunderberg, "The School of Valentinus," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"*, ed. Petri Luomanen and Antti Marjanen (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2008), 72n33.

Rome, Irenaeus (c. 135 – c. 202) in Lyon, Basilides in Alexandria,<sup>25</sup> Theophilus (d. c. 180 – 185)<sup>26</sup> in Syrian Antioch, and Tertullian in Carthage.

The narrative itself targets Gentiles. Matthew presents Jesus’s mission to be a light to, heal, proclaim justice to, and provide hope for Gentiles as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (4:13-16; 12:15-21). The gospel concludes with Jesus’s proclamation that he has been given all authority on heaven and earth, therefore his disciples must go and make disciples of all Gentiles (28:18-20). With a dual strategy, Matthew depicts Gentiles positively and Jesus’s Jewish opponents negatively. Jesus’s encounter with the centurion in Capernaum<sup>27</sup> exemplifies. When the centurion demonstrates πίστις in Jesus’s healing ability, Jesus marvels and sharply contrasts the Gentile’s πίστις with Israelites’:

When Jesus heard him, he was amazed (θαυμάζω) and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith (πίστις). I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs (οἱ υἱοὶ) of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (8:10-12)

This is the only time Matthew applies θαυμάζω to and not about Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

Matthew often distances Jesus from other Jews and Jewish settings. Jewish leaders murder children (2:16) and prophets (14:9-10; 23:34-35). Chapter 23 is arguably Jesus’s most vitriolic attack against Jewish leaders in the New Testament. Throughout the gospel, Jesus speaks of “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54 [singular]; cf. 6:2, 5; 23:6, 34). Twice he predicts (their) flogging of his followers in the synagogue (10:17; 23:34). “Their synagogues,” Jerusalem, and the Temple are all places of rejection for Jesus and his disciples.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Biographical details are limited. Basilides probably taught in Alexandria from 132 through 138 CE. Birger A. Pearson, "Basilides the Gnostic," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'*, ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), 27.

<sup>26</sup> Ferdinand Prostmeier, "Theophilus of Antioch," in *Brill's New Pauly Supplements I - Volume 2: Dictionary of Greek and Latin Authors and Texts* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Later, Jesus castigates Capernaum for its refusal to repent in spite of the miracles he performed there: “You will be brought down to Hades,” he warns (11:23). Judgment Day will be worse for Capernaum than for Sodom (11:24). Earlier, the evangelist linked Capernaum with Gentiles (4:13-15). In the First Gospel, both Gentiles and Jews are subject to judgment and eternal punishment.

<sup>28</sup> Those who marvel because of Jesus include his disciples (8:27; 21:20), the crowd/s (9:33; 15:31); the Pharisees’ disciples and Herodians (22:22), and Pilate (27:14).

<sup>29</sup> For Matthew’s negative portrayal of synagogues and Jewish leaders, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew's Portrayal of the Synagogue and Its Leaders," in *The Gospel of Matthew at the Crossroads of Early Christianity*, ed. Donald

Following scholarly consensus on dating the gospel to the third-quarter of the first century, I also infer that Matthew's earliest audiences lived under the rule of Vespasian (r. 69 – 79 CE), Titus (r. 79 – 81 CE), Domitian (r. 81 – 96 CE), Nerva (r. 96 – 98 CE), and/or Trajan (r. 98 – 117 CE). Jewish communities, which existed throughout the Empire in major cities like Alexandria, Syrian Antioch, and Rome, certainly knew about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70.<sup>30</sup> Vespasian and his son Titus both used the Roman victory to legitimize their power, and it became a hallmark of their respective reigns. Gentiles would have known, too. Throughout his reign, Vespasian issued *Judaea Capta* (Judaea conquered) coins of various denominations as a form of imperial propaganda to commemorate Titus's victory over Judaea and circulated them throughout the west, but not in the Levant.<sup>31</sup>

Third, I infer that the vast majority of Matthew's early audiences heard but did not read the First Gospel. Few had the ability to read or the requisite access to Greek texts. The gospel expects audiences to respond to Jesus's spoken words. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly says "You have heard that it was said" (ἤκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη: 5:21,27,33,38,43) when he quotes the scriptures. The verb "to hear" (ἀκούω) occurs sixty-three times in Matthew, often in contexts where Jesus expects a response. After telling the crowds that John the Baptist is the coming Elijah whom all the prophets and law prophesied, Jesus orders: "The one with ears must hear" (ὁ ἔχων ὄτια ἀκουέτω: 11:15; cf. 13:9,43). Three times he uses the second person plural imperative to introduce a parable (ἀκούσατε: 13:18; 21:33; ἀκούετε: 15:10).

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Senior (Walpole, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2011). Levine notes that Matthew's sectarian language differentiates the group from its parent body. Instead of meeting in "their synagogues," for example, Jesus's followers will meet in his church (ἐκκλησία; e.g., 16:18). Amy-Jill Levine, "Concluding Reflections," in *Matthew within Judaism: Israel and the Nations in the First Gospel*, ed. Anders Runesson and Daniel M. Gurtner, Early Christianity and Its Literature (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2020), 451-58.

<sup>30</sup>On the First Jewish Revolt, see Steve Mason, *A History of the Jewish War: A.D. 66-74* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016); *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History and Ideology*, ed. Andrea M. Berlin and J. Andrew Overman (Abingdon, GB: Routledge, 2002); *The Jewish Revolt against Rome: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mladen Popovic (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2011); *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 157-60.

<sup>31</sup>Vespasian's different coin types are well-represented in the Levant, but only 0.3% of those found were *Judaea Capta* coins. Corey Ellithorpe argues that Vespasian's exclusion of the Levant from *Judaea Capta* coin circulation represents an example of "negative geographical targeting" whereby an emperor strategically limited an otherwise widely distributed coin type from a certain region to avoid offending a particular group (e.g., conquered Jews, Dacians) with the graphic images on the coin reverse. Corey Ellithorpe, "Circulating Imperial Ideology: Coins as Propaganda in the Roman World" (PhD diss, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017), 113, 41-44.



Methodologically, I take a broadly historical-critical approach.<sup>32</sup> I depend on the work of biblical scholars, classicists, and historians. Throughout the dissertation, I begin with and continually return to primary texts, with “texts” construed broadly to include material remains (e.g., inscriptions). My goal is not to establish a single correct interpretation of Mt 19:12; rather, I seek to place the verse and its early reception in a richer historical and narrative context so that scholars (and anyone else who might read this dissertation) will appreciate more fully *all* of Matthew’s eunuchs. I will also employ anthropological insights when I address the issue of procreativity in Chapter 2.

Although I discuss eunuchs in wide-ranging literary sources, I foreground biblical accounts for two reasons. First, contemporary scholars regularly refer to two Old Testament<sup>33</sup> texts: Deut 23:1 (23:2 in MT and LXX) and Isa 56:3-5. While both are central in the interpretive history of Mt 19:12, the omission of other eunuchs in the LXX results in a narrow, distorted view. Second, because the evangelist and many early auditors already knew the scriptures, their preconceptions about eunuchs differed somewhat from prevailing views. Existing studies on Mt 19:12 have not addressed this difference.

To provide background for longstanding beliefs about eunuchs and to elucidate Matthew’s three eunuch groups, I include literary and material evidence that pre- and post-dates Matthew. For example, the curious expression Matthew uses in 19:12a—ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν—is not self-explanatory. However, biblical scholars have not discussed the strangeness of the expression or clearly explained who eunuchs engendered that way from mother’s womb might be. Writings of the Hippocratic authors, Aristotle (384 – 322

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<sup>32</sup> For a concise introduction to a historical-critical approach, see the first chapter of Warren Carter and Amy-Jill Levine, *The New Testament: Methods and Meanings* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013). Historical-critical methods have been sharply criticized in recent decades, and few scholars today describe their approach as historical critical. For discussion and a defense of historical-critical scholarship, see John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005). For another perspective, see George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>33</sup> Following convention, I will refer to the books of the Tanakh as the Old Testament. While the terms ‘Hebrew Bible’ and ‘Hebrew Scriptures’ seek to address the problem of supersessionism, they introduce other problems. Jews do not refer to the Tanakh as the ‘Hebrew Bible’ or the ‘Hebrew Scriptures.’ Christians understand their Bible to contain an Old and a New Testament (and sometimes other canonical books in between). A more serious concern is the possibility that if this terminology were adopted more widely, some Christians could interpret the ‘Hebrew Bible’ or ‘Hebrew Scriptures’ as separate and distinct from the ‘Christian Bible,’ which has undertones of Marcionism. For a helpful discussion, see "What is the Difference between the Old Testament, the Tanakh, and the Hebrew Bible?," Society of Biblical Literature, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/tools/bible-basics/what-is-the-difference-between-the-old-testament-the-tanakh-and-the-hebrew-bible>.

BCE), Galen of Pergamon (129 – 216 CE), Soranus of Ephesus,<sup>34</sup> and tannaitic rabbis<sup>35</sup> offer medical insights about eunuchs, newborns with anomalous genitalia, and adolescents who experienced delayed or no puberty. Contemporary medical literature and recent studies about the exhumed bodies of famous castrati (males who were castrated prepubertally to sing in European choirs or operas) help clarify physical changes to eunuchs for unfamiliar modern readers and complement ancient medical observations.

In this dissertation I employ enslavement and slave terminology interchangeably. Increasingly, historians have replaced ‘slavery’ and ‘slaves’ with ‘enslavement’ and ‘enslaved’ to remind readers that no human being should be reduced to an object, property, or tool (i.e., to the sole identity of another person’s slave). On the other hand, enslaved people who left oral or written accounts about their personal experiences often employed slave terminology, as Frederick Douglass’s eloquent 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, attests.<sup>36</sup> Avoiding the traditional terms ‘slave’ and ‘slavery’ altogether may inadvertently downplay these tragic histories. When literary accounts refer to a eunuch as the “slave of” a person, which they often do, I do the same and cite the primary source. By so doing, I hope to accentuate the fact that the vast majority of eunuchs in the Roman Empire were enslaved or formerly enslaved.

### **The Eunuch Verse as a Parable**

Not until late in my research did I realize that Mt 19:12 might be a parable.<sup>37</sup> When I examined the verse’s rhetorical features and its connections to Matthew 13, I revisited several

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<sup>34</sup> Soranus studied in Alexandria and practiced in Rome during the reigns of Hadrian and Trajan (98 – 138). Helen King, “Soranus” in the OCD.

<sup>35</sup> The Tannaim were Jewish scholars of the first two centuries who compiled legal traditions that were preserved in the Mishnah (the first codification of oral law, finalized in the early third century). Tannaitic rabbis also contributed to the Tosefta (a separate collection of oral law), Baraitot (legal commentary not included in the Mishnah), and midrash (biblical interpretation).

<sup>36</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> I had been preoccupied with an inconsistency: ancient and contemporary exegetes overwhelmingly interpret the first two groups as literal eunuchs and the third as metaphorical. Few acknowledge the inconsistency or justify their shift from literal to metaphorical. Originally, I considered interpreting all three groups literally.

older studies in which the authors compared Mt 19:12 to a type of *mashal* (משל) such as a proverb or an aphorism.<sup>38</sup> The primary translation of the noun form of משל in the Brown-Driver-Briggs is “proverb, parable (of sentences constructed in parallelism, usually of Hebrew Wisdom, but occas. of other types).” The scholars who suggested that Mt 19:12 might be a *mashal* stopped short of calling it a parable.<sup>39</sup>

After further examination of Matthew’s parables, I was convinced: the eunuch verse is a parable. That is why ancient and modern interpreters have always struggled to interpret Mt 19:12. That is why two streams of interpretation—literal and metaphorical—have always existed side by side, in tension.

Just what a parable is remains contested, though. New Testament parables take a variety of forms, including comparisons, contrasts, proverbs, riddles, stories, and allegories,<sup>40</sup> and scholars offer numerous definitions. John Dominic Crossan, for example, defines a parable as a “metaphorical story” and a “fictional story invented for moral or theological purposes.”<sup>41</sup> For Klyne Snodgrass, in most cases, “a parable is an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade.”<sup>42</sup> Instead of defining parables, Amy Jill-Levine focuses on what they *do* for audiences: “remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb....”<sup>43</sup> Jesus’s parables challenge hearers and readers. As Levine points out, Jesus and his Jewish followers “knew that parables and the

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile: Matthieu 19, 3-12 et parallèles* (Bruges: BE: Éditions de Y Abbaye de Saint André, 1959). Leo G. Perdue, "The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 2.3 (1986); Arthur J. Dewey, "The Unkindest Cut of All? Matt 19:11-12," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 8.1-2 (1992); Dale C. Allison, "Eunuchs because of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 19:12)," *TSF Bulletin* 8, no. 2 (1984).

<sup>39</sup> John Nolland comes close: “One must penetrate a parablelike enigma here. Not all are called to make themselves eunuchs, but all are called to understand and affirm the priorities involved.” Nolland, *Matthew*, 782.

<sup>40</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 10th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 25.

<sup>41</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012), 8, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 24. Arland Hultgren provides this working definition: “A parable is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between God’s kingdom, actions, or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined.” Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 3. Luise Schottroff defines parables as “fictional narratives” that describe “the structure of political rule or the structure of the world of work and social relationships (e.g., the injustice of wealth and the suffering of poverty; the role of the patriarchal father in relationship to sons).” Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 103.

<sup>43</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2014), 4.

tellers of parables were there to prompt them to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times to indict.”<sup>44</sup>

The LSJ’s primary definition of Παραβολή, “juxtaposition, comparison,” includes four sub-definitions: first, “comparison, illustration, analogy;” second, “NT, parable;” third, “by-word, proverb;” and fourth, “objection to an argument.” Although the second sub-definition is circular, the primary definition conveys something of the term’s capaciousness. The LSJ does not mention the derivation of παραβολή from παρά, “from” or “beside,” and βάλλω, “throw.”

The term παραβολή occurs sixteen times in the First Gospel.<sup>45</sup> Some parables appear only in Matthew.<sup>46</sup> Scholars disagree about the total number of parables in the First Gospel; Jans Lambrecht, for example, counts twenty-two,<sup>47</sup> whereas the *Kompendium des Gleichnisse Jesu* lists fifty-one.<sup>48</sup> Editor Ruben Zimmermann explains that fifty-one should not be considered a final number because some cases (e.g., 5:14; 7:13) are borderline.<sup>49</sup> Although scholars differ on the final count, they agree that the Matthean Jesus often speaks in parables. At one point, the evangelist declares that Jesus *only* spoke to the crowds in parables (13:34).

Many, but not all, Matthean parables are identified explicitly as parables. Sometimes the evangelist introduces Jesus’s words as a parable, as in 13:31—“He put before them another parable”—and 22:1—“Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables.” Once, Jesus prefaces his words as a parable: “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard...” (21:33). Jesus introduces as parables the sower (13:3-9,18-23), weeds among the wheat (13:24-30, 36-43), mustard seed (13:31-32), leaven (13:33), hidden treasure (13:44), pearl of great value (13:45-46), net (13:47-50), wicked tenants (21:33-45), and wedding feast (22:1-14).

The identification of others is less straightforward. Jesus refers to the fruitless fig tree

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<sup>44</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Mt 13:3,10,13,18,24,31,33,34 (2x),35,36,53; 15:15; 21:33,45; 22:1; 24:32

<sup>46</sup> Snodgrass mentions ten but does not list them, Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 23. Lambrecht lists eight: weeds among the wheat (13:24-30), hidden treasure (13:44), pearl (13:45-46), fisherman’s net (13:47-50), unforgiving servant (18:23-35), workers in the vineyard (20:1-16), two sons (21:28-32), wise and foolish virgins (25:1-13). Jan Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louvain, BE: Peeters Press, 1991), 20.

<sup>47</sup> Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Ruben Zimmermann, ed., *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh, DE: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 392-94.

<sup>49</sup> Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 263n7.

(21:18-22) as a parable much later (24:32-35). Peter infers that Jesus's words about defilement (15:10-11) must be a parable when he asks Jesus to "[e]xplain this parable to us" (15:15). Jesus confirms that Peter inferred correctly with a testy response (15:16-20, beginning with "Are you also still without understanding?").<sup>50</sup> Still others are identified as parables by convention. The two house builders (7:24-27) and unforgiving slave (18:23-35) fall into this category. Scholars debate whether other statements of Jesus are parables. For example, among the parables (21:45) Jesus tells the chief priests and Pharisees is his citation of Ps 118:22-23 (LXX 117:22-23) in Mt 21:42, which might be a parable within a parable (21:33-45).

There are eleven reasons that Mt 19:12 should be interpreted as a parable. I will elucidate them all here. In Chapter 4, I will elaborate the ninth, tenth, and eleventh.

First, Mt 19:12, like other Matthean parables, is enigmatic. As scholars often note, Jesus's parables can be difficult to decipher. This is especially true for Matthean parables. In Chapter 13, the evangelist avers that Jesus spoke in parables to fulfill the prophet's word: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden [κρύπτω, better "concealed"] from the foundation of the world" (13:35). In the words of one scholar, Mt 13:35 presents the "difficult truth about parables, the fact that they are the utterance *but not the unveiling* of what has been hidden, a proclamation of mystery rather than an explanation of it."<sup>51</sup> Jesus's parables are not always self-explanatory. He must explain the parable of the sower to his disciples (13:18-23). Shortly thereafter, they ask him to explain the parable of the weeds of the field (13:36), too. The fact that Mt 19:12 has been interpreted in divergent ways for almost two millennia attests to the verse's enigmatic power.

There is a second, related reason to read Mt 19:12 as a parable. Jesus shares concealed wisdom with privileged insiders as he does in other parables. He tells his disciples that knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (γινῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν) has been given (δίδωμι) to them, but not to the crowds (13:11). He then explains the parables of the sower and the weeds among the wheat to them, but not to the crowds. In Mt 19:12, Jesus again imparts concealed knowledge about the kingdom of heaven to privileged insiders.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Another parable with an indirect identification is the two sons (21:28-32).

<sup>51</sup> Peter S. Hawkins, "Parable as Metaphor," *Christian Scholar's Review* 12, no. 3 (1983): 226.

<sup>52</sup> See also reason nine.

Third, the Matthean Jesus expects active reception of his words. Not everyone will be able to make room for this word (Mt 19:11), he tells disciples. Jesus follows his words about eunuchs with an order: “the one who can make room, must make room” (ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω: 19:12d).<sup>53</sup> After the parable of the sower, he insists that “[t]he one who has ears, must hear” (ὁ ἔχων ὄτα ἀκουέτω: 13:9), a parallel construction.<sup>54</sup> The Matthean Jesus knows that only some will actually make room (χωρέω), hear (ἀκούω), see (ὁράω), and understand (συνίημι).<sup>55</sup> Reception is never passive in Matthew. As Jan Lambrecht puts it, Jesus’s parables are performative. They act as a catalyst for existential change: “[t]he hearer must choose, convert and act in accordance with Jesus’ message.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Snodgrass explains that parables often “engage listeners, create reflection, and promote action;” their primary goal is “to goad people into response.”<sup>57</sup> “Goad” is precisely what Jesus’ does when he tells audiences that they must make room for his words about eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven.

Another reason to interpret Mt 19:12 as a parable concerns eschatological reversals, which feature in other Matthean parables.<sup>58</sup> In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, for example, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a householder who pays all of his hired day laborers one denarius whether they started work at dawn or late in the day (20:1-16). Those who labored longest are paid last. He concludes, “[s]o the last will be first, and the first will be last”

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<sup>53</sup> My translation. There are several interpretative possibilities for χωρέω. The LSJ, for example, includes “have room for a thing, hold, contain” and “to be capable of.” “Make room for” makes better sense of the imperative and the Matthean Jesus’s expectation of active reception. He expects the disciples to do more than simply “hold” or “accept” his words. I argue in Chapter 4 that the eunuch verse is the referent for “this word” in 19:11.

<sup>54</sup> My translation. The NRSV “Let anyone with ears listen!” obscures the imperative.

<sup>55</sup> Mt 13:13-15, 19; 15:10.

<sup>56</sup> Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 24, 32. Snodgrass counts their ability to engage audiences as one of ten primary characteristics of parables.

<sup>58</sup> Elements of reversal serve as another characteristic of New Testament parables for Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 33. These parables support Matthew’s larger vision in which eschatological reversals are prominent. Jesus pronounces that the poor in spirit and those persecuted for righteousness are blessed and the kingdom of heaven is theirs (5:3, 10; cf 19:23-24). Whoever breaks the commandments and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven whereas the one who does them and teaches others to do them will be called great (5:19). Jesus praises Gentiles who demonstrate faith like the centurion in Capernaum; many from east and west will join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, even as the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness (8:5-13). Jesus responds to the disciples’ query about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven by warning them that they will never enter unless they abase themselves like a child (18:1-5; cf. 19:13). Many of the “first will be last, and the last will be first” (19:30). Those who wish to be first [in the kingdom: 20:21] among the disciples must be a slave (20:27).

(20:16). Jesus is explicit about who will precede whom in the kingdom (of God) in the parable of the two sons: tax collectors and prostitutes will enter before the chief priests and elders (21:31; cf. 21:23). In Roman literary sources, some eunuchs, especially self-made eunuchs, were associated with prostitutes and disparaged.

Fifth, other Matthean parables feature three components. Jesus mentions three elements of nature that assail a house (7:24-27: rain, floods, wind), three types of seed (13:4-8, 19-23), three stages of growth of a mustard seed (13:31-32: seed, plant, tree), leaven concealed in three measures of flour (13:33), three locations of (food) processing (15:11, 17-18: mouth, stomach, toilet), three attempts to collect fruit from the wicked tenants (21:33-43), three invitations to the prince's wedding feast (22:3-4, 9), and three slaves entrusted with talents (25:14-15). In all but two of these parables, the third element is particularly important. Sometimes the third exhibits the worst behavior. The third enslaved person in the parable of the talents hides the single talent in the ground and speaks disrespectfully, after which Jesus calls him "useless slave" and explains that the slaveholder (God) will cast that slave into the outer darkness (25:30).<sup>59</sup>

Sixth, Matthean parables often feature repetition and parallelism.<sup>60</sup> For example, with vivid imagery, the lyrical parable of the wise and foolish builder invites audiences to imagine a dangerous storm. It has parallel lines (7:24 and 7:26; 7:25 and 7:27) with almost identical wording. The three dangerous natural elements occur in perfect balance: conjunction, verb, noun (repeated three times). The repetition of lines and phrases serves at least two purposes: to carry the audience along, and to emphasize differences. One house is built on rock, the other on sand. One man is wise; the other, foolish. One house remains intact; the other collapses. Repetition, parallelism, balance, and striking imagery also feature in the parables of the sower, defilement, laborers in the vineyard, wicked tenants, wedding feast, faithful slave, and talents.

Matthew's use of parallelism and verbal repetition in the first three clauses of 19:12 is sophisticated. The three-time repetition of the opening clause εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι (with the postpositive γάρ in 19:12a)—an example of anaphora—creates balance, as do the three

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<sup>59</sup> Jesus uses the enslaved person's reprehensible behavior as a warning of eternal punishment. While he commends the first two slaves' faithful behavior and mentions rewards, he devotes more attention to the unfaithful slave. In terms of total word count, the first enslaved man receives forty-seven words, the second, forty-three, the third, one-hundred twenty-eight, including Jesus's aside in 25:29.

<sup>60</sup> New Testament scholars often point out these rhetorical elements. One of the defining characteristics of parables is simplicity and symmetry with the use of repetitions and parallels for Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 31.

distinctive prepositional clauses. As George Kennedy explains, “[a]naphora is like a series of hammer blows in which the repetition of the word both connects and reinforces the successive thoughts.”<sup>61</sup> The Matthean Jesus repeats other words in 19:11-12 for rhetorical impact: χωρέω, three times (once in 19:11, twice in 19:12d); καί and οἵτινες, three times (19:12a-b-c); and εὐνουχίζω, twice (19:12b-c). In all cases, the third and final instance of each term is most powerful. The final use of καί and οἵτινες leads to the third, most important group of eunuchs who voluntarily made themselves eunuchs. The last use of χωρέω takes the imperative: the one who can make room, *must* make room (χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω 19:12d).

The seventh reason I read the eunuch verse as a parable has to do with its ending. Matthean parables often have a punch line, lesson, or warning that comes at the end. This is true of Jesus’s parables of the wise and foolish builder, sower, weeds among the wheat, defilement, wicked tenants, wedding feast, talents, and fig tree.<sup>62</sup>

Eighth, one of the most prominent Christian exegetes understood Mt 19:12 as a parable. In his *Commentary on Matthew*, Origen argued at length that all three eunuch groups must be interpreted metaphorically. As I mentioned, Origen was one of the few interpreters in history who directly addressed the inconsistency of reigning interpretations. In the following passage, he acknowledges that men who castrated themselves interpreted Jesus’s words about eunuchs consistently, but they failed to understand that he spoke in parables:

Now one must be aware that the first interpreters are friends of the letter of the Gospel and have not understood that Jesus spoke these words as well in parables (ταῦτα ἐν παραβολαῖς ἐλάλησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς) and in a spiritual manner (πνεύματι εἴρηται). They have understood the words in the passage consistently with those who concede that the two previous castrations were meant physically, for they explain the third consistently with the previous two. They do not err so far as the sequence among the three is concerned, for if the first two are meant in a physical sense, it follows that the third is physical too. Their error is that they have looked at the beginning of the sayings in the passage incorrectly. (15.1 [Heine])

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<sup>61</sup> George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 27.

<sup>62</sup> Crucial matter usually appears at the end. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 33.



Origen's extended, thoughtful commentary on Mt 19:12 has convinced me that Eusebius's claim that Origen castrated himself in response to Mt 19:12 is incorrect.<sup>63</sup> Origen went on to say that the statement "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6) must be applied to certain New Testament passages, including Mt 19:12:

For one might say that, when the letter of the [first] two castrations (τῶν δύο εὐνουχισμῶν) is kept, it kills those who understand the third [castration] in a way that follows the first ones, and who dare to say that, on the basis of [the saying], "on account of the kingdom of the heavens," they are making themselves eunuchs in a similar way to the first ones who made themselves eunuchs (as though they have received this understanding in accordance with the word of the Lord). (15.1 [Gohl]<sup>64</sup>)

Origen then offered an allegorical reading of all three groups. His interpretation of Mt 19:12 as a parable supported his exegesis.

Again, I will elaborate reasons nine, ten, and eleven in Chapter 4, hence I only introduce them here. The ninth reason to count the eunuch verse among Matthew's parables is the pairing of something shocking with the kingdom of heaven. The clearest referent for the self-made eunuchs is *galli*. Tenth, the evangelist created close parallels between verses 19:11 and 13:11 as well as between 19:12d and 13:9 which encourage a comparison to the parable of the sower.<sup>65</sup> Finally, of the characteristics Mt 19:12 shares with other Matthean parables, none is more striking than Jesus's words about the kingdom of heaven.<sup>66</sup> The arrival of the kingdom of heaven is central to the First Gospel.

While there is no consensus on the timing of Matthean eschatology, some indications point to the end of the present, earthly age. The first is Jesus's messianic presence.<sup>67</sup> He

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<sup>63</sup> I will discuss Eusebius's allegation more fully in Chapter 4.

<sup>64</sup> Gohl's translation of these lines renders Origen's Greek more literally than does Heine's.

<sup>65</sup> Others have highlighted the link between Mt 19:11 and Mt 13:11. See, e.g., Dupont, *Marriage et divorce*, 178-79. William Alexander Heth, "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying' (19:12) and Its Relationship to Paul's Teaching on Singleness in 1 Corinthians 7" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), 171-75; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew, A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1982), 381-83; Nolland, *Matthew*, 776-77, 82; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 723.

<sup>66</sup> Compared with Mark (and the hypothetical Q), only Matthew clearly introduces Jesus' parables as "parables of the kingdom." Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 264.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew never uses the term 'messiah' (Μεσσίας); he uses 'Christ' (Χριστός). In fact, 'messiah' only occurs twice in the New Testament (Jn 1:41; 4:25). In Matthew it is implicit (So, e.g., 1:21, 23; 2:6). When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is "the coming one," Jesus responds that they should tell John about the signs they have witnessed (11:3-6). Matthew's connection of John with Elijah is another clear eschatological sign. The end of

proclaims his central message—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (ἤγγικεν)—twice (4:17, 10:7; cf. 3:2) twice, each time at a crucial juncture: when he begins his ministry, and when he commissions his disciples.<sup>68</sup> He promises his disciples that the Son of Man will come before they finish going through the cities of Israel (10:23) and that some will not die before the Son of Man comes in his kingdom (16:28). When disciples ask him about events surrounding the end of the age, Jesus responds directly, with apocalyptic details (24:7-12). Earlier, Jesus warned of family ruptures, hatred, betrayal, and murder (10:21-22, 28, 35-36). The focus on the final judgment further contributes to the gospel’s eschatological orientation. Apocalyptic signs that accompany the crucifixion—earthquakes, the tearing of the temple veil, and dead saints arising—indicate that the end of the age has started. However, the First Gospel ends with the Great Commission (28:16-20), which suggests a later date for the eschaton because the disciples must go make disciples of all the nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) first. Regardless of precisely when it will happen, the eschaton is near in Matthew.<sup>69</sup>

### πίστις Terminology

In this dissertation I often refer to the πίστις of eunuchs. Matthew’s early audiences were likely familiar with the longstanding trope of the king’s “most faithful (πιστότατος) eunuch” as well as its opposite, the treacherous eunuch. In Chapter 3 I discuss these stereotypes, among others, and argue in Chapter 4 that the eunuch parable is not only about the kingdom of heaven, it is implicitly about πίστις. To help frame the upcoming material, this section assesses the evangelist’s πίστις language and explains why ‘loyalty,’ ‘faithfulness,’ and their cognates offer the closest approximations of πίστις in reference to Matthew’s eunuchs.

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Malachi, for example, reads: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal 4:5-6).

<sup>68</sup> ἤγγικεν can also be translated “is drawing near” or “is at hand.” As R.T. France points out about the parallel expression in Mt 3:2, Jesus speaks of an event that is already happening now. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 103. For this dissertation, it matters little if the eschaton is imminent or distant in the First Gospel. What matters is its centrality.

<sup>69</sup> I will return to the topic of Matthean eschatology in relation to Matthew’s eunuchs at various points in the dissertation.

In the First Gospel, πίστις terms appear mainly in three contexts: somatic well-being, enslavement, and abused or misunderstood authority. In these contexts, human beings must demonstrate πίστις toward God, often through Jesus.

Matthew uses πίστις language when people experience illness, including demonic possession, or their somatic well-being is otherwise threatened or perceived to be. The evangelist emphasizes the πίστις of Gentiles and Jews who seek Jesus's healing. The centurion becomes an exemplar for his display of πίστις (8:10) and πιστεύω (8:13). When Jesus witnesses the πίστις of people from his hometown who carry a paralyzed man to him, he responds by healing and forgiving the man (9:1-2). Jesus also heals a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years because of her πίστις (9:20-22).<sup>70</sup> When two men who cannot see call Jesus "Son of David" and request his mercy, he asks them, "Do you believe (πιστεύω) that I am able to do this?" (9:28), then grants them eyesight according to their πίστις (9:29). Jesus lauds a Canaanite woman's great πίστις in his ability to heal her daughter (15:28). In cases of somatic healing, the recipient(s) or their agent(s) demonstrate πίστις in Jesus's divine power before he performs the healing.

The evangelist also uses πίστις language in contexts of enslavement. I reserve discussion of enslavement and eunuchs for Chapter 3 but make three points here about the parables of the faithful slave (24:45-51) and the talents (25:14-30). First, they reveal the tenuousness of human πίστις. Although πίστις was expected of enslaved persons, it was not assumed and could not be guaranteed. πίστις relationships are fragile because of human beings' penchant to disobey. The slaves described as bad (κακός; 24:48), evil (πονηρός; 25:26), lazy (όκηρός; 25:26), and worthless (άχρητός; 25:30) do not obey God's will, like many others in Matthew. The evangelist probably held a stereotype common in Greek and Latin writings, namely, that slaves do not behave with πίστις (or *fides*) because they care more about their own bodily concerns.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Candida Moss contrasts the healing in Matthew with Mark's longer account in which the hemorrhaging woman manages to draw Jesus's healing power out of him into her without his permission. Candida R. Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25-34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010). In Matthew, Jesus controls the healing process. He decides when and whom to heal.

<sup>71</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, "Slavery and Roman Literary Culture," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 219, citing numerous primary sources in n9. In Dio Chrysostom's treatise on distrust (άπιστία), he opined that "Nobody trusts slaves when they make an agreement, for the reason that they are not their own masters" (*Discourse* 74.9). Slaves were assumed to be untrustworthy in legal matters, and hence they could be tortured to obtain truthful testimony.

Second, these two parables expose an imbalance in Matthean πίστις relationships. In line with contemporaneous writings, Matthean πίστις relationships are based on trust and reciprocity, but not parity.<sup>72</sup> In both parables, God is the implied slaveholder who expects the enslaved men to take care of his (other) human property and financial assets in his absence. Enslaved men who are πιστός do what he expects, even when he is not physically present. Nowhere in the First Gospel does πίστις language apply to God; it is always human beings who must show πίστις.<sup>73</sup> Yet the evangelist does imply reciprocal πίστις to the slaveholder/God; the enslaved men who take good care of the slaveholder's property receive praise and (eternal) rewards upon his return (24:46-47; 25:21, 23).<sup>74</sup> However, fear of corporal punishment<sup>75</sup> (25:24-25) may underlie the enslaved men's respective displays of πίστις and reflects a dramatic status and power differential between human beings and the Matthean God.

Third, these parables reinforce the link between πίστις and eternal life. The slaveholder/God rewards the πίστις of the slaves who invested his talents by granting eternal life (25:21, 23). Enslaved men who are not πιστός receive brutal punishment, including eternal torture and dismemberment (24:51; 25:30). The parables expose Matthew's diametric scenarios for eternity: to be πιστός by carrying out divine will on earth enables one to enter the kingdom of heaven; to refuse to follow or to subvert divine will leads to never-ending agony.<sup>76</sup>

πίστις terms also occur in Matthean contexts when people misunderstand or abuse divine authority. Jesus's disciples do not always recognize whence his, or their own, authority derives. Jesus calls the disciples ὀλιγόπιστος when they worry that the storm at sea will kill them (8:26; cf. 6:30-31), when they misunderstand his warning about the Pharisees and Sadducees and wonder where they will obtain bread to feed a second crowd (16:8), and when they fail to exorcise a demon from a suffering boy (17:20). In the third case, Jesus calls them an ἄπιστος and perverse generation (17:17). When the disciples question him about how the fig tree withered

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<sup>72</sup> As Teresa Morgan shows, when participants in a relationship had unequal status, authors emphasized the πίστις expected of the lower-status person(s) but rarely of the other. Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 51-53.

<sup>74</sup> They also receive an increased workload, problematized by Jennifer A. Glancy, "Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267969>.

<sup>75</sup> On which, see Glancy, "Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables," especially 75, 77, 88-89.

<sup>76</sup> The centurion's story also reveals the link between πίστις and eternal life. Jesus implies that the centurion will have a place in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in contrast with the sons of the kingdom, who will face eternal suffering (8:11-12).

immediately (21:20), he responds that if they have πίστις and do not waver, they can do the same and even command a mountain to be thrown into the sea (21:21). More problematic are abuses of authority. Jesus warns that it is better to be drowned in the sea with a millstone around one's neck than to become a stumbling block to a little one who believes in (πιστεύω) him (18:6). He castigates scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites who tithe but disregard the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and πίστις (23:23). They are destined for hell (23:33).<sup>77</sup>

To summarize, Matthew depicts πίστις as an essential and expected behavior of human beings toward God that must be demonstrated. Those who seek healing from Jesus display their πίστις before he acts. In master/slave relationships where God is the implied slaveholder, enslaved men who exhibit prompt, full, and unquestioning obedience are πιστός. Even Jesus must prove his πίστις toward God, which he does throughout the gospel but most conspicuously on the cross, when he entrusts himself to God (27:43: πέποιθεν ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν) during his agony.<sup>78</sup> πίστις is reciprocal, though imputed to God. Matthew's audiences know that God is ultimately trustworthy and will fulfill his promises, but human beings often fail. Their πίστις is fragile. In Matthew there is an inextricable link between πίστις and eternal life; failing to demonstrate πίστις is perilous.

Matthew's use of πίστις is consonant with LXX texts. For example, there is a similar expectation in the LXX that human beings must demonstrate πίστις toward God. Abram demonstrates trust in (πιστεύω) God's ability to create innumerable heirs for him, and God reckons it as righteousness (Gen 15:6). God, who is always trustworthy, creates the capacity for πίστις in human beings, expects them to practice πίστις toward himself and each other, and punishes them when they do not. In Exodus and Numbers, people expect signs from God before they demonstrate πίστις (e.g., Exod 4:1-9; Num 14:11). πίστις is a "non-negotiable obligation" in the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and the Maccabees.<sup>79</sup>

As Teresa Morgan explains in her recent monograph on πίστις and *fides* in the Roman Principate and early Christian texts, πίστις was a fluid term with a semantic range that included

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<sup>77</sup> The chief priests, scribes, and elders mockingly tell Jesus that they will demonstrate faith (πιστεύω) if he comes down from the cross; let God rescue him now if God wants him since Jesus trusts in (πείθω) God and called himself the Son of God (27:42-43). Crucified robbers then insult Jesus in like manner (27:44).

<sup>78</sup> Morgan notes the singularity of Mt 27:43: "In one of the synoptic gospels does Jesus say that he puts his trust in God, and this is the only time that trust in God is explicitly attributed to him" Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 370. The inference, though, is clear throughout the synoptics.

<sup>79</sup> Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 205, 11.

“‘[t]rust’, ‘trustworthiness’, ‘honesty’, ‘credibility’, ‘faithfulness’, ‘good faith’, ‘confidence’, ‘assurance’, ‘pledge’, ‘guarantee’, ‘credit’, ‘proof’, ‘credence’, ‘belief’, ‘position of trust/trusteeship’, ‘legal trust’, ‘protection’, and ‘security’.”<sup>80</sup> There is no single term in English that conveys the many dimensions of πίστις in Matthew, but loyalty and faithfulness come close, and these are the terms I will use in this dissertation.<sup>81</sup> I will briefly discuss five other terminological options I considered—obedience, devotion, allegiance, commitment, and fidelity—then explain why I chose loyalty, faithfulness, and their cognates.

Obedience is an essential attribute of πίστις in the First Gospel, particularly with respect to divine will as interpreted by Jesus. Enslaved people, and by extension everyone who embraces Jesus’s teachings about the kingdom of heaven, must obey God’s will. However, obedience misses the emotive and volitional aspects of πίστις in Matthew. Devotion is another terminological option, but one may show devotion with or without obedience. The young man with many possessions who wants to obtain eternal life has devoted himself to keeping the commandments; however, instead of obeying Jesus’s instructions to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow, the young man leaves, grieving (19:16-22). Allegiance and commitment come somewhat closer. Allegiance better reflects the dramatic power and status differential between God and human beings. However, allegiance, like obedience, implies an obligation. A person may show allegiance because she has to, not because she wants to. Making a commitment to another person, human or divine, or to a cause usually signals a conscious choice. Yet commitments may be limited for various reasons. They may be short in duration and transactional in nature. Fidelity is another viable translation option, and the only one that stems directly from the ancient *fides*. Yet the term fidelity has become somewhat antiquated, analogous to the term fealty versus allegiance.

When I refer to eunuchs and πίστις, I use the terms loyalty, faithfulness, and their cognates, often but not always synonymously. Loyalty incorporates both obedience and commitment and also suggests a depth of feeling and a sense of permanence. Jesus demonstrates loyalty to his father’s will when he entrusts himself to God even on the cross. Yet loyalty, as the

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<sup>80</sup> Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 7. Morgan also includes *fides* in this list of widely accepted meanings.

<sup>81</sup> In his discussion of πίστις as a possible criterion of judgment in Matthew, Anders Runesson concludes that ‘faithfulness,’ along with ‘loyalty,’ better conveys πίστις in Matthew than ‘faith,’ contra Gundry. Anders Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 140-41, citing Gundry 464.

cliché warns, can be blind. It may be prompted by fear of punishment, as may be the case for elite slaves in Matthew.

Faithfulness implies loyalty or commitment as well as emotional involvement. Faithfulness, though, does not necessarily require obedience. What distinguishes faithfulness from loyalty, and the reason I use it in some contexts and not others, is that faithfulness manifests a conviction or belief in something or someone. The centurion, the people from Jesus's hometown who bring the paralyzed man, the woman with the chronic hemorrhage, the two men who cannot see, and the Canaanite woman all demonstrate faithfulness in Jesus's divine power to heal.

### **Eunuchs and Castration in Antiquity**

#### **Eunuchs: Qualms and Terms**

Talk about eunuchs and castration makes people uncomfortable. When I first told my daughter Sophia, then a teenager, that I intended to write a dissertation about Matthew's eunuchs (and tried, with some difficulty, to explain the word 'eunuch' to her), her initial response was "Why?" Then, "Are you crazy, Mama?" And finally, "That's disgusting!"

Some ancient writers also expressed disgust, particularly with men who chose to become eunuchs. Jewish historian and priest Flavius Josephus (c. 37 – c. 90),<sup>82</sup> for example, advised readers to shun and expel self-made eunuchs, "[f]or plainly it is by reason of the effeminacy (θηλύνω) of their soul that they have changed the sex of their body also. And so with all that would be deemed a monstrosity (τέρας) by the beholders" (*A.J.* 4.40 [Thackeray and Marcus, LCL]).

Biblical scholars do not express themselves as bluntly as Sophia or Josephus, although their writings sometimes betray qualms. Dale Allison, for example, opines that 'eunuch' is "not the sort of word one can freely utter in formal or polite company."<sup>83</sup> R.T. France writes, "To us the use of 'eunuch' language seems unhelpfully extreme when talking about those who could

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<sup>82</sup> The date of his death is uncertain; it may have occurred before or after Domitian's death in 96. For discussion, see Jonathan Edmondson's introductory remarks in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, 7-8.

<sup>83</sup> Allison, "Matt 19:12," 2.

marry but choose not to do so, and the fivefold repetition of the word (the noun ‘eunuch’ three times and the verb ‘to make a eunuch’ twice) within this one verse makes it the more uncomfortable.”<sup>84</sup> France does not explain why eunuch language causes discomfort, nor does Allison discuss why ‘eunuch’ cannot be uttered in polite company.

The use of certain terms may also reflect unease with eunuchs. ‘Mutilate,’ ‘geld,’ ‘emasculate,’ and cognates sometimes appear in treatments of Mt 19:12 and translations of primary sources about eunuchs. These terms are not neutral. Mutilation suggests violence and intentional disfigurement.<sup>85</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* provides two definitions of ‘mutilate’:

- 1: to cut up or alter radically so as to make imperfect <the child *mutilated* the book with his scissors>
- 2: to cut off or permanently destroy a limb or essential part of : CRIPPLE<sup>86</sup>

Following these definitions, a person who has been mutilated or has mutilated himself or herself is “imperfect” and “crippled.”<sup>87</sup> Donald Trautman claims that rabbis treated “mutilated eunuchs” more harshly than men “born impotent.”<sup>88</sup> Charles Talbert compares the practice of “self-mutilation” in “pagan” religions to metaphorical Christian interpretations.<sup>89</sup> Linking self-castration to non-Christian traditions distances historical Christians from castration.

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<sup>84</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724.

<sup>85</sup> See, e.g., Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 185; David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 170; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 384. In German scholarship, the equivalent of ‘to mutilate’ is *verstümmeln*. See, e.g., Walter Bauer, “Matth. 19,12 und die alten Christen,” in *Neutestamentliche Studien: Georg Heinrici zu seinem 70. Geburtstag (14. März 1914). Dargebracht von Fachgenossen, Freunden und Schülern*, ed. Gustav Adolf Deissmann and Hans Windisch (Leipzig, DE: J.C. Hinrichs, 1914), 237, 39, 41-43.

<sup>86</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11 ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003), s.v. “mutilate.”

<sup>87</sup> ‘Crippled’ is extremely derogatory. However, during disability movements, some embraced the term ‘crip’ as a positive, creative appropriation of ‘cripple.’ Robert McCruer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 210n5. In 2006, Robert McCruer articulated crip theory, a critical interrogation of dominant heteronormative and able-bodied assumptions characteristic of neoliberal capitalism.

<sup>88</sup> Donald W. Trautman, “The Eunuch Logion of Matthew 19,12: Historical and Exegetical Dimensions as Related to Celibacy” (STD diss, Thomas Aquinas University, 1966), 62, 70.

<sup>89</sup> Talbert writes: “Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 6.8) says Origen, taking Matt 19.12 literally, castrated himself. Such a practice [self-castration] was sometimes found in pagan religions. In the worship of Cybele and Attis, on the one hand, and of Artemis, on the other, worshipers sometimes engaged in self-mutilation (Catullus, Attis; Lucian, *Syr. d.* 19-20). The metaphorical interpretation has dominated Christian history (e.g., Athenagoras, Leg 33). Clement of Alexandria said that the true eunuch is not the one who cannot but the one who will not indulge himself (*Paed.*



To geld means to castrate an animal, typically a horse; a gelding is a castrated male horse. Racehorses are often gelded because castration purportedly makes them easier to train and less aggressive than stallions.<sup>90</sup> The use of gelding language dehumanizes eunuchs, links them with animals domesticated for work (or competition, or consumption), and hence (further) distances contemporary scholars and translators from ancient eunuchs.<sup>91</sup>

Emasculate and its cognates may point to concerns about eunuchs' masculinity.<sup>92</sup> A multivalent term, 'emasculate' can refer to castration or total ablation (i.e., removal of the penis and testicles) or to a male's procreative inability, but more often, it denotes a reduction of strength, power, or virility.<sup>93</sup>

Concern about eunuchs' masculinity appears in other ways. John Nolland, for example, poses the question "[w]hat kinds of images would have been evoked by talk of 'unmanned' men?"<sup>94</sup> After a brief discussion of eunuchs in the LXX with attention to Potiphar's marriage (Gen 39), Nolland returns to Mt 19:12 and claims that eunuchs from birth "make it quite clear" that Matthew's concern is "lack/loss of male potential."<sup>95</sup> He does not clarify what he means by "male potential." However, he twice mentions the first group of eunuchs' inability to "properly mature." Because these eunuchs as well as those castrated by people "would never carry on the family line," we may infer that for Nolland, "male potential" is the ability to marry and

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3.4.26). According to the First Council of Nicaea, canon 1, those who have castrated themselves cannot become priests. To become a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom means to live a celibate life." Talbert, *Matthew*, 235. Of the four Christian examples, two concern literal castration.

<sup>90</sup> Larry Bramlage, "Gelding: Why and When? A Veterinarian Explains," *The Horse* (June 9, 2003).

<https://thehorse.com/151577/gelding-why-and-when-a-veterinarian-explains/>

<sup>91</sup> Dale Allison writes that "the self-gelding of devotees sometimes played in a role in the cults of a few hellenistic religions" Allison, "Matt 19:12," 2. Numerous Loeb translations use 'gelding' language for eunuch-making. See, e.g., Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.331 (Colson); Mart. *Spect.* 9.2 (Shackleton Bailey); Dio Chrys. *Or.* 21.8 (Cohoon); Ael. *Letters of Farmers* 10 (Benner and Fobes); Amm. Marc. 18.5 (Rolfe).

<sup>92</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 777; James A. Kleist, "Eunuchs in the New Testament," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1945): 447; Trautman, "Eunuch Logion," 40-41, 57, 61, 71-72, 110; Halvor Moxnes, "Body, Gender, and Social Space: Dilemmas in Constructing Early Christian Identities," in *Identity Formation in the New Testament*, ed. Bengt Holmberg and Mikael Winninge (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 174-75. Moxnes problematizes scholarly treatments of this verse with respect to masculinity. In German scholarship, 'Entmannung' and cognates function the same way. See, e.g., Josef Blinzler, "εἶσιν εὐνοῦχοι: Zur Auslegung von Mt 19,12," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, no. 48 (1957): 260-61; Bauer, "Matth. 19,12," 237, 40; Peter Browe, *Zur Geschichte der Entmannung: Eine religions- und rechtsgeschichtliche Studie* (Breslau, DE: Müller & Seiffert, 1936).

<sup>93</sup> From the Latin *e* or *ex* (out of) and *masculus* (masculine, male), 'emasculate' denotes a removal or lack of masculinity. For *masculus*, the L&S provides "male, masculine; subst., a male" as its primary definition.

<sup>94</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 777.

<sup>95</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 778.

procreate. Daniel Patte expresses himself more candidly about eunuchs' masculinity. Of their (perceived) inability to have conjugal sexual relations, Patte contends that "[b]eing made a eunuch by a birth defect or by other people is the worst thing that can happen to a man; it is the loss of one's manhood. It is being deprived of sexual relationship—a good gift from God. This deprivation cannot be viewed as good! It is a loss."<sup>96</sup> Halvor Moxnes claims that some contemporary interpreters, like their ancient counterparts, view Matthew's spiritual eunuchs (i.e., 19:12c) as men with "heightened masculinity." However, he cites only one example: Dale Allison's comparison of spiritual eunuchs to Greek athletes or Spartan warriors who discipline themselves in preparation for competition or battle.<sup>97</sup>

Some scholars opt for different terminology than eunuchs. A blatant example is a 1945 article by James Kleist, who addressed one question: "how this foreign term could be expressed in intelligible modern English if one were disposed to eliminate it from the Bible."<sup>98</sup> Kleist concluded with the recommendation to replace εὐνοῦχοι in Mt 19:12a, b, and c, with "celibates barred from marrying by a natural defect," "celibates barred from marrying by an act of man," and "celibates who bar themselves from marrying," respectively. With his proposed translation, he claimed, ordinary hearers and readers would have no trouble understanding what Jesus meant.<sup>99</sup> Over three-quarters of a century later, some scholars continue to refer to eunuchs as men who could not marry.<sup>100</sup>

Some English Bibles also translate εὐνοῦχοι as men who cannot or will not marry, engage in sexual relationships, and/or have children. The NABRE, for example, translates the Greek of Mt 19:12 as "Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake

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<sup>96</sup> Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 267.

<sup>97</sup> Moxnes, "Body, Gender," 174. Dale C. Allison Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 202.

<sup>98</sup> Kleist, "Eunuchs," 447.

<sup>99</sup> Kleist avers that "[n]othing is so annoying to a reader as to be compelled, before he can go on with the text to search the footnotes or the glossary for the meaning of a term unknown to him. Nothing is so fatal to the total impression of a striking passage which one hears read as to have it punctured by explanations....The Greek or Hebrew original is the scholar's tool to work with: the translation is the Bible of the common man." Kleist, "Eunuchs," 449.

<sup>100</sup> In Chapter 2, I will challenge this reading.

of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.”<sup>101</sup> In other Bibles, εὐνοῦχοι are “celibate,”<sup>102</sup> “cannot have sex,”<sup>103</sup> and/or cannot “become fathers.”<sup>104</sup>

A few scholars bypass eunuch terminology altogether in their treatments of Mt 19:12.<sup>105</sup> In my research, I encountered something akin to what Assyriologist Albert Kirk Grayson described in his own study of eunuchs: “The attitude of modern scholarship towards the subject of eunuchs has been almost universally the same: the matter is to be avoided entirely, or, if that is impossible, it is to be dismissed as a trivial and unsavoury institution.”<sup>106</sup>

Whatever causes some to evade Matthew’s eunuch terminology, the result is contemporary interpretations that strip Mt 19:12 of its shock value. Matthew’s earliest audiences, though, could not un-see physical eunuchs after Jesus’s three-time repetition of εὐνοῦχοι and his double use of εὐνουχίζω terms. His words evoked images that were quite clear. Unlike modern scholars, ancient audiences had distinct referents for Jesus’s words. Although eunuchs have largely disappeared from the modern world, they were common in antiquity.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *The New American Bible, Revised Edition*, (Washington, D.C.: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2011). The NABRE does explain in a footnote that eunuchs is the literal translation of εὐνοῦχοι.

<sup>102</sup> *GOD’S Word Translation*, (Orange Park, FL: God’s Word to the Nations Mission Society); *The Holy Bible: International Standard Version*, (La Mirada, CA: Davidson Press); *Names of God Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011); *The Passion Translation: New Testament with Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs*, (Savage, MN: BroadStreet Publishing Group).

<sup>103</sup> The EasyEnglish Bible offers this translation: “There are several different reasons why a person may not marry. Some men cannot have sex. They were born like that. Some other people cannot have sex because people did something to them. Some people choose not to have sex. They do not marry because then they can work better for God and his kingdom. Anyone who can agree with this idea should do it.” *EasyEnglish Bible*, (Worcestershire, GB: MissionAssist 2019).

<sup>104</sup> *Holy Bible, New Century Version*, (Ft. Worth, TX: Thomas Nelson, 2003); *The Expanded Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011). The following translations refer to the inability to have or produce children: Easy-to-Read Version, (BibleLeague International, 2006); New Life Version, (Urichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2003); *New International Reader’s Version* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2014).

<sup>105</sup> Hare, *Matthew*, 222-23; Senior, *Matthew*, 215-16. Meier, *Vision of Matthew*, 138.

<sup>106</sup> Albert Kirk Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power: Their Role in the Assyrian Bureaucracy,” in *Vom Alten Orient Zum Alten Testament: Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993*, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, DE: Verlag Butzon and Neukirchener Verlag 1995), 85. Grayson traces the attitude to Edward Gibbon, who stated the following about eunuchs in his magnum opus, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “The aversion and contempt which mankind has so uniformly entertained for that imperfect species [eunuchs] appears to have degraded their character, and to have rendered them almost as incapable as they were supposed to be of conceiving any generous sentiment, or of performing any worthy action.” Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910), 277.

<sup>107</sup> I am not referring to men who have received medical treatment for prostate cancer or other medical conditions. Today’s analogues to ancient eunuchs might be prisoners chemically treated against their will to reduce or eliminate their libido or to render them sterile, individuals who consider themselves eunuchs (and are pathologized in DSM-5 as having “male-to-eunuch gender dysphoria”), and *hijras* in South Asia (about whom, see especially Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, 2 ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1999).

It is not self-evident today who is, or was, a eunuch. I begin, then, by addressing a question for which the answer is not straightforward: Who is a eunuch? Dictionary definitions are only somewhat helpful. The *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* provides a single definition of eunuch: “a man who has been castrated (= had the sex organs that produce sperm removed).”<sup>108</sup> At first glance, the definition appears straightforward and impartial. However, it misses many individuals: non-adults, males whose testicles produce little or no testosterone, uncastrated males with anomalous genitalia, uncastrated individuals who may identify with eunuchs (e.g., some intersex individuals), and the use of eunuch as a derogatory term for an “unmanly” man. Furthermore, the removal of testicles is one of several ways males become eunuchs. The *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* also introduces ambiguity with its parenthetical reference to “the sex organs that produce sperm” instead of “testicles” or “testes,” which are the only sex organs that produce sperm.

*Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* offers three definitions: first, “a castrated man placed in charge of a harem or employed as a chamberlain in a palace”; second, “a man or boy deprived of the testes or external genitals”; and third, “one that lacks virility or power.”<sup>109</sup> The first definition is antiquated as eunuchs no longer work in palaces and harems, and it fails to account for the many types of labor eunuchs performed. Also, because “employed” and “placed in charge of” have a positive valence, they lend legitimacy to eunuchs who worked in palaces and harems but obscure the fact that most were castrated for enslavement. The second and third definitions have decidedly negative connotations. The second, more medical definition misses some individuals in the same way the *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* definition does. “Deprived of” implies that the testes or genitals are essential for every male, and that they were taken away. The third definition reflects stereotypes about eunuchs’ masculinity, in spite of the gender-neutral “one.” “Virility,” a masculine-coded term, suggests that the “one that lacks virility or power” has a deficit of *masculine* “virility or power.” In addition, the use of “that” instead of “who” dehumanizes the “one.”

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<sup>108</sup> *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, ed. Paul Heacock (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), s.v. “eunuch.”

<sup>109</sup> *Merriam-Webster Collegiate*, s.v. “eunuch.”

These dictionaries leave open the question of who, precisely, should be defined as a eunuch today. For example, is a chemically castrated sex offender a eunuch? Is an incel?<sup>110</sup> Is a man who received chemical and/or surgical treatment for advanced prostate cancer? For scientist Richard Joel Wassersug, who has reflected publicly on his surgery for prostate cancer and subsequent androgen suppression therapy, the answer to the last question is yes. “In addition to being Jewish,” he writes, “I am a member of a definable gender minority that has been conspicuous throughout history. I am a eunuch.”<sup>111</sup>

After conducting research on castration and ancient eunuchs, particularly those in the Torah, Wassersug came to embrace his identity as a eunuch, “for I see myself as different and empowered, rather than disabled, by having my brain no longer awash in testosterone.”<sup>112</sup> For Wassersug, eunuchs are “genetic males who have been castrated—i.e., had our testicles removed or destroyed—but not out of any desire to transition to female.”<sup>113</sup> He differentiates eunuchs from males who wish to “feminize their bodies” and may elect castration; nevertheless, Wassersug describes eunuchs as “emasculated”: “We pass as males in public, but reside in a gendered no man’s land. Study after study of men on androgen deprivation therapy out of medical necessity confirm that patients feel less manly, but not necessarily female.”<sup>114</sup>

For other men who have received chemical or surgical treatment for advanced prostate cancer, embracing a eunuch identity is not an option. Kevin Cooper’s response to Wassersug on Malecare.org, a cancer support and advocacy organization, illustrates:

Sorry – but this does not work for me. I [*sic*] despite all the rah-rah-rah about what makes a man that’s out there, at the end of the day I am diminished, and filled with self-loathing because I have sacrificed my masculinity in order to continue living this bitter, gray

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<sup>110</sup> Incels—short for “involuntary celibates”—refers to an online community of men who express frustration about their lack of sexual relationships with women. Some forums include rants against women, particularly attractive young women and feminists. In November 2014 and April 2018, two self-described incels participated in killing sprees in Isla Vista, California and Toronto, Canada, respectively. Jim Taylor, “The Woman Who Founded the ‘Incel’ Movement,” *BBC Radio 5 Live* (August 30, 2018). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455>.

<sup>111</sup> Richard Joel Wassersug, “Embracing a Eunuch Identity,” *Tikkun* (February 24, 2012). <https://www.tikkun.org/embracing-a-eunuch-identity/>.

<sup>112</sup> Wassersug, “Embracing a Eunuch Identity.”

<sup>113</sup> Wassersug, “Embracing a Eunuch Identity.”

<sup>114</sup> Wassersug, “Embracing a Eunuch Identity.”

shadow of an existence. To ‘accept’ this emasculation, empowering as that might be, would also be the final abrogation of the self. I cannot and will not do so.<sup>115</sup>

Cooper’s statement poignantly demonstrates how the reduction of testicular function and/or the surgical or chemical removal of testes can jeopardize a male’s sense of identity and potentially lead to despair. Embracing his “emasculatation” would be the “final abrogation of the self” in an existence that has already become a “bitter, gray shadow” full of “self-loathing” for Cooper.

In the Roman Empire, too, eunuchs’ masculinity was suspect. The bawdy novella *Ass* attributed to Lucian of Samasota (b. 120 CE) provides a humorous account. The protagonist Lucius, a prominent Roman author who was metamorphosed into a donkey, responds with horror to a farmer’s plan to castrate him:

The whole household applauded his advice, but I was already in tears at the immediate prospect of losing (ἀπόλλυμι) the manhood (ἀνήρ) in my ass’s body, and thought I didn’t wish to live any longer if I should become a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος). I therefore decided to starve myself to death from that moment or to throw myself from the mountain, where, though hurled to a most miserable death, I could lie dead with my body whole (ὀλόκληρος) and unmutilated (ἀκέραιος). ([*Asin.*], Macleod, LCL)

Becoming a eunuch meant un-becoming a man, a prospect worse than death (and worse than being a donkey!) for Lucius.

Matthew’s term for eunuch, εὐνοῦχος, has a murky background. Epiphanius, bishop of Constantia on Cyprus (c. 315 – 403), connected the term to εὐνοεῖν, or “well disposed” (*Pan.* 2.58.4.3). He associated eunuchs’ pleasant disposition with their castration and explained that jealous foreign kings or tyrants castrated (εὐνουχίζω) boys whom they could entrust with their wives once the boys reached adulthood (2.58.4.2). The *Etymologicum Magnum*, a popular Byzantine etymological dictionary compiled in 1150 CE from ancient sources, offered the following etymology: “from the one holding the bed; also, to take care of; also, to guard” (ἀπὸ τοῦ τὴν εὐνήν ἔχειν καὶ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι καὶ φυλάσσειν).<sup>116</sup> The more recent etymological

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<sup>115</sup> Kevin Cooper, post to Malecare.org, March 5, 2021, 8:29 a.m. <https://malecare.org/embracing-a-eunuch-identity-by-dr-richard-joel-wasserman/>.

<sup>116</sup> *Etymologicum magnum: seu verius lexicon saepissime vocabulorum origines indagans ex pluribus lexicis scholiastis et grammaticis anonymi cuiusdam opera concinnatum*, 394, <https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb10209806?page=614>.

dictionary of Pierre Chantraine has a two-word entry: “voir εὐνή” (to see [or attend] the bed). The sub-entry for εὐνή reads “gardien de la couche, eunuque” (guardian of the bed, eunuch).<sup>117</sup>

Lexical entries of εὐνοῦχος and εὐνουχίζω, like contemporary dictionaries, have limitations. BDAG’s circular, three-part definition relies on traditional interpretations of Mt 19:12. Each definition lists one of Matthew’s eunuch groups: the first, “a castrated male person, *eunuch*. Mt 19:12b”; the second, “a human male who, without a physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children, *impotent male* (Wsd 3:14) εὐ. ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς Mt 19:12a”; the third, “a human male who abstains fr. marriage, without being impotent, *a celibate*. Mt 19:12c.” The NETS translation of Wis 3:14 reads: “And blessed is the eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) who has done no lawless deed with his hands nor thought evil things against the Lord, for special favor will be given him for his faithfulness (πίστις), and a very delightful lot in the shrine [ναός, often translated Temple] of the Lord.”<sup>118</sup> Nothing in Wis 3:14 suggests a eunuch “by nature,” and the reference to infertility is oblique; Wis 3:13 pronounces a similar blessing on barren women. It is unclear how to interpret BDAG’s expression “by nature.” Does it refer to a congenital condition of a “human male”? To his (presumed) predisposition to other human males? To something else?

According to the LSJ’s primary definition, εὐνοῦχος denotes a “castrated person, eunuch, employed to take charge of the women and act as chamberlain (whence the name, ὁ τὴν εὐνήν ἔχων).” Second, it refers to certain animals; third, to “dates, without stones.” Only the first use occurs with any regularity in ancient literature, but in reference to a castrated male, not an ungendered “person.”<sup>119</sup> Again, “employed” obscures the enslavement. The LSJ also assumes a derivation from εὐνή (bed) and ἔχω (to have): literally, “one having the bed” (ὁ τὴν εὐνήν ἔχων), that recalls the medieval etymology. However, eunuchs had a variety of responsibilities and labored in different settings; only some served as chamberlains and caretakers of women. It is

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<sup>117</sup> Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: histoire des mots*, vol. 1 (Paris, FR: Éditions Klincksieck, 1968), s.v., “εὐνοῦχος,” 385-86.

<sup>118</sup> *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under that Title* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>119</sup> LSJ’s complete entry: εὐνοῦχος, ὁ, (εὐνή, ἔχω) A. *castrated person, eunuch*, employed to take charge of the women and act as *chamberlain* (whence the name, ὁ τὴν εὐνήν ἔχων), *Hdt.*3.130, al., *Ar.Ach.* 117, *X.Cyr.*7.5.60, etc. 2. of animals, *Philostr.Her.*1.3 [Actually *Her.* 8.12/670 [LCL 521: 132-2 and ζῶον], *Sch.Par.A.R.*1.585.

3. of dates, *without stones*, *Arist.Fr.*267:—*Pythag.* name for θριδάξ [cannot find ref], *Lycusap. Ath.*2.69e [LCL 345:310-311; quoting Aristotle fr 326]

II. as Adj., *watching the bed, sleepless*, “λαμπάδες εὐνούχοισιν ὄμμασιν” *S.Fr.*789. [the line is missing the first 2 words]

also an etymological fallacy to assume that the origin of a term—even if we were reasonably certain we could trace it, which is decidedly not the case for εὐνοῦχος—elucidates what that term meant at a later point in time.

Two Latin terms are roughly equivalent to εὐνοῦχος: *spado* (from the Greek σπάδων) and *castratus*. The L&S primary definition of *spado* is “one who has no generative power, an impotent person (whether by nature or by castration; hence more gen. than *castratus*) . . . In partic., a castrated person, a eunuch.” L&S cites numerous legal texts from *The Digest* in its definition, including the following categorization of eunuchs by the renowned jurist Ulpian (c. 170 – 223 CE)<sup>120</sup>: “*Spado* is the general term; under that name are eunuchs by nature, also *thlibiae* [from θλιβίας] and *thlasiae* [from θλασίας], but it also incorporates any other type of eunuch” (*Spadonum generalis appellatio est: quo nomine tam hi, qui natura spadones sunt, item thlibiae thlasiae, sed et si quod aliud genus spadonum est, continentur.*) (DIG. 50.16.128, my translation).<sup>121</sup> Ulpian’s categorization, which served to clarify issues of inheritance, was not shared by everyone. Third-century jurist Marcian interpreted *spado* more narrowly. He distinguished between a *spado* and a *castratus* but did not explain either term (DIG. 40.2.14.1).<sup>122</sup> *Castratus* derives from the verb *castro*, for which the L&S offers the following as its first entry: “To deprive of generative power (both of male and female), to emasculate, castrate, geld.”

For εὐνουχίζω, BDAG provides this definition: “to cause someone to be a eunuch, castrate, emasculate, make a eunuch of εαυτόν oneself Mt 19:12b; pass., 12a.”<sup>123</sup> The LSJ offers “castrate,” with Mt. 19:12 as the primary example.<sup>124</sup> In antiquity, εὐνουχίζω was interchangeable with other terms for “to castrate,” such as the more commonly used ἐκτέμνω (cut out), ἀποκόπτω (cut off, hew off), and less commonly, σπάω (pluck off or out). Similarly,

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<sup>120</sup> On dating Ulpian’s birth and death, see Tony Honoré, *Ulpian: Pioneer of Human Rights*, 2nd ed., Oxford Scholarship Online, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12, 14.

<sup>121</sup> Ulpian’s writings were the primary source for *The Digest* of Justinian, which I will discuss shortly. He wrote over two hundred books about Roman law. Tony Honoré, “Ulpian,” (Oxford University Press, 2009). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195134056.001.0001/acref-9780195134056-e-818>.

<sup>122</sup> If he did explain, it was not recorded in *The Digest*. I will discuss this reference in Chapter 2.

<sup>123</sup> A TLG lemma search of εὐνουχίζω produced 492 results, with only 3 that pre-dated the New Testament: Xanthus, frag. 19, lines 2 and 10, and Clearchus, frag. 49, line 2. ποιέω paired with εὐνοῦχος or one of its substitutes also referred to the castration of boys or men.

<sup>124</sup> A. castrate, τινά Ev.Matt.19.12 (Act. and Pass.), Luc.Sat. 12, etc.; “γυναῖκας” Xanth.19: metaph., “γῆν” Philostr.V A6.42; [Philostratus describes Domitian’s proscription against eunuch-making, then has Appollonius joke that Domitian is “eunuchizing” the earth by cutting down vineyards.] “φάρμακον” Archig. ap.Orib.8.2.8:—Pass., Gal.4.570, D.C.68.2.



several terms in noun form were interchangeable with ‘eunuch,’ including ἐκτομίας, ἀπόκοπος, σπάδων. Less common was θλιβίας (pressed or compressed), a eunuch whose testicles had been crushed rather than excised.

The fact that eunuchs were castrated males has been obscured in Bible translations and scholarship, in part because many translators and a minority of biblical scholars do not consider the *saris* (סַרִּיס) to be a castrated male.<sup>125</sup> For reference, Table 1 presents the original Hebrew and Greek translations of all occurrences of eunuchs and genital injury in the MT and LXX.<sup>126</sup> Table 2 includes all NT references to eunuchs and castration. Both tables include English translations from the NRSV, followed by translations of the four best-selling English Bibles as ranked by the Evangelical Christian Publishing Association.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> The debate is longstanding. Scholars agree that *saris* is the Hebrew equivalent of the Akkadian *ša rēši* and the Cuneiform LÚ SAG. For the majority opinion that *saris* denotes a castrated male, see Hayim Tadmor, "Was the Biblical *saris* a Eunuch?," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995); Grayson, "Eunuchs in Power: Their Role in the Assyrian Bureaucracy.,"; Hayim Tadmor, "The Role of the Chief Eunuch and the Place of Eunuchs in the Assyrian Empire," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Part II*, ed. S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (Helsinki, FI: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001). Karlheinz Deller, "The Assyrian Eunuchs and Their Predecessors," in *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karlheinz Deller and Kazuko Watanabe (Heidelberg, DE: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999). J.D. Hawkins, "Eunuchs among the Hittites," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, ed. S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (Helsinki, FI: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2003). For differing views, see, e.g., A. Leo Oppenheim, "A Note on sa resi," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 5, no. 1 (1973); Stephanie Dalley, "Review of R. Mattila, *The King's Magnates*," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki, FI: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002). Luis R. Siddall, "A Re-Examination of the Title Sa Resi in the Neo-Assyrian Period," in *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference held at Mandelbaum House, The University of Sydney, 21-23 July 2004*, ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks, *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007).

<sup>126</sup> I have adapted and expanded Table 2.1, "Eunuchs in the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint," from Sean Burke, "Reading the Ethiopian Eunuch as a Eunuch: Queering the Book of Acts" (PhD diss, Graduate Theological Union, 2009), 30.

<sup>127</sup> In 2020, the four bestselling translations according to the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) were the NIV (1), KJV (2), NLT (3), and ESV (4). The ECPA Bestsellers Lists ranks the bestselling books published by ECPA members and sold by popular retailers such as Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, Target, and Walmart. "Bible Translations Bestsellers, Best of 2020," Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, <https://christianbookexpo.com/bestseller/translations.php?id=BO20>. Because the ECPA only ranks Bible translations by its members (of whom, I counted ninety-nine under "member search results" on July 11, 2021), they may not provide sales information for other popular translations such as the Douay-Rheims, the New American Bible, and the New Jerusalem Bible.

Table 1: Eunuchs and Genital Injury in the MT and LXX

	MT	LXX	NRSV	NIV	KJV	NLT	ESV
<b>Gen 37:36</b>	קריס	σπάδων	official	official	officer	officer	officer
<b>Gen 39:1</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	officer	officer
<b>Gen 40:2</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	official	officer
<b>Gen 40:7</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	n/a	officer
<b>Deut 23:2</b> (NRSV 23:1) (LXX 23:2)	פצע דקה שפכה כרת	θλαδίας ἀποκόπτω	one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off	one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting	he that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off	a man's testicles are crushed or his penis is cut off	one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off
<b>Lev 21:20</b>	מרוחץ אש	μόνορχις	crushed testicles	damaged testicles	stones broken	damaged testicles	crushed testicles
<b>Lev 22:24</b>	מרוחץ כתת נתק כרת	θλαδίας ἐκθλίβω ἐκτομίας ἀποσπάω	testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut	testicles are bruised, crushed, torn or cut	bruised, or crushed, or broken, or cut	damaged testicles or is castrated	testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut
<b>1 Sam 8:15</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	officer	officer
<b>1 Kgs 22:9</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	official	officer
<b>2 Kgs 8:6</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	official	official	officer	official	official
<b>2 Kgs 9:32</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>2 Kgs 18:17</b>	רב־סריס	Ῥαφίς	Rab-saris	chief officer	Rabsaris	field commander	Rab-saris
<b>2 Kgs 20:18</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>2 Kgs 23:11</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	official	chamberlain	eunuch	chamberlain
<b>2 Kgs 24:12</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	official	official
<b>2 Kgs 24:15</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	official	official	officer	official	official
<b>2 Kgs 25:19</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	officer	officer	officer	officer
<b>Isa 39:7</b>	קריס	σπάδων	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Isa 56:3</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Isa 56:4</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Jer 29:2</b> (LXX 36:2)	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	court official	court official	eunuch	court official	eunuch
<b>Jer 34:19</b> (LXX 41:19)	קריס	δυναστής	eunuch	court official	eunuch	court official	eunuch
<b>Jer 38:7</b> (LXX 45:7)	קריס	n/a	eunuch	official	eunuch	important court official	eunuch
<b>Jer 39:3</b> (LXX 46:3)	רב־סריס	Ναβουσαρίς	Rab-saris	chief officer	Rabsaris	chief officer	Rab-saris
<b>Jer 39:13</b>	רב־סריס	n/a	Rab-saris	chief officer	Rabsaris	chief officer	Rab-saris
<b>Jer 41:16</b> (LXX 48:16)	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	court official	eunuch	court official	eunuch
<b>Jer 52:25</b>	קריס	εὐνοῦχος	officer	officer	eunuch	officer	officer

Table 1 (continued): Eunuchs and Genital Injury in the MT and LXX

	MT	LXX	NRSV	NIV	KJV	NLT	ESV
<b>Est 1:10</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 1:12</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	attendant	chamberlain	n/a	eunuch
<b>Est 1:15</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 2:3</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 2:14</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 2:15</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 2:21</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	officer	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 4:4</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 4:5</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 6:2</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	officer	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 6:14</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Est 7:9</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	chamberlain	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Dan 1:3</b>	רב קרים	ἀρχιευνοῦχος	palace master	chief of court officials	master of eunuchs	chief of staff	chief eunuch
<b>Dan 1:7</b>	שר קרים	ἀρχιευνοῦχος	palace master	chief official	prince of the eunuchs	chief of staff	chief of the eunuchs
<b>Dan 1:8</b>	שר קרים	ἀρχיευνοῦχος	palace master	chief official	prince of the eunuchs	chief of staff	chief of the eunuchs
<b>Dan 1:9</b>	שר קרים	ἀρχיευνοῦχος	palace master	official	prince of the eunuchs	chief of staff	chief of the eunuchs
<b>Dan 1:10</b>	שר קרים	ἀρχיευνοῦχος	palace master	official	prince of the eunuchs	n/a	chief of the eunuchs
<b>Dan 1:11</b>	שר קרים	ἀρχיευνοῦχος	palace master	chief official	prince of the eunuchs	chief of staff	chief of the eunuchs
<b>Dan 1:18</b>	שר קרים	ἀρχיευνοῦχος	palace master	chief official	prince of the eunuchs	chief of staff	chief of the eunuchs
<b>1 Chr 28:1</b>	קרים	δυναστης	palace official	palace official	officer	palace official	palace official
<b>2 Chr 18:8</b>	קרים	εὐνοῦχος	officer	official	officer	official	officer
<b>Jdt 12:11</b>	n/a	εὐνοῦχος	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Wsd 3:14</b>	n/a	εὐνοῦχος	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Sir 20:4</b>	n/a	εὐνοῦχος	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Sir 30:20</b>	n/a	εὐνοῦχος	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Table 2: Eunuchs and Castration in the New Testament

	NT	NRSV	NIV	KJV	NLT	ESV
<b>Mt 19:12</b>	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch (19:12a,b)	eunuch
<b>Mt 19:12</b>	εὐνουχίζω	made eunuchs (19:12b-c)	made eunuchs (19:12b); choose to live like eunuchs (19:12c)	made eunuchs (19:12b-c)	made eunuchs (19:12b); choose not to marry (19:12c)	made eunuchs (19:12b-c)
<b>Acts 8:27</b>	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Acts 8:34</b>	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Acts 8:36</b>	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Acts 8:38</b>	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	n/a	eunuch
<b>Acts 8:39</b>	εὐνοῦχος	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch
<b>Gal 5:12</b>	ἀποκόπτω*	castrate	emasculate	cut off	mutilate	emasculate

\*ἀποκόπτω occurs in Mk 9:43,45 and Jn 18:10, 26 for cutting off another body part (cf. Acts 27:32)

Of the forty-five MT occurrences of *saris* (סַרִּיֶּס), including *rab saris* and *sar saris*, in Table 1, the LXX translators opted for Greek terms that denoted eunuch forty-one times (over 91 percent): εὐνοῦχος, thirty times; ἀρχιευνούχος (chief eunuch), seven; σπάδων,<sup>128</sup> two; Ναβουσαρίς (a transliteration of *nabu*<sup>129</sup> *saris*), one, and ῥαφίς (a transliteration of *rab saris*, chief eunuch),<sup>130</sup> one. Of the remaining four verses where *saris* appears, LXX translators chose δυνάστης twice and omitted the term twice (Jer 38:7; 39:13). The LSJ translates δυνάστης as “lord, master, ruler.” For the translators of the LXX, then, *saris* almost always denoted a castrated male.

Most scholars who write about Mt 19:12 cite or discuss Deut 23:1 to provide biblical context for Matthew’s eunuchs even though *saris* does not occur in that verse.<sup>131</sup> MT Deut 23:2 forbids a male with damaged stones (*petsu’a daka* ‘) from entering the assembly of the Lord. Nor does *saris* appear in Lev 21:20, which prohibits a priest with damaged testicles (*meroah’ ašekh*)

<sup>128</sup> The LXX uses σπάδων and εὐνοῦχος interchangeably for Potiphar (Gen 37:36, 39:1).

<sup>129</sup> *Nabu* derives from the Babylonian god Nabu. Nebuchadnezzar, for example, roughly translates from Babylonian into Hebrew as “Nebu, protect the boundary” and “possibly is also crown” (Brown-Driver-Briggs).

<sup>130</sup> On the term, see Hayim Tadmor, “Rab-saris and Rab-shakeh in 2 Kings 18,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983).

<sup>131</sup> I will discuss scholarly preoccupation with Deut 23:1 later in this chapter.

from offering a sacrifice, or Lev 22:24, which states that an animal with damaged testicles shall not be sacrificed.

Matthew's audiences, like the LXX translators, would have identified a εὐνοῦχος as a castrated male. That is because the default understanding of εὐνοῦχος was a male who had been castrated for enslavement. Sean Burke, who researched eunuchs for his dissertation and subsequent monograph on the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8:27-40, came to a similar conclusion:

On the basis of my own analysis of the usage of the word [εὐνοῦχος] in the Greek texts of Herodotus, Xenophon, Dio Chrysostom, Chariton, and Lucian, as well as in the Greek-Jewish texts of Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, and Philo of Alexandria, I conclude that it is most likely that for Greek-speaking audiences—whether elite or nonelite and whether Jewish or non-Jewish—the word εὐνοῦχος would have evoked a castrated male. In fact, I have not been able to find one example in Greek texts from the fifth century B.C.E. to the second century C.E. or in Greek-Jewish texts from the second century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. in which εὐνοῦχος was used to refer to a person who was *clearly not castrated*.<sup>132</sup>

In this chapter, I will introduce evidence that Matthew's earliest audiences would have viewed eunuchs as castrated males and provide more evidence and explication in Chapter 3.

However, metaphorical interpretations of eunuchs did exist, even before Christian authors described Matthew's self-made eunuchs as men who abstain from sex and marriage. In the mid-first century, Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus of Alexandria interpreted eunuchs both literally<sup>133</sup> and allegorically. He compared a mind that indulged in excessive pleasure (ταῖς περιτταῖς χρώμενος ἡδοναῖς) to a eunuch barren (ἄγονος) of wisdom. Pharaoh's chief butler, chief baker, and chief cook were "eunuchs barren of all the chief necessities, temperance (σωφροσύνη), modesty (αἰδώς), self-restraint (ἐγκράτεια), justice (δικαιοσύνη) and every virtue" (ἀρετή) (*Ios.* [Colson, LCL]).<sup>134</sup> Philo's allegorical writings about eunuchs reveal his understanding that literal eunuchs were unable to procreate; they were ἄγονος—literally, without offspring (γόνος). Philo's allegorical treatments of biblical eunuchs proved useful for Christian

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<sup>132</sup> Sean D. Burke, "Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* ed. Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, Semeia Studies (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2011), 178.

<sup>133</sup> On which, see Chapter 4.

<sup>134</sup> For Philo's reflections on eunuchs in Genesis, see Ra'anan Abusch, "Eunuchs and Gender Transformation: Philo's Exegesis of the Joseph Narrative," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (London, GB: The Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002).

teachers Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 211 CE) and Origen’s interpretations of Matthew’s eunuchs.

That eunuchs were understood in antiquity as castrated males will become clearer throughout this dissertation. One humorous example now, from Lucian’s satirical account *The Eunuch*, may be helpful in showing that a eunuch could be identified by his external genitalia. Philosopher Diocles argues that Bagoas<sup>135</sup>, his rival for a prestigious philosopher chair in Athens, should be disqualified because he is a eunuch. An observer disagrees: Bagoas had been caught in adultery and only claimed he was a eunuch to secure his acquittal. If he stripped, it would be obvious that he is completely masculine (πάνυ ἀνδρεῖος). The judges debate how to proceed:

They were not all of the same opinion. Some thought they ought to strip him, as is done with slaves, and determine by inspection whether he had the parts (*sic*, testicles: ὄρχις) to practise philosophy. Others made the suggestion, even more ridiculous, that they should send for some women out of bawdy-houses (οἴκημα) and bid him consort with (συνεῖναι) them and cohabit (ὀπιώω); and that one of the judges, the eldest and most trustworthy, should stand by and see whether he could practise philosophy! Then, as all were overcome by laughter and every man of them had a sore belly from shaking with it, they decided to refer the case to the highest court and send it to Italy. (12 [Harmon, LCL])

### Castration of Animals and Humans

The aforementioned dictionary and lexical definitions of eunuch refer to castration. Yet today, few know what castration entails. When I started researching Matthew’s eunuchs, I assumed it meant removal of the penis; I had never before thought about it (or wanted to). My only experience with castration was of my cats’, although I did not recognize it as such because veterinarians mentioned ‘neutering’ or ‘spaying.’ If I had asked for details about the respective surgical procedures, I would have learned that male cats had their testicles removed and females, their ovaries, fallopian tubes, and uterus.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> The character Bagoas is probably based on philosopher Favorinus of Arles, whom I will discuss in Chapter 2.

<sup>136</sup> Some veterinarians also perform non-surgical castration that involves injecting a drug into a male animal’s testes. "Spaying and neutering," <https://www.avma.org/resources/pet-owners/petcare/spaying-and-neutering>. Castration is also routine for livestock. In the U.S., 88 percent of male beef cattle and 100 percent of male piglets are castrated each year. Johann F. Coetzee et al., "A Survey of Castration Methods and Associated Livestock Management Practices Performed by Bovine Veterinarians in the United States," *BMC Veterinary Research* 6, no. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-6148-6-12>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2841153/> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2841153/pdf/1746-6148-6-12.pdf>; "Castration-Induced Pain in Pigs and Other Livestock," Farm Animal Welfare Fact Sheet, USDA-ARS-MWA Livestock Behavior Research Unit,

As Jay Geller pointed out during my defense, my confusion about castration was not uncommon and might be traced to Sigmund Freud's (1856 – 1939) theories and their subsequent reception. A brief overview of castration before and after Freud helps clarify; more extended discussion of human castration practices and corporeal consequences occurs in Chapter 3.

There is a long history of veterinary castrations. Extant records date to the Early Dynastic Period (c. 2900 - 2350 BCE) in the city state of Lagash, where young male cattle, donkeys, and onagers (wild asses) were castrated.<sup>137</sup> In antiquity, castration referred to cutting out, tying off, or crushing the testicles of a young male animal to disrupt sperm production, render the animal less aggressive, or, in piglets destined for future slaughter, to prevent “boar taint,” an unpleasant smell or taste that occurs in roughly thirty percent of uncastrated pigs when they are later cooked.<sup>138</sup> From the accounts of Marcus Porcius Cato (234 – 149 BCE), Marcus Terentius Varro (116 – 27 BCE), and Lucius Iunius Moderatus Columella (d. c.70 CE),<sup>139</sup> it is clear that castration referred to a procedure done to the testicles, usually excision, that resulted in sterility. Varro, for example, stated that castrated horses become calmer after the removal of their testicles (*testiculus*) because they no longer have seed (*On Agriculture* 2.7.16). During the Roman Republic and early Imperial Period, castration was performed routinely on bulls, lambs, roosters, boars, and horses.

Ancient writers offered practical advice about when and how to castrate. According to epic poet Hesiod (late 8<sup>th</sup> – early 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE), for instance, the best time to castrate (τάμνω) young goats and sheep was the sixth day of the month. Boars and bulls should be castrated on the eighth, and mules on the twelfth (*Works and Days* 786-791). Aristotle explained that any animal

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2011, <https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARUserFiles/50201500/Castration%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>. Approximately fifty million pigs are marketed each year in the U.S., and almost all are castrated as piglets with a non-sterile scalpel or knife in a commercial facility with no anesthesia or analgesic. "Pig Castration," Texas Tech Laboratory of Animal Behavior, Physiology and Welfare, <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/animalwelfare/research/pigcastration/index.php>.

<sup>137</sup> Kazuya Maekawa, "Animal and Human Castration in Sumer, Part I: Cattle and Equids in Pre-Sargonic Lagash," *Zinbun* 15 (1979).

<sup>138</sup> The USDA explains the cause and market solution of boar taint as follows: “As intact male pigs sexually mature, they can develop two naturally occurring compounds, androstenone and skatole, that over time can accumulate in the fatty tissue of some male pigs. They are released when the pork is cooked, causing the unpleasant aroma. Until recently, the primary means of controlling these off odors was surgical castration. Immunological castration gives producers another option to manage boar taint.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, "What is boar taint?," Knowledge Article. <https://ask.usda.gov/s/article/What-is-boar-taint>. The USDA avers that “while these naturally developing odors are completely safe, research shows that a relatively high proportion of consumers (greater than 30%), especially women, can easily detect them, making their control a necessity.”

<sup>139</sup> Silke Diederich, "Columella," in *Oxford Bibliographies. Classics.*, ed. Dee L. Clayman (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2016).

with testicles could be castrated, then discussed the castration of birds, calves, bulls, boar, and deer (*Hist. an.* 8(9), 632a). Calves, for example, were laid down, the scrotum was cut, and the testicles were squeezed out. Birds were cauterized (ἐπικαύση) with two or three hot iron tools.<sup>140</sup> Accounts were sometimes quite detailed. The following description from Columella of a method used on two-year old bulls helps clarify what veterinary castration by excision entailed, its physical impacts, and the measures taken in the first century to preserve an animal's health. Here Columella shares the expertise of Mago, who advised that young, tender bulls under age one should have their testicles placed between a cleft ferula (the hollow, cane-like stems of a tall plant) and broken up. However, if that is not possible, castration should occur by excision at age two:

. . . the operation should take place in the spring or in the autumn when the moon is waning, and that the calf should be bound in the machine;<sup>141</sup> then, before applying the knife, you should seize between two narrow laths of wood, as in a forceps, the sinews of the testicles (*testis*), which the Greeks call "hangers," (κρεμαστήρας) because the genital (*genitalis*) parts hang from them, and then take hold of the testicles and lay them open with a knife and after pressing them out cut them off in such a way that their extremities are left adhering to the said sinews. By this method the steer runs no danger from an eruption of blood, nor is it likely to lose its masculinity (*virilitate*) and become totally effeminate (*totus effemino*), and it keeps the form of a male when it has been deprived of generative power. This, however, it does not lose immediately; for, if you allow it to cover a cow directly after the operation, it is certain that it is possible for it to beget offspring; but it should by no means be allowed to do so, lest it die from a flux of blood. The wounds should be anointed with the ash of brushwood and litharge of silver [lead oxide], and the animal should be kept away from water for that day and be fed on only a little food. For the three following days it should be treated as a sick animal and tempted to eat with the tops of trees and green fodder cut off for it and must not be allowed to drink much. It is thought right also to anoint the actual sores after three days with liquid pitch and ashes mixed with a little oil, so that they may scar over more quickly and that they may not be infested by flies. (*On Agriculture* 6.26 [Forster and Heffner, LCL])

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<sup>140</sup> See also Varro, *On Agriculture* 3.9; Pliny, *NH* 10.50.

<sup>141</sup> Shortly before this passage, Columella provided details and dimensions of a machine used for the medical treatment of large quadrupeds. It was made out of oak boards, posts, railings, bars, a yoke, and nooses (6.19). For reference, two-year-old bull calves were quite large. They likely weighed over 1,000 pounds. Literary and zooarchaeological remains indicate that there were a number of different cattle breeds in Roman Italy. Oxen (castrated bulls) used for plowing tended to be larger and have heavier bones than those slaughtered at an earlier age for meat production. See Michael MacKinnon, "Cattle 'breed' variation and improvement in Roman Italy: connecting the zooarchaeological and ancient textual evidence," *World Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (2010); Michael MacKinnon, *Production and consumption of animals in Roman Italy: integrating the zooarchaeological and textual evidence*, vol. 54 (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2004).



Columella details specific measures taken to ensure the bull's health and quick recovery: not cutting off too much of the spermatic cord, not allowing the bull to injure itself by mating immediately afterward, anointing the wound, feeding the bull a special diet, and allowing sufficient recovery time. Columella knows that castration renders the bull non-procreative, although not immediately post-operation.

In addition to veterinary castrations, there are epigraphical and literary accounts of the castration of gods. Third-millennium BCE Egyptian funerary inscriptions refer to Horus's castration of Set. The two gods—as brothers, uncle and nephew, or hippopotami, depending on the source—violently fight over Osiris's throne. Horus prevails. By most accounts, he removes Set's testicles, and Set removes one or both of Horus's eyes.<sup>142</sup> In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Chronos cuts off his father Ouranos's genitals (μήδεα) with a long, jagged sickle placed into his hands by his mother Gaea, then throws the genitals into the sea (178-182).<sup>143</sup> The blood from Ouranos's severed genitals falls on Gaea, who later births the Erinyes, Giants, and Nymphs. The genitals also produce white foam in the sea, from which Aphrodite manifests (182-200).<sup>144</sup> In his second-

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<sup>142</sup> Twelve inscriptions in the pyramids of King Unis (c. 2353-2323 BCE), King Teti (c. 2323-2291 BCE), King Pepi I (c. 2289-2255 BCE), King Pepi II (c. 2246-2152 BCE), and King Pepi II's wife, Queen Neith, refer to Set's testicles in recitations, spells, and a resurrection ritual. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, ed. Peter Der Manuelian, trans. James P. Allen, Writings from the Ancient World, (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2005), 15, 65, 97, 239, 309. Inscriptions in Unis's pyramid: "May you spit on Horus's face for him and remove the injury against him; may you catch Seth's testicles for him and remove his hurt" (31). "and you [Sun? Unis?] illumined the night, provided as Seth, whose raw (testicles) were pulled off" (40). "Horus has fallen because of his eye, the bull has crawled off because of his testicles. Fall down, crawl away!" (52). Teti's pyramid: "Seth's fetcher desires Teti because he has gotten his testicles" (69). "Horus wailed for his eye, Seth wailed for his testicles" (76). "Horus has fallen because of his eye, Seth has felt pain because of his testicles" (90). Pepi I's pyramid: "You, ferryman! Get that (ferryboat) for Horus; get his eye. Get that for Seth: get his testicles" (128). "Seth rasped because of his testicles" (146). "You netted one yonder, you male here, the one who runs has run from you two who belong to that first body of the herd of justification, that was born when wrath had not yet come into being, that was born when noise had not yet come into being, that was born when cursing had not yet come into being, that was born when disturbance had not yet come into being, when Horus's eye had not yet been gouged out and Seth's testicles had not yet been tied off" (179). Pepi II's pyramid: "Seth has fetched Pepi Neferkare, desiring him because Pepi Neferkare has fetched his testicles for him" (250). Reference in Queen Neith's Pyramid: "Yonder opponent has fallen away because of his eye and crawled off because of his testicles. Fall down, crawl away!" (330). One spell in the Pyramid Texts refers to Thoth's testicles, in Pepi I's pyramid: "Should Thoth try to come in that bad coming of his, don't open your arms to him, but let there be said to him his identity of You Have No Mother, (and say): 'Go, you who have been barred from your testicles! Go to Pe, to Thoth-town!'" (166).

<sup>143</sup> Plutarch also refers to Uranus's genitals as μήδεα in *Moralia*, The Roman Questions 42A. According to Dio Chrysostom, some people claimed that Chronos castrated (ἐκτέμνω) Uranus, and Zeus also castrated Chronos. Dio thought this was absurd (*Discourse* 11.147).

<sup>144</sup> Hesiod, who called her laughter-loving (φιλομμειδής), traced her name from that term, as if it derived from μηδός (genitals), and ἀφρός (foam). Glenn Most translates φιλομμειδής as "smile-loving" and explains Hesiod's

century amusing *Saturnalia*, Lucian’s Chronos threatens to castrate any rich people who break his laws during his festival:

“And tell them that if they are disobedient it’s not for nothing that I carry this sharp sickle here—I should be a fool to have castrated (ποιέω ἐκτομίας) my own father, Uranus, and yet not make eunuchs (ἐὺνουχίζω) of the rich who break my laws, making them servants of the Great Mother and collectors for her, complete with flutes and cymbals.” That was his threat. So you had better not transgress his ordinances. (12 [Kilburn, LCL])

The earliest extant non-mythological record of human castration dates to the Neo-Sumerian Empire (c. 2110 – 2003 BCE). The term *amar-KUD*, which originally referred to the aforementioned young castrated cattle, donkeys, and onagers, later came to refer to castrated boys and young men, usually sons of women of low social status like weavers who lived in palaces or temples. Like their domesticated non-human counterparts, the *amar-KUD* performed physical labor. They raised horses and towed ships. There is no evidence that they had children.<sup>145</sup>

In Freud’s writings, castration almost always refers to removal of the penis, not the testicles.<sup>146</sup> In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, he analyzed the dream of a young

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etymology of Aphrodite in Hesiod, *Theogony. Works and Days. Testimonia*. trans. Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 19n10.

<sup>145</sup> Kazuya Maekawa, "Animal and Human Castration in Sumer, Part II: Human Castration in the Ur III Period," *Zinbun* 16 (1980).

<sup>146</sup> Freud understood that castration of males entailed removal of the testicles. In a larger discussion of homoeroticism and sexual behaviors in his 1905 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud brought up the experiments of biologists who conducted castrations and subsequently grafted genitals onto mammals of the opposite sex. These convinced Freud that different species of mammals could transform from male into female or female into male. He then mentioned the case of a man who lost his testicles due to tuberculosis. The man behaved as a “passive homosexual” in sexual relationships and displayed feminine secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., hair, fat accumulation on hips and breasts). However, after a surgical graft of an undescended testis from another man, those feminine-coded behaviors and physical attributes were reversed, and the man showed a masculine libido. Sigmund Freud, *A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works* ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Carrie Lee Rothgeb, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, (London, GB: Hogarth Press, 1953), 144. Freud’s colleagues and (their?) Jewish families apparently followed Freud’s later conflation of castration with penectomy. In a footnote in *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, for example, Freud refers to Sándor Ferenczi’s 1913 discussion of a young neurotic boy’s fear of castration: “The illuminating instance reported by Ferenczi (1913a) has shown us how a little boy took as his own totem the beast that had pecked at his little penis.” Freud continued: “When our [Jewish] children come to hear of ritual circumcision, they equate it with castration...” Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIII (1913-1914): Totem and Taboo and Other Works, (London, GB: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1955), 153n1.

female patient who strongly identified with her brother. She dreamed that her mother threatened castration (*Kastration*), which, for Freud, was “nothing other than a punishment for playing with the penis” (*die nichts anderes als Bestrafung für das Spielen mit dem Gliede sein kann*).<sup>147</sup> In his analysis of Leonardo da Vinci’s childhood dream, Freud explained how boys develop theories about castration. A boy views his own genitalia as especially valuable and important and believes that everyone has them. When he first sees the genitalia of a little girl, he assumes that her penis must be very little but will grow. Later, when the boy realizes that the growth did not occur, he modifies his theory. Because he has already been threatened with castration by his mother for showing excessive interest in his own penis, he concludes that girls must have masturbated and had their penis cut off. Now, girls only have a wound (i.e., the vagina) in its place.<sup>148</sup> Freud subsequently developed his famous castration complex (*Kastrationskomplex*), according to which the horror of castration remains in an adult’s subconscious even when childhood beliefs about genitals and castration have been corrected in the conscious mind.<sup>149</sup>

While the penis figured largely in Freud’s literary corpus, testicles did not. Freud referred to the penis (*penis, phallus, männliches Gleid*) four hundred sixty-eight times in his writings, but he mentioned the testicles or scrotum (*Testikel, testis, Hodensack*) only twelve times.<sup>150</sup> Further complicating matters, Freud’s contemporaries referred to ovariectomy (also called oophorectomy), the surgical removal of the ovaries, as castration (*Kastration*). The popular but controversial surgical procedure was often performed by European and U.S. doctors in the late 1800s and early 1900s to treat “hysteria” and other diseases of women (e.g., nymphomania).<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 3 ed. (Leipzig, DE and Vienna, AT: Franz Deuticke, 1911), 215.

<sup>148</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci* (Leipzig, DE and Vienna, AT: Franz Deuticke, 1910), 31-32. In Freud’s day, many viewed masturbation as a public health threat that had to be suppressed or treated surgically. See, e.g., Carlo Bonomi, “The Relevance of Castration and Circumcision to the Origins of Psychoanalysis: 1. The Medical Context,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 90, no. 3 (2009): 552 and 57, citing RA Spitz, “Authority and Masturbation: Some Remarks on a Bibliographic Investigation,” *Psychoanal Quarterly* (1952) 21:499.

<sup>149</sup> Gary Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 22.

<sup>150</sup> Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History*, 51, and note on 258. For his search, Taylor used Samuel A. Guttman, Randall L. Jones, and Stephen Maxfield Parrish, eds., *The Concordance to the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1980).. He also included “figures for *penis, penises, phalli, phallic, phallus, member* (in a specifically penile sense) and *scrotum, testes, testi*.” In fact, of the twelve references to testicles, testes, and scrotum, he repeated several almost verbatim.

<sup>151</sup> See, e.g., Bonomi, “Castration, Circumcision, Psychoanalysis,” 552 and 57, citing RA Spitz, “Authority and Masturbation: Some Remarks on a Bibliographic Investigation,” *Psychoanal Quarterly* (1952) 21:499. Freud studied under Jean-Martin Charcot, a renowned neurologist who treated “hysteria.” With an increasing number of surgeons who opposed ovariectomies, Charcot claimed that “hysteria” originated in the central nervous system, not the

Freud's castration complex, and many of his associated theories (e.g., the Oedipus complex, penis envy) have been widely disseminated and debated, and not only in academic and psychoanalytic contexts. In popular culture, for example, penis envy can refer variously to a woman's desire for a penis, a man's anxiety about the size of his penis, one of the greatest punk albums of all time,<sup>152</sup> and at least two types of a psychedelic mushroom that resembles a penis.

Greek and Roman writers knew that castration was a procedure that involved the testicles. Yet some scholars claim that castration could entail removal of the penis (i.e., a penectomy). In the oft-cited *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Theology in Late Antiquity*, for example, Matthew Kuefler states that the Latin *spado* refers to "eunuchs whose penises or entire genitalia had been surgically removed" and that there were "three basic procedures for castration—amputating the penis (with or without the testicles), tying up the scrotum, and crushing the testicles."<sup>153</sup> While ablation—the removal of the penis and testicles—was indeed practiced in dynastic China to make eunuchs,<sup>154</sup> I found very little evidence that eunuchs in Greco-Roman antiquity received ablation or a penectomy; both procedures carried a high mortality rate.<sup>155</sup> Literary and legal sources often refer to males castrated for enslavement, but they do not suggest that eunuchs died as a result. Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565) alleged that eighty-seven of ninety males died after castration

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genitals. Carlo Bonomi, "Freud and Castration: A New Look into the Origins of Psychoanalysis," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 26, no. 1 (1998): 37.

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/40-greatest-punk-albums-of-all-time-75659/crass-penis-envy-1981-174997/>

<sup>153</sup> Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 33, endnote 61. His sources include Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant, Family, Sexuality, and Social Relations in Past Times, (Oxford, GB: Basil Blackwell, 1988). and a description of castration in the seventh-century medical encyclopedia of Paul of Aegina (6.65). Paul of Aegina detailed two methods of castrating testicles: compression and excision (6.68). Other scholars have followed Kuefler. In her introduction to *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, for example, Larissa Tracy cites Kuefler when she claims that "[t]here are three medical possibilities in defining castration: removing or disabling the penis; removing or disabling the testicles; and removing or disabling the entire genitalia." Larissa Tracy, "Introduction, A History of Calamities: The Culture of Castration," in *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Cambridge, GB: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 4. She cites Mathew S. Kuefler, "Castration and Eunuchism in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York, NY: Garland, 1996), 285.

<sup>154</sup> See, e.g., Norman Alan Kutcher, *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>155</sup> Literary and medical accounts suggest that excision was the default method in the Roman Empire, not tying or crushing. There is much anecdotal evidence for excision, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.

(Nov. 142); his claim must be read with caution, though, as he actively sought to abolish castration.<sup>156</sup>

Similarly, there are scattered literary references to *galli* who cut off their penis, one of which (Mart. *Spect.* 3.81) I will share in the following section. However, derogatory accounts of *galli*'s frenzied, public self-castration written by elite Roman authors probably did not reflect actual practice. In Chapter 4, I will introduce material evidence for *galli* that suggests an altogether different ritual castration.

### Popular Beliefs and Stereotypes

Because there are no extant accounts written by eunuchs as far as we know, we have no record of how an ancient eunuch thought about identity, sexuality, parenthood, marriage, citizenship, social status, another social marker, or castration and its aftermath. We must rely instead on abundant literary sources and scattered material remains. Literary sources offer little help in reconstructing the lives of eunuchs in antiquity; however, they do reveal beliefs about eunuchs. For this reason, they are useful for understanding how Matthew's early audiences may have perceived eunuchs. Still, it is difficult to know how widespread beliefs were as the authors were almost always elite men. We must be cautious in generalizing. When a particular stereotype appears repeatedly, in different genres (e.g., medical writings, histories, novels), I assume that it reflects a fairly common view. What follows is a brief overview of common beliefs and stereotypes about eunuchs concerning non-procreativity, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

Three caveats are necessary. First, because certain stereotypes apply to particular eunuchs, I treat those in subsequent chapters. Positive stereotypes about extraordinarily loyal eunuchs, for instance, usually refer to eunuchs associated with monarchs, an issue I will treat in Chapter 3, but not to congenital or self-made eunuchs. Second, although I introduce issues of procreativity, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity separately, these were not (and are not) distinct categories; there is significant overlap. As one example, writers often described eunuchs as effeminate. The corollary was that eunuchs, like women, had voracious sexual appetites because

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<sup>156</sup> While noting that Justinian's rate is "presumably extreme," Benet Salway nevertheless concludes on this basis that there was "a certain inevitable rate of casualties from the castration process" Benet Salway, "MANCIPIVM RVSTICVM SIVE VRBANVM: The Slave Chapter of Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 109 (2010): 11. If he is correct, the rate would be very low, as I will discuss in Chapter 3.

they, like women, lacked appropriate self-control, which was a masculine attribute. Third, our modern, contested categories of ‘gender,’ ‘sexuality,’ and ‘ethnicity’ were understood differently in antiquity.

Since the 1978 publication of Kenneth Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality*, classicists and historians have focused on the hierarchical structures of sexual relationships in antiquity. According to the “penetrative model” Dover introduced, sexuality mirrored Athenian society: male citizens, who were deemed superior to females, male and female prostitutes, enslaved males, younger males, and other males who purportedly took a “passive” role in sexual encounters, should take an active, dominant role over their social inferiors.<sup>157</sup>

This model, slightly adjusted to reflect circumstances in the Roman Empire (e.g., where sexual relations between men and freeborn boys were considered unacceptable), grounds most scholarship on sexuality in the Roman world. Craig A. Williams avers that an insertive/receptive dichotomy is crucial for understanding Roman sexual categories: “The question ‘Who penetrated whom?’ lies behind nearly every ancient allusion to a sexual encounter, even between women.”<sup>158</sup> Williams points out that Roman writers had a specific vocabulary for penetration; there were Latin terms for penetration of the vagina (insertive: *futuere*; receptive: *crisare*), the anus (insertive: *pedicare*; receptive: *cevere*), and the mouth (insertive: *irrumare*; receptive: *fellare*).<sup>159</sup> Eunuchs could penetrate in more than one way, as Roman poet Martial’s (c. 38 – c. 101 CE) raunchy epigram about a man named Baeticus illustrate: “What concern have you, eunuch (*gallus*) Baeticus, with the feminine abyss? This tongue of yours should be licking male middles. Why was your cock (*mentula*) cut off with a Samian shard if you were so fond of a

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<sup>157</sup> Marilyn B. Skinner, ed., *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 7; Maud W. Gleason, “Elite Male Identity in the Roman Empire,” in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 78. Marilyn Skinner’s expanded introduction to *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* provides a helpful overview of some of the theoretical challenges facing historians of Greek and Roman sexuality. Often scholars refer to “hegemonic masculinity,” a dominant masculinity to which men are presumed to aspire. For a sketch of scholarship and critiques, see Eric C Stewart, “Masculinity in the New Testament and early Christianity,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46, no. 2 (2016). See also Mark Masterson, “Studies of Ancient Masculinity,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Chichester, GB: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2014); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995); Amy Richlin, “Sexuality in the Roman Empire,” in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>158</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 177.

<sup>159</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 178.

cunt, Baeticus? Your head should be castrated. You may be a eunuch loinwise (*inguen*), but you cheat Cybele's rites. With your mouth you're a man" (*Spect.* 3.81 [Shackleton Bailey]).<sup>160</sup>

Classicists and historians also view gender in antiquity a kind of continuum with male and female at each pole. For a male citizen in the early Roman Empire, the ideal was not to be uber-masculine, and a woman who demonstrated masculine-coded attributes could be praised for it. A man who purportedly displayed one or more characteristics associated with femininity such as softness, coldness, wetness, irrationality, self-indulgence, passivity, or excessive lust could be accused of being a woman, a prostitute, or even worse, a *cinaedus*.<sup>161</sup>

### *Non-procreativity*

Although authors held divergent views about eunuchs' characteristics, they all recognized that eunuchs could not procreate. Athenian historian and military commander Xenophon (b. c. 430 BCE)'s *Cyropaedia*, an encomium to Persian King Cyrus the Great (d. 530 BCE), provides an eloquent illustration. In the following passage, Cyrus lavishes praise on Gadatas, a military ally and nobleman, after the young man gained control of a crucial Assyrian fortress. Gadatas had been castrated by their mutual enemy, the Assyrian King. Cyrus tells Gadatas:

'...for by the favour of the gods you not only bid me joy but even compel me to be joyful. For believe me, I consider it a great advantage to leave this place friendly to my allies in this country. From you, Gadatas,' Cyrus went on, 'the Assyrian has, it seems, taken away the power of begetting children (*παῖς ποιέω*), but at any rate he has not deprived you of the ability of acquiring friends. Let me assure you that by this deed you have made of us friends who will try, if we can, to stand by you and aid you no less efficiently than if we were your own children.' (5.3.19 [Miller, LCL])

Cyrus's poetic words make sense to Xenophon's audiences because they knew that eunuchs could not procreate.

Centuries later, writers contemporaneous with the first evangelist continued to describe eunuchs as infertile. Philo allegorized the eunuch Potiphar as a mind "sterile in wisdom" (*ἄγονος*

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<sup>160</sup> Martial's epigram assumes that Cybele's eunuchs cut off their penises instead of or in addition to their testicles. The epigram would not have been as effective if Martial referred to Baeticus's testicles instead of his penis.

<sup>161</sup> Craig Williams describes a *cinaedus* as "a man who fails to live up to traditional standards of masculine comportment, and one way in which he may do so is by seeking to be penetrated; but that is merely a symptom of the deeper disorder, his gender deviance." Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 193.

σοφίας (*Leg.* 3.236; cf. *Ebr.* 220; *Ios.* 59); the chief butler, baker, and cook as an incontinent soul “infertile and sterile” (ἀγόνου δὲ καὶ ἐστειρωμένης; *Ebr.* 210); and the King of Egypt and his eunuchs as a pleasure-loving mind “sterile in all of the chief necessities: wisdom, modesty, self-control, righteousness, and all virtue” (ἄγονός ἐστι τῶν ἀναγκαιοτάτων, σωφροσύνης, αἰδοῦς, ἐγκρατείας, δικαιοσύνης, ἀπάσης ἀρετῆς; *Ios.* 153). Other writers used eunuchs’ infertility to amuse audiences. For example, Martial lauded Domitian, who with his anti-castration legislation “lately succored tender youths to stop cruel lust from sterilizing males (*ne faceret steriles saeva libido viros*). Boys, young men, and old men loved you before, Caesar, but now infants too adore you” (*Spect.* 9.7 [Shackleton Bailey, LCL]).

Medical experts also wrote about eunuchs’ infertility. Rufus of Ephesus, an anatomist and physician who lived in the second half of the first century CE, explained that those who have been made eunuchs (οἱ εὐνουχισθέντες) have infertile (ἄγονος) sperm because of the maiming (πήρωσις) of their testicles (*On the Anatomy of the Parts of the Body* 58).<sup>162</sup> In the second century, physician Galen explained that the removal of testicles prevented eunuchs from generating children (*On Semen* 1.15.35).

The issue of eunuchs’ non-procreativity was a sensitive one in the Roman Empire and accounts for some of the hostility directed at men who chose to castrate themselves or to have themselves castrated. With the exception of enslaved males and others with relatively low social status, males faced societal pressure to marry and produce children. Caesar Augustus (r. 27 BCE – 14 CE) strongly promoted monogamous marriage and childbearing with new social legislation in 18-17 BCE, the *lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*, modified in 9 CE with the *lex Papia Poppaea*. Accordingly, men and women who remained single or childless or were convicted of adultery faced legal penalties; those who produced a certain number of children received social, financial, and political rewards.<sup>163</sup> Augustus sought to solidify the *domus* as the central space and

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<sup>162</sup> Greek text and commentary in Carolyn J. Gersh, "Naming the Body: A Translation with Commentary and Interpretive Essays of Three Anatomical Works Attributed to Rufus of Ephesus" (PhD diss, University of Michigan, 2012).

<sup>163</sup> Kristina Milnor, *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life*, ed. David Konstan and Alison Sharrock, Oxford Studies in Classical Literature and Gender Theory, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3, 140. Milnor provides a brief overview of Augustan legislation and its initial reception on 140-141. See also Beth Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 52-56.



foundation of civic life, with husbands and fathers helping link home and state.<sup>164</sup> He glorified fatherhood and also presented himself as the male head of the whole Roman household: the *pater patriae*, father of the fatherland. Subsequent emperors followed suit.<sup>165</sup>

## Gender

### *Effeminate Males*

Becoming a eunuch was unthinkable for most men in the Roman world because it jeopardized their identity as men. To be an honorable, a man must demonstrate *virtus* which, according to the L&S primary definition, is “*manliness, manhood, i.e., the sum of all the corporeal or mental excellences of man, strength, vigor; bravery, courage; aptness, capacity; worth, excellence, virtue, etc.*” Both *virtus* and its Greek parallel ἀνδρεία were derived from “man” (*vir, ἀνήρ*).<sup>166</sup> Rhetors, politicians, lawyers, and historians regularly accused adversaries of displaying feminine-coded characteristics opposed to *virtus* such as softness (*mollitia, delicat, μαλακία*), weakness (*debilitas, imbecillitas, ἀσθένεια*), tenderness (*teneritas, τρυφή*), and effeminacy (*eviratus, effeminatus, θήλυς*).<sup>167</sup>

Eunuchs were regularly portrayed with these characteristics. The rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35 – c. 90s CE), for instance, who made a provocative comparison between slave dealers who castrate boys to make them more attractive and teachers of declamation, lamented that young men were unprepared for the battle (*pugna*) of the courtroom:

As those [slave] dealers think there is no beauty in strength or in a muscular arm (*robur ac lacertos*), and certainly not in a beard and the other natural endowments of the male (*natura proprie maribus*), and so take what might, if left alone, have

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<sup>164</sup> And as potential soldiers: Margaret Imber, "Life without Father: Declamation and the Construction of Paternity in the Roman Empire," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 7 (2008): 161. Earlier, Cicero explained that “[t]he primary bond is between spouses, because of the natural instinct for procreation; then with children; then there is the communality of the one household (*domus*). This is the basic principle of the city, the seed of the state.” *On Duties* 1.54. Quoted in Beryl Rawson, "Family and Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 610.

<sup>165</sup> Extant images bear this out: emperors stand with fathers and children, supporting them with loans to fathers (*alimenta*) and direct handouts of food and money (*congiaria*). Rawson, "Family and Society," 614.

<sup>166</sup> For a helpful discussion of the concept of *virtus* and a comparison with the Greek ἀνδρεία and ἀρετή see Chapter 1 of Catalina Balmaceda, *Virtus Romana: Politics and Morality in the Roman Historians* (UNC Press Books, 2017). See also Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 145.

<sup>167</sup> For discussion and numerous examples, see Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), especially 25-31.

developed into sturdiness and soften its supposed hardness (*forent ut dura molliunt*)—so do we cover up the manly form of eloquence (*orationis virilem*) and the power (*vis*) of lean and vigorous (*robustus*) speech with a delicate (*tener*) veneer of style, and think effectiveness of no importance, so long as everything is smooth and polished. I look rather at nature; any real man is handsomer to me than any eunuch (*nemo non vir spadone formosior erit*), nor can I believe that Providence is so indifferent to its own work as to make weakness (*debilitas*) an excellence, or that the knife can lend beauty to a creature that would be a monster (*monstrum*) if it was born like that. (*Inst.* 5.12.18-19 [Russell, LCL])<sup>168</sup>

When slave dealers castrated prepubertal boys, they ruined their natural male physical attributes. Instead of becoming strong, lean, vigorous, sturdy, handsome, powerful, bearded men, the young eunuchs were by implication delicate, smooth, polished, ugly, and weak. Quintilian blamed slave dealers and teachers for the young men's de-masculinization and feminization. Similarly, rhetorician Dio Chrysostom (b. c. 40s CE<sup>169</sup>) blamed Nero (r. 37-68 CE) for Sporus's castration and effeminacy. The young eunuch "actually wore his hair parted, young women attended him whenever he went for a walk, he wore women's clothes, and was forced to do everything else a woman does in the same way" (*Or.* 21.7 [Cohon, LCL]).<sup>170</sup> Dio Chrysostom claimed that after castrating the young man, the emperor changed Sporus's name to that of Nero's deceased wife (Sabina) and offered huge rewards to anyone who would marry them.

Eunuchs' self-control (*imperium*; ἐγκράτεια) was also suspect. Respectable men made strenuous efforts to develop and maintain self-control, another masculine-coded virtue.<sup>171</sup> In Dio Chrysostom's *Discourse on Kingship*, Socrates responds to a question about whether Xerxes I (r. 486 – 465 BCE) is indeed the strongest person (ἰσχυρότατος) on earth. As Socrates explains, Xerxes's inability to control his passions and behaviors makes him weaker and more effeminate than a eunuch:

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<sup>168</sup> Similarly, Seneca the Younger, *Quaestiones naturales*, 7.2-3, cited by Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 368n57.

<sup>169</sup> Claire Rachel Jackson, "Dio Chrysostom," in *The Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic*, ed. Daniel S. Richter and William A. Johnson (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>170</sup> Dio Chrysostom does not name Sporus. Suetonius does in *Ner.* 6.28.

<sup>171</sup> Even diet mattered, as Plutarch of Chaeronea's (c. 50 – c. 120 CE) advice in *Precepts of Health Care* indicates. Men should eat food that grows in the earth (132A), enjoy heavy meats and cheeses only in small quantities (131E-F), and drink water over wine, and wine only in moderation (132B-C). Moderate (μέτριος) and temperate (σώφρων) living enabled the body to stay constantly self-sufficiency (134D). See the helpful discussion of Lieve Van Hoof, "Plutarch's 'Diet-Ethics': Precepts of Healthcare Between Diet and Ethics," in *Virtues for the People: Aspects of Plutarchan Ethics*, ed. Geert Roskam and Luc Van Der Stockt (Leuven, BE: Leuven University Press, 2011).

For he who cannot check a fit of anger, which is often caused by mere trifles; who cannot conquer a lust for the basest things; who cannot thrust pain aside, imaginary as it often is; who cannot endure toil, even to gain pleasure; who cannot drive fear from his soul, though it avails naught in the midst of alarms but works the greatest mischief—must not such a man be greatly lacking in strength (πῶς οὐκ ἀσθενῆς οὗτος σφόδρα), be weaker than a woman (ἡττώμενος μὲν γυναικῶν), weaker than a eunuch (ἡττώμενος δὲ εὐνούχων)? Or do you call that man strong (ἰσχυρός) who is weaker than the softest of things (τοῦ μαλακωτάτου πάντων ἀσθενέστερον)? (*Or.* 3.35 [Cohoon, LCL])

Socrates compares Xerxes's self-control unfavorably with women's and eunuchs'. Xerxes is weak because he cannot master his anger, lust, and fear or endure pain and hard work. By Socrates's logic, it is a problem for a man to be weak. To be weaker than a woman is worse. To be weaker than a eunuch, the softest of all, is the worst-case scenario.

Overexposure to eunuchs could be dangerous and effeminizing, especially to impressionable young princes. Through the Athenian Stranger, a Socrates-like character in *Laws*, Plato (c. 429- 347 BCE) described the dire consequences for the Persian kingdom after Cyrus the Great neglected the management of his household, in particular, the discipline of his sons. While Cyrus was busy soldiering, he left the princes' upbringing to women and eunuchs, whose overindulgence and lack of discipline ruined their training (διεφθαρμένην δὲ παιδείαν) (695B). When Cyrus died and his spoiled, undisciplined sons (τρυφῆς μεστοὶ καὶ ἀνεπιπληξίας) took over, one of them killed the other, and then, "mad with drink and debauchery" (μαϊνόμενος ὑπὸ μέθης τε καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας), he lost the kingdom to the Medes (695B [Bury, LCL]). Plato blamed the princes' debauched lifestyle, filicide/ regicide, and squandering of the kingdom on their over-indulgent upbringing by women and eunuchs. Without proper training and discipline, the princes had neither self-control nor control over the Persian kingdom.<sup>172</sup>

The connection between eunuchs and women appears in other ways. Two authors attributed the origin of eunuch-making to a foreign queen. According to historian Hellanicus of Lesbos (c. 480 – 395 BCE), Queen Atossa was the first to institute the practice of using eunuchs. Hellanicus explained that the queen had been raised as a man by her father, Cyrus the Great. When she ascended to the throne, she disguised her feminine notions (κρυβοῦσαν δὲ τὴν τῶν γυναικῶν ἐπίνοιαν) and became the first to wear a Persian crown (τιάρα), trousers (ἀναξυρίδας),

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<sup>172</sup> Dio Chrysostom also linked the rearing of Persian boys by eunuchs and women to disastrous outcomes. Because Persian boys were raised by women and older eunuchs instead of spending time naked in the gymnasia and wrestling schools with their peers, some of them became confused and had sex with their own mothers (*Or.* 21.5).

and institute the service (ὑπουργία) of eunuchs (FGH 4 F 1a 178a). Atossa ruled many nations and was most warlike (πολεμικωτάτη) and most courageous (ἀνδρειοτάτη) in all of her deeds. Creating eunuchs apparently makes Queen Atossa more masculine. Almost a millennia later, Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330 – 395 CE) attributed eunuch-making to Queen Semiramis. He complained about people who brought a retinue of slaves to accompany them:

finally, the throng of eunuchs (*spado*), beginning with the old men and ending with the boys, sallow and disfigured by the distorted form of their members; so that, wherever anyone goes, beholding the troops of mutilated (*mutilus*) men, he would curse the memory of that Queen Samiramis of old, who was the first of all to castrate (*castro*) young males, thus doing violence, as it were, to Nature and wresting her from her intended course, since she at the very beginning of life, through the primitive founts of the seed, by a kind of secret law, shows the ways to propagate posterity. (14.17 [Rolfe LCL])

Marcellinus blamed the existence of eunuchs on women.

Fascinated by eunuchs' effeminacy, philosophers and medical writers shared their observations and explanations. A text attributed to Aristotle posed and answered questions about eunuchs, such as “Why do eunuchs have wounds and sores on their legs? Is it because women also have them, and eunuchs are womanlike (γυναικικός)?” ([*Pr.*] 10.42, 895a31-36 [Mayhew]) In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle averred that castration caused males to change into a female state (4.1, 766a26-31). Almost five centuries later, physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia explained in *On the Causes and Symptoms of Chronic Disease* that the loss of vital semen makes eunuchs “womanish” (γυναικώδης): they become shriveled (ρικνόομαι), weak, shrill-voiced (ὀξύφωνος), hairless, and beardless (ἀγένειος) (1.5).

In early rabbinic writings, the issue of eunuchs' gender was implicit and received little attention compared to halakhic matters for eunuchs, that is, the *saris adam* (‘eunuch of man’) and the *saris hammah* (‘eunuch of the sun’), two categories of the tannaitic rabbis. Their concerns about gender do appear in discussions of the *saris hammah*, who shared certain characteristics with women. For halakhic purposes, the *saris hammah* was considered male: saying grace after meals, blowing the shofar, reading the megillah, and laying on of hands during a sacrifice. For the first three events, his obligation to fulfill commandments also exempts other people, which is not the case for the *tumtum* (a person with male or female genitalia that are

covered over with skin) and *androgynous* (a person with both male and female genitals), whom the rabbis treated as individuals with indeterminate gender.<sup>173</sup>

However, *t. Yebam.* 10:6 suggests that the rabbis did question the *saris ḥammah*'s male status. The tosefta describes the *saris ḥammah* as a male who has not produced two pubic hairs by age twenty. He has no beard, smooth skin, and some say that he does not produce steam when he bathes on a cold, wet day. Rabbi Eleazar adds that the *saris ḥammah*'s voice is thin and indistinguishable from a woman's. All of these characteristics were associated with women and eunuchs in the Roman world. When the tannaitic rabbis discuss the *saris ḥammah*, they also define him as a separate category, which led to one scholar's conclusion that "[u]ltimately, they treat him as a man, but see her as a woman."<sup>174</sup>

### *Questionable Gender*

Most ancient authors viewed eunuchs as effeminate males. Generally, they were not seen as what we in the twenty-first century might call a third gender. There may be exceptions. Philo referred to Potiphar as "neither male nor female" (οὔτ' ἄρρεν οὔτε θῆλυ) (*Somn.* 2.184). In Lucian's satire *The Eunuch*, philosopher Diocles describes his rival Bagoas as neither man nor woman (οὔτε ἄνδρα οὔτε γυναῖκα); he is hybrid (σύνθετος), composite (Μικτός), monstrous (τερατώδης), and outside human nature (ἔξω τῆς ἀνθρωπείας φύσεως) (6).

Among the Christian writers who ridiculed self-castrated *galli* and the goddess they served, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348 – c. 405 CE) claimed that they castrated themselves to appease the bloodthirsty Mother of the Gods. "Both sexes (*uterque sexus*) are displeasing to her holiness," he wrote, "so [a *gallus*] keeps a middle gender between the two (*medium retentat inter alternum genus*), ceasing to be a man without becoming a woman. The Mother of the Gods has the happiness of getting herself beardless ministers with a well-ground razor!" (*Crowns of Martyrdom* 10.1071-75)

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<sup>173</sup> *t. Ber.* 5:14; *t. Roš Haš.* 2:5; *t. Meg.* 2:7; *t. Menah.* 10:13. The first three texts and the terms *tumtum* and *androgynous* are discussed by Sarra L. Lev, "They Treat Him as a Man and See Him as a Woman: the Tannaitic Understanding of the Congenital Eunuch," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (2010): 219.

<sup>174</sup> Lev, "Congenital Eunuch," 243. I am indebted in this dissertation to Sarra Lev's meticulous research on genital injury and eunuchs in biblical and tannaitic texts.

## *Sexuality*

Eunuchs' sexuality troubled ancient authors. Were they hypersexual, as many claimed, or hyposexual? Sexually frustrated? Frigid? We see all of these perspectives in the extant literature.

### *Voracious*

Eunuchs were stereotyped for their purported sexual depravity and excessive lust. In the TLG's earliest reference to a eunuch, late sixth century BCE Greek iambic poet Hipponax of Ephesus compared another iambic poet to a lascivious eunuch: "For one of them, dining at his ease and lavishly every day on tuna and savoury sauce like a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) from Lampsacus [an ancient Greek city in northwestern Anatolia], ate up his inheritance; as a result he has to dig a rocky hillside, munching on cheap figs and coarse barley bread, fodder for slaves" (frag. Ath 7.304b [Gerber, LCL])<sup>175</sup> The reference to tuna and sauce was a sexual metaphor for cunnilingus: every day a eunuch enjoyed dining on tuna—a woman's (external) genitalia—and sauce (μυσσωτός; a mixture of cheese, honey, and garlic)—a woman's vaginal secretion. Figs (σῦκα), another reference to female genitalia, and barley bread (κρίθινον κόλλικα), female bottoms, were a cheap substitute.<sup>176</sup> Martial and satirist Juvenal (fl. 110 – 130<sup>177</sup>) both wrote ribald verses about eunuchs' sexual exploits. In *The Orator's Education*, Quintilian used the saying "You are more lustful than any eunuch" (*libidiosior es quam ullus spado*) to illustrate one type of contrary (*contrarium*) in argumentation (6.3.64).

### *Frustrated*

According to others, eunuchs could not have sexual relations but had pent-up desire. Aristotle or someone writing in his name called eunuchs "insatiable, like women" (ἄπληστοι,

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<sup>175</sup> Hipponax's comment was recorded in the late second or early third century CE by Athenaeus of Naucratis, who cites second century BCE Alexandrian scholar Lysanias as his source.

<sup>176</sup> Carl A. Shaw, "Genitalia of the Sea: Seafood and Sexuality in Greek Comedy," *Mnemosyne* 67, no. 4 (2014): 569, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568525X-12341278>. Greek writers considered tuna an aphrodisiac. The rival poet-eunuch "dined" so often, he wasted all his money on his depraved sexual proclivities. On figs and bread, see Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, 2 ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 117-18, 202. Lexicons obscure Hipponax's reference to female genitalia. In the chorus of Aristophanes' *Peace*, for example—"The bridegroom's fig is great and thick; the bride's very soft and tender" (line 1350)—the LSJ lists "*pudenda muliebria*" under III for σῦκον (fig), offering no explanation in English but citing the passage in Aristophanes. *Pudenda muliebria* usually refers to female genitalia.

<sup>177</sup> Josiah Osgood, "Introduction: Persius and Juvenal as Satiric Successors," in *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal*, ed. Susanna Braund and Josiah Osgood (Somerset, GB: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 1.

ὥσπερ αἱ γυναῖκες); however, they did not, and indeed could not, have penetrative sex because the passages to the penis were blocked off, which caused a backup of semen in the anus. This backup also meant that eunuchs preferred to assume a passive (πάσχω) position in sexual relations ([Pr.] 879b).

Roman playwright Terence (d. c. 159 BCE) offers another example in his play *The Eunuch*. A young Athenian soldier pretends to be a recently purchased eunuch to gain access to the private quarters of a beautiful girl and rape her. Upon learning of the rape, the female slave in charge of the girl is outraged by the eunuch's crime. The young man responsible for the eunuch accuses her of being drunk and crazy: "How could a eunuch do it?" he asks. She insists that it occurred, then tells another enslaved woman: "I'd heard that they were great lovers of women, for heaven's sake, but couldn't do it (*nil potesse*). Oh dear, the thought never even occurred to me. Otherwise I would have shut him in somewhere and never put him in charge of the girl" (655-665 [Barsby, LCL]).

A third example is found in Dio Chrysostom's *Fourth Discourse on Kingship*. The philosopher Diogenes compares sophists to licentious (ακόλαστος) eunuchs. Puzzled, Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BCE) asks Diogenes why:

"Because," came the reply, "the most wanton eunuchs, protesting their virility (τῶν εὐνούχων φασὶν οἱ ἀσελγέστατοι ἄνδρες εἶναι ἄνδρες εἶναι) and their passion (ἐράω) for women, lie with them and annoy them, and yet nothing comes of it, not even if they stay with them night and day. So too in the schools of the sophists you will find many growing old in their ignorance, wandering about in their discussions far more helplessly than Homer says Odysseus ever did upon the deep, and any one of them might sooner find his way to Hades as that hero did than become a good man by talking and listening." (*Or.* 4.36 [Cohoon, LCL])

### *Undersexed*

Other writers assumed that eunuchs experienced no sexual desire. For example, one of the Hippocratic authors claimed that most Scythian men became like eunuchs (εὐνουχίας) because they spent too much time riding horses, then attempted to cure the problem by cutting a vein behind the ear:

After this treatment, when the Scythians approach a woman but cannot have intercourse (ἀφίκωνται παρὰ γυναῖκας καὶ μὴ οἷοί τ' ἔωσι χρῆσθαι σφισιν), at first they take no

notice and think no more about it. But when two, three or even more attempts are attended with no better success, thinking that they have sinned against Heaven they attribute thereto the cause, and put on women's clothes, holding that they have lost their manhood (ἀνανδρία). (*Aer.* 22.20-30 [Jones, LCL])

The author added that by wearing trousers all the time and being on horseback, the Scythians did not masturbate (μήτε χειρὶ ἄπτεισθαι τοῦ αἰδοίου). That, combined with cold and fatigue, made them forget about desire (ἴμερος) for intercourse (μεῖξις) (22.64-70).

The elder Pliny (23/24 – 79 CE) heard from some magi that eunuchs' urine could be used as an antaphrodisiac (*HN* 24.42.72). Similarly, the third-century historian Phylarchus claimed that there was a white root from India that quelled men's desire when it was cut up, made into a paste with water, and applied to men's feet, a euphemism for genitals. Men whose "feet" were covered forgot about sex (συνουσία) and became like eunuchs (FGH 81 F 2a 35a).

Physician Galen wrote at length about testicles and the consequences of castration. He argued that the removal of testicles resulted in the loss of strength, body heat, hair, and, contra Aristotle, sexual desire:

Therefore [the testicles] are a source of strength for animals (ζῷον), and they also pour forth a large amount of heat to the whole body, and for that reason those who have lost them are without hair not only on their chins but over all their body; they have small veins, as was said, like women, and they have no sexual desire (Ἀφροδίσια), as though they were something other than an animal. Thus the testicles (ὄρχεις) surpass even the heart itself in this, that besides providing heat and strength to animals they also lead the way to the perpetuation of the race. So the philosophers and physicians before me, overlooking these matters of such magnitude, quarrel about small and trivial things, inquiring whether the testicles contribute anything to the production of semen. (*On Semen* 1.15.41-43 [De Lacy])<sup>178</sup>

The late second-century CE Pyrrhonist<sup>179</sup> skeptic Sextus Empiricus used eunuchs to make a rhetorical point in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: because a eunuch did not experience sexual desire,

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<sup>178</sup> Galen also referred to the ovaries as testicles (ὄρχεις). Sex could be dangerous when people overindulged. Whenever the semen in the testicles was emptied, the testicles drew seminal fluid from other veins. If a person had sex immoderately, the testicles pulled seminal fluid from veins all over the body along with vital pneuma. The loss of these fluids (i.e., through ejaculation) caused weakness. Some even died from excess of pleasure (ἡδονή). *On Semen* 1.16.30-32

<sup>179</sup> There were two dominant streams of Skeptic philosophy in antiquity: Pyrrhonism and Academic. Although Pyrrho of Elis (360 – 270 BCE) was the founder of the former, the extant writings of Sextus Empiricus form the



no one would describe him as sexually self-controlled (ἐγκρατής πρὸς ἀφροδίσια) because there was no sexual desire to rise above (3.275). As we will see in subsequent chapters, one way patristic writers differentiated metaphorical self-made eunuchs (i.e., ascetics) from involuntary eunuchs (i.e., congenital and enslaved) was the ability of the former to experience and resist sexual desire.

### *Ethnicity*

Authors also commented on, and stereotyped, eunuchs' foreignness. This is particularly true for enslaved eunuchs and *galli*. Roman apologist Dionysius of Halicarnassus (c. 60 – 7 BCE) claimed that even when Romans adopted a foreign religious tradition, they never practiced its undesirable elements. The public rites of the Mother proved his point: while Roman leaders perform the sacrifices and oversee the games, only Phrygians participate in her public processions:

But by a law and decree of the senate, no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a parti-coloured robe (ποικίλην ἐνδεδυκῶς στολήν), begging alms or escorted by flute-players, or worships the god with the Phrygian ceremonies. So cautious are they about admitting any foreign religious customs (ἐπιχώρια ἔθη περὶ θεῶν) and so great is their aversion to all pompous display that is wanting in decorum. (*Roman Antiquities* 2.19 [Cary, LCL])<sup>180</sup>

Such behaviors were, in Dionysius's and other elite Romans' view, ostentatious and utterly un-Roman.

Sometimes an author made a generic reference to eunuchs' foreignness. Tertullian, for example, mentioned "foreign eunuchs" (*alienus spado*) (*Mon.* 1.1). Others noted the country of origin when introducing a eunuch. Physician Ctesias of Cnidus, a doctor who served in

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basis of what scholars know about Pyrrhonism. Diego Machuca, "Pyrrhonism," in *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2019). Pyrrhonians argued that epistemology was uncertain because sense data was unreliable. As there was no reliable way to judge sensory data, they encouraged following appearances (*phainomena*) and suspending judgment. They sought to avoid dogmatic philosophical beliefs (e.g., Stoicism). John O'Brien, "Pyrrhonism," in *The Cambridge History of French Thought*, ed. Michael Moriarty and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>180</sup> *Galli* were not always mocked for their perceived foreignness. Historians Polybius and Livy both wrote about *galli* who interceded as diplomats to prevent troops from attacking their city. Polybius did mention two *galli*'s pectoral decorations (προσηθίδιος) and Livy referred to "frenzied *galli*" (*fanatici Galli*) in traditional dress (*sollemni habitu*), yet neither author derided them. Polybius *The Histories* 21.7; Livy *History of Rome* 37.9.9.

Artoxerxes II's (r. c. 405 – 359 BCE) court, called Artoxares a Paphlagonian<sup>181</sup> eunuch (FGH 688 F 3c 14). Greek scholar Didymus (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) referred to Aristotle's father-in-law Hermias as a Bithynian eunuch slave (FGH 291 F 2b). Roman writer Claudius Aelianus's (161/77 – 230/8 CE) Bagoas was an Egyptian eunuch (VH 6.8). Some eunuchs wanted to be remembered by the land of their birth and/or upbringing. A late third-century CE Cappadocian funerary inscription reads "My native country was Armenia; the Cappadocian land brought me up. Euphrates (Εὐφράτης) the Eunuch (εὐνοῦχος), loved by all mortals. Be merry (εὐφρήνου), traveller!<sup>182</sup> As a eunuch with no forename or family name listed on his epitaph, Euphrates was probably enslaved or manumitted.<sup>183</sup>

These locations—Paphlagonia, Bithynia, Egypt, Armenia, and Cappadocia—were all part of the east for Roman writers—that is, any location east of Roman Italy—and hence, suspect. As Benjamin Isaac has demonstrated, even as the Empire grew territorially by aggressive conquest, Romans were anxious about imperial decline. Authors revealed fears, ambivalence, and insecurities about the people they did or did not subjugate.<sup>184</sup>

A major preoccupation was loss of masculinity. I noted that at least two authors attributed eunuch-making to foreign queens. Often, the feminization of eunuchs was linked with their foreignness. For example, in the late first century BCE or early first century CE<sup>185</sup>, novelist Chariton of Aphrodisias drew a sharp contrast between the Persian King Artaxerxes II's (r. 405/4 – 359/8 BCE) most trusted (πιστότατος) eunuch Artaxates and the beautiful young woman in

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<sup>181</sup> Paphlagonia was a region in north central Anatolia that bordered the Black Sea.

<sup>182</sup> Translation by Manfred Horstmanshoff, "Who Is the True Eunuch? Medical and Religious Ideas about Eunuchs and Castration in the Works of Clement of Alexandria" (paper presented at the From Athens to Jerusalem: Medicine in Hellenized Jewish Lore and in Early Christian Literature: Papers of the Symposium in Jerusalem, 9–11 September 1996, Jerusalem, IL), 104. The original discussion of this inscription is found in Thomas Drew-Bear, who dates the monument to the end of the High Empire (i.e., the Principate: 27 BCE – 284 CE) in Thomas Drew-Bear, "Un eunuque arménien en Cappadoce," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 4 (1984): 140.

<sup>183</sup> Euphrates's monument was made of marble. Drew-Bear, "Un eunuque arménien," 140–41. Sometimes the gravestone or monument was ordered before death (hence, length of life was not inscribed), so manumission was theoretically possible after the fact. In any case, Euphrates—or someone on his behalf—paid well; marble gravestones were out of reach for most. For funerary monuments and gravestones, marble was the most expensive, then limestone, then brick or tufa. Lawrence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 105, 07. It is also conceivable that Euphrates was a *gallus*, though that seems less likely: why draw attention to his status as a eunuch but not as a *gallus*?

<sup>184</sup> Benjamin H. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 304, 23, 509–10. See also Chapter 1: "Superior and Inferior Peoples," for numerous examples.

<sup>185</sup> On the challenge of dating, see Goold's introduction in Chariton, *Callirhoe*. trans. G.P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 481 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1–3.

Artaxates's care. Artaxates had just convinced the king that it would be fine for him to have sleep with Callirhoe since she was not yet (to their knowledge) married:

The king, now in high hopes, rode back to the palace as happy as if he had captured the finest (κάλλιστος) game. Artaxates, too, rejoiced in the thought that he had rendered him a true service and that from then on he would hold the reins at court, seeing that they would both be grateful to him, especially Callirhoe. As a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος), slave (δοῦλος<sup>186</sup>), and oriental ([sic] βάρβαρος), he reckoned the task [to convince Callirhoe to sleep with the king] would be easy, having no idea of the pride (φρόνημα) and nobility (ευγενής) of a Greek and especially of the chaste (σώφρων) and faithful (φίλανδρος) Callirhoe. (*Callirhoe* 6.4.10 [Goold, LCL])

Chariton refers to Artaxates as a βάρβαρος, that is, a foreigner. He serves a foreign king who does not demonstrate honorable behavior. By contrast, Callirhoe represents ideal femininity, which for Chariton meant Greek, self-controlled, and noble.

#### Castration: Legal Aspects

As non-procreative, effeminate, castrated males who were oversexed or undersexed and possibly foreign, eunuchs were suspect in the Roman Empire (27 BCE – 476 CE). Several emperors banned castration, even as they used eunuchs as lovers (or sex slaves) and bodyguards, among other roles. Domitian, Nerva, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius (r. 138 – 161 CE) banned castration by means of a rescript, an edict, or, in Hadrian's case, both. A rescript (*rescriptum*) represented an imperial response to a formal petition about a legal or administrative problem submitted by an individual or a group with scribal assistance. Emperors after Augustus also enacted general legislation by edict. An imperial edict remained in effect unless a later emperor amended it in some way.<sup>187</sup>

Emperors tended to intensify earlier castration bans and penalties. For this reason, and because there are no records of imperial revocations of any castration ban, we may infer that

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<sup>186</sup> Chariton explicitly refers to Artaxates's slave status twice: "Indeed every slave, when he speaks to anyone about his master, has to give prominence to himself as well, in the hope of profiting personally from the conversation" (6.5.5 [Goold, LCL]).

<sup>187</sup> Although emperors responded to some petitions through a secretary, across the Empire, local and provincial officials or their proxies responded to most. In theory, rescripts addressed specific cases, but in practice, they often became general law. Jill Harries, "Law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2010). and Honoré, *Ulpian: Pioneer of Human Rights*, 4.

castration within the Roman Empire was proscribed from Domitian's ban circa 85 CE through the 533 CE publication of *The Digest*, one of a three-part compendium of Roman legislation ordered by Byzantine Emperor Justinian I. *The Digest*, which includes juristic commentary and details about imperial rulings on castration, represented an authoritative distillation of Roman legal history that included only the most salient legislation and commentary. According to Justinian, the sixteen legal scholars who compiled *The Digest* perused almost two thousand authoritative volumes of Roman legal history to create the abridgement that became *The Digest*.<sup>188</sup> That *The Digest* preserved various rulings about castration indicates the perceived importance of this legislation.

Although Domitian promulgated the first castration ban in 85 or 86 while he was censor (85 – 91 CE<sup>189</sup>), *The Digest* recorded almost nothing about any of his legislation, probably because the Senate promptly condemned him after his assassination.<sup>190</sup> However, numerous writers mentioned Domitian's ban, including two well-known poets who wrote while he was alive: Statius (c. 45/50 – c. 95/96 CE) and Martial. In 93 CE, Earinus, a young eunuch slave adored and later manumitted by Domitian, personally commissioned a poem from Statius.<sup>191</sup> The poet cleverly attributed Earinus's castration to the gods, prior to Domitian's ban:

... Not yet had the leader's noble clemency (*pulchra ducis clementia*) begun to keep male children intact from birth (*ortu intactos servare mares*). Now 'tis forbidden to mollify sex (*frangere sexum*) and change manhood (*hominem mutare nefas*); rejoicing Nature sees only those she created. No more under an evil law (*lege sinistra*) do slave mothers fear to bear the burden of sons (*ferre timent famulae natorum pondera matres*).

You too, had you been born later, would now be a young man, with shaded cheeks and limbs full-grown, stronger.... (*Silvae* 3.73-79 [Shackleton Bailey and Parrott, LCL])

In two verses (of the Latin original), Statius celebrated Domitian's ban in at least five ways: by

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<sup>188</sup> The other two parts include the *Code*, twelve books of imperial rescripts, and the *Institutes*, an elementary textbook. Another work, the *Novellae*, recorded Justinian's own legislation. Alan Watson, *The Digest of Justinian*, Revised ed., vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), preface.

<sup>189</sup> Domitian became Censor in 85 CE. Ian Carradice, *Coinage and Finances in the Reign of Domitian, AD 81-96*, British Archaeological Reports, (Oxford, GB: Oxford Press, 1983), 28.

<sup>190</sup> For dating the ban, see Charles Leslie Murison, "Cassius Dio on Nervan Legislation (68.2. 4): Nieces and Eunuchs," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, no. H. 3 (2004): 351.

<sup>191</sup> On dating the *Silvae*, see Statius, *Silvae*. trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey and Christopher A. Parrott, Loeb Classical Library 206 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), xiii. Statius described Domitian's ban as one of his just laws (*iustis legibus*: 4.3.13).

characterizing it as an act of Domitian's "noble clemency," by appealing to his auditors' belief that "manhood" should not be altered, by personifying nature as rejoicing, by referring to an "evil law," and by describing the fear of enslaved mothers that their newborn sons would be castrated. In the same book of poems, Statius referred obliquely to Domitian's ban: "as Censor he forbids strong sex to perish and stops grown males from fearing the punishment of fair form" (4.11-15 [Shackleton Bailey and Parrott, LCL]).<sup>192</sup>

Martial referred to Domitian's ban indirectly and in his characteristic bawdy manner. "Hyllus my boy, you fuck the wife of an armed tribune, fearing nothing worse than a boyish punishment [i.e., anal rape] (*supplicium tantum dum puerile times*). Alas and alack, you'll be castrated as you sport (*dum ludis, castrabere*). Now you'll say to me: 'That's not allowed (*non licet hoc*).' Well, how about what you're up to, Hyllus? Is that allowed?" (*Spect.* 2.60 [Shackleton Bailey, LCL]) Published circa 86 in Martial's second book, this epigram is the earliest reference to Domitian's ban.<sup>193</sup> In another epigram, Martial quipped that Domitian prohibited castration and adultery, where formerly even a eunuch was an adulterer (6.2).

Accounts about Domitian that post-date him should be read with caution; however, even his critics approved of his castration ban.<sup>194</sup> Roman historian Suetonius (c. 70 – c. 130 CE) stated that Domitian did well to prohibit the castration (*castro*) of males and keep down the price of eunuchs (*spado*) who remained with slave dealers (*Dom.* 7.1).<sup>195</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, who categorized Domitian among the bad emperors, nonetheless praised him for penalizing castration within imperial borders because it meant fewer eunuchs:

Through disgust with these and their kind, I take pleasure in praising Domitian of old, for although, unlike his father and his brother, he drenched the memory of his name with

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<sup>192</sup> His mention of adult males (*adultos*) is odd, particularly in light of the poem for Earinus. The Loeb translators struggled to account for it: "On the face of it, *adultos* should refer to emasculation after puberty, but this could only have been exceptional. Statius must have been thinking of boys before puberty as opposed to infants, but his wording seems indefensible. The edict presumably banned such emasculation at any age" Statius, *Silvae*, 241n5.

<sup>193</sup> C. Henriksen, "Earinus: An Imperial Eunuch in the Light of the Poems of Martial and Statius," *Mnemosyne* L, no. 3 (1997): 284, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568525972609681>.

<sup>194</sup> The modern term *damnatio memoriae* refers to the condemnation of an emperor's memory which often entailed destruction of imperial image, statues, and inscriptions and confiscation of his property. Pliny the Younger described the gleeful public destruction and melting of Domitian's golden images (*Pan.* 52; cited by Troels Myrup Kristensen, "Iconoclasm," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Sculpture*, ed. Elise A. Friedland, Melanie Grunow Sobocinski, and Elaine K. Gazda (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015). DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199921829.013.0043

<sup>195</sup> Other references to Domitian's castration ban include Philostr. *VA* 6.42, Tac. *Ann.* 12.66, and Tac. *Hist.* 2.71.

indelible detestation, yet he won distinction by a most highly approved law (*inclaruit lege*), by which he had under heavy penalties forbidden anyone within the bounds of the Roman jurisdiction to geld (*castro*) a boy; for if this had not happened, who could endure the swarms of those whose small number is with difficulty tolerated (*quis eorum ferret examina, quorum raritas difficile toleratur*)? (18.4.5 [Rolfe, LCL])<sup>196</sup>

There are no records about penalties under Domitian, and his reasoning for instituting the ban remains unclear. Consul and historian Cassius Dio (c. 164 – c. 229 CE) claimed that he wanted to insult the memory of his predecessor Titus, who also adored eunuchs (67.2.3).

The Senate declared Nerva emperor the same day Domitian died. Dio stated that Nerva made laws “prohibiting the castration of any man, and the marrying by any man of his own niece” (68.2.4 [Cary, LCL]). During Nerva’s brief reign, the Senate also legislated against castration. According to *The Digest*, “[i]t is provided by a *senatus consultum* given in the consulship of Neratius Priscus and Annius Verus [May – June 97] that whoever hands his slave over for castration (*servum castrandum tradiderit*) is fined half his property” (*dimidia bonorum mulatur*) (48.8.6 [Watson]).<sup>197</sup>

Hadrian strengthened the penalties, which were outlined in a rescript with his signature. His rescript included an edict by which he mandated the loss of property for those found guilty of making eunuchs and, for slaves and doctors who performed castrations as well as voluntary castrates, execution. Ulpian detailed Hadrian’s rescript:

It is laid down, in order to end the practice of making eunuchs (*spadones fecerint*), that those who are found guilty of this crime (*crimine arguerentur*) are to be liable to the penalty of the *lex Cornelia*, and their goods must deservedly be forfeit to my imperial treasury. Slaves, however, who castrate others are to be punished with the extreme penalty (*ultimo supplicio*). If those who are liable on this charge fail to appear in court, sentence is to be pronounced in their absence as if they were liable under the *lex Cornelia*. It is certain that if those who have suffered this outrage (*hanc iniuriam*) announce the fact, the provincial governor must give those who have lost their manhood (*virilitatem amiserunt*) a hearing; for no one should castrate another, freeman or slave, willing or unwilling (*liberum servumve invitum sinentemve*), nor should anyone

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<sup>196</sup> Ammianus’s mention of the ban occurs in the larger context of his condemnation of Eusebius, Emperor Constantius II’s (r. 337-361) head chamberlain (*praepositus cubiculi*), and other eunuchs and palace chamberlains.

<sup>197</sup> All subsequent translations of the *The Digest* are Alan Watson’s. A *senatus consultum* represented a decision by the Roman Senate. During the early principate, a *senatus consultum* held legislative force, but over time it became obsolete with the rising importance of the emperor’s role and legislation. Watson, *The Digest of Justinian*, 1, glossary.

voluntarily offer himself for castration (*se sponte castrandum*). Should anyone act in defiance of my edict, the doctor performing the operation shall suffer a capital penalty, as shall anyone who voluntarily offered himself for surgery (*se sponte excidendum praebuit*). (DIG. 48.8.4)

The original petition that prompted Hadrian's rescript and edict no longer exists. According to Paulus (fl. early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), another prominent jurist whose writings contributed to *The Digest*, Hadrian clarified to Ninnius Hasta, a senator and governor, that "those too who crush the testicles of others (*thlibias facio*) are in the same position as those who castrate (*castro*) them" (DIG. 48.8.5).<sup>198</sup>

Jurist Modestinus (fl. 200 – 250 CE) recorded a ruling of Hadrian's successor Antoninus Pius. Pius extended Hadrian's ban to encompass the practice of circumcision by non-Jews: "By a rescript of the deified Pius it is allowed only to Jews to circumcise (*circumcido*) their own sons; a person not of that religion who does so suffers the penalty (*poena*) of one carrying out a castration" (*castro*) (DIG. 48.8.11). Paulus recorded another law about circumcision with penalties similar to those in Hadrian's earlier rescript about castration: "Roman citizens, who permit themselves or their slaves to be circumcised (*circumcido*) in accordance with Jewish custom, are exiled permanently to an island and their property confiscated; the doctors suffer capital punishment. If Jews shall circumcise purchased slaves of another nation, they shall be banished or suffer capital punishment" (*Sententiae* 5.22.3-4 [Abusch]).<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Many scholars interpret Hadrian's legislation with respect to the Second Jewish Revolt (132-135) and assume that Hadrian banned circumcision. Some also claim that Hadrian's ban instigated the Revolt. Peter Schäfer disputes this claim in his discussion of the Revolt's causes "Die Ursachen: Das Verbot der Beschneidung" in Peter Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand: Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom*, vol. 1, Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum, (Tübingen, DE: Mohr, 1981), 38-50. No evidence for Hadrian's original ban exists. Ra'anan Abusch argues convincingly that Hadrian did not ban circumcision, and no legislation about circumcision existed until Antoninus Pius introduced it. Further, the ban continues with respect to the right of a slave not to be thrown to beasts before seeing a judge. Abusch argues that Hadrian's ban is part of a broader enforcement of (slightly) better treatment of slaves. Ra'anan Abusch, "Negotiating Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kokhba Revolt," in *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

<sup>199</sup> CPL 1800. Ra'anan Absuch has adapted the translation in *Roman Imperial Legislation on the Jews*, ed. and trans. Amnon Linder (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 117-20; Abusch, "Genital Mutilation," 90. Abusch points out that the ban respects the existing right of Jews to circumcise their sons. Some scholars interpret Pius's rescript as a mitigation of Hadrian's (posited) ban. See, e.g., William Horbury, *Jewish War under Trajan and Hadrian* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 313n115.

## Misrepresentations of Ancient Jewish Perspectives

In conducting research for this dissertation, I repeatedly encountered two misrepresentations of ancient Jewish perspectives on eunuchs that I will challenge, not only because they present a narrow, historically inaccurate depiction of eunuchs in biblical literature and early Jewish communities, but because they present a distorted view of Judaism and ancient Jews as intolerant, inflexible, and exclusivistic.

### Abhorrence and Exclusion of Eunuchs

Many scholars assert that ancient Jews despised and excluded eunuchs. “Jewish people were horrified by castration,” claims Craig Keener.<sup>200</sup> According to Ben Witherington, “most rabbis found castrated men abhorrent.”<sup>201</sup> J. David Hester describes the eunuch as “an outcast from the community of believers” and claims that “Jewish moral tradition condemned eunichism as an act offensive to nature.”<sup>202</sup> Gary Brower opines: “Jewish writers seem to agree that castration physically removed both animals and men from the circle of their biological equals.”<sup>203</sup>

Scholars who make claims about Jewish horror and exclusion of eunuchs often cite Deut 23:1 (23:2 MT, LXX). MT, LXX, and NRSV translations of the verse follow:

MT: לֹא יָבֹא פְּצוּעֵ-דָבָר וְכָרוֹת שְׂפָפָה בְּקִהְל יְהוָה: ס

LXX: οὐκ εἰσελεύσεται θλαδίας καὶ ἀποκεκομμένος εἰς ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου

NRSV: No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

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<sup>200</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 471. Louis Countryman states that “[t]he eunuch and the bastard, who were truly individuals, incapable of being related to a family, were permanently excluded from the assembly of Israel (Deut 23:1-2); they had no place in a society where the family was the fundamental unit.” Louis William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988), 146-47. Similarly, Raymond F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament*, Good News Studies, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 119.

<sup>201</sup> Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: a Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 30.

<sup>202</sup> Hester, "Postgender Jesus," 37 and 29, “as suggested by the Deuteronomic author”. By “Jewish moral tradition,” Hester appears to mean Philo, Josephus, and possibly Deut 23:1 and Lev 18:22; 20:13; 21:20. He does not consider early rabbinic texts.

<sup>203</sup> Gary Robert Brower, "Ambivalent Bodies: Making Christian Eunuchs" (PhD diss, Duke University, 1996), 102.



From this verse, some infer that Jews did not allow eunuchs into the covenant<sup>204</sup> or the Jewish community.<sup>205</sup> According to Donald Hagner, the verse forbids the presence of a eunuch among the chosen people.<sup>206</sup> Keener infers that if the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) were a eunuch “in the literal sense, this would have made his full conversion to Judaism impossible (Deut. 23:1).”<sup>207</sup>

The evidence does not support claims of a blanket prohibition on or general Jewish abhorrence of eunuchs. Because εὐνοῦχος does not appear in LXX Deut 23:2—nor does קרית appear in the MT—it is curious that scholars continue to cite this verse, and few others (i.e., Isa 56:3-5).<sup>208</sup> The term that appears in the LXX, θλαδίας, does refer to a eunuch, but to one with crushed testicles.

Both MT terms for males with injured genitals—*petsu’ a daka’* and *kerut shofkhah*—are hapax legomena. The JPS Tanakh translates קרית־דָּכָא as “one whose testes are crushed.”<sup>209</sup> JPS translates קרית־שֶׁפְּכָה, as “[one whose] member is cut off.” Early rabbinic writers understood the terms as instances of genital damage and rarely mentioned eunuchs. For the author of *T. Yebam.* 10:3, *petsu’ a daka’* referred to “anyone whose testicles were injured—that they were crushed or pierced or missing.”<sup>210</sup> The author of *Sifre to Deuteronomy* defined the crushing wound as one that damages one or both testicles, even partially. This injury, unlike the permanent damage experienced by the *kerut shofkhah* as a severed tube, could regenerate.<sup>211</sup> *T. Yebam.* 10:4 described the *kerut shofkhah* as “anyone whose penis is cut off from the corona forward.”<sup>212</sup>

Tannaitic rabbis interpreted both terms in halakhic contexts. For example, they discussed whether a woman whose husband experienced an injury to his testicle when he fell and died,

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<sup>204</sup> Keener, *Commentary on Matthew*, 471.

<sup>205</sup> Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185. Nolland, *Matthew*, 778-79. Rick Talbott claims that the “Law of Moses excluded eunuchs from the covenant with Israel (Deut 23:1, Lev 21:20, 22:24-25), but Isaiah 56:3-5 praises faithful eunuchs.” Talbott, “Kyriarchy,” 41. For William Heth, they were “excluded from the congregation of Israel.” Heth, “Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying',” 40.

<sup>206</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 51.

<sup>207</sup> Craig Keener, “Biblical Studies: The Aftermath of the Ethiopian Eunuch,” *The A.M.E. Church Review* 118, no. 385 (2002): 112.

<sup>208</sup> Sarra Leah Lev, “Genital Trouble: On the Innovations of Tannaitic Thought regarding Damaged Genitals and Eunuchs” (PhD diss, New York University, 2004), 93.

<sup>209</sup> *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2000).

<sup>210</sup> Translation by Lev, “Genital Trouble,” 558.

<sup>211</sup> Pisqa’ 247 on Deut 23:2. *Sifre Devarim*. trans. Marty Jaffee (2016), <https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/book/sifre-devarim/>.

<sup>212</sup> Lev, “Genital Trouble,” 559, translation by Lev.

after having sex with her, should participate in Levirate marriage, which, in Mishnaic sources, is the expectation that a childless widow will marry her brother-in-law (*yibbum*) or eat *terumah*, the portion or tithe of a harvest dedicated to a priest (e.g., Deut 18:4; *t. Yebam.* 10:3).<sup>213</sup> In the following verse (*t. Yebam.* 10:4), a *kerut shofkhah* with a puncture at the base who spills semen is not kosher, but a man with even a hair's width of corona remaining is.

Early rabbinic writers did not interpret MT Deut 23:2 as a general prohibition on eunuchs or on men with specific genital damage. In fact, the rabbis had much to say about eunuchs who were already part of their communities, as I will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3. One example of a text that differentiates between eunuchs and males with damaged genitals named in MT Deut 23:2, however, may be helpful here. *T. Menah.* 10:13 clarifies that these males were Jews who took part in community rituals: "The laying on of hands [during a sacrifice] is done by priests, Levites, and Israelites, converts and freed slaves, *halalin*, *netinin*, and *mamzerin*, a *seris adam* and a *seris hannah*, a *petsu'a daka'* and a *kerut shofkhah*. It is not done by non-Jews, nor by women nor by slaves nor by minors."<sup>214</sup> In tannaitic texts, a *halal*<sup>215</sup> is a child born from a priest's illicit marriage, a *netin* is a descendant of the Gibeonites, and a *mamzer* is a child born from an illicit relationship.<sup>216</sup> Like the *petsu'a daka'* and *kerut shofkhah*, they were members of Jewish communities with halakhic responsibilities.<sup>217</sup>

One Jewish writer did interpret Deut 23:1 as prohibition on eunuchs from entering the assembly; however, Philo's interpretations were allegorical. In *On Dreams*, Potiphar speaks about himself as a eunuch excluded from immortality (ἄμοιρος ἀθανασίας) and separated by a cord (ἀποσχονίζω) from the holy assembly (ἐκκλησία ἱερός) (27). In other texts, the eunuch is a pleasure-lover who is barren (ἄγονος) of self-control (σωφροσύνη), shame (αἰδώς), self-restraint (εγκράτεια), justice (δικαιοσύνη) and all virtue (ἀπάσης ἀρετῆς) (*Ios.* 26). He cannot enter the assembly because he cannot sow masculine seeds of virtue and produce fruit of wisdom (*Ebr.* 51). Philo's interpretations impressed Clement of Alexandria, who explained eunuchs'

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<sup>213</sup> Dvora E. Weisberg, "Levirate Marriage and Halitzah in the Mishnah," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 1, no. 1 (1998): 40.

<sup>214</sup> Translation by Lev, "Congenital Eunuch," 239.

<sup>215</sup> Lev, "Congenital Eunuch," 239n61.

<sup>216</sup> Simcha Fishbane, *Deviancy in Early Rabbinic Literature: A Collection of Socio-Anthropological Essays*, The Brill Reference Library of Judaism, (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007), 7.

<sup>217</sup> I will discuss the *saris hannah* and *saris adam* in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

proscription from the assembly in very similar terms: they are barren (ἄγρονος) and unfruitful (ἄκαρπος) in behavior and word (*Strom.* 3.15.99.4).

Claims that Jews excluded and despised eunuchs rest in part on a translation of “assembly of the LORD” (קְהֵל־יְהוָה). For example, Walter Brueggemann, who interprets the term as “covenantal community,” argues that covenantal membership was closely connected to sexual generativity and male membership in the covenant community, and that in the post-exilic world, this sectarian community was deeply concerned about issues of exclusion and inclusion.<sup>218</sup> He and other biblical scholars point to continuities between Deut 23 and Deut 22, where a major focus is illicit sexual relations.<sup>219</sup> MT Deut 23:2 and 23:17-18 share thematic concerns with Chapter 22; however, there is no obvious connection between 23:2, where the focus is genital damage and entry into the assembly, and the preceding verses. In Chapter 22, the Deuteronomist discusses sexual impropriety, not generativity, and his driving interest appears to be justice, not covenantal community membership: specifically, justice for a wife falsely accused of premarital sexual misconduct and for her parents (22:13-19), for a husband whose new wife was not a virgin (22:20-21), for a husband or engaged man whose wife or fiancée committed adultery (22:22-24), for a betrothed or single woman who was raped and for her father (22:25-29), and for a father whose son committed incest with the stepmother (22:30). And because there is no mention of any covenant in Deut 23, “covenant community” is not an apt translation of קְהֵל־יְהוָה.

By itself, קְהֵל may be translated “assembly” or “gathering.” “Assembly of the LORD” is more restrictive. It can refer to the people of Israel (e.g., Num 20:4; Jdg 21:5). Elsewhere, though, the term refers to a governing assembly and concerns issues such as citizenship and rights of land ownership and marriage.<sup>220</sup> 1 Chr 28:8 differentiates the “assembly of the LORD” from “all Israel.” In addition, while the *petsu’a daka* and *kerut shofkhah* are the first of several groups that may not enter the assembly of the LORD, the Deuteronomist provides no explanation, in contrast to the entry restriction for Ammonites and Moabites (Deut 23:3-6[4-7]). Several scholars suggest that MT Deut 23:2 may refer to men who have ritually cut themselves

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<sup>218</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 227.

<sup>219</sup> J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, (Leicester, GB: Apollos, 2002), 347; Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 228; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy [Devarim]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 209.

<sup>220</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 210.

for the worship of other gods, but this remains speculative.<sup>221</sup> The Deuteronomist provides no details about why they may not enter or how and when the genital damage occurred (e.g., intentional body modification? accidental? castration for enslavement?).

Most scholars focus almost exclusively on Deut 23:1 and Isa 56:3-5 to the neglect of other biblical eunuchs. Because I will discuss many LXX texts in Chapter 3, I will limit myself here to making two points. First, there is no LXX evidence that eunuchs were cast out, and only two verses might be considered derogatory (Sir 20:4; 30:20). Two passages pronounce God's favor or blessing on faithful eunuchs: Isa 56:3-5 and Wis 3:14. Second, many LXX texts indicate that eunuchs were deeply integrated into the life of Judah and Israel. They were among the highest officials of King Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, Jeconiah, Josiah, and Ahab's retainues.<sup>222</sup> One served as military commander for the Kingdom of Judah (Jer 52:25). Those who threw Jezebel from her window, for example, ultimately served Jehu, the divinely appointed King of Israel, whether wittingly or not (4 Kgs 9:32-33 LXX).<sup>223</sup> Many LXX eunuchs were named, and most worked in royal households.<sup>224</sup> Biblical texts do not reflect a general exclusion and abhorrence of eunuchs. The proximity of eunuchs to the kings of Israel and Judah suggest rather that some were at the very heart of the community.

Two verses about eunuchs in the LXX, both in Sirach, concern sexually frustrated eunuchs. The first occurs with instruction about keeping silent instead of judging in haste and anger (20:1-8). The verse reads "A eunuch's desire to violate a girl—thus is he who makes judgments by force" (20:4; NETS). The author was probably familiar with the trope of lustful eunuchs. The second verse, Sir 30:20, describes a eunuch's inability to consummate sexual relations despite his fervent desire and efforts. The verse reads "Whoever sees with the eyes and groans is like a eunuch who embraces (περιλαμβάνω) a maiden and groans" (NETS). The later Greek recension adds "Thus is he who makes judgments by compulsion," making the verse's connection with 20:4 more explicit.

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<sup>221</sup> McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 5.

<sup>222</sup> 1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6; 23:11; 24:12,15; 25:19,21; Jer 36:2; 48:16 LXX; 1 Sam 8:15

<sup>223</sup> Janet Everhart argues that the eunuchs actively conspired with Jehu to bring about Jezebel's death. While possible, it has little textual support. Janet S. Everhart, "Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>224</sup> Named eunuchs: Gen 37:37; 39:1; Dan 1:3; Est 1:10; 2:3,8,14,21; 4:5; 6:2; 7:9; 2 Kgs 23:11; Jdt 12:11,13; 13:1,3; 14:14). Eunuchs with significant power: e.g., Est 7:9; 2 Kgs 9:32-3 and in high-profile positions: e.g., Dan 1:3; 2 Kgs 25:19; Jer 52:25; Jdt 12:11.

## Insistence on Marriage and Childbearing

A second, related assessment is that ancient Jews were so concerned about procreation, they could not abide eunuchs. Some scholars emphasize the obligatory nature of marriage. For rabbis and other Jews in antiquity, they claim, producing children was mandatory.<sup>225</sup> As one scholar puts it, “[i]n Israel blessings were counted by one’s progeny. It is on this factor that all social and religious prejudice against the eunuch centers. In Israel marriage was a divine ordinance. The unmarried man diminishes the likeness of God (Gen. 1,26-28). Against this the eunuch hopelessly sinned.”<sup>226</sup> Another asserts that eunuchs were “universally despised and ridiculed, esp in Judaism, because they cannot fulfill God’s command to beget children.”<sup>227</sup>

Several scholars compare Jewish exclusion of literal eunuchs with Christian acceptance of metaphorical eunuchs. Accordingly, Jesus presented a new perspective on both marriage and celibacy vis-à-vis other Jews, as the following quote from Craig Blomberg about Mt 19:12 illustrates: “Jesus thus strikingly repudiates the typical Jewish prejudice against celibacy (excluding the Essenes), even while he advocates a stricter faithfulness to one’s spouse than Judaism officially promoted among those already married.”<sup>228</sup> Blomberg’s statement assumes that Judaism in the first century (excluding the Essenes) was a stable, one-dimensional, formal

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<sup>225</sup> As Ben Witherington puts it, “[s]ince most early Jews would have seen eunuchs as people who had been blighted or cursed by God, in view of the creation order mandate to ‘multiply’ (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 4.290-1), it is likely that while Jesus’ teaching on marriage was a shock, his teaching on singleness [i.e., 19:12] would have seemed even more stunning.” Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 364. Earlier, he claimed that “[t]his [the goodness of remaining single for the sake of the kingdom] was a novel teaching since most Jewish sages took the command to be fruitful and multiply as incumbent on all able-bodied Jews” Witherington III, *Matthew*, 359. Similarly, Rudolf Schnackenburg states: “In Judaism matrimony was not only highly esteemed but was regarded as an obligation, for the purpose of begetting children; according to Deut 23:1, castrated men were not to be received into the community” Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185. In his explanation of contemporary Judaism (in the first century), Jerome Kodell asserts that “[t]he Pharisees would have been hostile and critical of celibacy because of the extreme stress on marriage and procreation in Jewish tradition. The Genesis command to ‘increase and multiply’ (1:28) was treated as an absolute divine mandate. Sterility was considered a misfortune, even a disgrace (1 Sam 1:6); and so was virginity.” Jerome Kodell, “The Celibacy Legion in Matthew 19: 12,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (1978): 19; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr, *Matthew: Volume 3: 19-28*, vol. 3 (A&C Black, 1988), 25. Per Dale Allison, Old Testament texts and rabbinic sources proscribed castration and because “celibacy was almost universally frowned upon in Judaism” Allison, “Matt 19:12,” 2.

<sup>226</sup> Trautman, “Eunuch Logion,” 107.

<sup>227</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 501. Luz lists Isa 56:3-5 and Wis 3:14 as exceptions.

<sup>228</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19: 3-12,” *Trinity Journal* 11, no. 2 (1990): 185.

religion that made official pronouncements. Some turn to Isa 56:3-5 to highlight Jewish prejudice against infertile eunuchs and the alleged contrast between Jesus's attitude in Mt 19:12 and Jewish (or OT) attitudes. William Heth asserts that "[t]he eunuch in this passage calls himself 'a dry tree' (v 3), because everyone in Israel would complain that he is not able to contribute offspring to the community of God."<sup>229</sup> Heth also claims that Isa 56:3-5 "simply illustrates the boundless nature of God's love. Even those considered worthless by Israelites will be loved by God and allowed to participate in religious life."<sup>230</sup> He does not provide evidence that eunuchs were considered worthless by Israelites. According to Frederick Bruner, Isa 56:3-5 reaches its fulfillment in Jesus, who spoke of eunuchs with compassion, in contrast to the rigid OT law.<sup>231</sup> Ben Witherington expounds on Jesus' fulfillment of Isa 56:4:

In Jesus' view, those who chose the Dominion and service to it would certainly have an everlasting name even if they had to forego marrying. The cut off were no longer cut off, the marginalized were no longer in the margins, the oppressed were no longer oppressed, and the outcasts were no longer cast out in the ministry of Jesus, for it was a foreshadowing and foretaste of the Dominion that was already coming. Jesus had come to seek and save the least, the last, and the lost and make them the first, the most, the found—yes, even the despised like eunuchs and tax collectors and notorious sinners and Gentiles.<sup>232</sup>

Mt 19:12 can be read in view of the Isaian text, and early Christians certainly did that. My point here is that the sharp juxtaposition of Isa 56:3-5 against Deut 23:1 has been used to support a stereotypical depiction of Old Testament Judaism as harsh and exclusivistic against a merciful, inclusivistic Christianity.

In the lovely Isaian passage, the writer envisions the Lord's "salvation" (יְשׁוּעָה; LXX σωτήριον) and "deliverance" (הַחֲרָטָה; LXX ἔλεος) (56:1).<sup>233</sup> Eunuchs who please God, keep the

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<sup>229</sup> Heth, "Unmarried (Matthew 19:12)," 59n13.

<sup>230</sup> Heth, "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying'," 44.

<sup>231</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2, The Church Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 274.

<sup>232</sup> Witherington III, *Matthew*, 365-66.

<sup>233</sup> For most biblical scholars, Isa 56 marks the beginning of trito Isaiah, composed sometime after 538 BCE, when Cyrus the Great allowed Judahite exiles to return to Jerusalem. The small number of returnees became discouraged as they waited for construction of the new temple. Chapter 56 promises God's salvation and deliverance for all who keep the sabbath, treat others justly, and follow the covenant, including foreigners and eunuchs. The chapter culminates in a vision of the ingathering of dispersed Israelites and many other faithful people at God's house on Zion.

Sabbath, and obey the covenant should not say “I am a dry tree” (56:3). The Lord promises them an “everlasting name (עוֹלָם שֵׁם; LXX ὄνομα αἰώνιος) that shall not be cut off” (כָּרַת; LXX ἐκλείπω) and “a monument and a name (שֵׁם וְדָבָר; LXX τόπος ὀνομαστός) better than sons or daughters” (56:5).<sup>234</sup> These gifts parallel the myrtle tree, a symbol of fertility, described three lines before as a monument and everlasting name for the Lord (55:13). The Greek ἐκλείπω obscures the Hebrew allusion to castration (and to cutting down a tree) with כָּרַת.

The claim that Jews in antiquity insisted on marriage and procreation is overstated and misleading. There is also an assumption that certain rabbinic or LXX texts were embraced and followed by most or all Jews in antiquity. Jews did not agree about everything, and some (literate, male) redactors may have had hortatory and/or other aims that differed significantly from their early auditors'. There existed a diversity of perspectives about marriage, sexuality, and procreation among ancient Jews as writings from Philo, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the rabbis, and Paul attest.<sup>235</sup> Although many scholars recognize the existence of Jewish ascetic groups in their articles and commentaries about Mt 19:12, some nonetheless aver that to marry and procreate was a “solemn duty” or “an absolute divine mandate.”<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> The Hebrew expression שֵׁם וְדָבָר, transliterated Yad Vashem, was chosen as the name for the World Holocaust Remembrance Center on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem, inaugurated in 1953 and tasked to “gather in to the homeland material regarding all those members of the Jewish people who laid down their lives, who fought and rebelled against the Nazi enemy and his collaborators, and to perpetuate their memory and that of the communities, organizations and institutions which were destroyed because they were Jewish.” <https://www.yadvashem.org/about/yad-vashem-law.html>. The expression *yad vashem* is probably a hendiadys, that is, a figure of speech where one of two words connected by a conjunction functions as an adjective (e.g., ‘nice and warm’ instead of ‘nicely warm’). Accordingly, *shem* modifies *yad* and the expression *yad vashem* refers to a named monument, i.e., a memorial stele for the eunuchs that is better than sons and daughters. D. W. Van Winkle, “The Meaning of Yād Wāšēm in Isaiah LVI 5,” *Vetus Testamentum* 47, no. 3 (1997): 379, citing 1 Chr 22:5 and 1 Chr 22:9 as other examples, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568533972651270>.

<sup>235</sup> On which, see William R. G. Loader, *Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in the Writings of Philo and Josephus and in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); William R. G. Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013); William R. G. Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Loader William, ““Not as the Gentiles”: Sexual Issues at the Interface between Judaism and Its Greco-Roman World,” *Religions* 9, 9, no. 258 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3390/re19090258>; William Loader, “Sexuality and Eschatology: In Search of a Celibate Utopia in Pseudepigraphic Literature,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 24, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951820714558755>.

<sup>236</sup> “Absolute divine mandate” in Kodell, “Celibacy Logion.” 19, citing Gen 1:28. Kodell mentions Philo, Josephus, Ben Azzai, and Essenes as exceptions. According to Heth, “[t]he rabbis unanimously taught that it was a duty for every Israelite to marry and have children.” Heth, “Unmarried (Matthew 19:12),” 59. France claims that “in Jewish society at that time the possibility of remaining celibate was not a recognized option. With the one remarkable exception of Jesus himself, there is little evidence that mainstream Judaism contemplated the possibility of a man remaining unmarried; marriage and the fathering of children were regarded as religious duties.” France, *Gospel of*

Early Jewish ascetic communities and individuals committed to lifestyles that deprived more traditional households. Josephus and Philo both wrote about the Essenes, Josephus extensively. According to Josephus, Essene men were known for their dignified training (σεμνότητα ἀσκεῖν), piety (εὐσεβεῖς), and self-control (ἐγκράτεια) (*BJ* 2.8.2-5,13). They did not encourage marriage—although they did not reject it—because they distrusted women’s lewdness (ἀσέλγεια). They despised wealth, shared possessions with the community, and wore their clothing and shoes until they fell apart. One group of Essenes, though, married for the purpose of procreation. Their wives also committed to an Essene lifestyle and participated in three purifications to demonstrate their fertility (*B.J.* 2.8.2-5,13).<sup>237</sup> Philo described the Essenes as older men who left their wives and any children behind when they joined the community.<sup>238</sup> Both Josephus and Philo believed the Essenes had been in existence for a long time.<sup>239</sup> Philo also wrote a detailed account about another ascetic community—the Therapeutae—a group of men and women who left behind their families, gave away their possessions, and joined a community near Lake Mareotis outside of Alexandria to live a contemplative, philosophical life with scriptural study and meditation.<sup>240</sup>

Not all Jews who practiced asceticism did so in large groups. Josephus, for example, mentioned three years he spent living an ascetic life in the desert as a disciple of Bannus. He explained that he wore only clothing produced by trees, ate only food that grew on its own, and bathed in cold water day and night for the sake of purity (ἀγνεία) (*Vit.* 2.11-12). Another example is John the Baptist, whom the evangelists associated with the wilderness (Mk 1:3-4; Mt 3:1,3; 11:7; Lk 1:80; 3:2,4; 7:24; Jn 1:23), ascetic practices (Mk 1:6/Mt 3:4; Mt 11:8/Lk 7:25; Mt

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*Matthew*, 722. France sketches but dismisses claims of celibacy regarding the Essenes and Paul (722n28-29). For Moloney, “[t]he Rabbinic evidence makes it clear that it was an unconditional duty for a Rabbi to marry, in obedience to Gen. 1,28....The unmarried state was obviously blameworthy.” Francis J. Moloney, “Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy: A Redactional and Form Critical Study,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1, no. 2 (1979): 51.

<sup>237</sup> On the Essenes’ abstention from marriage and sex, Joan E Taylor, “Women, Children, and Celibate Men in the Serekh Texts,” *Harvard Theological Review* 104, no. 2 (2011): 10-11.

<sup>238</sup> Taylor, “Women, Children, Celibate Men,” 4.

<sup>239</sup> Taylor, “Women, Children, Celibate Men,” 6. The Essenes may be the community associated with Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls, although scholars continue to debate the issue. Whoever authored the scrolls, it is clear from textual (e.g., CD 7:3-10; 1QSa 1; 4Q159; 4Q265; 4Q270; 4Q271; 4Q502) and archaeological remains that some women and children lived and died in Qumran. See, e.g., Tal Ilan, “Gender issues and daily life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (2010); Taylor, “Women, Children, Celibate Men,” 18; Rachel Hachlili, “The Qumran Cemetery Reassessed,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Timothy H. Lim and John J. Collins (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>240</sup> Taylor, “Women, Children, Celibate Men,” 5.



11:18/Lk 7:33), and Jewish prophets (Mk 1:2-3/Mt 3:3/Lk 3:4-6; Mt 11:9-11/Lk 7:26-28; Lk 1:76-79; cf. Jn 1:19-28).

While the rabbinic texts cited by scholars do express strong concerns about procreation, others do not. As Chapter 2 will clarify the *saris ḥammah* clearly could and did marry even though he could not procreate, and women were under no obligation to procreate.

### Concluding Remarks

An enigmatic verse, Mt 19:12 has always generated passion and controversy. Since the second century, there have been polarized interpretations of Matthew's self-made eunuchs. Leaders of formative Christian communities understood Jesus's words as a recommendation to abstain from sex, marriage, or remarriage. They sought to stamp out the practice of castration even as some ardent followers of Jesus sought castration. Modern exegetes also argue that the Matthean Jesus discouraged marriage, remarriage, or both. They almost uniformly reject a literal reading of the self-made eunuchs.

This chapter outlined the dissertation, opened my argument that Mt 19:12 should be interpreted as a parable, discussed πίστις terminology in Matthew and the dissertation, reviewed terminological challenges and qualms, introduced ancient stereotypes and perceptions about eunuchs, provided an overview of Roman Imperial anti-castration legislation, and challenged common scholarly misrepresentations of ancient Jewish perspectives about eunuchs.

While Matthew's self-made eunuchs have received a tremendous amount of attention, the other eunuchs have not. This dissertation examines all three groups in their narrative and historical context. I argue that Mt 19:12 is a parable about the kingdom of heaven and implicitly, loyalty. Jesus's words would have shocked early audiences, who would have identified the self-made eunuchs as *galli*, but the self-made eunuchs fit exceptionally well in Matthew. Eunuchs belong here, where Jesus speaks in parables to confound listeners and recommends that his adherents amputate offending body parts and take up their cross to follow him. With the arrival of the messianic age, Matthew's eunuchs help prioritize πίστις to God and his kingdom at the expense of traditionally configured human households.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM MOTHER'S WOMB: THE EUNUCHS OF 19:12a

This chapter seeks to answer two questions:

1. How have commentators, both ancient and modern, interpreted Mt 19:12a (εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως)?
2. How might Matthew's early audiences have understood eunuchs who were engendered that way from mother's womb?

In both ancient and contemporary writings, Matthew's first two groups of eunuchs have been eclipsed by the third. For the eunuchs of 19:12a, most scholars offer a brief comment about the nature of congenital eunuchs. A typical assessment is that they could not have sex, marry, or reproduce. Scholars regularly characterize these eunuchs by their lack, that is, by what they do not have or cannot do.

This chapter focuses on what the eunuchs of 19:12a *do* for Matthew: they help the evangelist signal that Jesus promotes a different kind of procreation: with the beginning of the messianic age, making disciples supersedes making babies.

The chapter includes three sections. The first, "Mt 19:12a: History of Interpretation," offers a selective review of ancient and contemporary exegesis, including claims about these eunuchs' procreative, sexual, and marital capabilities. In antiquity as today, congenital eunuchs were rare but not unknown. A number of ancient exegetes interpreted the eunuchs of Mt 19:12a metaphorically. Few referred to a genital anomaly. Contemporary scholars uniformly interpret the eunuchs of 19:12a literally, yet they do not acknowledge that a literal interpretation is not straightforward given Matthew's unusual wording; Jesus speaks of eunuchs who became so at conception or birth (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν), yet males became eunuchs when they were castrated. Although it is conceivable that newborn boys were castrated, I found no evidence of the practice in primary sources. Many scholars claim that these eunuchs were born with a "defect" or "deformity." The Matthean Jesus may have referred to babies born with anomalous genitalia or, as early rabbinic writers did, to males who experienced puberty late or not at all.

Some ancient commentators and almost all contemporary scholars neglect the reference to mother's womb.

The second section, "Congenital Eunuchs," opens with a discussion of possible ancient analogues to Mt 19:12a. An overview of contemporary medical literature highlights the variety and enormous complexity of physiological conditions that might cause a baby to appear to be a eunuch or a young person to experience an anomalous puberty. In antiquity, there existed a variety of perspectives about who congenital eunuchs were and how they came into being. Writers ascribed "fault" to a number of issues: problematic seed, mother's womb, both parents, or astronomical signs. Although they disagreed about the particulars, they all thought something had gone wrong in the generative process.

"Mt 19:12a in Light of Matthew," the final section of this chapter, argues that congenital eunuchs support the evangelist's focus on spiritual procreation. They are part of the evangelist's larger program of relativizing human households and literal procreation in favor of disciple-making before the eschaton.

### **Mt 19:12a: A Selective History of Interpretation**

#### Ancient Exegesis

The earliest post-biblical citation of Mt 19:12a occurs in Justin Martyr's *First Apology*. His rendition reads: "There are some who were made eunuchs by people, and there are some who were engendered eunuchs, and there are some who made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven, but not all can make room for this" (15, my translation). In comparison with the GNT, Justin's citation omits Matthew's three-time repetition of εὐνοῦχοι as well as mother's womb.

Justin's citation:

Ἐἰσὶ τινες οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων  
εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ ἐγεννήθησαν εὐνοῦχοι  
εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν  
πλὴν οὐ πάντες τοῦτο χωροῦσιν

GNT:

εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως  
καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων  
καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν  
ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω

Justin also removed one qualifier—Mt 19:12d (“the one who can make room, must make room,” my translation)—in favor of his restatement of Mt 19:11’s “not everyone can make room for this word but those to whom it is given” (my translation of οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον τοῦτον ἀλλ’ οἷς δέδοται). While his rendition is missing many of Matthew’s rhetorical features, it is more streamlined and makes the referent for “this word” explicit: Jesus’s statement about eunuchs.<sup>241</sup>

Clement of Alexandria claimed that the followers of Basilides, an early second century Christian teacher from Alexandria who was deemed a heretic, interpreted Jesus’s words as follows:

[They] say that when the apostles enquired whether it was not better to refrain from marriage, the Lord answered, “It is not everyone who can accept this saying: some are eunuchs from birth (οἱ μὲν ἐκ γενετῆς), others from necessity” (οἱ δὲ ἐξ ἀνάγκης [better translated “by force”]). They explain the saying something as follows. Some men have from birth a physical aversion in relation to women (φυσικὴν τινες ἔχουσι πρὸς γυναῖκα ἀποστροφὴν ἐκ γενετῆς). They follow their physical make-up (τῇ φυσικῇ ταύτῃ συγκράσει χρώμενοι) and do well not to marry. These, they say, are the eunuchs from birth. (*Strom.* 3.1.1 [Ferguson])

This citation removes ambiguity about when they became eunuchs: from birth (ἐκ γενετῆς), not conception. There is no mention of mother’s womb. There is also no mention of testicles. Physically, these eunuchs may have resembled other newborn males, yet they had a different physical constitution that caused an aversion to women. Σύγκρασις, a term that refers to mixture or blending, probably refers to the substances from which these eunuchs were generated. We might infer that Basilides’s followers thought that some males were born with a physical attraction to males; however, Clement did not state this. Basilides’s followers may have been the

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<sup>241</sup> The referent is unclear, and scholars have several theories. In Chapter 4, I will return to Justin’s citation when I discuss these theories.

first to mention “eunuchs by force” (ἀνάγκη) an expression that was picked up by subsequent Christian writers, though without acknowledging Basilides.

Tertullian referred to congenital eunuchs implicitly in his *Treatise on the Resurrection*, although his focus was the eunuchs of 19:12c. He wrote: “We also, as we are able, give the mouth release from food, and even withdraw sex from copulation. How many voluntary eunuchs (*spado voluntarius*) are there, how many virgins wedded to Christ, how many barren of both sexes equipped with genitals that bear no fruit” (*quot steriles utriusque naturae infructuosis genitalibus structi*) (61 [Evans]). Those who are barren and cannot bear fruit is probably Tertullian’s gloss on the eunuchs of Mt 19:12a. He connects them positively with the virgins and voluntary eunuchs who chose to become, and remain, non-procreative. Alternatively, perhaps Tertullian spoke about congenital eunuchs in his community.

Origen of Alexandria argued that all three groups of Matthew’s eunuchs must be interpreted consistently and figuratively. He described eunuchs from mother’s womb as those who abstain from sexual desire (αφροδισία) and do not give in to licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια) and impurity (ἀκαθαρσία) because of their constitution (κατασκευή) (*Comm. Matt.* 15.4). Origen’s figurative interpretation nevertheless has decidedly somatic underpinnings with his use of the term κατασκευή and his point about abstention. He did not mention a genital anomaly.

According to Bishop of Constantia and monk Epiphanius (c. 315 – 403 CE), although these eunuchs are guiltless (ἀναίτιος) and have not sinned, they have done nothing worth praise, either, since they were born without the organs of generation created by God (τὰ παιδοποιὰ ὄργανα τὰ ἐκ θεοῦ κεκτισμένα) (*Pan.* 2.58.3.3). Epiphanius followed Basilides’s use of the expression ἐκ γενετῆς and “eunuchs by force,” inverted 19:12a and 19:12b as Justin did, and omitted ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς. They will not have the kingdom of heaven as their reward (μισθός) for being eunuchs because they were not initiated into the struggle (ἀγῶνος μὴ μεμυῆσθαι) (2.58.3.4). Epiphanius then followed with a curious statement: “Even though they have experienced desires (εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν μεμύηνται οἱ τοιοῦτοι), since they lack the ability to do what should not be done, neither do they have a reward for not doing it. They haven’t done the thing, not because they didn’t want to but because they couldn’t” (2.58.3.5 [Williams]). “Experienced” obscures the Greek μυέω, which by the LSJ’s primary entry means “initiate into the mysteries.” For Epiphanius, although these eunuchs had been initiated into [the mystery of] sexual desire, they had not been initiated into the struggle [for the kingdom of heaven]. As we

shall see, the possibility of rewards associated with the kingdom of heaven appeared in many Christian writings in reference to Mt 19:12.

A number of fourth-century commentators compared the first two groups of eunuchs unfavorably with the third on the basis of their inability to make the decision to become eunuchs. For popular preacher and Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (c. 354 – 407 CE), the exercise of free will and reason differentiated the three groups. Eunuchs who were eunuchs by nature (ἐκ φύσεως) or the abuse (ἐπηρέαζω) of others would not be able to earn rewards and crowns (*Hom. Matt* 62, PG 58:599). Bishop of Milan Ambrose stated that some eunuchs are eunuchs from birth due to natural *necessitas*, not virtue (*virtus*). Those who make themselves eunuchs and choose to live continently do so of their will, not by force (*Vid.* 13.75, PL 16:285-286). According to bishop and ascetic Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE), Jesus, himself an unwedded spouse of virgins, professed that there are natural (*natus*), artificial (*facticius*), and voluntary (*uoluntarius*) eunuchs and preferred the third (*Faust.* 30.4). In his *Commentary on Matthew*, exegete and ascetic Jerome (c. 347 – 420 CE) interpreted the first two groups as fleshly (*carnalis*) eunuchs, the third as spiritual (*spiritualis*). Those who were eunuchs from mother's womb (*ex matris utero*) were frigid by nature and not inclined to lust (*frigidiore naturae sunt, nec libidinem appetentes*). They would not receive the reward (*praemium*) of chastity (*puclitia*) because their situation was involuntary (*Comm. Matt.* PL 26:135-136).

Church leader and ascetic Gregory of Nazianzus in Cappadocia (329 – 389 CE) delivered a sermon on Mt 19 in which he discussed eunuchs at length. He interpreted eunuchs from mother's womb as naturally self-controlled (σωφροσύνη). This should be no cause for pride, however, as they did not choose to be eunuchs; their self-control had not been put to the test. He followed with several rhetorical questions, beginning with “What benefit (χάρις) has fire for burning? For it is its nature to burn” (*Or.* 37.16 PG 36:301). Gregory demanded something else of eunuchs: they must not go whoring (πορνεύω) with respect to the deity (θεότης) but exhibit self-control (σωφροσύνη). Yet their physical self-control was insufficient. They have been yoked (συζεύγνυμι; Mt 19:6) to Christ and must not dishonor him or commit adultery (μοιχεύω) against the soul (κατὰ ψυχὴν) (37.19). Gregory then provided a spiritual interpretation: eunuchs from mother's womb are those who by nature (ἐκ φύσεως) incline toward the good (νεύειν τὸ ἀγαθόν). He added that free will helps bring the natural inclination to fullness (37.20).

## Contemporary Exegesis

Some scholars bypass this group of eunuchs. Those who do mention them usually refer to a genital anomaly: they have a “natural defect,”<sup>242</sup> “birth defect,”<sup>243</sup> or “deformity.”<sup>244</sup> One scholar refers to an “accident of birth.”<sup>245</sup> Another claims that they were “born without sexual organs or impotent.”<sup>246</sup> Few consider puberty. An exception, John Nolland interprets Mt 19:12a as children who were “occasionally born with defective genitals and subsequently would fail to develop male secondary characteristics as they grew up.”<sup>247</sup>

Most scholars and a number of English Bibles omit mother’s womb.<sup>248</sup> The NIV, for example, reads “[f]or there are eunuchs who were born that way;” the NRSV, “[f]or there are eunuchs who have been so from birth;” and the NLT, “[s]ome are born as eunuchs.”

Scholars make assumptions about these eunuchs’ sexual capabilities. Craig Blomberg describes them as “people born without the capability of having sexual relations (particularly hermaphrodites without properly developed genitals).”<sup>249</sup> Several use the term “impotent,” which may refer to a male’s inability to maintain an erection during sexual intercourse.<sup>250</sup>

There are two problems with claims about congenital eunuchs’ sexual incapacity. The first is a lack of details about the cause(s). Only certain genital problems in a newborn will lead to impotence, if indeed impotence is understood as a male’s inability to maintain an erection during sexual intercourse. Second, such a framing of sexuality excludes most aspects of sexual relationships. While ‘sexuality’ resists any simple definition, health care organizations and professional societies incorporate a range of aspects in their definitions. The World Health Organization’s working definition offers one example:

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<sup>242</sup> Trautman, "Eunuch Logion," 62; Kleist, "Eunuchs.;" Quentin Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 19, 12)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1968): 448, "natural defect".

<sup>243</sup> Patte, *Structural Commentary*, 267. “Impotent, injured, or suffering from a birth defect” in Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 242. It is a “congenital defect” for Collins, *Divorce*, 118.

<sup>244</sup> Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364.

<sup>245</sup> Trautman, "Eunuch Logion," 62.

<sup>246</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series, New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 707. See also Keener, *Commentary on Matthew*, 471. Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs," 358.

<sup>247</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 778.

<sup>248</sup> For 19:12a, the NRSV, KJV, NIV, NLT, ASV, ERV, NASB and Douay-Rheims have “born.” The RSV, NET, ISV, and ESV have “from birth.” RSV, NRSV, NIV, NLT, ERV and ISV omit “mother’s womb.”

<sup>249</sup> Blomberg, "Exegesis of Matthew 19: 3-12," 185.

<sup>250</sup> Dale C. Allison Jr., "Eunuchs because of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 19: 12).", *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (1984): 3. Hagner, *Matthew*. Loader 580; Luz, *Matthew* 8-20.

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.<sup>251</sup>

Even if scholars' claims about impotence applied to some eunuchs, in view of a definition like this, Matthew's congenital eunuchs were certainly capable of experiencing and expressing a robust sexuality. Early rabbinic sources, which I will discuss shortly, assumed that congenital eunuchs had sex with their wives. And as noted in Chapter 1, Epiphanius thought congenital eunuchs experienced but could not fulfill their sexual desires.

Several scholars consider the possibility that 19:12a refers to homosexuality.<sup>252</sup> R.T. France, for example, discusses but dismisses the idea that the verse "also includes those who are psychologically disinclined to heterosexual intercourse and thus debarred from fatherhood."<sup>253</sup> Most ancient references are not to homosexuality but to bisexuality, he explains. France also points out that the concept of "an innate and irreversible homosexual orientation" reflects "modern Western psychology," not Jesus's world.<sup>254</sup>

There are several problematic assumptions with the view he rejects, but he does not discuss them. Attributing homosexuality to an individual's psychological inclination discounts genetic, social, or other factors that might cause a person to be more or less sexually inclined toward another person at a given point in time. Second, a disinclination toward heterosexual intercourse does not imply an inclination toward homosexual intercourse. Third, he offers no

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<sup>251</sup> World Health Organization, *Defining sexual health: report of a technical consultation on sexual health*, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva, (Geneva, CH: World Health Organization, 2006). As another example of the complexity of the subject of 'sexuality,' the research focus of the 110<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in 2015 was "Sexualities in the Social World." American Sociological Association, "Sociologists to Explore the Topic of Sexuality at Annual Meeting in Chicago," news release, July 6, 2015, <https://www.asanet.org/press-center/press-releases/sociologists-explore-topic-sexuality-annual-meeting-chicago>.

<sup>252</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2, The Church Book*, 274. Bruner recommended Exodus North America, which at the time did conversion therapy. For William Loader, it might refer to people called "homosexual" today but "we cannot know." William R. G. Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 107.

<sup>253</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 725.

<sup>254</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 725. France does not cite the ancient references or provide additional evidence. Osborne refers to France's discussion of homosexuality in Osborne, *Matthew*, 707n23.



explanation why or evidence that a psychological disinclination toward heterosexual intercourse would debar these eunuchs from fatherhood. Such a framing of fatherhood, which assumes heterosexual intercourse, would also debar the Matthean God from fatherhood as well as any non-procreative human male. And while France correctly points out that the concept of sexual orientation does not reflect Jesus's world, the expression "an innate and irreversible homosexual orientation" has more to do with psychiatry and contemporary debates about sexuality than with modern psychology.<sup>255</sup> Further, as we have seen, some early Christians did speak about congenital eunuchs as males who had a different physiological response to women.

Other scholars mention these eunuchs' non-procreativity. Halvor Moxnes calls them boys "born with destroyed or imperfect genitals and who could therefore not beget children."<sup>256</sup> Genitalia, however, have external and internal components. It is unclear if Moxnes is referring to external genitalia such as the scrotum, the penis, or both. R.T. France describes the eunuchs of 19:12a as "physiologically incapable of procreation."<sup>257</sup>

Some claim that congenital eunuchs could not marry. For Rudolf Schnackenburg, 19:12a refers to a "natural, congenital or accidental, incapacity for marriage."<sup>258</sup> Others describe the eunuchs of 19:12a as "physically incapable of marriage,"<sup>259</sup> "born incapable of marriage,"<sup>260</sup> or "'unable' to accept a normal married situation" due to physical inability.<sup>261</sup> According to Ben Witherington, they are "unfit for marriage" because of their "deformity."<sup>262</sup> Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri interpret 19:12 as a "call for some to accept the unmarried state for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" which is "in sharp contrast to other situations in which men have a physical

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<sup>255</sup> The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) pathologized homosexuality as a mental disorder from 1952 until 1974, then replaced the term with "sexual orientation." Jacob J. van den Berg, "Heterosexist Bias in the DSM," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender*, ed. Kevin L. Nadal (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017).

<sup>256</sup> Moxnes, "Body, Gender," 172-73.

<sup>257</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724. Peter Guyot, the author of a monograph on enslaved and manumitted eunuchs in Greco-Roman antiquity, describes eunuchs as "sterile men because of a gonadal defect" (*infolge eines Defektes der Gonaden zeugungsunfähige Männer*); for some, it is congenital (*angeborene*). Peter Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Stuttgart, DE: Klett-Cotta, 1980), 15. Robert H. Gundry mentions a "congenital incapacity" without clarifying the incapacity. Gundry, *Matthew*, 382.

<sup>258</sup> Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185.

<sup>259</sup> William F. Albright and Christopher Stephen Mann, *Matthew*, The Anchor Bible, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 227; Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs," 335.

<sup>260</sup> Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs," 358.

<sup>261</sup> Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," 52.

<sup>262</sup> Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364. So too Raymond Collins, due to their "congenital defect." Collins, *Divorce*, 118.

incapacity for marital relations and natural fatherhood.”<sup>263</sup> The incapacity for marriage thesis had an earlier proponent in Marie-Joseph Lagrange, who claimed that a “natural defect” made them incapable of marriage; eunuchs were “unfortunate” because they could not marry.<sup>264</sup>

There are at least three assumptions at work in such assessments: first, that heterosexual marriage necessitates the male partner’s physical ability to procreate (hence, one unstated goal of marriage is that couples should have sexual relations to produce children); second, that eunuchs could not or did not engage in sexual activity, which I already challenged; and third, that eunuchs could not marry. These assumptions reflect narrow, contemporary perspectives about heterosexuality, procreation, sexuality, and marriage. They can also be challenged on historical grounds.

Licit marriages in the Roman Empire were heterosexual but did not necessitate procreative capability. For a marriage to be legal during the Principate, both parties had to meet three criteria: citizen status, consent, and minimum age (for females, twelve; for males, adult [*pubes*] status, typically fourteen). There were limitations and disqualifications. Certain kin relations could not marry, nor could active-duty soldiers until Emperor Severus Alexander (r. 222 – 235 CE) relaxed that restriction. Freeborn citizens could not marry pimps, prostitutes, convicted adulterers or those caught in adultery, and senators and their family members could not marry manumitted persons. Procreative capability was never a requirement of marriage. Nor did procreative incapability disqualify a male or female citizen of age from marrying or invalidate an existing marriage.<sup>265</sup>

While procreative capability was not a requirement, emperors, consuls, and jurists actively promoted childbearing within the marital setting. The aforementioned Augustan marriage legislation of 18 BCE and 9 CE mandated marriage for male citizens aged twenty-five to sixty and female citizens aged twenty to fifty. Augustus instituted financial and political incentives for child production as well as stiff financial penalties for noncompliance. For example, an unmarried citizen could not legally inherit, and a childless husband or wife could

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<sup>263</sup> Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 243.

<sup>264</sup> Quoted in Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs,” 340n9. Quesnell cites Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (Paris, FR: J. Gabalda, 1941), 2, 91.

<sup>265</sup> Certain kin relations could marry. For example, after Claudius’s ruling in 49, a man could marry his brother’s daughter. For a full discussion of eligibility and restrictions, see Chapter 2 of Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: iusti coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian*, ACLS Humanities E-Book, (Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1991).

receive only one-tenth of the estate of the dead partner. If divorce or death ended a marriage, the widow or widower had to remarry unless she or he already had three children (if the surviving spouse was freeborn) or four (if manumitted). Subsequent imperial and senatorial legislation from Tiberius to Severus Alexander generally strengthened existing marital legislation by closing loopholes.<sup>266</sup>

The scholarly claim that congenital eunuchs could not marry rests on the unstated assumption that marriage should result in biological children. There are two problems with this view. First, some married couples in antiquity chose not to have children. Women sometimes used pessaries as contraceptives or sought abortions. Fathers who abandoned unwanted children incurred no penalty for doing so.<sup>267</sup> Augustan legislation also faced popular resistance and ridicule, particularly among the elite male citizens it targeted.<sup>268</sup> Historian Tacitus (b. c. 56 – 58 CE), for example, had the following to say:

This law, complementary to the Julian rogations, had been passed by Augustus in his later years, in order to sharpen the penalties of celibacy (*caelebs*) and to increase the resources of the exchequer. It failed, however, to make marriage and the family popular—childlessness remained the vogue. On the other hand, there was an ever-increasing multitude of persons liable to prosecution, since every household was threatened with subversion by the arts of the informers; and where the country once suffered from its vices, it was now in peril from its laws. (*Ann.* 3.25 [Moore])

Second, adoption was a common, well-known practice. Most emperors in the first and second centuries adopted their successor. Julius Caesar adopted Octavius, who became the first Roman emperor. Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius (r. 121 – 180 CE), and Lucius Verus (r. 161 – 169 CE) also adopted a successor. According to Josephus, Essene men adopted others' children and trained them (*B.J.* 2.8.2-5, 13). In Romans 8, Paul relied on his addressees' familiarity with adoption (ὀιοθεσία: 8:15, 23) to claim that “we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (8:17a). Usually tied to inheritance, adoption enabled a childless man to establish a legal heir who could

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<sup>266</sup> Dieter Nörr, "The Matrimonial Legislation of Augustus: An Early Instance of Social Engineering," *Irish Jurist* 16, no. 2 (1981): 351-53. See also Severy, *Augustus and the Family*, 52-56.

<sup>267</sup> Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 406-07.

<sup>268</sup> Nörr, "Matrimonial Legislation," 353-54.

carry on the family line and name and maintain his property.<sup>269</sup> Adoptees were typically young men who had survived the high infant and childhood mortality rates, and their adopters were often wealthy men.<sup>270</sup> Although women could not adopt until Emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565) removed the requirement of *patria potestas* (paternal power), male citizens could, even if they were single.<sup>271</sup>

From Roman legal writings, it is clear that at least some eunuchs adopted. Hence, some jurists viewed eunuchs as *men* who could legally adopt if they had citizen status, in contrast with women who could not unless they received a special dispensation. The second-century CE jurist Gaius mentioned eunuchs in his comparison of two types of adoption: *adrogatio*, the adoption of a legally independent person not currently under *patria potestas*, and *adoptio*, the adoption of a legally dependent person currently under *patria potestas*. He explained that “[t]he thing which both modes of adoption have in common is that even those who cannot have children of their own, for example, eunuchs (*spado*), can adopt” (Dig 1.7.2.1). Third-century jurist Modestinus provided more details about eunuchs who adopted by *adrogatio*: “A eunuch can by *adrogatio* obtain for himself an heir (*sui heres*); his bodily defect (*corporale vitium*) is no hindrance to him” (Dig. 1.7.40.2). Other jurists had reservations about whether eunuchs were eligible for particular adoptive practices. First-century jurists Cassius, Labeo (d. 10 – 22 CE), and Javolenus opined that a eunuch (*spado*) could adopt a child *in utero*—a *postumus*—as legal heir; first-century jurist Proculus and second-century jurists Julian and Ulpian disagreed in the case of a *castratus* (Dig. 28.2.6.1).<sup>272</sup> Third-century jurist Marcian opined that “if a *spado* wishes to manumit [i.e., his female slave] in order to marry her, it is possible; this is not so in the case of a *castratus*.”<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Hugh Lindsay, *Adoption in the Roman World* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 103. For the vast majority of poor men and women in the Roman Empire, however, the direct impact of the marriage legislation was probably minimal.

<sup>270</sup> Rawson, "Family and Society," 7.

<sup>271</sup> Lindsay, *Adoption*, 71-72. Adoption could be an alternative to marriage.

<sup>272</sup> Sed est quaesitum, an is, qui generare facile non possit, postumum heredem facere possit, et scribit Cassius et Javolenus posse: nam et uxorem ducere et adoptare potest. spadonem quoque posse postumum heredem scribere et Labeo et Cassius scribunt: quoniam nec aetas nec sterilitas ei rei impedimento est. (1) Sed si castratus sit, Iulianus Proculi opinionem secutus non putat postumum heredem posse instituere, quo iure utimur.

<sup>272</sup> Si spadoni mulier nupserit, distinguendum arbitror, castratus fuerit necne, ut in castrato dicas dotem non esse: in eo qui castratus non est, quia est matrimonium, et dos et dotis actio est.

<sup>273</sup> As mentioned, Marcian did not treat *spado* as a general category as Ulpian did.

A serious flaw with the contention that congenital eunuchs could not marry is that eunuchs could and did marry. As biblical scholar Jacques Dupont aptly stated in reference to Mt 19:12, “[c]e qui lui est impossible n’est pas de se marier, mais d’accomplir l’acte de la generation” (what is impossible for him is not to get married, but to accomplish the act of generation).<sup>274</sup> Juristic and rabbinic texts provide evidence of married eunuchs. The basis of Cassius, Labeo, and Javolenus’s reasoning that a eunuch could institute a *postumus* as heir was that he can marry and adopt. Ulpian, who had more reservations about eunuchs’ marital rights, argued that a castrated eunuch should not be able to claim a wife’s dowry, but an uncastrated eunuch should. “If a woman marries a eunuch” (*spado*), he explained, “I think that a distinction must be drawn between a man who has been castrated (*castratus fuerit*) and one who has not, so that if he has been castrated, you may say that there cannot be a dowry; but where a man has not been castrated, there can be a dowry and an action for it, because a marriage can take place here” (DIG. 23.3.39.1).<sup>275</sup> While Ulpian did not describe an “uncastrated eunuch,” we may infer from his classification of eunuchs elsewhere in the *Digest* that he meant “eunuchs by nature” (*natura spadones*: DIG. 50.16.128), that is, congenital eunuchs.

Biblical, apocryphal, and rabbinic sources also clarify that eunuchs married and had children. Potiphar was a married eunuch, although sources do not indicate if he was a congenital eunuch.<sup>276</sup> Gen 39 emphasizes the fact that Potiphar has a wife: “his [Joseph’s] master’s wife” tries to sleep with Joseph (39:7); Joseph declines “his master’s wife” (39:8), explaining that Potiphar only withheld her because “you are his wife” (39:9); and Potiphar becomes angry after listening to the false accusation of “his wife” (39:19). The T. Jos. emphasizes her married status even more strongly, in twelve verses: “Pentephris’s wife” (2.18), “her husband” (1.36, 60, 62, 72; 2.19, 39, 52), “my husband” (1.37, 40, 44), and “your husband” (1.65). Pentephris (i.e., Potiphar) cares for his wife (7.2), has children, and also has a concubine who might beat the children and destroy the earthly memorial of his wife (7:5-6).

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<sup>274</sup> Dupont, *Mariage et divorce*, 198.198

<sup>275</sup> Si spadoni mulier nupserit, distinguendum arbitror, castratus fuerit necne, ut in castrato dicas dotem non esse: in eo qui castratus non est, quia est matrimonium, et dos et dotis actio est.

<sup>276</sup> ἐκτέμνω suggests that Potiphar was castrated by knife. In *On Dreams*, Potiphar calls himself a eunuch whose procreative organs of the soul have been cut off (τὰ γεννητικὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκτετμημένο) (2.184). Philo also plays on the castration with Potiphar’s claim that he is cut off (ἄμωρος) from immortality because he cannot produce children and grandchildren (27). Of the fifty-eight biblical verses (MT, LXX, NT; excluding Lev 21:20) that mention a eunuch one or more times, only Mt 19:12 states any cause.

Most scholars compare Mt 19:12a with the *saris ḥammah* (eunuch of the sun) in rabbinic texts.<sup>277</sup> For W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, the eunuchs of 19:12a and b “undoubtedly represent a standard categorization”: the eunuch of the sun was either “born with defective male organs” or “had otherwise been rendered impotent by the circumstances of his birth.”<sup>278</sup> Craig Keener refers to Jewish teachers who distinguished between those born with no sexual organs or who had operations.<sup>279</sup> Other scholars refer to a “standard rabbinic distinction” or “common Jewish division.”<sup>280</sup>

There is no reason to presume that any rabbinic source about eunuchs reflects a standard Jewish categorization, or to one that should be predated to the first century.<sup>281</sup> Sarra Lev, who has extensively researched tannaitic texts on genital damage, flips the claim of Matthean scholars that Mt 19:12a-b reflects the rabbinic categories of the *saris ḥammah* and *saris adam*. She argues that the rabbinic categories indicate, in part, a response to Christian interpretations of eunuchs. She explains: “Although the *seris 'adam* and the *seris chammah* are nowhere to be found in the biblical literature, parallel categories do appear in the non-rabbinic literature. The categories thus seem to be an invention of the rabbinic system using the biblical terminology in order to conform to the existing Roman and Christian discourse.”<sup>282</sup>

Some commentators of Mt 19:12 cite *m. Yebam.* 8:4-6. The passage relates the perspectives of several rabbis on three topics: whether a eunuch should perform *halitzah* and

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<sup>277</sup> Davies and Allison, for example, describe a male “born with defective male organs or one who had otherwise been rendered impotent by the circumstances of his birth” as a “eunuch of the sun” Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 22. Similarly, Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 501; Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: a Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life*, ed. G.N. Stanton, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 28; Trautman, “Eunuch Logion,” 61; Blinzler, “Mt 19,12,” 260; Nolland, *Matthew*, 777; Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 227; Stephen R. Llewelyn, Gareth J. Wearne, and Bianca L. Sanderson, “Guarding Entry to the Kingdom: The Place of Eunuchs in Mt. 19.12,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10, no. 3 (2012): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01003002>; Moloney, “Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy.”; Kodell, “Celibacy Logion,” 20.

<sup>278</sup> Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 22. Allison made the same statement in his 1984 article about eunuchs Allison, “Matt 19:12,” 3.

<sup>279</sup> Keener, *Commentary on Matthew*, 471.

<sup>280</sup> For John Nolland, it is “a known Jewish division.” Nolland, *Matthew*, 777. R.T. France refers to “[t]he standard rabbinic distinction between a ‘man-made eunuch’ and a ‘eunuch by nature’ (m. Yebam. 8:4; m. Zabim 2:1).” France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724. Witherington writes of a “common Jewish division” Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364.

<sup>281</sup> To assume there was a cut-and-dried categorization of eunuchs by Jews flattens rabbinic Judaism by failing to account for a diversity of perspectives.

<sup>282</sup> Lev, “Genital Trouble,” 127-29.

*halitzah* should be performed for his wife, whether a eunuch should contract *yibbum* or his wife should be taken in *yibbum*, and whether the wife of a eunuch priest should eat *terumah*. *Halitzah* is the rite that releases a woman from the requirements of a levirate marriage.<sup>283</sup> In Rabbi Akiva's (c. 50 – 132 CE) view, a *saris ḥammah* does not perform *halitzah*, and *halitzah* is not performed for his wife, because he was never "fit." Rabbi Eleazar ben Hyrcanus disagreed. He reasoned that a *saris ḥammah* may be cured. In *m. Yebam.* 8.6, a *saris ḥammah* priest who married the daughter of an Israelite confers the right to eat *terumah* to his wife. The passage does not offer any description or explanation of how he became a *saris ḥammah*. In fact, of the twenty-five tannaitic texts that discuss halakah for a *saris ḥammah*, only one describes him.<sup>284</sup>

The issue of Levirate marriage figures most prominently in rabbinic texts about the *saris ḥammah*. Seven of eight halakhot of the Mishnah and Tosefta proscribe Levirate marriage for the *saris ḥammah*.<sup>285</sup> The rabbis' primary concern appears to be non-procreativity and whether he will be able to generate lineage in his dead brother's name.

Implied in many tannaitic texts is the ability of the *saris ḥammah* to have sex with his wife. In *m. Soṭah* 4:4, for example, a wife who has been accused of adultery may prove her innocence to her *saris ḥammah* husband. The rabbis treated the *saris ḥammah* as a separate category in a listing of seminal charges that made men impure (*m. Zabim* 2:1). At issue again may be non-procreativity; since the rabbis knew that eunuchs could not physically generate children, they may have questioned whether the *saris ḥammah*'s seminal emissions should be treated differently with respect to halakhah.<sup>286</sup>

Tannaitic texts also explain that certain individuals, including an elderly man, a *saris*, a childless man, a merciful man, and a cruel man, may not sit on a Sanhedrin or judge a capital trial unless the accused is a *mesit* (מסיח, agitator) who encourages Jews to worship idols (*t. Sanh.* 7:5).<sup>287</sup> In the larger context, the rabbis' concern appears to be mercy—men who are most distant

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<sup>283</sup> Weisberg, "Levirate Marriage and Halitzah in the Mishnah," 40.

<sup>284</sup> Sarra Lev cautions about generalizing from twenty-five texts in Lev, "Genital Trouble," 59-60.

<sup>285</sup> Lev, "Congenital Eunuch," 223.

<sup>286</sup> Lev, "Congenital Eunuch," 235.

<sup>287</sup> *b. Sanh.* 36b discusses capital cases in general. *t. Sanh.* 10:11 is about the *mesit*. Rabbi Yehuda added merciless and merciful (*t. Sanh.* 7:5; cruel in *b. Sanh.* 36b).

from child-raising (i.e., the childless man, the *saris*, the elderly man) may be less merciful, and mercy is crucial in capital cases.<sup>288</sup>

Rabbinic sources on congenital eunuchs, then, reflect a particular set of concerns that do not support a direct equivalence with Matthew's congenital eunuchs. The rabbinic texts are nevertheless helpful for scholarship on Matthew's eunuchs because they demonstrate that Jewish congenital eunuchs in the early centuries did marry and have sex. These men were also members of early Jewish communities who shared responsibilities. Their inclusion challenges the misconceptions of many scholars that I discussed in the last chapter.

### **Congenital Eunuchs**

In the following section, I clarify some of the many medical issues that might cause a person to be identified as a eunuch engendered that way from mother's womb. I then discuss several possible historical analogues to the eunuchs of Mt 19:12a.

There are a number of medical reasons newborns might have atypical genitalia or boys might experience delayed puberty, no puberty, or during puberty, develop certain characteristics associated more commonly with females. People in antiquity recognized most of these issues, although they ascribed different etiologies than contemporary biomedical researchers. Before addressing ancient understandings of and responses to congenital eunuchs, I provide a brief overview of contemporary medical literature to elucidate both the large variety and complexity of these issues.

#### **Contemporary Medical Perspectives**

Several conditions may cause a newborn to appear to be a eunuch: undescended testes, retractile testes, anomalous genitalia, or bilateral anorchia. The most common congenital anomaly of the male genitals, undescended testes (also known as cryptorchidism) occurs in 3.4

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<sup>288</sup> The *mesit*, however, receives less consideration than others accused (*t. Sanh.* 10:11). Lev, "Congenital Eunuch," 232.



percent of full-term and 30 percent of preterm boys.<sup>289</sup> In 10 percent of these cases, both testicles are involved. During the third trimester, the testicles of a male fetus usually descend from the fetal abdomen into the groin via the inguinal canal, then into the scrotum. In cases of undescended testes, one or both testicles do not fully descend. By three to four months of age, most cases have resolved on their own, although it takes longer for boys born preterm. In other cases, particularly when the undescended testicle(s) remains in the abdomen, descent does not occur spontaneously. Surgical intervention may be necessary because undescended testes place boys at increased risk of testicular cancer, inguinal hernias, infertility, testicular torsion, and testicular trauma. The standard surgical treatment, orchidopexy, relocates the testis or testes into, and affixes it to, the scrotum and has a 98 percent success rate.<sup>290</sup>

Retractile testes occurs when one or both testes permanently ascend into the inguinal canal due to an active cremasteric (upper inner thigh) reflex. Typically, an infant boy's cremasteric reflex allows him to retract his testes into the inguinal canal briefly, but only for minutes to an hour.<sup>291</sup> Retractile testes may occur in older infants, boys, or men. Major causes include cerebral palsy, a movement disorder; hypopituitarism, an impaired ability of the pituitary gland to produce hormones; hyperthyroidism, a hyperthyroid gland that produces too much of the hormone thyroxine; attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, a neurodevelopmental disorder; Klinefelter syndrome, an inherited chromosomal disorder in males; Down syndrome, a genetic disorder of chromosome 21; and Chiari II malformations, located where the skull meets the spine. Treatment of retractile testes requires regular clinical observation and, in some cases, orchidopexy.<sup>292</sup>

Sometimes babies are born with external genitalia that do not appear to be distinctly male or female. Genitalia may be incompletely developed or have both male and female characteristics. In some cases, external and internal genitalia do not correspond to biological sex. The terms used by medical professionals to label some of these issues continue to change, in part

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<sup>289</sup> Elder, "Undescended Testes," 165. Ectopic testes—those found above the inguinal canal, in the perineum, in the femoral area and lateral to the scrotum—were once considered a separate condition. According to one recent study, because ectopic testes share a similar histology and risk profile, they should be treated as a variation of undescended testicles. Casale, "The Ectopic Testis."

<sup>290</sup> Elder, "Undescended Testes," 166–71.

<sup>291</sup> Dr. Todd Rice, email message to author, May 20, 2020.

<sup>292</sup> Mevorach, Hulbert, and Rabinowitz, "Retractile Testes," 159–63. Researchers debate the distinction between undescended and retractile testes.

because they have been, and continue to be, stigmatizing: in the U.S., “disorder of sex differentiation” (DSD) since 2006, “ambiguous genitalia,” “hermaphroditism,” “pseudo-hermaphroditism,” and “intersex” (a term preferred by many who experience this issue and one that I will use).<sup>293</sup>

As there are several dozen variations of intersex conditions—and some manifest later in life or even post-mortem—I will mention three that are especially relevant for this study: gonadal dysgenesis, 5 $\alpha$ -reductase deficiency, and bilateral anorchia. In gonadal dysgenesis, the gonads (i.e., testes or ovary) do not develop completely. Cases present in multiple ways, and treatment varies. Increasingly, practitioners incorporate family members and a team of medical experts to address critical ethical considerations. Sometimes, the medical team recommends a gonadectomy—the surgical removal of testes or ovaries—to reduce the risk of gonadal malignancy and/or to remove a gonad inconsistent with the “desired” sex.<sup>294</sup> 5 $\alpha$ -reductase deficiency, a chromosomal disorder that impacts males, is characterized by a small penis, an

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<sup>293</sup> Georgiann Davis provides a helpful overview in Davis, “The Power in a Name.” For a cultural history of medical treatments of intersex individuals, see Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, particularly her epilogue in which she discusses some of the issues involved in naming: “How to name diverse conditions involving aspects of external genitalia, sex chromosomes, internal reproductive anatomy, and gender identity raises political as well as medical questions. The choice of nomenclature influences not only how doctors interpret medical situations but, also and as important, how parents view their affected children, how intersex people understand themselves, and how others outside medical settings—such as gender and legal scholars, historians, and media commentators—think, talk, and write about gender, sex, and the body” (154). The recent film “Stories of Intersex and Faith” offers this definition: “Intersex refers to physical markers of biological sex rather than to a gender identity or sexual orientation.” Megan DeFranza and Paul Van Ness, “Stories of Intersex and Faith,” (March 6, 2019).

<sup>294</sup> Braga and Salle, “Ambiguous Genitalia,” 268. This raises the question, *whose* desired sex? In their chapter “Ambiguous Genitalia” in the 2014 reference text, Luis Henrique Perocco Braga and Joao Luiz Pippi Salle, “Ambiguous Genitalia,” *Current Clinical Urology* (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2014). In *Pediatric Urology for the Primary Care Physician*, Luis Henrique Perocco Braga and Joao Luiz Pippi Salle recommend a quick evaluation and early gender assignment, if possible. Their quote, in context, follows (*italics mine*): “A newborn with ambiguous genitalia should have rapid assessment and, *if possible, early gender assignment* to minimize emotional trauma to the family. However, ethical implications should be considered and careful evaluation and discussion undertaken, as about one-quarter of these patients as adults are now known to be dissatisfied with the sex of rearing that was allocated by the family and physicians. A multidisciplinary approach involving endocrinologist, pediatric urologist, neonatologist, geneticist, epigenetic counselor, pediatric gynecologist, psychologist and social worker is required, and decision should always include the family. It should be based on the anatomic-physiological findings as well as *the likely prognosis for behavior and gender orientation.*” Braga and Salle, “Ambiguous Genitalia.” Who makes the prognosis? And how reliable could any prognosis be on a newborn’s future “behavior and gender orientation”? A more cautious approach is taken by Bonnie McCann-Crosby et al. in their literature review of diagnosis and management of gonadal dysgenesis. They recommend a particular algorithm for diagnosis and malignancy risk stratification and tailored treatment based on an individual’s specific diagnosis and risk of malignancy. They note that there is a paucity of long-term outcome studies. McCann-Crosby et al., “State of the Art Review in Gonadal Dysgenesis,” 14–17. See also Kreukels et al., “Gender Dysphoria and Gender Change in Disorders of Sex Development/Intersex Conditions.”

enlarged utricule (a homologue to the vagina), and undescended testes.<sup>295</sup> In extremely rare cases (approximately 1 in 20,000<sup>296</sup>), boys are born with bilateral anorchia, the absence of both testes. The condition, also called vanishing testes syndrome, occurs when the newly formed testes disappear during gestational weeks twelve and fourteen. In the U.S., recommended treatment includes prosthetic testes, male hormones, and counseling.<sup>297</sup>

Other conditions cause a male to experience puberty late and/or to develop secondary sexual characteristics (i.e., those that appear during puberty) associated with females. In medical literature, delayed puberty refers to a girl or boy who shows no signs of pubertal development by the age of thirteen or fourteen. Sometimes, puberty occurs on its own by age eighteen. Other cases that do not resolve without treatment (e.g., long-term hormone replacement) include hypogonadotropic hypogonadism, hypergonadotropic hypogonadism, and androgen insensitivity syndrome.

Hypogonadotropic hypogonadism occurs when the hypothalamus has trouble secreting certain sex hormones. Causes include central nervous system problems (e.g., tumor), certain diseases (e.g., Hand-Schüller-Christian, histiocytosis X), developmental problems (e.g., optic dysplasia, cleft palate), isolated gonadotropic deficiency (e.g., Kallman syndrome), idiopathic hypopituitarism (a growth hormone deficiency sometimes caused by breech delivery), chronic diseases (e.g., Celiac, intractable asthma), malnutrition, anorexia nervosa, hypothyroidism, and genetic syndromes (e.g., Prader-Willi, Bardet-Biedl).

Hypergonadotropic hypogonadism interferes with the gonads' ability to produce sex hormones. Boys with Klinefelter syndrome, a relatively common type of hypergonadotropic hypogonadism, often develop gynecomastia. Boys born with undescended testicles, anorchia, or gonadal dysgenesis may also have hypergonadotropic hypogonadism.<sup>298</sup>

Androgen insensitivity syndrome (formerly called testicular feminization) occurs when a person has typical XY (i.e., male) chromosomes but responds partially or not at all to testosterone. Those with a partial response may be born with atypical genitalia or a "micropenis"

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<sup>295</sup> Braga and Salle, 270, 274.

<sup>296</sup> The rate is a "rough approximation" by Martin Bobrow and Malcolm H. Gough, "Bilateral Absence of Testes," *The Lancet* 295, no. 7642 (1970): 366, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(70\)90753-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(70)90753-1).

<sup>297</sup> U.S. National Library of Medicine, "Anorchia," in *A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia* (Bethesda, MD). <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001185.htm>.

<sup>298</sup> Chapter 15 in Gardner, *Greenspan's Basic & Clinical Endocrinology*.

and severe hypospadias (i.e., the opening of the urethra is not at the tip of the penis). Surgery is often preformed to change the genitalia so that they conform to one biological sex. When the surgery creates male genitalia, exogenous testosterone is often prescribed. In mild cases, a boy may develop gynaecomastia at puberty or have fertility problems later in life. Those with complete androgen insensitivity often have undescended testicles and female external genitalia but no uterus. These cases are often not diagnosed until puberty when breasts develop but menses do not occur. Sometimes complete androgen insensitivity syndrome is diagnosed at birth by swelling of the labia or an inguinal hernia.<sup>299</sup> A mutation of the gene that encodes androgen reception causes androgen insensitivity syndrome, and exact prevalence is unknown. While complete androgen insensitivity is rare and occurs in 1 of 20,000 to 64,000 people, mild and partial androgen insensitivity are more common.<sup>300</sup>

This overview has sketched some of the numerous conditions that might have caused a person to be viewed as a congenital eunuch in the Roman Empire. Medical practitioners today almost always recommend rapid assessment and treatment of conditions that cause babies to be born with atypical genitalia, even when treatment is not medically necessary.<sup>301</sup> In antiquity, people also viewed such anomalous conditions as problems. Their understandings of the nature of the problems differed of course, as did their solutions, which were sometimes drastic.

### Ancient Perspectives

Subsequent chapters will discuss the abundant evidence for the existence of literal eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people (Mt 19:12b) and eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs (Mt 19:12c). The ancient evidence for literal eunuchs who were engendered that way from mother's womb (Mt 19:12a), however, is less clear. In my research I encountered no

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<sup>299</sup> Ieuan A. Hughes et al., "Androgen insensitivity syndrome," *The Lancet* 380, no. 9851 (June 13, 2012), [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)60071-3](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60071-3). My warm thanks to Dr. Todd Rice for bringing androgen insensitivity syndrome to my attention. Email message to author, March 6, 2020.

<sup>300</sup> Nicolás Mendoza and Miguel Angel Motos, "Androgen insensitivity syndrome," *Gynecological Endocrinology* 29, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3109/09513590.2012.705378>.

<sup>301</sup> This is a deeply contentious issue. See, e.g., Katrina Alicia Karkazis, *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); David A. Rubin, *Intersex Matters: Biomedical Embodiment, Gender Regulation, and Transnational Activism*, SUNY Series in Queer Politics and Cultures, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017); Georgiann Davis, *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis*, Biopolitics, (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2015); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender, Politics, and the Construction of Sexuality*, Second paperback edition, Updated edition. ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020).

mention of a eunuch *in utero* prior to the First Gospel. There are only scattered texts, listed in this section, that might be compared to Mt 19:12a. That does not mean that congenital eunuchs did not exist. My point is that Matthew's expression εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως was distinctive.

In antiquity, a variety of perspectives existed about congenital anomalies and congenital eunuchs. Writers did not agree about who these eunuchs were and how they came to be. Some focused on problematic seed. Others paid closer attention to the womb or considered astronomical signs. Some ascribed the "fault" for congenital problems to one or both parents. Authors differed on the particulars (e.g., Whose seed caused the problem? Was there a dearth or an overabundance of seed? Was the seed diseased or cold?), and several listed other causes (e.g., the mother's womb, accidents), but all believed that something had gone wrong.

Procreative beliefs are historically and culturally specific. According to a common understanding in industrialized countries, procreation occurs when the genetic material from male sperm successfully fertilizes a female egg after a male-female couple has had intercourse while the woman is ovulating. However, not everyone views procreation as a biological process based on the sexual activity of autonomous heterosexual couples. Ancient audiences certainly did not understand procreation in that way. And even when procreation is understood as the fertilization of an egg by sperm, sexual intercourse is not requisite: some women conceive through assisted reproductive technologies (ART), others with a sperm donor in a fertility clinic or at home.<sup>302</sup>

Procreative understandings stem from diverse beliefs about bodily substances, kinship relations, and cosmology. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins argues that procreation is "the culturally constructed process by which life comes into being. . . how life comes into being; what it is composed of; who or what the agents are; what the person is, both male and female; and how persons are related to one another, the nonhuman world, and the cosmos."<sup>303</sup> Sahlins claims that substances involved in creation (e.g., semen, blood, milk, spirit) are not only physiological, they

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<sup>302</sup> See, e.g., the CDC's definition and discussion of ART: Division of Reproductive Health National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, "What is Assisted Reproductive Technology?," (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). <https://www.cdc.gov/art/whatis.html>. On sperm donation trends during the pandemic, see Nellie Bowles, "The Sperm Kings Have a Problem: Too Much Demand," *The New York Times* (New York, NY).

<sup>303</sup> Marshall Sahlins, "Birth Is the Metaphor," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 3 (2012): 674.

are “meaningful social endowments that situate the child in a broadly extended and specifically structured field of kin relationships.”<sup>304</sup> As we shall see, congenital eunuchs did not always have a clear place in society, and no one was quite sure who they were and how they came into being.

*Who were these eunuchs?*

*They might be monsters.*

In the early Roman Empire, people with congenital anomalies were often viewed with fear, disgust, and sometimes, pity. Illustrative is Platonist writer Plutarch of Chaeronea’s (c. 50 – 120 CE) description of the unusual predilection of some Romans

who, being unaffected with any thing that is beautiful and pretty, either in the works of art or nature, despise the most curious pieces in painting or sculpture, and the fairest boys and girls that are there exposed to sale, as not worth their money; therefore they much frequent the monster-market (τῶν τεράτων ἀγοράν), looking after people of distorted limbs and preternatural shapes, of three eyes and pointed heads, and mongrels

Where kinds of unlike form oft blended be  
Into one hideous deformity (κάποφώλιον τέρας; quoting Euripides’  
*Theseus*).

All which are sights so loathsome, that they themselves would abhor them were they compelled often to behold them. And if they who curiously enquire into those vicious deformities and unlucky accidents that may be observed in the lives of other men would only bind themselves to a frequent recollection of what they had seen and heard, there would be found very little delight or advantage in such ungrateful and melancholy reflections. (*On Being a Busybody* 10 [Helmbold, LCL])

Plutarch’s descriptor for the “monster market” of enslaved individuals with congenital anomalies—“τέρας”—is the same word eighth-century BCE poet Homer used for the Gorgon (*Iliad* 5.742). Both uses fall under LSJ’s secondary definition of τέρας as “in concrete sense, *monster*,” with the sub-definition “*monstrous birth, monstrosity*.” According to the primary definition, τέρας is a “*sign, wonder, marvel, portent*,” such as “a *sign* of coming battle” and

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<sup>304</sup> Sahlins, “Birth Is the Metaphor,” 674.

“esp. of *signs* in heaven.”<sup>305</sup> In this sense, “monstrous” births could signal disaster. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (d. c. 420s BCE), for example, the birth in Sardis of a mule with both male and female genitals from a (sterile) mule—and Xerxes the Great’s refusal to acknowledge the portent—helped predict his failed attempt to invade Greece (7.57).<sup>306</sup>

Many Romans considered a person born with anomalies to be a bad omen, and hence, a threat to society. Certain curses and oaths included the invocation that women deliver monstrous babies.<sup>307</sup> According to the Twelve Tables, an early Roman legal code developed circa 450 BCE, a child with visible abnormalities should be killed quickly.<sup>308</sup>

Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BCE/1 CE – 65 CE) defended the practice of killing newborns associated with bad omens and the drowning of weak and monstrous (*monstruosus*) babies as reasonable because it separated the useless (*inutil*) from the healthy (*sanus*) (*On Anger* 1.15.2).<sup>309</sup> His father Seneca the Elder (c. 50 BCE – c. 40 CE) shared the following example from a hypothetical case in which Seneca’s friend, the well-respected Spanish orator Clodius Turrinus, defended a man who was accused of harming the state because he took abandoned babies, removed or destroyed body parts, then raised the children to become beggars:

Many fathers are in the habit of exposing offspring who are no good (*inutil*). Some right from birth are damaged (*mulco*) in some part of their bodies, weak and hopeless. Their parents throw them out (*proicio*) rather than expose (*expono*) them. Some even cast out home-bred slave children (*vernula*), when they are born under an evil star or are physically weak (*invalidus*). This man reared some in this category, and removed (*aufero*) with his own hand parts capable of making each individual specially pitiful. (*Declamations* 10.4.16 [Winterbottom, LCL])

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<sup>305</sup> It is from this term that teratology, the modern study of congenital anomalies (often called abnormalities), derives.

<sup>306</sup> Discussed by Fiona Mitchell, "Monstrous Omens in Herodotus' Histories" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient Literature, 2013), 9. Similarly, Plato's Socrates described the hypothetical birth of a calf from a horse instead of a colt as a monstrosity; such offspring, he claimed, would be against nature (*παρὰ φύσιν*) (*Cra.* 393b-c).

<sup>307</sup> For examples, see Jean-Jacques Aubert, "Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30, no. 3 (1989): 440-41.

<sup>308</sup> Table IV, first line: *cito necatus tamquam ex XII tabulis insignis ad deformitatem puer* (Cicero, *On the Laws* 3.8.19).

<sup>309</sup> Quoted in Christian Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World: A Social and Cultural History* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 40.

Turrinus relied on his audience's familiarity with the practice of abandoning newborns with congenital anomalies. He mentioned the common practice to support his claim that the defendant showed compassion. Unlike other parents who expose or throw out their children, the defendant raised and physically improved abandoned babies who would have died otherwise. Turrinus and Seneca do not challenge the legality of child exposure.

Among those viewed as monsters and portents were people who exhibited both male and female characteristics.<sup>310</sup> Sometimes they were killed. Greek historian Diodorus Siculus of Sicily (c. 90 – c. 30 BCE) wrote about two intersex adults (ἀνδρόγυνος) who were burned alive (frag. 32.12). In the first case, the husband brought suit against his wife before the Senate. The terrified senators followed the recommendation of Etruscan diviners to burn her alive. Diodorus objected that the senators misunderstood the wife's illness (νόσος). This was no monster (τέρας), he claimed; they acted based on fear and superstition. According to Roman historian Livy (59 BCE – 17 CE), when senators learned about a twelve-year-old intersex (*semimarem*) child in Umbria, they insisted that the child be kept away from Roman soil and put to death as soon as possible (*History of Rome* 39.22). Following Livy, late antique writer Julius Obsequens<sup>311</sup> mentioned eight separate drownings of intersex (*androgynus*) babies and children in various Roman territories. In two of those cases, virgins purified the city afterward.<sup>312</sup> Diodorus, Livy, and Obsequens's writings indicate that Roman authorities responded vigorously to eliminate the perceived threat posed by individuals who did not appear to correspond fully to a male or female body.

As I argued in Chapter 1, εὐνοῦχος almost always referred to a castrated male. Unsurprisingly, I found no references to a born εὐνοῦχος (or *spado*) who was put to death because of a genital anomaly. There are, though, scattered references to congenital eunuchs as monsters.<sup>313</sup> And in one suggestive text, rhetorician Quintilian hinted that a newborn who resembled a eunuch would be considered a monster. Nature makes men more attractive than

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<sup>310</sup> An androgynous child born in Sinuessa required the atonement of full-grown victims as well as prayers. Livy, *History of Rome*, 27.11.

<sup>311</sup> Scholars disagree about when he wrote (between the second and fourth centuries) and the extent to which he used Livy as a source. For discussion, see Susanne William Rasmussen, *Public Portents in Republican Rome*, Analecta Romana Instituti Danici, (Rome, IT: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2003), 21.

<sup>312</sup> Obsequens mentions one in Luna (22), one in the Ferentino region followed by three purifications by nine virgins (27), one in the Forum Vessanum (32), two in Rome (47, 48), one in Urbinum (50), an eight-year-old in Roman territory (34), and a ten-year-old in Saturnia followed by purification of twenty-seven virgins (36).

<sup>313</sup> For example, Joseph. *AJ* 4.40; Pliny *NH* 12.5, in a double entendre.



eunuchs, Quintilian argued, “nor can I believe that Providence is so indifferent to its own work as to make weakness (*debilitas*) an excellence, or that the knife can lend beauty to a creature that would be a monster (*monstrum*) if it was born like that” (*Inst.* 5.12).<sup>314</sup> Lucian’s character Diocles makes a similar point in *The Eunuch* by arguing that as a eunuch (εὐνουῆχος), his rival for the philosophical chair should also be barred from temples, holy water bowls, and public assemblies because it was an ill-omened (δυσσιώνιστος) and ill-met (δυσάντητος) sight to encounter a eunuch, who was (among Diocles’s other descriptors) monstrous (τερατώδης) (6).

*They were born with “deformed” or atypical genitals.*

In his discussion of the first cause of sterility in *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle provided a possible analogue to Matthew’s eunuchs in utero. He stated that both men and women are sterile (ἄγονος) from birth (ἐκ γενεῆς) if they have deformities (πηρώω) in the body parts used for copulation. Instead of growing beards, men remain like eunuchs (εὐνουχίας) and women do not experience puberty (2.7, 746b22-25). Aristotle recognized that some living beings were born with both masculine and feminine external genitals (αἰδοῖον), which he considered a redundancy. When this happened, only one functioned; the non-functional genital was contrary to nature (παρὰ φύσιν) (4.4, 772b27-32).<sup>315</sup> He explained that “[w]herever a deficiency occurs in such parts as e.g. an extremity or some other limb, we must take it that the cause is the same as it is if the whole of the forming creature suffers abortion—and abortions of fetations frequently occur” (4.4, 772b36-773a2 [Peck, LCL]).

Wealthy aristocrat and politician Polemon of Laodicea (c. 88 – 144 CE) wrote about congenital eunuchs in *Physiognomy*, a popular instruction manual about judging character from physical appearance and deportment.<sup>316</sup> In the following passage from the Leiden Arabic<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Similarly, see Seneca the Younger, *Natural Questions* 7.2-3, cited by Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 368n57.

<sup>315</sup> In *GA* 4.4, 773a21-27, he also states: “There have been instances of boys in whom the termination of the penis has not coincided with the passage through which the residue from the bladder passes out, so that the passage came too low; and on this account they sit in order to pass water, and when the testes are drawn up they seem from a distance to have both male and female generative organs.” Aristotle’s description of the atypical location of the urethral opening corresponds with contemporary medical descriptions of hypospadias. See, e.g., the Mayo Clinic’s overview: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/hypospadias/symptoms-causes/syc-20355148>

<sup>316</sup> Simon Swain, “Introduction” in Simon Swain, ed., *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1-2.

translation, Polemon warns about the evil nature of eunuchs, especially those born without testicles:

You have learnt that eunuchs are an evil people, and in them is greed and an assembly of various (evil) qualities. Know also that eunuchs whom people castrate have an inner nature, colour, and body that change from their condition before castration. As for those born without testicles, other things apply to them different from those who are castrated. No one is more perfect in evil than those who are born without testicles. If, then, you see the eyes that I described to you at the beginning of this account, you will find their owner is similar to eunuchs. (B3 [Hoyland])

Polemon targeted his rival, the orator and philosopher Favorinus of Arles (c. 85 – 155 CE), who may have been a congenital eunuch. Lucian’s Bagoas in *The Eunuch*, likely based on Favorinus, had unmanly characteristics from birth. One of the judges argues that Bagoas’s case was worse than that of “a cut priest (βάκηλος<sup>318</sup>), for the latter had at least known manhood (ἀνδρεία) once, but the former had been marred (ἀποκόπτω) from the very first (ἐξ ἀρχῆς εὐθύς) (9 [Harmon, LCL]). As the term ἀποκόπτω refers to excision, it is unclear what Lucian imagined occurred with baby Bagoas (Was he castrated as an infant? Were one or both testicles damaged?).

With one exception, rabbinic texts about the *saris hammah* do not focus on anomalous genitals.<sup>319</sup> That exception, *t. Yebam.* 10:3, refers to a man with one testicle as a *saris hammah*.

*They were eunuchs by nature.*

In the mid-second century CE, travel writer Pausanias mentioned poet Hermesianax’s description of Attis as “not child-bearing from mother’s begetting” (οὐ τεκνοποιὸς ὑπὸ τῆς μητρὸς τεχθεῖη) (7.17.9). In Chapter 1, I shared jurist Ulpian’s capacious definition of *spado*: “*Spado* is the general term; under that name are eunuchs by nature (*natura spado*), also *thlibiae* [from θλιβίας] and *thlasiae* [from θλασίας], but it also incorporates any other type of eunuch (*spado*)” (DIG. 50.16.128, my translation). Ulpian’s definition corresponds with early Christian writers who described the eunuchs of Mt 19:12a as eunuchs from birth (ἐκ γενετῆς) or by nature

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<sup>317</sup> Polemon’s original Greek text, as well as the earliest Arabic translation, have been lost. The most reliable extant translation of *Physiognomy* is a fourteenth century Arabic manuscript in Leiden. For discussion of the Leiden translation and others, see the introduction of Swain, *Polemon's Physiognomy*, 4-6.

<sup>318</sup> Lucian refers to *galli*. See also his *Saturnalia* 2.12 and *Pseudologista* 17. Athenaeus also uses the term βάκηλος pejoratively for a sophist who dances at a dinner party (4.12, 134c).

<sup>319</sup> I will discuss other rabbinic texts about the *saris hammah* in this section.

(ἐκ φύσεως; *natus*). Without using Matthew’s terminology, Eusebius described Dorotheus as a eunuch by nature born that way (τὴν φύσιν δὲ ἄλλως εὐνοῦχος, οὕτω πεφυκὸς ἐξ αὐτῆς γενέσεως) (*Hist. eccl.* 7.32). He thought highly of Dorotheus, a presbyter in Antioch who had been honored by the emperor with oversight of the lucrative Tyrian purple dye industry.<sup>320</sup>

*They are males with delayed puberty.*

John Nolland correctly points out that in rabbinic writings, “it is not interest in the absence of testicles but interest in the absence of evidence of physical maturing that defines the *saris*” [*ḥammah*].<sup>321</sup> I mentioned that only one of twenty-five tannaitic texts concerning halakhic matters for a *saris ḥammah* offers a description.<sup>322</sup> That text, *T. Yebam.* 10:6, presents the *saris ḥammah* as a man who has not produced two pubic hairs by the age of twenty and has characteristics associated with women: beardless, smooth skin that does not produce steam when bathing in the cold on rainy days, and a thin voice indistinguishable from a woman’s.<sup>323</sup> Because the *saris ḥammah*’s body is cold (like a woman’s), his body produces no steam when he bathes on a wet, cold day. The author identifies the *saris ḥammah* by three female-coded characteristics, not his procreative capability.<sup>324</sup>

Third-century writer Philostratus referred to Favorinus as a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) but also as ἀνδρόθηλος (from ἀνὴρ, “man,” and θῆλυς, “female”) whose adult characteristics betrayed his birth as intersex: “He was born double-sexed (διφυῆς), a hermaphrodite (ἀνδρόθηλος), and this was plainly shown in his appearance; for even when he grew old he had no beard; it was evident

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<sup>320</sup> Eusebius listened to Dorotheus’s homilies and respected him as an educated man with training in rhetoric, grammar, and Hebrew. Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church: A New Translation*. trans. Jeremy M. Schott (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 5.

<sup>321</sup> Nolland does not specify which *saris*, but the *saris ḥammah* may be inferred from his larger discussion about “eunuchs by birth,” and his citation of *b. Yebam.* 79b, which discusses the *saris ḥammah* and *saris adam*. Nolland, *Matthew*, 778n49.

<sup>322</sup> Lev, “Genital Trouble,” 59-60. However, even though the first line of *t. Nid.* 6.2 refers more generally to *sarisim*, the *saris ḥammah* is implied. The tosefta reads: “A male of twenty years who has not produced two hairs, even if he produces them at a later date, [nevertheless] he is like a *saris* [eunuch] for all intents and purposes.” Translation by Lev, “Genital Trouble,” 387.

<sup>323</sup> The *saris ḥammah* had a female counterpart, the *’aylonit*, who did not experience physical puberty at the expected age. *T. Yebam.* 10.7 describes her as a woman with no breasts and thin hair and who has difficulty during sexual intercourse. For Rabbi Gamaliel, she has no *mons veneris* [an indeterminate term] and for Rabbi Eleazar, she has a thick voice that cannot be distinguished from a man’s. Sarra Lev argues that the *’aylonit* was the mirror image of the *saris ḥammah* and received her rabbinic sex/gender classification from him. Sarra Lev, “How the *’Aylonit* Got Her Sex,” *AJS Review* 31, no. 2 (2007): 297n1.

<sup>324</sup> Lev, “How the *’Aylonit* Got Her Sex,” 308. As Lev points out, this description of the *saris ḥammah* is consistent with typical Greco-Roman descriptions of eunuchs as gender crossers.

too from his voice which sounded thin, shrill, and high-pitched, with the modulations that nature bestows on eunuchs (εὐνοῦχος) also” (*Lives of the Sophists* 1.8 [Wright, LCL]). The last clause in Greek—ὡσπερ ἡ φύσις τοὺς εὐνούχους ἤρμοκεν—suggests that Favorinus was not a εὐνοῦχος, though he shared some characteristics. However, Philostratus then claimed that Favorinus called himself a eunuch and liked to share a witty saying about three paradoxes in his life: “Though he was a Gaul he led the life of a Hellene; a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος), he had been tried for adultery (μοιχεία); he had quarrelled with an Emperor [Hadrian] and was still alive” (1.8 [Wright, LCL]).

*How did they come to be?*

*Something went wrong in mother’s womb.*

The Hippocratic author of *Generation* listed six causes of a maimed (πηρόω) or diseased (νοσέω) fetus, all of which involved the mother and half of which concerned her womb (μήτρα): a narrow or constricted womb, a gaping womb, an external blow to the womb, a fall by the mother, some other violence suffered by the mother, or diseased seed produced by maimed parents. If the embryo attempted to move through too narrow a space *in utero*, it could become maimed in the same way that a tree blocked off by a stone could grow twisted or misshapen. If the fetus suffered a blow *in utero*, the body part that was hit could be damaged (*Generation* 9-11).

Plato’s famous comparison of a womb to a wandering creature is based on his assumption that when a womb (μήτρα) is fruitless (ἄκαρπος) for too long, it becomes dangerous and wanders (*Timaeus* 91c). In its desire for sex and procreation, a wandering womb causes multiple problems: it blocks passageways, including airways, and contributes to various diseases. As a separate entity that acts at will, the uterus appears to have a more critical procreative role than the woman whose body it inhabits.<sup>325</sup> For centuries, wandering womb theories maintained a tenacious hold. An exorcism amulet found in Beirut and dated to the last century BCE or first

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<sup>325</sup> In the immediately preceding context, Plato also described a man’s genitalia as a willful creature: “Wherefore in men the nature of the genital organs is disobedient and self-willed, like a creature that is deaf to reason, and it attempts to dominate all because of its frenzied lusts” (91b [Bury, LCL]).

century CE, as one example, commands a woman's womb, by the name of the living, unconquerable God, to remain in its place.<sup>326</sup>

*Something went wrong with the seed.*

Empedocles of Sicily (c. 494-434 BCE), the Hippocratic writers, Soranus, and Galen all traced anomalous births to the seed. While no complete text of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher and poet Empedocles remains, his embryological theories informed subsequent theorists. Aristotle quoted him extensively.<sup>327</sup> Empedocles's understanding of "monstrous" births of human and non-human animals was grounded in his cosmological theory. In the beginning, he wrote, disconnected organs and body parts wandered around. Divine forces brought them together in random, sometimes bizarre formations: creatures with two faces and two pairs of breasts, oxen with human faces, human children with oxen's heads, and dark creatures with a mixture of male and female parts (frag. B57, B59, B60, and B61).<sup>328</sup> The undesirable initial creations died out while the creatures that came together with matching limbs and organs survived (frag. B62 and Strasbourg D).<sup>329</sup> With respect to anomalous births in his own time, Empedocles posited five problems with the seed (i.e., sperm): too much, too little, a disturbance in its movement, its division into parts, or its deflection (Aetius 5.8.1).<sup>330</sup>

For the Hippocratic author of *Generation*, weak seed could emerge from the mother's or the father's corresponding weak parts (8). If weak seed predominated, the resulting child's parts

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<sup>326</sup> Christopher A. Faraone, "New Light on Ancient Greek Exorcisms of the Wandering Womb," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, no. Bd. 144 (2003): 191-93. Faraone compares this wandering womb exorcism amulet to four others with similar invocations. Three invoke the unnamed God of Jews and later Christians. The fourth replaces God with the Trinity, Mary, and John the Baptist. It is unclear if the woman who wore the Beirut amulet was Jewish; it was not uncommon for non-Jewish magicians to use the powerful god or his angels in their spells.

<sup>327</sup> In *GA*, for example, he frequently discusses and corrects Empedocles's theories, e.g., 722b, 723a, 731a, 747a-b, 764a-b, 765a, 769a, 777a, 779b.

<sup>328</sup> For discussion, see *Empedocles, the Extant Fragments*. trans. M. R. Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 49-56; Simon Trépanier, "From Wandering Limbs to Limbless Gods: Δαίμων as Substance in Empedocles," *Apeiron* 47, no. 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/DOI.10.1515/apeiron-2012-0033>.

<sup>329</sup> Elsewhere, however, Empedocles compared human and non-human animal generation to plants. Fire and the divine force of Strife caused the shoots of men and women to come up from the earth. Eventually, these shoots developed fully in utero. Aristotle pointed out that Empedocles was inconsistent here; he should have extended his theory about the combination of parts into monstrous formations to plants (*Ph.* 199b10-13), discussed by M.R. Wright in *Empedocles, the Extant Fragments*, 51.

<sup>330</sup> M. R. Wright, *The Presocratics: The Main Fragments in Greek with Introduction, Commentary & Appendix containing Text & Translation of Aristotle on the Presocratics* (Bristol, GB: Bristol Classical Press, 1985), 52. According to Empedocles, both mother and father contributed seed. He thought the parents' limbs and organs replicated as tiny miniatures within the seed, then combined *in utero* (Censorinus 5.4).

would resemble that parent's parts. Further, diseased seed produced by maimed (πηρόω) parents could produce a diseased (νοσέω) fetus (11). Under certain circumstances with maimed parents, the moisture from which the seed was formed could develop a disease. That seed—incomplete, weak, and maimed—would then produce maimed offspring. Because the Hippocratic writers compared eunuchs to women with respect to their smooth skin and relative hairlessness (*Nature of the Child* 9), we might infer that they considered the birth of babies with anomalous genitalia to be an issue of the quantity of the weaker female seed—not quite enough to be either clearly female or male.

*Nature's goal was not achieved.*

In Aristotle's embryological writings, nature creates nothing in vain. He accounted for congenital anomalies by explaining that failures (ἀμαρτία) occur when the final goal is not achieved (*Ph.* 2.8, 199b). Monstrosities (τέρας) may occur when nature makes an attempt to achieve a purpose but fails to achieve that purpose.<sup>331</sup> Such births are imperfections (ἀτέλειος) because they are unlike the parents. Offspring born without one part or with an extra part are contrary to nature (παρὰ φύσιν), although they are not random because they occur habitually (*GA* 4.4, 770b).<sup>332</sup> He compared these births to a "smoky" vine that occasionally produces black grapes; their appearance reflects an intermediate state between black and white and is a small alteration, not an alteration to a different nature.

*There was an accident.*

Soranus described a medical condition that may have been retractile testicles: "For we do not believe in lifting it [a four-month old] upon the shoulders and moving it about, since the testicles, if bruised, sometimes retract into the upper parts, sometimes dissolve and thus some

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<sup>331</sup> Discussed in Stasinou Stavrianeas, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Natural Teleology and Its Failures in Aristotle," in *Evil in Aristotle*, ed. Pavlos Kontos (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 51.

<sup>332</sup> Aristotle provided numerous examples of deficiencies in animals: missing toes, spleen, kidney, liver, or gall bladder (*GA* 771a) and compared deficiencies in parts to an abortion (770b; 772b-773a). He explained that for creatures born with two sets of (external) genitals—one masculine and one feminine—one of the redundant organs does not function because, being contrary to nature, it received insufficient nourishment and the other organ gained mastery.

boys become cryptorchids (Κρυψόρχις [from κρύπτω, “concealed,” and ὄρχις, “testicle”]), others eunuchs” (εὐνοῦχος) (*Gyn.* 2.40 [Temkin]).

*It was in the stars.*

The second-century CE astronomer and philosopher Claudius Ptolemy attributed the birth of eunuchs and intersex individuals to inauspicious astronomical movements:

And if the moon at rising applies to Mars, and if she also bears the same aspect to Mercury that Saturn does, while Mars again is elevated above her or is in opposition, the children born are eunuchs or hermaphrodites (εὐνοῦχοι ἢ ἑρμαφρόδιτοι) or have no ducts and vents (ἄτρογλοι καὶ ἄτρητοι). Since this is so, when the sun also is in aspect, if the luminaries and Venus are made masculine, the moon is waning, and the maleficent planets are approaching in the succeeding degrees, the males that are born will be deprived of their sexual organs or injured therein, particularly in Aries, Leo, Scorpio, Capricorn, and Aquarius, and the females will be childless and sterile. (*Tetrabiblos* 3.12 [Robbins, LCL])

In several recensions of the ancient biography *Alexander Romance*, Alexander the Great’s biological father, the Pharaoh Nectanebo, tells Olympias not to give birth to Alexander until the astronomical signs are aligned or her child will be a eunuch (1.12).<sup>333</sup>

*The gods willed it.*

There was a widespread understanding that gods and goddesses took an active role in the procreative process.<sup>334</sup> Abundant literary and material remains from across the ancient Mediterranean attest. For example, thousands of terracotta votive offerings of uteri and swaddled

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<sup>333</sup> In the fifth-century Armenian version, Nectanebos tells Olympias, “Be patient a little longer, Queen, for if you give birth now, your offspring will be castrated or deformed” (26) in Albert Mugrdich Wolohojian, *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1969). The *Alexander Romance* originated in the Hellenistic period, but the earliest extant Greek manuscript dates to the third century CE. Krzysztof Nawotka, *The Alexander Romance by Pseudo-Callisthenes: A Historical Commentary*, Mnemosyne Supplements: Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature, (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017), 4.

<sup>334</sup> Octavian’s mother Atia, like Alexander’s mother Olympias, claimed to be impregnated by Apollo (Suetonius, *Deified Augustus* 94, cited in Ehrman 2014, 29). Male gods often begat sons and daughters after having sex—consensual or not—with human women. Pindar describes Zeus’s son Heracles’s valiant defense of himself and his twin brother after Hera, in a jealous rage, sought to kill the newborn children of the mortal Alcmena with snakes (*Nemean Odes* 1). For discussion about divine sonship in the New Testament, see, e.g., Adela Yarbro Collins on Mark’s use of “Son of God” in light of Greek and Roman usage Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark and His Readers: The Son of God Among Greeks and Romans,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 2 (2000).

infants dating from the fourth to early first-century BCE across Italy strongly suggest that women sought divine assistance in conception and childbirth.<sup>335</sup> Another example, from the mid-second century CE, comes from travel writer Pausanias's description of a grove of trees near a sanctuary of Artemis Kalliste in Arcadia, Greece. The domesticated trees and the wild ones represent, respectively, the fruitful women and non-fruit bearing young women Artemis protects (8.35.8).<sup>336</sup> A third example, from the same time frame but in Asia Minor, is of Isis stating in an aretalogy: "I brought together woman and man. I appointed women to bring their infants to birth in the tenth month."<sup>337</sup> Her devotees, like Artemis's, knew that she oversaw conception and childbirth. Accordingly, one of Isis's epithets was "fruit-bearing" (καρποφόρος).<sup>338</sup>

Philosophers also discussed the roles of gods in procreation. Empedocles, for example, described how Aphrodite, the divine force of Love, prompts conception by pushing a male toward a female, thereby causing a union of the couple's seed, after which Neikos, the divine force of Strife, separates body parts and gender, resulting in an embryo.<sup>339</sup> In *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates speaks of immortal souls that, after tending the gods, fall to earth and enter into men (246-250).<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Emma-Jayne Graham, "The Making of Infants in Hellenistic and Early Roman Italy: A Votive Perspective," *World Archaeology* 45, no. 2 (2013): 219. See also Rebecca Miller Ammerman, "Children at Risk: Votive Terracottas and the Welfare of Infants at Paestum," *Hesperia Supplements* 41 (2007).

<sup>336</sup> Discussed by Helen King, "Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women," in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, ed. Laura K. McClure (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 122-23.

<sup>337</sup> Translated by Frederick C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953). Cited in Ross Shepard Kraemer, ed., *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2004), 457.

<sup>338</sup> Birgitte Bøgh, "The Graeco-Roman Cult of Isis," in *The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*, ed. Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen, Olav Hammer, and David A. Warburton (Durham, GB: Acumen, 2013), 229 and 38n6. Aristophanes uses the same "fruit bearing" epithet for Demeter (*Frogs* 384): ἄγε νυν ἑτέραν ὕμνων ἰδέαν τὴν καρποφόρον βασιλείαν Δήμητρα θεᾶν ἐπικοσμοῦντες ζαθέαις μολπαῖς κελαδεῖτε. In a discussion of marital "sowing," Plutarch praises Sophocles's epithet "fruitful Cythera" (εὐκαρπον Κυθήρεια) for Aphrodite (*Advice to Bride and Groom* 144b).

<sup>339</sup> For discussion of previous scholarship on Empedoclean embryology and zoogony, see Laura Gemelli Marciano, "Empedocles' Zoogony and Embryology" (paper presented at the The Empedoclean Kosmos: Structure, Process and the Question of Cyclicity. Proceedings of the Symposium Philosophiae Antiquae Tertium Myconense, 6–13 July 2003, Part 1: Papers, 2005). *The Empedoclean Cosmos: Structure, Process and the Question of Cyclicity: Proceedings of the Symposium Philosophiae Antiquae Tertium Myconense* (edited by Apostolos L. Pierris. Patras, Greece: Institute for Philosophical Research, 2005): 373-404.

<sup>340</sup> Aristotle appears inconsistent with respect to divine involvement in generation. While he argued that only a human being could generate another human being, he also claimed that a male procreator is "better and more divine" than a female because only he contributes the principle of movement. The gods—or a god—are implied. David Balme raises the complex issue of Aristotle's understanding of *nous*, a divine or eternal source necessary for embryological development. David M. Balme, "Human Is Generated by Human," *The Human Embryo* (1990): 22n2.



Matthew's audiences who were familiar with biblical accounts knew about God's role in procreation. Biblical texts present God as the author of all life. In the LXX, God institutes and undergirds the entire earthly process by opening and closing the womb and creating embryos. Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden point out that in the Old Testament, as in the ancient Near East, "[t]he default state of humanity is not fertile. God must 'open the womb.'"<sup>341</sup> It is through God, the first woman says, that she conceived and acquired Cain (Gen 4:1), and God raised up seed for her in Seth instead of Abel after Cain's fratricide (4:25). The townsfolk and elders extend a blessing to Boaz that the LORD grant children to Ruth as he had to Rachel, Leah, and Tamar (Rt 4:11-12). The next verse confirms that the LORD granted Ruth conception after Boaz entered her.

In continuity with LXX texts, New Testament writings acknowledge God's control over the conception and birth of children.<sup>342</sup> When Paul offers Abraham as a model of faithfulness for his recipients in Rome, he reminds them of the patriarch's trust in God's ability to honor his promise (of innumerable descendants) in spite of Abraham's advanced age and Sarah's barrenness (Rom 4:19-21; cf. Gen 17). By Matthew's account, not Joseph but the Holy Spirit begets Jesus in Mary (Mt 1:20), a child who will be called "God with us" (Mt 1:23). God pre-selects and/or names Jesus and other men before their birth (e.g., Lk 1:15; 2:21; 1 Pet 1:20; Gal 1:15; cf. Isa 49:1; Jer 1:5). Occasionally, God also creates men imperfect in utero (e.g., Acts 3:2; cf. Ps 57:5). I will return to wombs and God's role in the following section.

### **Mt 19:12a in Light of Matthew**

#### Diminishment of Earthly Households

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<sup>341</sup> Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 230. Andrew T. Lincoln cites the following passages where God takes an active role: Job 31:15; 10:8-12; Ps 139:16; Jer 1:5; Isa 44:2, 24; 49:1-6. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 84-86. Divine will appears clearly in Gen 1:11-12, 22, 27-29 and 2:18-24. God also withholds children. Jacob, angry at Rachel, claims that he doesn't know why God withheld fruit from her womb (Gen 30:2).

<sup>342</sup> The same is true of Talmudic texts. As Gwynn Kessler argues, traditional "one seed" and "two seed" medical theories do not capture rabbinic understandings of conception in which God inscribed Jewishness *in utero*. Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

The Matthean Jesus focuses intently on the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. His life, teachings, death, and resurrection all serve to save God's people from their sins (1:21) before the end and the final judgment. Everything else is relative in importance, including marriage, child bearing, child raising, and existing familial commitments. Jesus demonstrates throughout the gospel, in his teaching and actions, that there is one thing that truly matters: striving for the kingdom of heaven by doing the will of God. The eunuchs of Mt 19:12a support Matthew's larger project of relativizing earthly households by discouraging human procreativity.

### *Problematic Conceptions, Dangerous Births, Fragile New Lives*

Matthew's apocalyptic vision includes sinister images of conception, birth, and nursing. He associates a woman's early labor with wars around the world, famines, and earthquakes (24:7-8). When the end comes, it will be terrible for pregnant and nursing women (24:14,19). In addition to these eschatological images, Matthew associates other disturbing images with conception, birth, and infants. Herod the Great systematically kills all infants two and under in Bethlehem and its vicinity (2:16). Matthew interprets this catastrophe as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's words about Rachel's grief for her dead children (2:17-18). This tragedy could not have been averted. Jesus's infant life was also in jeopardy. The angel's warnings, and Joseph's obedience to them, saved Jesus from his would-be killers (2:13-15,19-23).

Outside the genealogy, the evangelist mentions only four physical conceptions or births: Jesus's (1:18-25; 2:1-4), John's (11:11), Judas's (26:24), and eunuchs' in mother's womb (19:12a). In each case, the male(s) faces an early and/or violent end to physical continuity: respectively, crucifixion, decapitation, hanging, and figurative castration (i.e., cessation of a procreative cycle). None appears to have a wife or children.

The Matthean Jesus also shares rich metaphors about the generation of new life gone wrong and the outcome of spiritual non-procreativity. When Jesus curses an unfruitful fig tree—"Never, into eternity, shall fruit be generated from you!" (21:19: literal translation mine), it instantly withers (ξηραίνω). There are two notable redactional differences between Mark and Matthew. Whereas Mark focused on the fig tree's death (i.e., "withered away to its roots" 11:20) and the fact that Jesus's curse caused its death (11:21), Matthew focused on the speed of the withering (παραχρημα) and directed the curse at the non-procreator. ξηραίνω has a lexical meaning of "dry up" and indicates barrenness. This is the same term the LXX uses in Isa 56:3:

“and do not let the eunuch say that I am a dried up tree.” Whereas the Markan Jesus curses the fig tree indirectly—“May no one ever eat fruit from you again” (11:14), the Matthean Jesus curses the tree’s generative ability. The fig tree (συκῆ) was a metaphor for a man’s phallus in Greek literature and was often paired with a branch or fruit to denote his entire external genitalia.<sup>343</sup> As Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden have argued, among the diverse perspectives about procreation among nascent Jewish and Christian communities, barrenness was understood by some communities as a privileged eschatological sign.<sup>344</sup>

The Matthean Jesus often speaks of problematic seeds, fruit-bearers, and wheat. In his parables, seed with no root gets scorched (καυματίζω) and dries up (ξηραίνω 13:6). Other newly planted seed gets choked (πνίγω 13:7). The weeds of the field will be uprooted (ἐκρίζω: 13:29; cf. 15:13) and burned (κατακαίω 13:30).<sup>345</sup> Trees that do not produce fruit will be cut down (ἐκκόπτω) and thrown into the fire (3:10; 7:19). The language of scorching, choking, cutting down, and burning (εἰς πῦρ) is violent. The respective outcomes of the problematic seed, fruit-bearers, and wheat all evoke images of eternal punishment.

Matthew’s images of conception, birth, and new life are not unremittingly negative, however. There are positive metaphors of new life that I will discuss shortly.

### *Children and the Kingdom of Heaven*

Jesus welcomes children into the kingdom, but he does not encourage anyone to have them. As discussed, the evangelist connects conception and childbearing with the eschaton. There is no evidence that Jesus or his disciples have children.<sup>346</sup>

Twice Matthew directly links children, like eunuchs, with the kingdom of heaven. One of these occurs immediately after the eunuch verse. People bring children to Jesus so that he may lay hands on them and pray (19:13). Although the disciples admonish (ἐπιτιμάω) them, Jesus responds with the imperative: “allow the children to come to me and do not hinder them, for to such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven” (19:14, translation mine). Here Jesus speaks about actual children who have a place in the kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>343</sup> Henderson, *Maculate Muse*, 118, citing Antiphanes 98 and Pherecrates 97

<sup>344</sup> Candida Moss and Joel Baden call attention to this and to the link in the LXX between scorched plants and human infertility. Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 203.

<sup>345</sup> Only Matthew has the parable of the weeds of the field (13:24-30) and its explanation (13:36-43).

<sup>346</sup> The disciples’ treatment of the children in 19:13 suggests that they view children as an obstacle.

In Chapter 18, Jesus sets a child in the middle of his disciples to teach them about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. He expects his followers to abase (ταπεινώω) themselves like the child (18:4) and to receive believing little ones in his name (18:5). They must not act as a stumbling block (σκανδαλίζω)<sup>347</sup> or despise little ones (μικροί τουῦτοι) who believe in him. Anyone who does that would be better off drowned with a millstone around the neck (18:6). It is not the desire of his Father in heaven that one of these little ones be destroyed (ἀπόλλυμι 18:14). Here, the “little ones” are a metaphor for (new) disciples who need guidance and support to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus’s interactions with and words about children are almost always positive.<sup>348</sup> They are characterized by his healing and feeding and their recognition of his work. Jesus heals a boy and a girl tormented by a demon (17:14-20; 15:22-28) and resurrects a dead girl (9:18-19, 23-26). Children shout “Hosanna to the Son of David” in the Temple after Jesus heals blind and limping people who have come to him (21:14-15), which he interprets as fulfillment of Isaiah’s words about infants and nurslings from whose mouths God (implied) has rendered praise (21:16; cf. Ps 8:2). He also thanks his father that (metaphorical) infants have received his revelation about repentance and judgment, in contrast with the cursed, unrepentant cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (11:20-25).

The eunuchs of Mt 19:12a could not procreate. They were non-procreative from their origin. There was never a possibility that they could contribute physically to baby-making. By contrast, children, elderly men, women (cf. Gen 17:17), and other eunuchs theoretically had procreative potential at some time in life. Eunuchs from mother’s womb never had this potential.

Matthew’s placement of 19:13-15 directly after 19:12 was not accidental and might point to something else: children in the heavenly kingdom could represent Matthew’s eunuchs’ surrogate progeny. Jesus’s promise of a hundredfold for disciples who left property and family (19:29) might lend plausibility to my speculation, as could Jesus’s teaching: “For in the

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<sup>347</sup> I will discuss Matthew’s σκανδαλίζω language in Chapter 4.

<sup>348</sup> Jesus uses metaphorical children to chide the crowds for their profound misunderstanding and disrespect of himself and John the Baptist (11:7-19).

resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (22:30).<sup>349</sup>

### *Marriage in Light of the Eschaton*

While the evangelist never clarifies if Jesus marries, has sex, or makes babies, these are unlikely given Jesus’s semi-itinerant lifestyle, his gloomy view of human households, and his intense focus on his father’s work of preparing for the kingdom’s arrival by preaching, teaching, healing, and calling people to repentance and discipleship.

Although Jesus respects marriage as divinely instituted, he repeatedly associates marriage with blood, death, and end times (e.g., 22:2-14, 23-30; 24:38-39; 25:1-13).<sup>350</sup> He never recommends marrying. Jesus actively recruits male disciples to join his eschatological work and follow him. All but Peter appear to be unmarried.<sup>351</sup> He hopes that they, and anyone else interested, will leave their closest kin and property to follow him (4:18-22; 19:21-29). Jesus’s recruitment of the first disciples and later followers strengthens his movement but destabilizes existing households.

The creative work done in an earthly marriage according to both Genesis passages to which the Matthean Jesus alludes in 19:4-6—tilling the ground, being fruitful, and having dominion—must be subordinated to kingdom work. Matthew’s predecessor Paul, who also sought to build a unified group of believers in light of the eschaton, similarly discouraged adherents from marrying, remarrying, and having children on earth (1 Cor 7). Subsequent Christian writings develop this view to one logical conclusion: asceticism is an appropriate response for a Christian who wishes to live an earthly life for the kingdom of heaven (cf. 1 Tim 2).<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Mt 19:29 calls to mind Job’s unsettling reward of new progeny and property. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore’s suggest that metaphorical children supersede biological children and that actual progeny are replaced by spiritual fruit (3:8-10). Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, Semeia Studies (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 75, 91.

<sup>350</sup> See Marianne Blickenstaff, *While the Bridegroom Is with Them: Marriage, Family, and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew* (London, GB: T&T Clark International, 2005).

<sup>351</sup> As Amy-Jill Levine pointed out to me in an earlier draft of this dissertation, Peter’s wife never appears in Matthew; he could be a widower, divorced, or separated.

<sup>352</sup> Other New Testament writings urged the opposite. 1 Tim 2:15, for example, asserts that a woman will be saved through childbearing (τεκνογονία) if they remain in faith, love, sanctification, and with self-control.

### *Family Betrayals, Rejections, Displacements, and Murder*

In light of the eschaton, family relationships will break down. Jesus warns of fratricide, prolicide, and parricide (10:21). Citing the prophet Micah, he tells the disciples bluntly that he has come armed to sunder family members: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (10:34-36; cf Mic 7:6). The translation “set against” weakens the force of διχάζω. With his metaphorical sword, Jesus will sever these bonds. Parents invite an eternal curse on themselves and their children (27:25). A mother encourages her daughter to murder a prophet (14:6-11), the Pharisees and scribes resemble their murderous fathers (23:30-33). They are as deadly as vipers (3:7; 12:34; 23:33) who commit matricide at birth.<sup>353</sup>

After examining Matthew’s use of πατήρ language for God, Julian Sheffield concluded that the language underscores God’s fatherhood but displaces human fathers. Jesus repeatedly calls God, not Joseph, his father, and Joseph disappears from the narrative after Chapter 2. The first disciples Jesus summons are two pairs of brothers. James and John leave their father in the boat to carry on the family’s work of mending nets. Matthew intensifies the pathos by mentioning their father twice (4:21, 22). Later, when a disciple wants to follow Jesus after burying his father, Jesus rebuffs him with a cryptic statement: “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Mt 8:22; cf. 15:4). The man must make an instantaneous, difficult decision about his primary loyalty. One is not worthy (ἄξιος, 2x) of Jesus if love for father or mother exceeds love of him (10:37), and to be unworthy leads to judgment and death (3:8-12; 22:8; cf. 22:12-14). Jesus instructs his disciples to “call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” (23:9).

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<sup>353</sup> On which, see Craig S. Keener, “‘Brood of Vipers’ (Matthew 3.7; 12.34; 23.33),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005).

## Procreation and Mt 19:12a

Earlier in this chapter, I shared Marshall Sahlins's claim that procreation is a "culturally constructed process by which life comes into being. . . how life comes into being; what it is composed of; who or what the agents are; what the person is, both male and female; and how persons are related to one another, the nonhuman world, and the cosmos" and that the substances involved, whatever they may be, are "meaningful social endowments that situate the child in a broadly extended and specifically structured field of kin relationships."<sup>354</sup> Sahlins' theory provides a helpful point of entry into Matthew's rich procreative language. Taking my cue from him, I will argue that Matthew's eunuchs *in utero* were engendered eunuchs in their mother's womb. They alert Matthew's audiences to a different, compelling procreative cycle. The most essential procreation that happens in Matthew is not baby-making; it is disciple-making.

### *How does life come into being for Matthew's congenital eunuchs?*

Life comes into being in the First Gospel by God's creative design and (usually) through human agents. Matthew never depicts God as a direct participant in sexual encounters, but he repeatedly highlights God's role as creator. When Jesus speaks of the judgment, he says the righteous will inherit the kingdom prepared for them at the world's foundation (καταβολή; 25:34).<sup>355</sup> During his polemical engagement with Pharisees about grounds for divorce, Jesus cites Gen 1:27 in his question: "Have you not read that the creator (ὁ κτίσας) from the beginning made them male and female?" (Mt 19:4/LXX Gen 1:27).<sup>356</sup> Matthew follows neither the LXX ὁ θεός nor Mark's implicit pronoun for God (Mk 10:6), and whereas Mark focuses on the timing ("from the beginning of creation, [he] made them male and female"), Matthew emphasizes God's role as creator of gendered human beings with the substantival participle ὁ κτίσας ("the one who has created," "the creator").

The Matthean God, who has no womb and presumably came from no womb, nonetheless controls all wombs. God continues generating human beings after his primordial creation of the cosmos and first couple by taking an active role in human conception. He predetermined both

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<sup>354</sup> Sahlins, "Birth Is the Metaphor," 674.

<sup>355</sup> The term can be a metaphor for procreation. See, e.g., Heb 11:11.

<sup>356</sup> LXX Gen 1:27: καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν, ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς. Mark 10:6: ἀπὸ δὲ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς. Matthew 19:4: ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε ὅτι ὁ κτίσας ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς.

Jesus's and John the Baptist's existence centuries before they were born (1:23; 2:5-6; 3:3). He also generates new life, or rebirth, by raising his dead son (16:21; 17:9,23; 20:19; 28:5-7; cf. other dead saints 27:52-54).<sup>357</sup>

The most conspicuous signifier of God's generativity in Matthew is his title 'Father.' At forty-four occurrences to Mark's four, Matthew displays a clear redactional preference.<sup>358</sup> Jesus, the most dramatic result, calls God "my father" sixteen times.<sup>359</sup> The angel's explanation to Joseph (1:20-23) and the naming of Jesus (1:23; cf. 28:20) confirm that Jesus was divinely begotten. Matthew reaffirms his paternity with a fulfillment citation (2:15) and a voice out of the heavens that states, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17) and again in 17:5.<sup>360</sup>

Jesus says nothing about the procreative substances from which congenital eunuchs were generated. He assigns no fault to father's seed, mother's seed, or mother's womb. Like the tannaitic rabbis, the Matthean Jesus does not speculate about what causes their condition, and, like the rabbis, he does not characterize them as lacking anything or having a defect. Jesus

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<sup>357</sup> Matthew also employs the metaphor of stones for God's generativity. When John the Baptist excoriates Pharisees and Sadducees who have come for baptism, he warns them not to make the presumptuous claim that Abraham is their father, "for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:9). Matthew's audiences probably knew about other gods who create human beings out of stones; with the goddess Themis's guidance, flood survivors Deucalion and Pyrrha throw the stones of mother earth to generate men and women. See, e.g., Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 42:28-31. Stones and rocks also appear in procreative contexts in biblical texts. Isaiah urges those who seek the Lord and pursue righteousness to "Look to the rock (*πέτρα*) from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug" (51:1). For the author of 1 Peter, Christ is a living (*ζάω*) stone (*λίθος*) to whom followers should come as newborns who long for pure, spiritual milk (2:2-5). And in Matthew, Jesus calls Peter the rock (*πέτρα*) upon which he will build his church (16:18).

<sup>358</sup> Julian Sheffield, "The Father in the Gospel of Matthew," in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (2001), 53. By Sheffield's count, God is called 'God' 51 times in the gospel, 'Father' 44 times, and 'Lord' 18 times (57). Only John employs 'Father' for God more often; Matthew's references to God as 'Father' encompass two-thirds of the synoptics'.

<sup>359</sup>Mt 7:21; 10:32-33; 11:27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 18:10,14,19,35; 20:23; 26:29,39,42,53. He also addresses God in the second person as "father" (11:25-26) and self-referentially as the Son of Man's father (16:27) and as the King (25:34).

<sup>360</sup> For the argument that this was direct impregnation, see Heikki Räisänen, "Begotten by the Holy Spirit," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), 330. Matthew further emphasizes God's paternity with Jesus's titles. Jesus refers to himself as "the son" of "my father" who has sole knowledge of the father. He has discretionary access as his father's intermediary (11:27; 18:35). Others call Jesus "son of God." The Devil taunts him twice during the temptation ("If you are a son of God..." 4:3,6). The chief priest asks Jesus directly if he is the Christ, the son of God (26:63). During the crucifixion, passers-by mock him as "son of God" (27:40), and chief priests, scribes and elders claim that Jesus called himself this in reference to his slippery response to the high priest ("You have said so" 27:43; cf. 26:24 for his identical response to Judas). After witnessing Jesus, then Peter, walk on water, the disciples worship Jesus and tell him "You are truly a son of God" (*θεοῦ υἱὸς* 14:33), as do the frightened centurion and other guards overseeing Jesus' crucifixion (27:54).



assigns no fault to eunuchs for being eunuchs in mother's womb. They just are: 'eunuch' is "what the person is, male and female." They are not monsters, although they may be portents of the eschaton.

Matthew does leave two important clues about how these eunuchs came into being. These clues help explain their relationships to each other, the world, and the cosmos. The first clue is γεννάω; the second, ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς.

The verb Matthew employs for the first group of eunuchs, but not for the other two, is γεννάω. Often rendered 'beget' or 'conceive,' γεννάω can refer to conception or birth, to prenatal or postnatal existence.<sup>361</sup> As the LSJ notes, γεννάω is a causal form of γίγνομαι, a term that itself refers to coming into existence. By contrast, the English terms 'conceive' and 'give birth' usually refer to a specific point in time.

Matthew uses γεννάω more than any other New Testament writer. It appears a staggering forty-three times in quick succession in Jesus's genealogy (e.g., 1:2: "Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren;" KJV). Although the KJV is over four centuries old, its 'begats' capture a feature of γεννάω that the majority of translations do not: masculine procreative agency. In Matthew, males beget. The popular NRSV translation "[was] the father of" obscures each man's active procreative role, if not his paternity. That so much begetting occurs in the first chapter alone focuses attention on masculine begetting in Matthew, including God's begetting of Jesus through the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20).

There are several ways to translate ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν. Each translation hinges on the interpretation of the preposition ἐκ with γεννάω. In the prevailing translation of English Bibles and commentaries—"out of" or "from" mother's womb—ἐκ is an ablative genitive of separation that denotes a point of departure. Accordingly, some males became eunuchs when they came "out of" mother's womb, at birth. The second and third options produce the same result: eunuchs who came into existence as eunuchs *in utero*. As an ablative genitive of source, ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς refers back to origin, that is, to conception. If ἐκ is a

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<sup>361</sup>Major lexicons—BDAG, Middle Liddel, and LSJ—have "beget" in their first entry. All three specify that begetting was usually a masculine domain. Compare with Luke's "son of." See also Maarten J.J. Menken's lexical and exegetical discussion (*Born of God* 2009, 360-364). He cogently argues for a translation of γεννάω as "begotten," not "born" in many verses in Jn and 1 Jn. Matthew also employs the cognate 'generation' (γενεά: 1:17 [4x]; 11:16; 12:39,41,42,45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34) and γεννητός (11:11).

temporal genitive, the (chronological) beginning receives emphasis.<sup>362</sup> Paul offers an example parallel to 19:12a when he tells the Galatians that God selected him “from my mother’s womb” (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου; Gal 1:15).<sup>363</sup> As an ablative genitive of source or a temporal genitive, ἐκ calls for a translation of ἐγεννήθησαν as “conceived” or “engendered” instead of “born.” With the fourth option, ἐκ conveys the means by which an action occurred. If ἐκ is an ablative of means in 19:12a, mother’s womb was the instrument by which some males became eunuchs. Hence, the Matthean Jesus placed the responsibility for the creation of some males as eunuchs on their mothers’ wombs. 19:12a would then translate to “For there are some eunuchs who were engendered that way by means of mother’s womb.”

Since all four translations of ἐκ are viable, Matthean context will determine the most appropriate. It must account for how Matthew uses ἐκ with γεννάω elsewhere in the narrative and how Matthew understands mother’s womb.

A surprising verse that parallels 19:12a occurs at the genealogy’s culmination when an angel of the Lord informs Joseph: “for that conceived [γεννηθὲν] in her is from the Holy Spirit” (1:20). Together with 1:18 (“before they came together [i.e., sexually] she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit”), 1:20 clarifies that Jesus’s father is no human male, in sharp contrast to the preceding thirty-nine named human fathers.<sup>364</sup> Most Bibles translate all preceding occurrences of γεννάω as “was the father of” and switch to “conceived” for 1:20.<sup>365</sup>

However, these same Bibles do not employ “conceived” for Matthew’s eunuchs in spite of the similarities between the last clause of 1:20 and 19:12a:

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<sup>362</sup>As Daniel Wallace explains, when ἐκ (or ἀπὸ) is used temporally, emphasis is placed on the beginning (e.g., Mk 9:21 the boy who has had seizures “from childhood” ἐκ παιδιόθεν). Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 123.

<sup>363</sup>Another example is LXX Ps 22, from which the Matthean Jesus draws his dying words (Ps 22:1 in Mt 27:46). David says he has known God as his God “from my mother’s womb” (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου, 22:10; cf. Ps 71:6). See also Lk 1:15: ἔσται γὰρ μέγας ἐνώπιον τοῦ κυρίου καὶ οἶνον καὶ σίκερα οὐ μὴ πῖνῃ καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου πλησθήσεται ἔτι ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός αὐτοῦ (for he [JBap] will be great in the sight of the Lord and he will drink neither wine nor liquor and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb).

<sup>364</sup>While Joseph did not beget Jesus himself, he does accept his role as Jesus’s human, adoptive father. This allows Matthew to trace Jesus’s legal, human paternity through Joseph and King David back to Abraham. Davies and Allison Jr, *Matthew: Volume 3: 19-28*, 3, 185.

<sup>365</sup>“Begot” in KJV, ASV, ERV; “begot” in Douay-Rheims. “Was the father of” in NIV, NLT, ESV, NASB, NET, and NRSV. “Fathered” in ISV. The same Bibles that render γεννάω as “born” or “from birth” in 19:12, render it “conceived” in 1:20. “Conceived” is employed by NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NASB, KJV, ISV, NET, ASV, ERV, and Douay-Rheims. For 19:12a, the NRSV, KJV, NIV, NLT, ASV, ERV, NASB and Douay-Rheims have “born.” The RSV, NET, ISV, and ESV have “from birth.” Two of the remaining three occurrences of γεννάω are linked to Jesus’ atypical birth (2:1,4).

Mt 1:20: τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου  
 Mt 19:12a: εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως

Both verses share the same two verbs—γεννάω and εἰμί—in almost identical form—aorist passive (participle and indicative, respectively) and present active indicative, respectively. Both have the same conjunction—γὰρ—and the same preposition—ἐκ—at the head of a prepositional phrase. In 1:20, γεννάω must be translated “conceived” or “begotten” because a translation of “born” is nonsensical (i.e., for that which was born in her is from the Holy Spirit). Because ἐκ in 1:20 qualifies when, how, or by whom Jesus came into existence, it must be an ablative genitive of source, a temporal genitive, an ablative of means, or an ablative of agency (i.e., “by the Holy Spirit”). It cannot be an ablative genitive of separation.

The eunuchs of 19:12a are connected to mother’s κοιλία, a womb or belly. Associated not only with coming into existence but also with death, transition, and resurrection, the womb is a place of mystery in Matthew. The evangelist compares Jonah’s three-day, three-night entrapment in the κοιλία of the large fish (Mt 12:40; cf. Jon 2:1) to Jesus’s three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ τῆς γῆς) after crucifixion. In Mt 15:17, κοιλία is the place where food passes (χωρέω, also in 19:11-12, and related to χώρα, space or receptacle)<sup>366</sup> through the body before elimination (e.g., “into the mouth,” “into the belly,” “into the sewer;” cf. Mk 7:19). In mother’s womb, eunuchs grow in a mysterious place.<sup>367</sup>

The most appropriate translation of εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως is “for there are eunuchs who were engendered that way from mother’s womb.” It has exegetical support with a translation of ἐκ as an ablative genitive of source or a temporal genitive. It has narrative support with the links to Mt 1:20 and γεννάω. The creation of male and female from the beginning (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς in 19:4,8) with God as creator (ὁ κτίσας in 19:4)

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<sup>366</sup> Plato compared the χώρα to a mother in *Timaeus* (52b; 51a)

<sup>367</sup> Matthew’s use of κοιλία accords with its use elsewhere in the NT and the LXX, where it is associated with God’s blessing and cursing, new life, and death. The Lucan evangelist uses it three times for Elizabeth’s womb (1:15,41,44), three times for Mary’s womb (1:42; 2:21; 11:27), and once for Jesus’ prediction of woe for the women of Jerusalem (23:29). In Lk 1:15, a clause with almost the same wording as Mt 19:12a, John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit while he is still in his mother’s womb (ἔτι ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς αὐτοῦ). Just after Moses delivers the Decalogue, he shares God’s promises of multiple blessings for Israelites, including the offspring of wombs (Deut 7:13). Samson, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Paul were pre-selected by God from the womb (Judg 16:17; Isa 49:1,5; Jer 1:5; Lk 1:15; Gal 1:15). In Isaiah’s words, God formed the people Israel from the womb (Isa 44:2; cf. Isa 44:24; 46:3).

in the same narrative context strengthens the argument for conception. Moreover, had Matthew wished to emphasize the eunuchs' birth as most English Bibles have it, there were better options he employs elsewhere. The evangelist uses *τίκτω* to demonstrate how Jesus's birth fulfills the Isaianic prophecy that a young woman "will give birth" to a son (1:21; "gave birth" in 1:25), whom she "has in the womb" (*ἔχω ἐν γαστήρ*). That Jesus had already been born (*τίκτω*) is also made explicit by the magi in 2:2.

Matthew's eunuchs in mother's womb were not mistakes or monsters. They were conceived *as* eunuchs. They are part of Matthew's procreative process. With the use of *γεννάω*, the evangelist helped "situate the child in a broadly extended and specifically structured field of kin relationships" by connecting them with Jesus's progenitors.<sup>368</sup> With *γεννάω*, Matthew also linked them to Jesus's genesis and his own conception in Mary's womb. *κοιλία* strengthens their link to Jesus, and by extension, to Jonah and to God's salvific purposes for human beings.<sup>369</sup>

#### Reimagining Procreation for the Kingdom of Heaven

Eunuchs *in utero* denote an end—the cessation of one procreative cycle—at their beginning. Their existence as eunuchs supports Matthew's larger program of diminishing earthly households. With the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, it matters not if a male has testicles or generates human children.

And yet, eunuchs *in utero* also signal a(nother) beginning—a different procreative cycle—at their beginning. There is a parallel, creative process in Matthew that occurs alongside the diminishment of existing households. With the end of the age in sight, making disciples supersedes making babies.

Disciple-making is an essential part of the work Jesus does and commissions his disciples to do—so essential, in fact, that his final words in Matthew stress its necessity: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:19-20).

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<sup>368</sup> Sahlins, "Birth Is the Metaphor," 674.

<sup>369</sup> The outcome in Jonah's case was what the Lord desired: repentance of the people of Nineveh and rescue from destruction. The outcome in Jesus's crucifixion also accorded with God's will: the beginning of the messianic age.

Jesus models a way of life that ultimately leads to eternal joy, if not to earthly happiness and security. A man may “enter into the joy of [his] master”—the kingdom of heaven—if he has done God’s will on earth (25:21,23). He does not need to procreate physically.

Matthew presents Jesus as a metaphorical father.<sup>370</sup> As biblical fathers beget, feed, heal, teach, model righteous behavior, bless, and protect their children, so too does Jesus. However, each time Jesus appears as an implied father, he exemplifies some aspect of Matthean ideal fatherhood for current and potential disciples without physically begetting children.<sup>371</sup> Jesus calls the healed paralytic, “child” (9:2), and the healed hemorrhaging woman, “daughter” (9:22). When he praises God for revealing “these things” (i.e., Jesus's mighty works) to infants rather than the wise and intelligent (11:25), the infants are disciples and others who welcome his instruction and mighty works and repent (11:29-12:1). Some scholars read “these little ones” (10:42; 18:6,10,14) who believe in Jesus as a reference to Jesus’s disciples. In the First Gospel, Jesus is a metaphorical father who generates children for the kingdom of heaven and teaches his children to do the same.

The disciple-making procreative cycle begins, as does any procreative cycle, with creation. With no wife and no sex, Jesus begins generating disciples—Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, immediately after his baptism and testing (4:18-22). Like loyal sons, Jesus’s disciples must accept his authoritative teachings and live as he lives. They must also prepare to die as he dies (20:22-23; 26:35). Jesus’s expectation that they continue the procreative cycle he and John modeled for them becomes explicit in his final words to the remaining eleven to go “disciple,” baptize all the nations, and teach them everything he has commanded (28:19).<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Jerome Neyrey claims that Matthew is “mute” about Jesus as a husband and father and “never presents him as having any role in ‘private’ household world” Jerome H. Neyrey, “Jesus, Gender, and the Gospel of Matthew,” in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (2003), 55.

<sup>371</sup>Fathers and fathering may be seen in Matthew’s descriptions, images, stories, and metaphors. Fathers provide for their children’s needs. Whenever children request food, fathers feed them (7:9-10). One dedicated father continues to advocate for his child’s life, even when death appears inevitable (9:18,23-26). An enslaved father deeply in debt begs for mercy and promises restitution to prevent his slaveholder from selling off himself, his children and wife (18:24-27). A father king (i.e., God) organizes and pays for his son’s elaborate wedding feast (22:2-13). Non-royal fathers bring their wives and children to follow the powerful healer Jesus wherever he goes, even when it means jeopardizing the evening meal by going to a deserted place (14:13-15) or having no food for three days (15:29-38). That many of these men were fathers who came with their wives and children is my assumption as Matthew does not clarify in either account how the women and children are related to the men in the crowds (14:21; 15:38).

<sup>372</sup> W.D. Davies and Dale Allison argue that the imperative *μαθητεύσατε* is not the first step in a series but “a general imperative which is filled out (although not exhausted) by what follows: baptism and instruction in obedience belong to discipleship (so Bengel).”

There are a number of substances in Matthew's procreative world: seed, wheat, trees, plants, fruit, and (literal) water for baptism. Jesus is the primary sower of seed, seen most clearly in the parables of the sower and the weeds of the field. In explaining the latter, he tells his disciples that the man who sows "good seed"—the "sons of the kingdom"—is the Son of Man (13:37). The kingdom too is the Son of Man's (13:41). Following narrative logic, the "sons of the kingdom" should be Jesus's sons, as Son of Man is self-referential. However, Jesus then pronounces that after the unrighteous have been sorted and thrown into the fire, "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father" (13:43). Matthew reserves the title "father" for God, not Jesus (23:8-9), yet the parable also casts Jesus as sower and father.

No other human men sow in the First Gospel, but Jesus's forerunner models another way to make disciples. Before his encounter with Jesus, John was baptizing in the Jordan. When paired with confession and genuine repentance, John's baptism generates eternal life for recipients as it comes from heaven (11:25). In this way, baptism is analogous to the generation of life through Jesus's seed.<sup>373</sup>

But this is not all John the Baptist models. He also acts as messianic forerunner by employing the definitive procreative metaphor for disciple-making in Matthew: "make fruit" (3:8: ποιήσατε καρπὸν; cf. καρποφορέω in 13:23). John is the first to issue this imperative. In the LXX and other ancient writings, "fruit" regularly refers to offspring; "bearing fruit," to having babies. Matthew likens new or developing disciples, not infants, to fruit, planted seed, or wheat ripening for harvest (3:12; 13:25, 29-30).<sup>374</sup>

Not only must disciples produce fruit, they should produce *a lot* of fruit—one hundred, sixty, or thirty pieces (13:23). Fruit bearing is not optional but mandatory. In the Sermon on the Mount, after telling disciples and crowds that they will recognize people by the fruits they produce, Jesus warns that not everyone, but only the one who does the will of his heavenly

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<sup>373</sup> Other early Christian texts may signal that baptism superseded physical birth. For Paul's use of baptism as adoption, see Caroline E. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007). Maarten Menken argues that eternal life in John begins when the believer is begotten by God in baptism through the spirit. Maarten Menken, "'Born of God' or 'Begotten by God'? A Translation Problem in the Johannine Writings," *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853609X435429>. Tertullian interpreted baptism as a rebirth in which Christ's semen replaced Adam's. Taylor G. Petrey, "Semen Stains: Seminal Procreation and the Patrilineal Genealogy of Salvation in Tertullian," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2014.0032>.

<sup>374</sup> In another of Matthew's agricultural metaphors, disciples are agricultural workers who tend the crop or bring in the harvest (10:10, implied by Jesus's direct address in 9:37-38; cf. 20:1,2,8).

father, will enter the kingdom of heaven (7:20-21).<sup>375</sup> As R.T. France explains, “[t]o produce fruit is the *sine qua non* of the blessing, and indeed the very existence, of God’s people. To fail to produce it, or even to deliberately withhold it, is the way to disaster.”<sup>376</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Whereas ancient and contemporary exegetes viewed congenital eunuchs in terms of lack—perfectly formed genitals, a sex life, wives, children, the ability to demonstrate virtue or self-control and to earn rewards—this chapter focused on what they *do* for the First Gospel. In light of the eschaton, congenital eunuchs help the evangelist relativize human families by deemphasizing physical procreation. They signal a different, more essential procreative process.

Exegetes have used Matthew’s congenital eunuchs as a foil for the self-made eunuchs. Contemporary scholars have little to say about this group of eunuchs except that there is probably something wrong with their genitals. The review of medical literature revealed an astounding variety of factors that might cause an individual to appear to be a eunuch, whether at birth or later in life.

The tannaitic rabbis knew that some children experienced puberty at a later stage or not at all, and that gender did not always reveal itself in an unexpected way. These rabbis lived in community with congenital eunuchs, some of whom were married, and some of whom were married priests. Unlike other ancient writings that focused on what might be wrong with or dangerous about congenital eunuchs, the rabbis and the first evangelist did not speculate about their condition, assign blame, or describe them as problematic, defective, or dangerous. They were not monsters.

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<sup>375</sup> Worry about this age and the deceitfulness of riches will also cause a person to become unfruitful (13:22). The evangelist employs “fruit” more than any other New Testament author: “produce fruit” (ποιέω κἄρπος: 3:8,10; 7:17-19; 12:33; 13:26; 21:43), “bear fruit” (καρποφορέω: 13:23), other occurrences of “fruit” (καρπός: 7:16,20; 13:8; 21:19,34,41), “fig(s)” (σῦκον: 7:16), “grape(s)” (σταφυλή: 7:16); “thorn(s)” (ἄκανθα: 7:16; 13:7 [2x]; 27:29); “thistle(s)” (τριβόλος: 7:16), “vine” (ἄμπελος: 26:29); “vineyard” (ἄμπελών: 20:1,2,4,7,8; 21:29,33,39,40,41). Jesus uses “fruit” (γένημα: 26:29) in a literal way when he tells the disciples he will not eat “this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

<sup>376</sup> Referring to Mt 21:43, Richard T. France, “By Their Fruits: Thoughts on the Metaphor of Fruit in the Bible,” *Rural Theology* 11, no. 1 (2013): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1470499413Z.0000000007>.

I argued on historical, narrative, and exegetical grounds that in Matthew, these eunuchs were conceived *as* eunuchs. They were meant to be non-procreative. They came into being in a narrative world where human fathers are displaced, where human conception, birth, nursing, infants, weddings, and marriage are associated with death and destruction, and where Jesus predicts family betrayals, rejections, and murder and rewards his followers for leaving their parents, children, and siblings behind for him. Matthew's eunuchs engendered that way from mother's womb were born into and belong in this setting. They were not accidents. They point to another, active procreative process in the First Gospel evident through the evangelist's rich procreative metaphors. They help the evangelist show that in light of the eschaton, what matters most is making disciples, not babies.



## CHAPTER 3

### ENSLAVED TO ELITES: THE EUNUCHS OF MT 19:12b

This chapter seeks to answer two questions:

1. How have commentators, both ancient and modern, interpreted Mt 19:12b (καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων)?
2. How might Matthew's early audiences have understood eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people?

In the early Roman Empire, eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people were castrated males. Castration almost always denoted enslavement, hence Matthew's early audiences would have interpreted the eunuchs of 19:12b literally, as castrated males who had been enslaved or manumitted. They would have known that eunuchs served elites. It was a cliché that kings valued eunuchs for their loyalty and used them in high-level roles. Emperors solicited eunuchs, too, although Roman authors ascribed their acquisitions to lust, not trust.

Few, if any, among Matthew's earliest audiences would have interpreted Mt 19:12b metaphorically upon first hearing. Because they knew that castration was almost always coerced, usually upon attractive, prepubescent boys, they would have differentiated this group from congenital eunuchs and *galli*.<sup>377</sup> Although they may have shared their contemporaries' broader stereotypes about eunuchs' effeminacy, foreignness, and sexuality, among others, the dominant trope about man-made eunuchs concerned their faithfulness (πίστις and cognates): eunuchs were either a monarch's most loyal slaves, or the most treacherous. Kings and kingdoms could rise or fall on account of eunuchs. Matthew's early audiences would have heard about the eunuchs of Mt 19:12b with these presuppositions and been attuned to the gospel's repeated mentions of the kingdom of heaven and faithfulness as well as its positive depiction of enslavement to God.

Ancient Christian exegetes used the eunuchs of Mt 19:12b as a foil for the self-made eunuchs. They distinguished the two groups on the basis of volition, self-control, reason, and the

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<sup>377</sup> I discuss *galli* in Chapter 4.

possibility of rewards. Many offered a metaphorical interpretation. Contemporary scholars devote scant attention to 19:12b. They interpret these eunuchs literally, as castrated slaves or servants and as counterparts to the rabbinic designation *saris adam* (eunuch of man). Some view them, along with the eunuchs of 19:12a, as a foil for 19:12c.

The chapter begins with a selective history of interpretation of Mt 19:12b. The second section, “Castration: The Making of Eunuchs,” clarifies how Matthew’s early audiences might have interpreted eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people and discusses the circumstances under which boys and men became eunuchs, including consequences of pre- and post-pubertal castration. The third section, “Ancient Preconceptions about Eunuchs Who Were Made Eunuchs,” treats stereotypes about and common depictions of enslaved and manumitted eunuchs in the early Roman Empire and the LXX. In the final section, “Mt 19:12b in Light of Matthew,” I consider implications of Mt 19:12b for Matthew’s early audiences in view of the gospel’s characterization of high-level slaves, God as a slave-owning king, and metaphorical enslavement to God. I will argue that these eunuchs signaled enslavement to Matthew’s early audiences, who themselves should serve God as good and loyal slaves. With these eunuchs, the Matthean Jesus helped prime his followers for the self-made eunuchs.

### **Mt 19:12b: A Selective History of Interpretation**

#### Ancient Exegesis

In the earliest post-biblical citation of 19:12, Justin Martyr inverted the first two eunuch groups. Again, his citation reads: “There are some who have been made eunuchs of men, and some who were born eunuchs, and some who have made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven; but all cannot receive this saying” (*I Apol.* 15, my translation). Whether Justin paraphrased Mt 19:12 or quoted another version that circulated in the second century, his rendition foregrounds eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people. The inversion is logical as this group would have been more familiar to Justin’s audiences than congenital eunuchs.

According to Clement of Alexandria, the followers of Basilides called the eunuchs of 19:12b ‘eunuchs by force’ (οἱ ἐξ ἀνάγκης; εὐνοῦχοι κατὰ ἀνάγκην) (*Strom.* 3.1.1). Some were castrated by misfortune (ἐκτετμημένοι κατὰ συμφορὰν); others were theatrical ascetics (οἱ

θεατρικοί ἀσκηταί) who exercise self-control (κρατοῦσιν ἑαυτῶν) for honor (εὐδοξία). Basilides's followers contrasted 'eunuchs by force' with those who made themselves eunuchs because of the eternal kingdom (ἔνεκα τῆς αἰωνίου βασιλείας) by reasoned principle (ἐπιλογισμός). If Clement's account is accurate, Basilides's second-century followers may have been the first to interpret 19:12b both literally and metaphorically.

Early Christians continued to use the language of compulsion and reason. According to Epiphanius, the early second-century "heretics" Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes compared eunuchs who became so "by force" (κατὰ ἀνάγκην) with those who became so "by reason" (κατὰ λόγον) (*Pan* 1.32.4.3). Epiphanius accused another second-century group, the Valesians, of forcibly castrating (μετὰ ἀνάγκης αὐτὸν ἀποτέμωσι) any male disciple whom they could not persuade to undergo castration voluntarily (2.58.1.5). He had heard rumors that Valesians extended hospitality to strangers, then bound them to boards and castrated them, too (2.58.1.6-7). Many Valesians were deranged (φρενοβλάβεια), he opined (2.58.2.1). They did not understand that every body part will be raised: "For if the kingdom of heaven makes all things perfect, it can have no imperfection in it. And since the resurrection is a resurrection of the *body*, all the members will be raised and not one of them left behind" (2.58.2.2 [Williams]). Epiphanius asked rhetorically, "Who is going to tear his heart out? And yet the heart is the cause of offenses at every turn, for scripture says, 'From within proceed fornication, adultery, uncleanness and such like.' [Mk 7:21; Mt 15:19] All right, who will tear his heart out?" (2.58.2.4 [Williams]). He added that because of their castration, they were no longer men (2.58.3.1).<sup>378</sup>

Clement of Alexandria terminology of force, self-control, and reason in his metaphorical interpretation of Mt 19:12b. To explain Paul's suggestion that married couples might agree to be sexually abstinent for a time in order to pray (1 Cor 7:5), Clement compared a married man who for a time practices control (ἐγκράτεια) by force (κατὰ ἀνάγκην) to an unmarried man, that is, one who makes himself a eunuch (ἑαυτὸν εὐνουχίσαντος) (*Strom.* 3.12.79). Implicitly, the married man who abstains for prayer is a eunuch by force. For Clement, self-control grounded on sexual purity (καθαρῶς) and reasoning (λογίζομαι) makes a man worthier before God. Two options were acceptable ways of serving God: living as a eunuch (εὐνουχία: i.e., unmarried), and

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<sup>378</sup> In the seventh century, John of Damascus echoed Epiphanius's allegation that Valesians castrated themselves and visitors. He claimed that Valesians lived in Bacathus, a town in Arabian Philadelphia (modern Amman, Jordan) (*Concerning Heresy* 58).

marrying in order to have children. When each one fulfills the service to which he was called, each receives a proper reward.

Origen of Alexandria acknowledged that there were literal eunuchs in the scriptures but sought a higher (ἀνάγωγῆ) meaning (*Comm. Matt.* 15.5). Some of Pharaoh's eunuchs, for example, were "unproductive of anything good" (ἄγονοι παντὸς καλοῦ), whereas the eunuchs who helped rebuild Jerusalem were people of God "barren of anything evil" (ἄγονοι παντὸς κακοῦ, translation mine). Ἄγονος trades on the eunuchs' inability to procreate and also reflects Origen's awareness of Philo's extensive treatment of eunuchs (He quotes Philo in 15.3.). Origen found a literal interpretation of Mt 19:12 unacceptable; all three groups must be interpreted consistently. The eunuchs of Mt 19:12b abstain from sexual desire (αφροδισία), licentiousness (ἀκολασία), and impurity (ἀκαθαρσία) on account of human words (ἀνθρώπινοι λόγοι) from Greek philosophy or sects. Origen contrasted these words with God's word, which is a rational (λογικός) sword that castrates the passionate (παθητικός) part of the soul with reason (15.4).

Epiphanius described eunuchs who were castrated by people as boys who had been castrated for service (χρήσεως) to a king or ruler. Because some foreign kings and tyrants were jealous and suspicious of their wives, they took boys and castrated (εὐνουχίζω) them for later use. As adults, the eunuchs were entrusted (ἐμπιστεύω) with the wives. As mentioned in the introduction, Epiphanius traced the meaning of εὐνοῦχος to these eunuchs: a castrated boy is "well disposed" (εὐνοῦς) because his members (μέλος, which Epiphanius uses synonymously with ὄργανο) have been taken away (ἀφαιρέω) and he cannot have sex (*Pan.* 2.58.4:1-4).

Jerome interpreted the first two groups of eunuchs as fleshly (*carnalis*) (*Comm. Matt.* PL 26:135-136). Eunuchs by captivity (*captivitas*) or womanish pleasures (*deliciae matronales*) would not receive the reward (*praemium*) of voluntary (*voluntas*) eunuchs. Since their chastity (*castimonia*) was inevitable (*necessitas*), nothing whatsoever is owed to them (*nihil omnino debetur*). Jerome offered an etiology similar to Origen's: philosophers made some men eunuchs, idol worship caused others to be "softened into females" (*emolliuntur in feminas*), and others feigned chastity because of heretical convictions. These eunuchs will not obtain (*consequor*) the kingdom of heaven.

Gregory Nazianzus offered a metaphorical interpretation similar to Origen's. For Gregory, it would be small (μικρός) and exceedingly weak (λίαν ἀσθενής) and unworthy (ἀναξίως) of the word to stop with a literal interpretation (*Or.* 37.16 PG 36:301). According to a

higher understanding, eunuchs made so by people are those whom the word cleanses (καθαρίζω) by cutting off (ἐκτέμνω) the passions. He plays on stereotypes about eunuchs with “exceedingly weak” and puns on castration with “cutting off.” These metaphorical eunuchs have learned from the teaching word (ὁ διδασκαλικὸς λόγος) to distinguish better from worse and to exercise spiritual self-control (πνευματικῆ σωφροσύνη). Gregory highly approved of these eunuchs, both teachers and students.

For John Chrysostom, the exercise of free will and reason differentiated Matthew’s three eunuch groups. Eunuchs who were made so by others could not earn rewards and crowns because they had been castrated. Manmade eunuchs could not make that choice, so their castration was in vain (μάτην) unless they exercised reason (λογισμός) and self-control (σωφρονέω) (*Hom. Matt.* 62, PG 58 Col 599).

Augustine also preferred a metaphorical interpretation. He read Jesus’s words about eunuchs in light of Isa 56:3-5. Like the eunuchs of rich men and kings, these (metaphorical) eunuchs cannot procreate because their bodily organ is without strength (*virile membrum debilitatur*) (*Holy Virginit*y 24). He disputed the claim that Isaiah wrote about physical eunuchs with “severed bodies” (*corpore abscisi*) and insisted that the prophet spoke of eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He was adamant about this point: “Is any one so madly (*dementia*) opposed to the truth as to believe that eunuchs (*in carne factos eunuchos*) made so in the flesh have a better place than married persons in the house of God?” (Schaff, [NPNF]). Augustine did believe that physical eunuchs could receive a place in God’s house equal to that of married Christians who raised their children in the fear of God, provided that they became Christians and observed God’s laws. They could not receive a higher place than that of sons and daughters, though, because their unmarried status was due not to virtue of the soul (*animi virtute*) but by force of the flesh (*carnis necessitate*).<sup>379</sup>

### Contemporary Exegesis

Scholars do not say much about Mt 19:12b. Almost all interpret this group of eunuchs literally, as castrated males. For Grant Osborne, “those ‘made eunuchs,’ either castrated (often for service in a royal court [e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8] or in a harem) or [who] had

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<sup>379</sup> Augustine’s language echoes Ambrose’s (*Vid.* 13.75).

become impotent due to disease or accident,” were real-world eunuchs, in distinction from the metaphorical eunuchs of 19:12c.<sup>380</sup> Other scholars make the point about castration more obliquely.<sup>381</sup> Many mention a court setting: “royal courts,”<sup>382</sup> “Eastern courts,”<sup>383</sup> “oriental courts,”<sup>384</sup> “a pagan court,”<sup>385</sup> and “Near Eastern royal households.”<sup>386</sup> The most frequently cited role is that of harem attendant.<sup>387</sup> Donald Trautman, for example, states that “this group of eunuchs calls to mind the palaces of oriental princes and the eunuchs as male guardians or overseers of their harems.”<sup>388</sup> Stephen Llewelyn, Gareth Wearne, and Bianca Sanderson recognize that eunuchs performed a variety of jobs but conclude from their study of eunuchs in the OT that the “gatekeeper/guardian” role is most relevant for Matthew’s context.<sup>389</sup>

Scholars almost uniformly view Matthew’s second group as counterparts to the *saris adam*, that is, eunuch of man. W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, for example, claim that Matthew’s eunuchs of 19:12b are “equivalent” to the *saris adam*.<sup>390</sup> Ben Witherington writes that “[t]he saying is undoubtedly off the rabbinic line.”<sup>391</sup>

Rabbinic writings about the *saris adam*, however, do not make the distinction that Matthew does about how this *saris* became a eunuch. To be clear, a *saris adam* could be self-

<sup>380</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 707. See also Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 383; Gundry, *Matthew*, 382; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724; Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364; Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185. Carmen Bernabé mentions castration and “symbolic castration” but not 19:12b. Bernabé, “Eunuchs and Predators,” 131, 33.

<sup>381</sup> Castration may be inferred in Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 227. See also Patte, *Structural Commentary*, 267; Senior, *Matthew*, 215; Blinzler, “Mt 19,12,” 255n7; Kodell, “Celibacy Logion,” 20; John P. Meier, *Matthew*, New Testament Message, (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), 216. In reference to Justin Martyr, Heth, “Unmarried (Matthew 19:12),” 80-81. Castration is mentioned in a footnote in Anderson and Moore, “Matthew and Masculinity,” 88n33, quoting Matthew Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 259.

<sup>382</sup> Hagner, *Matthew*, 550. “Courts” in Davies, *Matthew*, 133. A “royal government” in Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 242.

<sup>383</sup> Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185.

<sup>384</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 777.

<sup>385</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724, referring to eunuchs in the Old Testament.

<sup>386</sup> Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364.

<sup>387</sup> Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 242. See also Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185. For R.T. France, 19:12b were men deliberately castrated “to provide ‘safe’ attendants of a married woman or custodians of a harem” France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724. John Nolland asserts that “[i]n oriental courts eunuchs were used for roles in the royal court (initially, no doubt, because this made them ‘safe’ in relation to the royal harem, but then also to develop a cast who could devote themselves to public affairs on behalf of the monarch without the distraction of family).” Nolland, *Matthew*, 777. Nolland recognizes that eunuchs had various responsibilities, as does Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364.

<sup>388</sup> Trautman, “Eunuch Logion,” 62.

<sup>389</sup> Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson, “Guarding Entry,” 234-35.

<sup>390</sup> Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 22.

<sup>391</sup> Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 28. Similarly, Trautman writes: “Jesus made the same differentiation among eunuchs that was known to the rabbis and His listeners” Trautman, “Eunuch Logion,” 61. Blinzler explains that Judaism (*Judentum*) recognized two types of physical eunuchs. Blinzler, “Mt 19,12,” 260.

made.<sup>392</sup> Rabbinic texts about the *saris adam* focus on the issues of Levirate marriage previously discussed concerning whether he should perform *halitzah* or *yibbum* (*t. Yebam.* 2:6; *t. Yebam.* 11:2; *m. Yebam.* 8:4). The *saris adam* was also obligated in reading the megillah (*t. Meg.* 2:7) and laying on hands during a sacrifice (*t. Menah.* 10:13). He was categorized apart from the *saris ḥammah* with respect to genital discharges (*m. Zabim* 2:1).

Like the *saris ḥammah*, the *saris adam* is a category created by the rabbis. Because the rabbis had different concerns about the *saris adam*, making a direct comparison between Matthew's eunuchs and the *saris adam* is not helpful for interpretation of Mt 19:12b. Because eunuchs who were made eunuchs for enslavement were very well known in the Roman Empire, a better focus is eunuch slaves in the Roman Empire. Also, given Matthew's assumption that his audience is familiar with the scriptures, scholars should attend closely to the many eunuchs in the LXX.

### **Castration: The Making of Eunuchs**

In the following section, I clarify how boys and men became eunuchs in antiquity, beginning with castration methods and corporeal consequences. I then discuss the historical antecedents and sources of eunuch-making, including andrapodization, tributes, military actions, the sale of house-born (*vernae*) and other enslaved males, child exposure, piracy and kidnappings, punitive measures, sale by a parent, and self-sale. Finally, I show that forcible castration was almost invariably linked with enslavement. For this reason, I argue that even when literary sources do not explicitly refer to enslavement, scholars should assume that almost all eunuchs were enslaved unless specific evidence suggests otherwise.

#### Methods

Although ancient writers mentioned human castration, they rarely discussed methods. Herodotus, for instance, referred to punitive eunuch-making on five occasions (3.48, 50; 6.9, 32; 8.105) but provided no details about how it was conducted. Xenophon was also indirect. In

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<sup>392</sup> Lev, "Genital Trouble," 528.

*Cyropaedia*, Cyrus the Great compares eunuchs to castrated horses, bulls, and dogs (7.5.63). “And men, too, in the same way, become gentler when deprived of this desire (στερισκόμενοι ταύτης τῆς ἐπιθυμίας), but not less careful of that which is entrusted to them; they are not made any less efficient horsemen, or any less skilful lancers, or less ambitious men” (7.5.63 [Miller, LCL]).

Indirect evidence points to the use of three castration procedures on human males: excision, crushing, and tying off of the testicles. Greek and Latin terms sometimes indicate the method used. θλίψω and *comprimere* and cognates refer to squeezing; θλάω, to crushing. τέμνω and cognates (e.g., ἐκτέμνω, ἀποτέμνω, ἐκτομάζω) and *excido* denote cutting.<sup>393</sup> The Hippocratic writer of *Generation*, for example, detailed the consequences of having the spermatic cords cut:

Eunuchs do not have intercourse because the passageway of their seed is destroyed, i.e., the passage through the actual testicles; also dense, narrow cords extend from the testicles (ὄρχις) to the penis (αἰδοῖον), by means of which it is raised and lowered, and these are cut away by the incision (ἐν τῇ τομῇ ἀποτέμνεται), and for this reason eunuchs are not potent. (2 [Potter, LCL])

Other anecdotal evidence suggests that excision was the standard practice. Many sources refer to a “cut” or “knife.” Doctors performed castration and other surgeries on male patients with genital disease. Aulus Cornelius Celsus, an encyclopaedist active during Tiberius’s rule, explained that in some cases, excision was necessary whenever testicular injury caused pus to develop and the testicles lacked nourishment (*On Medicine* 6.18.6). Celsus also provided a remarkable level of detail about how to excise diseased tissue from inside a scrotum using a scalpel and hands, tying off blood vessels with flax thread, and inserting two pins and a dressing at the incision site (5.6.18). For the Roman slave trade where slaves were displayed naked at markets, excision offered a visible guarantee to a prospective buyer that a prepubescent boy (typically) or a postpubertal male was indeed a eunuch.

Yet castration by excision carried risks. The greatest was hemorrhage. The threat of bacterial infection, though unrecognized as such, posed another grave risk given poor sanitation,

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<sup>393</sup> ἐκτομάζω: Htd 3.48-49; Pl., *Symp.* 195C. Strabo 16.2.38; Ath. 6.91; Diog Laert. 1.7; Ael., *De natura animalium* 9.16; Plut., Alcibiades 16.2; *On the Malevolence of Herodotus* 22.



inadequate sterilization of surgical instruments, and no antibiotics.<sup>394</sup> Most probably survived castration. A far riskier practice, total ablation could result in death as significant blood loss leads to hemorrhagic shock and multi-system organ failure.<sup>395</sup> That doctors used urethral catheters in the imperial period is clear from both material and literary sources. However, insertion of the catheter or plug—a necessity to keep the urethra open for urination, block the vas deferens (the tubes that transport urine and sperm) from entering the prostate, and prevent sperm from passing into the urethra—increased the risk of infection.<sup>396</sup> It is unlikely that those involved in eunuch-making for the slave trade wanted to incur financial loss by jeopardizing the lives of the boys and men they castrated.

At least some castrations occurred by compression. In Chapter 1, I mentioned the jurist Paulus, who claimed that Hadrian told a senator that “those too who crush the testicles of others (*thlibias facio*) are in the same position as those who castrate (*castro*) them” (DIG. 48.8.5). In other words, those who perform castration by compression would also face capital punishment.

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<sup>394</sup> In spite of notable advancements such as clean piped water, latrines, drains, and sewers, major sanitation problems remained (e.g., the use of human excrement as crop fertilizer, public baths, public latrines where people may have cleaned themselves with a shared sponge attached to a stick). Piers D. Mitchell found archaeological evidence of infectious diseases in human fecal matter throughout the Roman Empire (at excavation sites in ten modern countries) caused by twelve endoparasites (e.g., tapeworm, roundworm, whipworm) and five ectoparasites (e.g., fleas, lice). Mitchell, “Human Parasites in the Roman World,” 48. See also the recent publication of Koloski-Ostrow, *The Archaeology of Sanitation in Roman Italy*.

<sup>395</sup> Castration can also lead to shock. A man who removed his testicles with his fingernails several hours after high consumption of cannabis was treated for hemodynamic shock approximately eight hours later, when he came to the emergency room. His condition stabilized after he received blood transfusion Ahsaini et al., “Bilateral Testicular Self-Castration Due to Cannabis Abuse.” Jean D. Wilson and Claus Roehrborn discuss the nails Skoptsy inserted into the urethra and the five centimeter pewter plug inserted by Chinese surgeons after the removal by knife of the penis, scrotum, and testes. The plug stayed inside the urethra for a minimum of four days, during which time the newly made eunuch was not allowed to drink water or urinate, and then for approximately one hundred days, except during urination. Three centimeter long urethral dilators were also used to prevent the narrowing and closure of the urethra. Wilson and Roehrborn, “Long-Term Consequences of Castration in Men,” 4325–26. The mortality rate for total ablation may have been high. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), an estimated twenty percent of males died after the procedure. Eng, Zhang, and Zhu, “Skeletal Effects of Castration on Two Eunuchs of Ming China,” 108.

<sup>396</sup> Dr. Todd Rice provided clarification on this point in an email dated 3/6/2020. See, e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Roman bronze catheters at The British Museum’s online site, museum number 1968,0626.24: [https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?assetId=198824001&objectId=400007&partId=1](https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=198824001&objectId=400007&partId=1). Celsus describes the use of bronze catheters for kidney stones, blood clots, and a collapsed ureter: “For this purpose bronze tubes (*aeneae fistulae*) are made, and the surgeon must have three ready for males and two for females, in order that they may be suitable for every body, large and small: those for males should be the longest, fifteen finger-breadths in length, the medium twelve, the shortest nine; for females, the longer nine, the shorter six. They ought to be a little curved, but more so for men, and they should be very smooth and neither too large nor too small” (*On Medicine* 6.26 [Spencer, LCL]).

Cauterization may have been used occasionally after excision. Dozens of literary sources pair the medical practices of excision and cauterization as a last but essential curative measure.<sup>397</sup> Doctors in imperial times frequently cauterized wounds. Second-century physician Galen explains that cauterization is sometimes necessary, “[f]or such parts putrefy very quickly and it is better for the sake of safety if you cut out or around the putrefaction and cauterize its root, as it were, joining it to unaffected parts” (*A Method of Medicine to Glaucón* 2.11 [Johnston, LCL]). He continued: “This is what we are often accustomed to do in the case of the genitalia (αἰδοῖος), sometimes applying the cauterizing agents to the affected parts themselves and sometimes also putting a lint pledge beneath first.” One of Juvenal’s satires may hint that while surgeons excised the testicles of post-pubertal men, slave-dealers cauterized the testicles of prepubescent boys:

Yet the height of [women’s] pleasure is when a crotch that’s already ripe with the hot blood of youth and its black quill is taken to visit the surgeons. So it is that the testicles are allowed to drop and told to grow first and then, once they make two pounds in weight, Heliódorus [a popular first-century surgeon] tears them off (*rapio*), to the loss of the barber and no one else. (But it’s a real and pitiable loss (*debilitas*) that sears (*uro*) the boys of the slave-dealers. They’re embarrassed by the pouch and the chickpea they’re left with.) (*Satire* 6.373)

In Latin medical sources, the verb *uro* and its cognates refer to cauterization and cautery tools.<sup>398</sup>

### Corporeal Consequences

While most eunuchs probably survived their castration, they experienced permanent physical consequences. Modern medical and skeletal studies have elucidated numerous health problems. The subjects of these studies include living eunuchs (i.e. the *hijra* of India, Christian *Skoptzy* in Eastern Europe, Muslim eunuchs in the late Ottoman Empire, Chinese eunuchs at the

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<sup>397</sup> See, e.g., Demosthenes, *Against Aristogeiton* 1.95; Xen., *Memorabilia* 1.2.54; Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 3 80; Appian, *Roman History* 6.87. There are also dozens of references to surgery (or the knife) and cautery.

<sup>398</sup> To my knowledge, classicists have not yet recognized that *uro* here might refer to castration by cauterization. They have, though, struggled to determine the best interpretation of Juvenal’s line: *mangonum pueros vera ac miserabilis urit debilitas, follisque pudet cicerisque relictis*. ‘*Debilitas*’ in L&S: “lameness, debility, infirmity, weakness.” ‘*Relictus*,’ from ‘*relinquo*’ in L&S: “to leave behind, not take along, not stay with, leave, move away from, quit, abandon.” The L&S defines ‘*follis*’ as a “bellows” or a “windball,” “pillow” or “cushion” (inflated with air). It could also mean “left behind” or “left in their possession.” Discussing three different scholars’ interpretations, Henry Jackson interpreted the line as “they are ashamed of the bag (the scrotum) and the pod (the penis) which alone remain to them.” Henry Jackson, “On the New Fragments of Juvenal,” *The Classical Review* 13, no. 8 (Nov. 1899): 401.

end of the Qing Dynasty, and men chemically treated for advanced prostate cancer, another serious medical condition, or as a punitive measure<sup>399</sup>), skeletal remains (i.e., exhumed *castrati* singers in Italy, several Skoptzy and Chinese eunuchs), and eunuchs in historical records (i.e. those who served in Korean and Chinese imperial courts).

Castration causes a major loss in testosterone production, which typically leads to the development of female secondary sexual characteristics such as reduced facial and body hair, gynecomastia (increased breast tissue), and weight gain around the hips and abdomen. Along with infertility, castration often results in osteoporosis, pituitary enlargement, hyperlipidemia, prostate reduction, reduced libido, erectile dysfunction, urological problems (e.g., chronic urinary retention, leakage), and skin wrinkling.<sup>400</sup> One study of eunuchs in the Korean Chosun Dynasty court (1392-1910), however, found that they had a longer lifespan than their non-castrated peers of a similar social status.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> British mathematician Alan Turing is a well-known example of punitive castration. After a 1952 conviction of “gross indecency,” he opted to receive estrogen treatments for one year, with probation, in lieu of a prison term. For castration of sex offenders see, e.g., “Orchiectomy,” a chapter by Richard B. Krueger, Michael H. Wechsler, and Meg S. Kaplan, esp. 172-173, 176-183, in Saleh, *Sex Offenders Identification, Risk Assessment, Treatment, and Legal Issues*.

<sup>400</sup> In their review article, Belchetz et al. discuss these and additional health problems (e.g., fatigue, sleep apnea, depression) in males with hypogonadism, that is, testosterone deficiency. Belchetz, Barth, and Kaufman, “Biochemical Endocrinology of the Hypogonadal Male.” See also Wilson and Roehrborn, “Long-Term Consequences of Castration in Men.” Androgen-deprivation therapy (ADT) for advanced prostate cancer also causes hot flashes, and 80% of men who receive ADT reported loss of sexual function Michael William Aucoin and Richard Joel Wassersug, “The Sexuality and Social Performance of Androgen-Deprived (Castrated) Men throughout History: Implications for Modern Day Cancer Patients,” *Social Science & Medicine* 63, no. 12 (2006): 3163, 71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.08.007>, <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0277953606004096>. For a brief, sensitive account of one medical resident’s treatment of a *hijra*, see Amita Mukhopadhyay and Ritam Chowdhury, “The Eunuch Patient,” *Tropical Doctor* 39, no. 1 (2009): 63-64, <https://doi.org/10.1258/td.2008.080016>, [https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1258/td.2008.080016?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr\\_id=ori:rid:crossref.org&rfr\\_dat=cr\\_pub%3dpubmed](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1258/td.2008.080016?url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori:rid:crossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%3dpubmed). Eng, Zhang, and Zhu, “Skeletal Effects of Castration on Two Eunuchs of Ming China,” 108. Sujata patwchrdhan et al., “Chronic Urinary Retention in Eunuchs.” Studies conducted on men who received orchiectomy (removal of one testicle), chemical castration, or hormonal therapy for prostate cancer found evidence of osteoporosis in femoral neck mineral density (Eng, citing Daniell et al., 2000) and osteoporotic fractures (Eng, citing Daniell, 1997; Smith et al., 2006). Jean D. Wilson and Claus Roehrborn summarized the results of eight medical studies conducted from the early twentieth century to 1960 on living eunuchs: Skoptzy in Eastern Europe, eunuchs in Ottoman courts, and eunuchs in imperial Chinese courts. They found an enlarged pituitary among Skoptzy and eunuchs in Ottoman courts who had been castrated at age ten or eleven, thinning of the skull bones in all Skoptzy, kyphosis (curvature of the spine often associated with women) among the majority, gynecomastia in roughly half, and a small, atrophied, or impalpable prostate in all eunuchs studied. See another discussion of health impacts on Chinese eunuchs in the helpful introduction of Kutcher, *Eunuch and Emperor*.

<sup>401</sup> The eighty-one eunuchs for whom the authors had detailed birth and death records lived an average of seventy years compared to three comparable groups whose average lifespan was between fifty and fifty-six. Min, Lee, and Park, “The Lifespan of Korean Eunuchs,” 792–93. The authors interpret their findings as support for the disposable

The younger a male is upon castration, the greater its health impacts. Prepubertal castration interferes with normal epiphyseal closure, the growth plates at the end of long bones that normally close during adolescence. Lack of closure leads to longer, more fragile arm and leg bones, hence castrated boys often become taller than their peers.<sup>402</sup> Recent skeletal studies of two famous Italian singers castrated prepubertally—Farinelli (1705 – 1782), whose body was exhumed in 2006, and Gaspare Pacchierotti (1740 – 1821), whose body was exhumed in 2013—found tall stature (estimated at six foot two and six foot three inches, respectively) and visible epiphyseal lines indicative of delayed and incomplete fusion. Farinelli’s bones also exhibited osteoporosis consistent with that of a postmenopausal woman and severe hyperostosis frontalis interna (skull thickening) in the frontal bone, a condition nine times more common in females.<sup>403</sup>

Prepubertal castration inhibits growth of the vocal cords, which typically reach a length in adult males sixty-seven percent longer than in pre-pubescent boys. When the vocal cords lengthen during typical puberty, the pitch lowers. Prepubertally castrated males retain a higher pitch; however, their oral cavity, pharynx, and thoracic capacity reach adult size.<sup>404</sup> From the late 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of Italian boys were castrated prepubertally in the attempt to create the distinctive voices of *castrati* for the Sistene Chapel Choir, other European Catholic choirs, and the Italian opera. In many cases, their impoverished families hoped to gain financial security if a boy were selected and trained.<sup>405</sup>

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soma theory that there is a trade-off between longevity and reproduction due to competitive allocation of resources. Two other studies, however, found no statistical difference. One of those studies, unpublished, compared twenty-five *castrati* with twenty-five non-castrated singers. Jenkins, “The Voice of the Castrato,” 1878. The other study compared the recorded lifespan of fifty famous *castrati* with fifty famous non-castrated singers of a closely matched birth year. Eberhard Nieschlag, Susan Nieschlag, and Hermann M. Behre, “Lifespan and Testosterone.”

<sup>402</sup> Eng, Zhang, and Zhu, “Skeletal Effects of Castration on Two Eunuchs of Ming China,” 108.

<sup>403</sup> Zanatta et al., “Occupational Markers and Pathology of the Castrato Singer Gaspare Pacchierotti (1740–1821),” 4–8. Belcastro et al., “Hyperostosis Frontalis Interna (HFI) and Castration,” 634. On the prevalence of HFI in women: <https://rarediseases.org/rare-diseases/hyperostosis-frontalis-interna/>. Zanatta et al. question the HFI finding because it is not necessarily correlated with castration and because a similar study of Skoptzy showed thinned skull bones in all (7). In another recent study, the skeleton of a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) eunuch indicated probable prepubertal castration due to incomplete epiphyseal closure and tall stature compared to other skeletal remains. Eng, Zhang, and Zhu, “Skeletal Effects of Castration on Two Eunuchs of Ming China,” 111–14. The eunuch’s name was Huang Zhong. Researchers estimated his age of death at twenty to twenty-four. The skeleton of the second Ming eunuch suggested postpubertal castration. However, because the researchers compared the eunuch skeleton to one hundred forty-seven skeletons (presumably male and female, but not specified) from four areas in northern and central China from divergent time periods (from 2000 BCE–1368 CE), I question the finding of relative tall stature.

<sup>404</sup> Jenkins, “The Lost Voice,” 1502, 1506. Typically, the vocal cords grow from a mean 17.3 mm in a prepubertal male to 28.9 mm in an adult male.

<sup>405</sup> Jenkins, “The Voice of the Castrato,” 1877–78. Citing a 1927 German study, Jenkins claims that the number of castrated boys peaked at 4,000 per year during the mid-eighteenth century. Jenkins, “Long-Term Consequences of

Abundant literary and material evidence indicates that people in antiquity recognized most of these physical consequences. Eunuchs in Neo-Assyrian reliefs typically appear beardless, with a double chin and a rounded abdomen. The Hippocratic author of *Nature of the Child* observed that eunuchs made so prepubertally do not grow beards and do not become bald (20). Aristotle explained that eunuchs do not become bald because of their transition to the female state (διὰ τὸ εἰς τὸ θῆλυ μεταβάλλειν), a transition he characterized as a deformity (πήρωσις) (GA 5, 5.784a7-12).<sup>406</sup> In his view, eunuchs and women grew little body hair because they were too moist ([*Prob*] 895a). Galen attributed eunuchs' hairlessness on their chins and much of their bodies to the excision of the testicles, which produce essential heat and strength (*On Semen* 4.571). Historians, playwrights, and novelists wrote about eunuchs' lack of facial hair. Ctesias, for instance, claimed that one of Darius II's (r. 424 – 404 BCE) influential eunuchs tried to procure a moustache and beard in a plot against the king. His goal: to disguise himself as a man (άνήρ) (FGH 688 F 3c 15).<sup>407</sup> Philostratus claimed that eunuchs were more ashamed of the fact that their chins are “barren and hard and like stone” than of their castration because the former was “a perfectly obvious disfigurement of their appearance” (*Letter* 15(63) [Benner and Fobes, LCL]).

Other frequently mentioned attributes include the voice, bodily weakness, and skin wrinkling. Authors described eunuchs' voices as shrill (ὄξεια),<sup>408</sup> fine (λεπτός),<sup>409</sup> feminine (θηλυκός; γυναικείος),<sup>410</sup> strained (ἐπίτονος),<sup>411</sup> and corrupted (*inquinatus*).<sup>412</sup> Eunuchs' bodies were weak (ἀναλκις; *debilitas*)<sup>413</sup> and soft (μαλακός; *mollis*).<sup>414</sup>

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Castration in Men.” Italian opera singer Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), who was almost castrated, wrote: “I came within a hair’s breadth of belonging to that famous corporation—or rather let us say de-corporation. As a child, I had a lovely voice and my parents used it to have me earn a few paoli by singing in churches. One uncle of mine, a barber by trade, had convinced my father of the opportunity that he had seen, the breaking of my voice should not be allowed to compromise an organ which—poor as we were, and as I had shown some predisposition towards music—could have become an assured future source of income for us all. Most of the castrati in fact, and in particular those dedicated to a theatrical career, lived in opulence.” Servadio, *Rossini*, 15.

<sup>406</sup> See also *Hist. an.* 9.50, 632a.

<sup>407</sup> See also Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 120; Stat. *Silv.* 3.4; Cass. Dio 75.14.5.

<sup>408</sup> Including cognates (e.g., ὄξύς): Arist., *Hist. an.* 8(9) 632a; Arist., [*Pr.*] 11.16, 900b; 11.34, 903a; 11.62a, 906a; Dio Chyrs., *Or* 62.6; Philostr., *VS* 1.489

<sup>409</sup> Arist., *On Things Heard* 803b, 20; [*Pr.*] 11.16, 900b; Luc., *Eunuch* 7

<sup>410</sup> Arist., [*Pr.*] 894b; Luc., *Eunuch* 7, 10

<sup>411</sup> Philostr., *VS* 1.489

<sup>412</sup> Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 9.2.4 ext. 3

<sup>413</sup> Xen., *Cyr.* 7.5.62; Quint., *Inst.* 5.12

<sup>414</sup> Dio Chyrs., *Or.* 3.35; Stat. *Silv.* 3.4 (*mollio*)

Aristotle was interested in the physical impacts of castration and more broadly, in how general corporeal changes could follow damage to a specific body part. When one crucial body part changes, he explained, the whole body will differ greatly in form and appearance (*GA* 4.1, 766a). Aristotle described eunuchs (and females) as less muscular, less articulated, and softer than (non-castrated) males. Castration causes dramatic changes in the entire body, even though it only appears to impact one part:

And when one vital part changes, the whole make-up of the animal differs greatly in appearance and form. This may be observed in the case of eunuchs (εὐνοῦχος); the mutilation (πηρόω) of just one part of them results in such a great alteration of their old semblance, and in close approximation to the appearance of the female. The reason for this is that some of the body's parts are 'principles' (ἀρχή), and once a principle has been 'moved' (i.e., changed), many of the parts which cohere with it must of necessity change as well. (4.1, 766a26-31 [Peck])<sup>415</sup>

Aristotle reasoned that the testicles did not contribute to generation. Rather, they were non-essential appendages to the spermatic passages. They functioned like loom weights that, if removed, caused the passages to draw back up inside (*GA* 1.4, 717a13-717b5; 5.7, 787b20-788a16).

### Societal Views

The understanding among elites was that no respectable Roman citizen would castrate another male. The account of C. Fulvius Plautianus (d. 205 CE) by Cassius Dio exemplifies this view. Plautianus gained remarkable power under his cousin, the Emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193 – 211 CE), as a prefect of the Praetorian Guard, honorary senator, and consul. His daughter even married Caracalla (r. 198 – 217 CE). In 205, however, Caracalla orchestrated Plautianus's murder.<sup>416</sup> For Dio, Plautianus's castration of one hundred noble Roman boys and men demonstrated his power and despicable character:

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<sup>415</sup> Mayhew notes that Aristotle made the point four different times. *GA* 5.3.784a4 –11; cf. 782a9 –11 Mayhew, 62, 65. Robert Mayhew, *The Female in Aristotle's Biology: Reason or Rationalization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 62, 65.

<sup>416</sup> Anthony R. Birley, "Gaius Fulvius Plautianus," in *OCD* (2016).

He wanted everything, asked everything from everybody, and would take everything. He left no province and no city unlooted, but snatched and gathered in everything from all sides; and everybody sent a great deal more to him than to Severus. Finally, he sent centurions and stole horses with tiger-like stripes, sacred to the Sun, from the islands in the Red Sea. This one statement will suffice, I think, to make clear all his officiousness and greed; but I will add one thing more. At home he castrated a hundred Roman citizens of noble birth—though none of us knew of it until after he was dead. From this anyone may comprehend the full extent both of his lawlessness and of his power. Nor was it boys or youths alone that he castrated, but grown men as well, some of whom had wives. His purpose was that Plautilla, his daughter, whom Antoninus afterward married, should have only eunuchs as her attendants in general, and especially as her teachers in music and other branches of art. So we saw the same persons both eunuchs and men, fathers and impotent, emasculated and bearded (εὐνούχους τε καὶ ἄνδρας, καὶ πατέρας καὶ ἀόργεις, ἐκτομίας τε καὶ πωγωνίας). In view of this, one might not improperly claim that Plautianus had power beyond all men, equalling even that of the emperors themselves. (76.14.5-6 [Cary and Foster])

Cassius Dio used the castration to emphasize Plautianus's greed, officiousness, lawlessness, and power. Plautianus exemplified the worst, most anomalous, Roman nobleman. Whether or not he conducted a single castration (It is curious that no one knew about the one hundred castrations until after Plautianus's death.), the idea that an elite Roman man would castrate not just enslaved boys and young men, but another Roman citizen was appalling.

#### Antecedents

A number of scenarios led to eunuch-making: andrapodization, tributes, military actions, exploitation of house-born (*vernae*) and other slaves, child exposure, piracy and kidnappings, punitive measures, sale by a parent of a freeborn child, and self-sale. I will discuss each with the caveat that evidence is sparse and anecdotal. There are no estimates of how many boys and men were castrated. Nor is it clear where castrations occurred. However, because imperial legislation proscribed castration within imperial borders and imposed increasingly severe penalties on castrators, castrations likely occurred undercover and in neighboring empires.

We also do not know which eunuch-making scenarios were most common during the Principate, although some inferences are more plausible than others. The first two scenarios— andrapodization and tributes—reflect literary traditions and stereotypes about Persian and Babylonian practices that may have been familiar to Matthew's early audiences but were no longer practiced. Eunuch-making during the Principate probably reflected the larger slave-

making process. Research on Roman slave sources points to prisoners-of-war, *vernae*, and exposed infants as common sources.<sup>417</sup> One distinguishing factor is that slave-dealers solicited attractive boys for castration.

An ancient practice, andrapodization was an act of war whereby a victorious military rounded up, selected, and abducted children and young women for enslavement.<sup>418</sup> Though incomplete, a Hittite hieroglyphic inscription circa 850 BCE found near modern Kahramanmaraş, Turkey, provides an early example:

12. [when] I captured [the city] Illu[wasi],
13. (of) the men I cut off the feet,
14. but the children I made USINASIs [eunuchs] to us,
15. and thereby I exalted my image<sup>419</sup>

Roughly four centuries later, Herodotus described andrapodization in several different contexts. Of the Greco-Persian Wars (499 – 493 BCE), for example, he wrote that Persian generals overtook mainland Ionian cities, then selected “the comeliest boys and castrated them, making them eunuchs instead of men (ἐποίησεν ἀντὶ <τοῦ> εἶναι ἐνορχέας εὐνούχους), and they carried the fairest maidens away to the king; this they did, and burnt the cities, yea, and their temples” (6.32 [Godley, LCL]).

Biblical and pseudepigraphal writings also attest to andrapodization. Isaiah warns Hezekiah, the King of Judah, that his sons will be taken away and made into eunuchs (סִרְיָ; LXX σπάδων) for the house of the King of Babylon (Isa 39:7).<sup>420</sup> In the Testament of Judah, the Lord instigates andrapodization as a punitive measure. Judah warns his sons that because of their lewdness (ἀσέλγεια), witchcraft (γοητείας), and idolatry (εἰδωλολατρεία), the Lord will punish them severely:

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<sup>417</sup> William V. Harris, "Demography, Geography and the Sources of Roman Slaves," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999); Walter Scheidel, "The Roman Slave Supply," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* ed. K. R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Keith Bradley, "On Captives under the Principate," *Phoenix* (2004). They disagree about the relative importance of each source.

<sup>418</sup> Kathy L. Gaca challenges consensus scholarship on andrapodization that does not differentiate among those specifically targeted for enslavement (i.e., the young who cannot fight back) during warfare and focuses on mercantile aspects. Kathy L. Gaca, "The Andrapodizing of War Captives in Greek Historical Memory," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140 (2010): 135-47.

<sup>419</sup> John David Hawkins, *Inscriptions of the Iron Age, Part 1: Text, Introduction, Karatepe, Karkamis, Tell Ahmar, Maras, Malatya, Commagene*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2012), 257.

<sup>420</sup> Josephus made the enslavement of Hezekiah's castrated offspring explicit, as well as their loss of manhood (*A.J.* 10.33).



[T]he Lord shall bring upon you famine and pestilence, death and the sword, avenging siege, and dogs for the rending in pieces of enemies, and revilings of friends, destruction and blighting of eyes, children slaughtered, wives carried off, possessions plundered, temple of God in flames, your land desolated, your own selves enslaved among the Gentiles (ὕμῶν αὐτῶν δουλείαν ἐν ἔθνεσι), and they shall make some of you eunuchs for their wives (ἐκτεμοῦσιν ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς εὐνούχους ταῖς γυναῖξιν αὐτῶν); and whenever ye will return to the Lord with humility of heart, repenting and walking in all the commandments of God, then will the Lord visit you in mercy and in love, bringing you from out of the bondage (αἰχμαλωσία) of your enemies. (23 [de Jonge])<sup>421</sup>

The placement of Judah's warning about eunuch-making at the end of a list of sixteen dreadful punishments underscores its severity. By the time of Matthew's redaction, though, andrapodization was a historical practice that his audiences knew about from popular literary accounts such as Herodotus and the LXX.

Another practice attested in literary sources but no longer performed was eunuch-making as part of a tribute sent to a king. By Herodotus's account, Darius I (d. 486 BCE) required a tribute from Babylon and the rest of Assyria that included five hundred boys to be made into eunuchs (3.92).<sup>422</sup>

General warfare and military actions contributed to large influxes in Roman slave markets. Victorious commanders processed through Rome in ritual triumphs with prisoners-of-war. During the Principate, images of captives on monumental art, coins, paintings, pottery, and plaques were ubiquitous.<sup>423</sup> A series of wars in the Republican Period, the Jewish Wars (66-73; 132 – 135 CE), and the 198 Roman sack of Ctesiphon (modern Baghdad), the capital of the Parthian Empire, led to the enslavement of hundreds of thousands.<sup>424</sup> Roman campaigns on the frontiers, including Britain, the Rhine, Dacia, Africa, and the east, also resulted in many captives.<sup>425</sup> For slave-dealers who followed the troops, locations outside imperial borders would

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<sup>421</sup> *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, probably composed during the first two centuries C.E., comprise the attributed final speeches of Jacob's sons to their descendants.

<sup>422</sup> See also Hdt 3.48; cf. Plutarch, *On the Malice of Herodotus* 22.

<sup>423</sup> Bradley, "Captives," 299.

<sup>424</sup> Scheidel, "Roman Slave Supply," 296.

<sup>425</sup> Bradley, "Captives," 301.

have been legally permissible for conducting castrations. Other empires and tribes (e.g., Gaul, Dacia) also provided a source of enslaved people for Roman markets.<sup>426</sup>

A male born into slavery (*verna*) could be castrated against his mother's wishes. Statius alluded to this practice when he wrote about Domitian's anti-castration edict that "[n]o more under an evil law do slave mothers fear to bear the burden of sons" (*Silv.* 3.4). Similarly, Martial wrote that Domitian stopped "the boy snatched from his mother's breast" from being made sterile (*sterilis*) (*Spect.* 9.8).

The enslavement of exposed children, a widely attested practice, may have been another source of eunuchs. Although data is limited, evidence from Roman Egypt suggests that the sale of foundlings contributed significantly to local slave markets.<sup>427</sup> However, high estimated child mortality rates, the length of time before foundlings might be considered useful as slaves, and the financial investment required to raise them may have made the acquisition of foundlings a less attractive option for slaveholders and dealers.<sup>428</sup>

In rare cases, a parent may have sent a son to be castrated. Philostratus related one of the most successful arguments of Pollux of Naucratis (Egypt), a popular orator to whom Commodus (r.161 – 192 CE) granted a teaching position in Athens, about the subject of (Greek) islander parents who sold their sons to pay taxes. A young eunuch of the Babylon king purportedly wrote this letter to his father back on the island:

I am a king's slave: I was given to him as a present from a satrap (δουλεύω βασιλεῖ δῶρον ἐκ σατράπου δοθείς); yet I never mount a horse of the Medes or handle a Persian bow, nay I never even go forth to war or the chase like a man, but I sit in the women's quarters and wait on the king's concubines. Nor does the king resent this, for I am a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος). And I win their favour by describing to them the seas of Greece, and telling them tales of all the fine things that the Greeks do; how they hold the festivals at Elis, how oracles are given at Delphi, and which is the altar of Pity at Athens. But pray, father, write back to me and say when the Lacedaemonians celebrate the Hyacinthia and the Corinthians the Isthmian games; when are the Pythian games held at Delphi, and whether the Athenians are winning their naval battles. Farewell, and greet my brother for me, if he has not yet been sold. (*VS* 2.12 [Wright])

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<sup>426</sup> Scheidel, "Roman Slave Supply," 296. Harris also discusses importation of slaves but does not mention if they were prisoners-of-war Harris, "Demography, Geography," 72-73.

<sup>427</sup> Twenty-two of thirty papyrus slave sale contracts dated between 42-47 CE and discovered in Fayuum (central Egypt) record wet-nursing arrangements for infant slaves. Scheidel, "Roman Slave Supply," 298-99.

<sup>428</sup> Bradley, "Captives," 308. The point about financial investment is mine.

Although piracy and kidnappings also contributed to Roman slave markets, they were sporadic and may not have been a major source.<sup>429</sup> In the fourth century CE, historian Ammianus Marcellinus wrote about a head chamberlain (*praepositus cubiculi*) named Eutherius (*History* 16.5). He was captured as a boy in Armenia, castrated (*abstractis geminis*), then sold to Roman traders, who brought him to Constantine's (r. 306 – 337 CE) palace.

Literary accounts of punitive eunuch-making likely had more to do with good storytelling or polemics than historicity. For example, Herodotus wrote about a young man named Hermotimus who was captured by enemies, sold to a slavedealer who had him castrated, then gifted to Xerxes the Great (8.105-106). Some years later, while Hermotimus was handling business for the king, he tracked down the slavedealer. After convincing the unwitting man to assemble his family for a reward, Hermotimus forced him to castrate his four sons in front of his wife, then forced the sons to castrate their father.<sup>430</sup>

Xenophon told a similar account of a eunuch whose vengeance cost a king his kingdom. Gadatas, a handsome prince and ally of the Assyrian king, defected because the jealous king castrated him after his fiancée praised Gadatas. The prince allied with Cyrus the Great. In battle, he reclaimed a crucial fort that enabled Cyrus to conquer Babylon (*Cyr.* 5.3.11-15; 7.5.27-30). In the second century CE, Greek historian Appian of Alexandria claimed that the slaves of Minucius Basilus, one of Julius Caesar's murderers, killed him because he had forcibly castrated them as a punishment (*Roman History* 3.14.98). Eusebius claimed that an evil judge ordered despicable punishments on Christian men, including making some of them eunuchs (*Martyrs of Palestine* 7.4). Emperor Constantine purportedly used castration as a punishment (CODE JUST.

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<sup>429</sup> Scheidel, "Roman Slave Supply," 293-300. The sale of children was considered barbaric or a case of extreme financial duress; although some children were sold or leased, the evidence is murky.

<sup>430</sup> Herodotus shared an account of the Corinthian ruler Periander's unsuccessful attempt to exact revenge on enemies in Corcyra who had killed his son (3.48-50, 53). Periander sent three hundred sons of Corcyran noblemen to King Alyattes of Lydia to be castrated. His plan was thwarted by the Samians, who protected the boys in the Temple of Artemis. Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius related the same story, although Plutarch said it was the Temple of Diana, and Diogenes called it the Temple of Hera (Plutarch, *On the Malice of Herodotus* 22; Diogenes, *Lives. Periander* 1.7). For another account of eunuch-making as revenge, see Philostr. *VA* 2.569.

4.42.1).<sup>431</sup> In Genesis Rabbah 86.3, God castrates Potiphar because he purchased Joseph for sex.<sup>432</sup>

There is no scholarly consensus about the relative importance of self-sale as a source of slaves. Scattered references do suggest that at times, it may have occurred due to food insecurity. For example, sometime after the end of Domitian's reign, Clement of Rome reminded his Corinthian audience that many sold themselves into slavery and used the proceeds to pay for others' food (1 Clem 55:2). It is unclear if any young men sold themselves to save themselves or their families from starvation, although if Seneca the Elder's account of Augustan orator Titus Labienus has any historical validity, some boys were bribed into castration and enslavement. Labienus complained about prominent, rich men who used their wealth "against nature" (*contra naturam*) to deceive (*circumeo*) the innocence (*simplicitas*) of freeborn males (*ingenuorum*). These unscrupulous men wanted to own flocks (*grex*<sup>433</sup>) of eunuchs (*castratus*) for their slave-quarters (*ergastulum*): "they cut (*amputo*) their darlings (*exoletus*), to fit them to submit to their lusts over a longer period; and because they are themselves ashamed of being men, they make sure that as few men exist as possible. No-one rushes to the aid of these pampered (*delicatus*) and pretty (*formosus*) cripples" (*debilis*) (*Controversiae* 10.4.18 [Winterbottom, LCL]). The quote from Labienus illustrates another aspect of eunuch-making that became increasingly prominent during the imperial period: the solicitation of attractive prepubescent boys for castration and enslavement.

### Enslaved Eunuchs

The following section includes three parts. In the first, I argue that because castration was closely tied to enslavement, biblical scholars should interpret eunuchs as castrated slaves or former slaves unless evidence suggests otherwise. The vast majority was castrated by people, for

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<sup>431</sup> Emperor Leo (r. 457-465) did the same: *Romanae gentis homines sive in barbaro sive in Romano solo eunuohos faatos nullatenus quolibet modo ad. dominum cuiusdam transferri iubemus* (CODE JUST. 4.42.2).

<sup>432</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 315. Kraemer notes that in the Babylonian Talmud, B. *Sotah* 13b, the angel Gabriel castrates Potiphar because he was so attracted to Joseph.

<sup>433</sup> *Grex* is also a technical term for an acting troupe, as Christenson notes in his commentary on Terence's *The Eunuch*. David M. Christenson, "Eunuchus," in *A Companion to Terence*, ed. Antony Augoustakis and Ariana Traill, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester, GB: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 273.

people. Matthew’s ancient audiences would have recognized eunuchs as castrated slaves, with the exception of *galli*, males who were castrated due to medical conditions, and males with a congenital condition or who had an accident that caused testicular damage. In the second part, I provide a brief overview of the larger slave system in the early Roman Empire with a focus on expectations of slaves by slaveholders and distinctions among the enslaved. This section provides necessary context for the third part, in which I introduce eunuchs as elite slaves.

### *Castration and Enslavement*

In most cases, ancient sources do not state that eunuchs were enslaved. There is a reason for that: it was common knowledge. The sources focus instead on whom eunuchs served and in what capacity. The literary convention of referring to a eunuch as “eunuch of [slave-holder’s name]” typically designated a eunuch’s enslaved status. Hagai is the eunuch of King Ahasuerus (τῷ εὐνούχῳ τοῦ βασιλέως) in LXX Est 2:3. While the Lucan evangelist gave the Ethiopian eunuch multiple descriptors—man, Ethiopian, eunuch, and treasury minister of the Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians (ἀνὴρ Αἰθίοψ εὐνοῦχος δυνάστης Κανδάκης βασιλίσσης Αἰθιόπων ὃς ἦν ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γᾶς αὐτῆς)—‘slave’ was not among them. Luke’s audiences understood that he was the (earthly, if not spiritual) property of the queen.

Some literary sources, though, did refer explicitly to a eunuch’s enslavement, including several of the aforementioned texts about andrapodization (e.g., Hdt. 6.9). A eunuch who first served Darius III (d. 330 BCE), and afterward Alexander the Great, referred to himself as a slave (δοῦλος) who is devoted to his masters (φιλοδέσποτος) (Diod. Sic. 17.66.4). Several authors referred to Aristotle’s father-in-law Hermias as a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) and a slave (οἰκέτης in Strabo, *Geography* 13.1.57; δοῦλος in Didymos, *On Demosthenes* Col 5; Diog. Laert. 5.11). Josephus introduced his son’s tutor as a slave (δοῦλος) and eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) (*Vita* 429).

Other sources referred to a eunuch’s manumitted status. Some formerly worked in the imperial household. Suetonius described Posides as one of Emperor Claudius’s most highly regarded freedmen (*libertus*) (*Claud.* 5.28). According to Cassius Dio, Sporus was Emerpor Nero’s freedman (ἀπελεύθερος) (62.28.3). The most remarkable record of an imperial eunuch’s manumission is found in Statius’s poem written in honor of the eunuch Flavius Earinus, a favorite of Domitian. Earinus commissioned the poem to commemorate the gift of his hair, a

jeweled box, and a mirror to the god Asclepius of Pergamon (*Silv.* 3.4, lines 17-20).<sup>434</sup> In his preface to the third book of *Silvae*, Statius called Earinus “our Germanicus’s freedman” (*Germanici nostri libertus*). Earinus’s dedication of his hair may have signified his newly manumitted status. If so, Domitian manumitted him at a relatively young age.<sup>435</sup>

Throughout antiquity, eunuchs were bought and sold. Material and literary sources provide evidence of the market for eunuchs. Castrated slaves commanded a premium compared to others, particularly if they were attractive or had specialized skills. Pliny the Elder made the exaggerated claim that the poet Clutorius Priscus paid 50,000,000 sesterces (equivalent to 12,500,000 denarii) for one of the eunuchs of Sejanus (20 BCE – 31 CE), a prefect of Tiberius’s Praetorian Guard (*NH* 7.39).<sup>436</sup> To put that amount into perspective, the first evangelist lists one denarius as the wage for a (male) day laborer in the late first century (Mt 20:2).<sup>437</sup> Hypothetically, if a male day laborer worked six days per week, year-round, it would take him almost 40,000 years to earn that much. The fact that eunuchs were more valuable than other enslaved people is also clear in the first-century novel *Callirhoe*.<sup>438</sup> After the protagonist won a naval battle, he ordered his troops to give an accounting of the captives. They responded by bringing the eunuchs, female slaves, and “less valuable bodies” (ἐὐωνότερα σώματα) to the marketplace (ἀγορά) (7.6.3).<sup>439</sup>

Some of the castration legislation discussed in the first chapter also refers to enslavement. Nervan legislation instituted a hefty fine of one-half of property when someone handed over a slave (*servus*) for castration (*castro*) (DIG. 48.8.6). Enslavement is implicit in the *senatus consultum* that called for the Lex Cornelia penalty—namely, deportation for life and sale of property—for “anyone who castrates (*castro*) a man for lust or for gain” (*promercium*) (DIG.

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<sup>434</sup> Statius also refers to Earinus’s status as a slave (lines 33-38). Earinus is also Caesar’s “boy” (*puer*) (line 7).

<sup>435</sup> The hair dedication could have also signified his transition into adulthood. For a helpful discussion of Earinus’s dedication and possible age at manumission, see Henriksén, “Earinus,” 285-89.

<sup>436</sup> Pliny opined that the cost had more to do with lust than beauty (*tam Hercule quam libidinis, non formae*). A silver denarius was equivalent to four sesterces. “Sestertius” in Timothy Darvill, “Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology,” (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>437</sup> According to offended guests at Simon’s house, an alabaster flask of nard that a woman used to anoint Jesus could have been sold for over three hundred denarii (Mk 14:3-5).

<sup>438</sup> G.P. Goold, translator of the 1995 Loeb edition, argues for a date of 25 BCE – 50 CE (1-3).

<sup>439</sup> In a letter purportedly written by Emperor Gordian III (r. 238 -244) to his father-in-law, the young emperor made the comment: “Were it not that the mighty gods watch over the Roman Empire, even now we should be sold by bought eunuchs as though under the hammer” (*Historia Augusta. The Three Gordians* 25 [Magie, LCL]). Matthew Kuefler points out that “under the hammer” refers to the *hasta*, that is, the pole set up for a slave auction. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 319n136.

48.8.3.4). The term *promercium*, that is, putting up goods for sale, shows that eunuch-making was a commercial enterprise that imperial legislators found objectionable. Suetonius also made eunuchs' enslavement explicit in his description of Domitian's castration ban: "He prohibited the castration (*castro*) of males and kept down the price of the eunuchs (*spado*) that remained in the hands of the slave dealers" (*Dom.* 7.1 [Rolfe, LCL]).<sup>440</sup>

It is clear from legal writings that eunuchs continued to be purchased. Jurists debated whether enslaved eunuchs had a disease or a defect. The Edict of the Curule Aediles, codified in *The Digest* but in effect since the Republican Period (509 – 31 BCE), required that sellers disclose any defects, diseases, and other known problems to potential buyers (DIG. 21.1.38.7). Author Aulus Gellius (b. c. 125 – 128 CE) discussed the edict and two jurists' views about eunuchs:

The edict of the curule aediles, in the section containing stipulations about the purchase of slaves, reads as follows: "See to it that the sale ticket of each slave be so written that it can be known exactly what disease (*morbis*) or defect (*vitio*) each one has, which one is a runaway or a vagabond, or is still under condemnation for some offence."

Therefore the jurists of old raised the question of the proper meaning of a "diseased slave" (*manceps morbosus*) and one that was "defective" (*vitiosus*), and to what degree a disease differed from a defect. Caelius Sabinus, in the book which he wrote on the Edict of the Curule Aediles, quotes Labeo, as defining a disease in these terms: "Disease is an unnatural condition of any body, which impairs its usefulness." But he adds that disease affects sometimes the whole body and at other times a part of the body. That a disease of the whole body is, for example, consumption or fever, but of a part of the body anything like blindness or lameness. "But," he continues, "one who stutters or stammers is defective rather than diseased, and a horse which bites or kicks has faults rather than a disease. But one who has a disease is also at the same time defective. However, the converse is not also true; for one may have defects and yet not be diseased. Therefore in the case of a man who is diseased," says he, "it will be just and fair to state to what extent the price will be less on account of that defect."

With regard to a eunuch (*eunuch*) in particular it has been inquired whether he would seem to have been sold contrary to the aediles' edict, if the purchaser did not know that he was a eunuch. They say that Labeo ruled that he could be returned as diseased....

I must not omit to say that this also is stated in the works of the early jurists, that the difference between a disease and a defect is that the latter is lasting, while the former comes and goes. But if this be so, contrary to the opinion of Labeo, which I quoted above, neither a blind man nor a eunuch is diseased. (*Attic Nights* 4.2 [Rolfe])

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<sup>440</sup> Other references to the ban include Philostr., *VA* 6.42; Tac., *Ann.* 12.66; *Hist.* 2.71; Mart. *Spect.* 9.6.5.

Eunuchs posed a challenge to jurists in terms of categorization because there were financial ramifications for slaveholders. Gellius's discussion demonstrates that eunuchs were bought, sold, and perhaps also returned on occasion.

Sometimes existing slaves were castrated to bring up their prices, though the practice was illegal within imperial borders by the end of the first century, if not earlier. First-century jurist Vivianus<sup>441</sup> held that "if someone castrates (*castro*) your slave-boy (*puer*) and thus increases his value . . . the Lex Aquilia should not apply, but that you should instead bring the action for insult or sue under the edict of the aediles for four times his value" (DIG. 9.2.28). The Lex Aquilia was a statute that concerned restitution due to owners when slaves or livestock were unlawfully injured or killed.

Although there are few extant records of the actual prices for slaves in the Roman Empire, one Byzantine source lists some of the maximum prices for eunuchs set by Justinian. According to Justinian's price list, eunuchs were among the costliest slaves at two to three times the value of uncastrated slaves (CODE JUST. 6.43.3,1; 7.7.1,5-5b). Specifically, he assigned a value of 30 gold *solidi* for a eunuch aged nine or younger and 10 *solidi* for an uncastrated child nine or younger. Unskilled eunuchs ten or older were priced at 50 *solidi* compared to 20 for their uncastrated counterparts, and skilled eunuchs aged ten or older were 70 *solidi* compared to 30 for their uncastrated counterparts. Justinian also assigned a higher value for skilled eunuchs than for doctors, midwives, and scribes (at 50 to 60 *solidi*). As Kyle Harper points out, Justinian did not attempt to regulate maximum prices.<sup>442</sup> Hence, slave dealers may have charged much more than 70 *solidi* for a skilled eunuch over age nine.<sup>443</sup>

Several first-century Greek and Latin texts described eunuchs—especially beautiful eunuchs—as valuable gifts given to kings. Josephus claimed that Herod the Great (c. 73 – 4 BCE) presented his son Herod Archelaus (22 BCE – c. 18 CE)<sup>444</sup> with 70 talents, a jewel-

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<sup>441</sup> Federico Procchi, "Vivianus," in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. R.S. Bagnall et al. (2021). 6

<sup>442</sup> Kyle Harper, "Slave Prices in Late Antiquity (and in the Very Long Term)," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*, no. H. 2 (2010): 228.

<sup>443</sup> The premium for skilled eunuchs would have reflected the original investment of time and financial resources for the requisite education or training. Some eunuchs had specialized skills. The eunuch in Acts, for example, was literate (Acts 8:28-34), as was the tutor of Josephus' son. We may infer that some received specialized education or vocational training and that monarchs and other elites expected the eunuchs who served as their treasurers, tutors, and military commanders, among other positions, to be highly skilled.

<sup>444</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Herod Archelaus," <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Herod-Archelaus/40195>



encrusted throne, some eunuchs, and a concubine (*B.J.* 1.511). In the first or early second century CE, historian and rhetorician Quintus Curtius claimed that the eunuch Bagoas was among the remarkable gifts (*dona ingentia*) presented to Alexander the Great by the late Darius III's military commander Nabarzanes (6.5.23). In Statius's poem about Earinus, Venus proclaimed that she would give him to Domitian as a gift (*donum*) (*Silv.* 3.4 line 37).

### *Enslavement in the Early Empire*

A sketch of the Roman slave system with a focus on expectations of slaves by slaveholders and distinctions among slaves helps situate enslaved eunuchs historically and provides necessary context for the final section of the chapter on Matthew's eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people.

The Roman economy was bolstered by the labor of enslaved people. Most freeborn Roman men found it undignified, even shameful, to perform manual work or engage in commerce. They aspired to be self-sufficient, without relying on others for income. So, while occupations such as landowner and farmer (both prominent in Matthew) were highly respectable for freeborn Roman men, slaves and day laborers did most of the physical and administrative work.<sup>445</sup>

Varro grouped enslaved persons with oxen as tools (*On Agriculture* 1.17.1), and Plutarch described Crassus's slaves as "living implements of household management (ὄργανα ἔμψυχα τῆς οἰκονομικῆς) (*Crassus* 2.6). An absentee landlord could consider himself the respectable farmer of his land even though slaves performed the labor. With enslaved persons acting as their surrogates, historian John Bodel explains, slaveholders saw themselves as self-sufficient and reaped "the material and social benefits of labour (revenue, prestige, autonomy) without incurring the physical and social costs (fatigue, toil, dishonour)."<sup>446</sup>

According to Bodel, Roman slavery was grounded on ideology more than economics. While slaveholders certainly exploited slaves for labor, they also benefited for other reasons. The

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<sup>445</sup> See, e.g., Cicero's hierarchy of honorable and dishonorable professions (*On Duties* 150-151), discussed by John Bodel, "Slave Labour and Roman Society," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* ed. Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 314.

<sup>446</sup> Bodel, "Slave Labour," 316.

enslaved provided companionship, caregiving, advice, and emotional support.<sup>447</sup> They also functioned as a visible indicator of the slaveholder's status. Prominent Romans traveled with slaves, often many, to draw attention to their wealth and prestige. Traveling with only three or four was considered the exception for an elite slaveholder; a large retinue was preferable.<sup>448</sup>

For many enslaved individuals, life was brutal and degrading. Both female and male slaves were exploited to satisfy slaveholders' sexual desires. They often had little autonomy. Slaveholders expected slaves to respond promptly whenever they wanted something done, night or day. Any perceived failure could lead to beating, whipping, or restraints such as manacles, leg fetters, or neck chains. Slaveholders sometimes paid someone else to tattoo, brand, torture, or execute an enslaved person. Some slaves became a public example of disobedience when they were burned alive, crucified, or placed in an arena with animals.

Descriptions of "good" and "bad" slaves pepper Roman writings. At auctions, sellers promoted desirable characteristics such as loyalty, obedience, hard work, diligence, and thrift. From a slaveholder's perspective, a loyal slave was one who understood, embraced, and enacted the slaveholder's will and desires. Ideally for the slaveholder, an enslaved individual made the slaveholder's desires his or her own. Seneca the Younger employed the term *colere* (worship) not only for worship of the gods and honor due to ancestors or a benevolent ruler, but for slaves who revered their slaveholders (*Epistulae* 47.17).<sup>449</sup> During times of political instability and anxiety such as the Republican Civil Wars; authors of philosophical tracts, histories, and exempla wrote about faithful slaves who remained loyal even when there was no possibility of punishment or reward. In the first century, Valerius Maximus and Seneca shared stories of slaves who died in the place of a slaveholder by impersonating him.<sup>450</sup>

Yet these were exceptional cases; a stereotypical assessment was that slaves fundamentally lacked πίστις (*fides*) and devotion (*pietas*). They acted not according to the slaveholder's will but followed their bodily desires. Roman authors claimed that "bad" slaves lied, cheated, stole, and wasted time. They were oversexed gluttons who drank, overslept, and

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<sup>447</sup> Bodel, "Slave Labour," 311-13.

<sup>448</sup> Keith Bradley, "Freedom and Slavery," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2010), 628.

<sup>449</sup> Joshel, "Slavery and Literary Culture," 217-20 and 28-29.

<sup>450</sup> Joshel, "Slavery and Literary Culture," 219. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 6.8; Seneca, *On Benefits* 3.25

gambled when any opportunity presented itself. First-century agricultural author Columella, who offered detailed advice to slaveholders on proper management of slaves and slave managers, repeatedly described slaves with these qualities.<sup>451</sup>

The perceived social status of slaves varied dramatically. Status was determined by such factors as rural or urban location, education or skill set, household hierarchy, proximity to the slaveholder, age, gender, reputation, and attractiveness.<sup>452</sup> On the lower rung, some enslaved persons labored in fields or mines, lived in underground prisons, and worked in chain gangs. Others who worked in the imperial household were influential and often far wealthier than their freeborn counterparts.

Romans made a distinction between slaves who worked in the *familia urbana* or the *familia rustica*, which corresponded to the tradition of wealthy Romans who kept a rural villa as well as a city town house and two sets of slaves. This distinction held in the will, when a slaveholder could legally bequeath slaves to designated heirs or manumit them. The types of work determined the classification; a gardener who worked in the town house would be part of the *familia rustica*. Generally speaking, an enslaved person's assignment to the *familia rustica*, where larger estates used chain gangs and underground prisons, was considered inferior.<sup>453</sup> Urban settings generally provided a better quality of life. Slaveholders sometimes sent domestic slaves to the *familia rustica*—the rural estate—for punishment.

In the imperial household, slaves' jobs were highly specialized. They had high-profile positions that reflected the emperor's desired self-representation. For example, one imperial slave was responsible for gem-encrusted gold plates, another for gold drinking cups, another silver drinking cups, and so on. The only position higher in the imperial hierarchy than these servers was that of the freedman who managed the emperor's private budget.<sup>454</sup>

Jurists considered skilled slaves to be more valuable. Training occurred through informal and formal apprenticeships, formal schooling in particular trades, crafts, and arts, and in-home schools (*paedegogia*) in wealthy households. When it came to advancement or manumission,

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<sup>451</sup> Joshel, "Slavery and Literary Culture," 220, citing Columella, *On Agriculture* 1.1.20; 1.7.5-6, 7; 1.8.2, 18, 20; 1.9.5; 11.1.3, 14-16, 15-17, 26, 28.

<sup>452</sup> Keith Bradley, "Resisting Slavery at Rome," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 378. Attractiveness is my addition to that list. Eunuchs who were young (e.g., teens) and good-looking were among the most desirable slaves.

<sup>453</sup> Bodel, "Slave Labour," 329-30.

<sup>454</sup> Bodel, "Slave Labour," 324-25.

however, pleasing the slaveowner trumped specialized training.<sup>455</sup> Enslaved individuals who were lucky enough to be offered the opportunity for manumission—and to pay for it themselves—sometimes prospered. Thousands of funerary inscriptions suggest that manumitted slaves thrived and often bought their own slaves.<sup>456</sup>

### *Eunuchs as Elite Slaves*

Sociologist Orlando Patterson described slavery in his 1982 landmark *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* as “a form of personal, corporeal domination, by the slaveholder or his agent, based on the exercise or threat of physical and psychological violence,” and a slave as “a person without honor, having no dignity that any free person is required to respect, and . . . [whose] dishonor parasitically aggrandized the power and honor of the slave-holder.”<sup>457</sup> Patterson famously coined the term ‘natal alienation’ to explain how a slave became severed from preexisting and potential kinship connections and incorporated into a slavemaster’s household. Natal alienation involves

the loss of ties of birth in both descending and ascending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the

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<sup>455</sup> Bodel, "Slave Labour," 331, 34.

<sup>456</sup> Bradley, "Resisting Slavery," 378-79.

<sup>457</sup> Orlando Patterson, "Trafficking, Gender and Slavery: Past and Present," in *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2012), 323. Joseph Calder Miller challenges sociological definitions like Patterson’s that describe slavery as an institution. Slaving, he argues, is a historical process that must be contextualized as much as possible with careful attention to the motivations of slavers and experiences of enslaved. Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery As History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 10-11, 21, and *ibid.* Other scholars have theorized slavery. In 1979, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff theorized slavery as an issue of ‘rights-in-persons’ whereby one or more persons exert rights over another person or group. In their own research on enslavement in African societies, Miers and Kopytoff determined that slaves never sought freedom in the sense of living an autonomous existence, which was dangerous and undesirable. Instead, they sought belonging by attaching to a patron, kin group, or power. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, "Introduction," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 5. In his Marx and Engels’-inspired anthropological analysis of enslavement, Claude Meillassoux defined slavery as “a social system based on the exploitation of a class of producers or persons performing services, renewed mainly through acquisition (used also, by extension, to mean enslavement).” Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnois (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 343. More recently, *The Routledge History of Slavery* defines slavery as “a form of exploitation, whether in Africa or elsewhere, historically or in contemporary times. Its definition derives from the idea that slaves are property, and that slaves are outsiders who are alien by origin or who could be denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions.” Trevor Burnard and Gad Heuman, *The Routledge History of Slavery*, Routledge Histories, (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 36.

slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood,’ and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master.<sup>458</sup>

These definitions do not apply well to eunuchs, although New Testament scholars continue to cite Patterson and assume that eunuchs were natively alienated.<sup>459</sup> In antiquity, castration could but did not necessarily lead to natal alienation, and some eunuchs were highly respected. For example, in the second century CE, Pausanias claimed that Attalus I (269 – 197 BCE), one of the Athenian *eponymoi* and King of Pergamon, was the nephew of an enslaved eunuch named Philetaerus:

A Macedonian of the name of Docimus, a general of Antigonus, who afterwards surrendered both himself and his property to Lysimachus, had a Paphlagonian eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) called Philetaerus. All that Philetaerus did to further the revolt from Lysimachus, and how he won over Seleucus, will form an episode in my account of Lysimachus. Attalus, however, son of Attalus and nephew (ἀδελφιδοῦς) of Philetaerus, received the kingdom from his cousin Eumenes, who handed it over. (*Description of Greece* 8)

Philetaerus had prominent relatives, military prowess, political savvy, and supporters. He also exercised power by promoting a revolt and negotiating with Seleucus.

Eunuchs enslaved to monarchs often worked in the distinctive inner court, where royal decision-making occurred and involved the ruler and those closest to him or her. A physical as well as social space, the inner court was not a private sphere in a contemporary sense, disconnected from political affairs, although the royal family usually lived there.<sup>460</sup> The Roman *aula* (derived from the Greek αὐλή), for example, was the space wherein different parties sought

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<sup>458</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7. Patterson recognized that slaves made informal social bonds but argued that they were “never recognized as legitimate or binding” (6).

<sup>459</sup> Burke, “Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch,” 180; Warren Carter, *Households and Discipleship: A Study of Matthew 19-20*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, (Sheffield, GB: JSOT Press, 1994), 82, 88-89; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 384; Joseph A. Marchal, “Who Are You Calling a Eunuch?! Staging Conversations and Connections between Feminist and Queer Biblical Studies and Intersex Advocacy,” in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. Susannah Cornwall (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 36-37.

<sup>460</sup> Jeroen Frans Jozef Duindam, “Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires,” in *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: a Global Perspective*, ed. Jeroen Frans Jozef Duindam, Tülay Artan, and Metin Kunt (Boston, MA: Brill, 2011), 20, referring to the essays of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and especially Peter Fibiger Bang in the same volume. Aloys Winterling also made this point in Aloys A. Winterling, *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 59.

to gain the emperor's favor and vied for power; those whom the emperor favored received personal fortunes and positions of power.<sup>461</sup> Eunuchs who acted as gatekeepers and bodyguards determined access to a monarch. According to Ctesias, the Median general Arbaces was only able to gain access to the Assyrian King Sardanapallus after he gave one of the eunuchs a golden bowl (FGH 688 F 3c 1b).<sup>462</sup>

Sovereigns who had the greatest social standing had eunuchs in their court. These eunuchs often became extremely wealthy and highly respected. Assyrian eunuch governors received eponyms to designate their time in power. Eunuchs like Taprammi, "eunuch of the [Hittite] palace," left a great treasure behind.<sup>463</sup> Their status, and their treasure, derived from the monarchs they served. The greater a respective eunuch's status and treasure, the greater that of the respective monarch. In LXX Genesis, Potiphar heads a household and has many possessions: a house (39:2,4,5,8,9,11, 14, 16), slaves (39:2,14,17,19), a field (39:5), a wife (39:7,8,9,19), Egyptian inhabitants (inferred from 39:11,14, who may also be slaves), and a prison (40:7; 41:10). The author emphasizes his status as "lord" (He is called Joseph's lord in 39:2,3,4,7,8 [2x],16,19,20.).<sup>464</sup>

Pliny the Elder was offended by the case of an extremely wealthy Thessalonian eunuch who managed to change his status (*adopto*) from the freedman (*libertus*) of Marcellus Aeserninus, a senator, praetor, and respected orator, to imperial freedman of Claudius. Pliny claimed that he imported expensive evergreen plane-trees for his country estate outside Rome

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<sup>461</sup> Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Roman Imperial Court: Seen and Unseen in the Performance of Power," in *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective*, ed. Jeroen Franz Josef Duindam, Artan Tülay, and Metin Kunt (Boston, MA: Brill, 2011), 96-98, 101. If he did not embody his kingdom, the expectation remained that he should. Imperial biographers like Suetonius regularly described the emperor surrounded by his court. For an excellent, nuanced discussion of the Roman imperial court and scholarship since Theodor Mommsen, see Aloys A. Winterling, "A Court without "State." The aula Caesaris," in *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* ed. Aloys Winterling (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2009). I will discuss eunuchs who worked for monarchs in the following section.

<sup>462</sup> See also Athenaeus's similar account in *The Learned Banqueters* 12.529a.

<sup>463</sup> Taprammi, lived in the late thirteenth century and probably served at least some time under King Tudhaliya IV. That Taprammi sold a slave to the Queen of Ugarit and sued the King of Ugarit for unlawfully taking his slaves' houses underscores his status and power. Multiple extant attestations of Taprammi exist, including one epigraph on an elaborately carved bronze bowl with a stag hunting scene. This bowl, one of the most intricately carved Hittite pieces ever discovered, points to Taprammi's wealth; the treasure discovered at Kastamonu, Turkey, including the bowl, likely belonged to him. John David Hawkins, "A Bowl Epigraph of the Official Taprammi," in *Aspects of Art and Iconography: Anatolia and its Neighbors. Studies in Honor of Nimet Özgüç*, ed. Machteld J. Mellink, Edith Porada, and Tahsin Özgüç (Ankara, TR: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1993).

<sup>464</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 271.

during Claudius's reign. He remarked sarcastically, "he deserves to be called another Dionysius!" (*NH* 12.5 [Rackham, LCL])<sup>465</sup>

There is inscriptional evidence of another imperial eunuch. A gravestone held by the Vatican Museum was inscribed for Titus Flavius Parthenopaeus, a seventy-five year-old imperial eunuch—"Aug(usti) lib(erti)." He was originally a slave of Nero's second wife Poppea Sabina (c. 62 – 65 CE) but assumed responsibility for imperial ceremonial dress (*eunuchus ab ornamentis*), possibly into the reign of Hadrian (r. 117 – 138) given Parthenopaeus's remarkably advanced age.<sup>466</sup>

Some eunuchs had specialized skills. Pliny the Elder claimed that one man alone made repairs to a magnificent Egyptian underground labyrinth: Chaeremon, Pharaoh Nectanebo II's eunuch (*spado*) (*NH* 36.89). The eunuch in Acts was literate (Acts 8:28-34), as was the tutor of Josephus's son (*Vita* 76.429). Scholars should infer that they received specialized education or vocational training and that monarchs and other elites expected the eunuchs who served as their treasurers, tutors, and military commanders, among other positions, to be well trained. The fact that skilled eunuchs garnered a premium in Justinian's price list may have reflected the original investment of time and financial resources for the requisite education or training.

### **Ancient Preconceptions about Eunuchs Who Were Made Eunuchs**

I have demonstrated that castration and enslavement were closely linked in antiquity. To answer the question—How would Matthew's early audiences have understood eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people?—I take a two-pronged approach. First, I discuss common preconceptions about such eunuchs in the early Roman Empire, without reference to the First

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<sup>465</sup> Aeserninus's new status would have been reflected in his name as well as his wealth. For naming conventions in manumission and adoption, see Lindsay, *Adoption*, 94 and *ibid*.

<sup>466</sup> CIL 06, 08954 (3463, 3891). The full inscription follows: D(is) M(anibus) / T(iti) Fl(avi) Aug(usti) lib(erti) / Parthenopaei / Popp(a)eani eunuchi / ab ornamentis / vix(it) ann(os) LXXV / T(itus) Fl(avius) Nicephorus / lib(ertus) patrono sanc / tissimo et pientis(simo) / bene meranti / fecit. On his service into Hadrian's reign, see P.R.C. Weaver, "Misplaced Officials," *Antichthon* 13 (1979): 78. On the title *ab ornamentis*, see Susan Treggiari, "Jobs in the Household of Livia," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 43 (1975): 53. Other funeral inscriptions to manumitted eunuchs: CIL 2.06247,6 in Southeast Spain and CIL 6.08847 and CIL 6.33855 in Rome. There are also later inscriptions of Christian eunuchs (e.g., *cubiculari*).

Gospel. People in the late first century would have identified these eunuchs as males, particularly attractive ones, who had been castrated prepubertally for enslavement. It was common knowledge that kings, queens, and emperors had eunuchs. Monarchs valued their loyalty and beauty. They and other elites also displayed eunuchs to highlight their status and wealth. Matthew's early audiences would have known that eunuchs served in many roles, from escorts and messengers, to military commanders and lovers. Although the sources discussed below are predominantly literary accounts due to the paucity of material evidence, they do reflect beliefs about eunuchs, which is crucial for gaining some sense of Matthew's early audience's preconceptions.

Second, I turn to the gospel to assess how Matthew's audiences would have viewed these eunuchs in their larger narrative. The evangelist often depicts high-level slaves who either prove good and faithful to their master or completely fail to meet expectations. Matthew's audiences would not have been surprised to encounter eunuchs among these slaves. Nor would they have been surprised by the metaphor of enslavement to God—indeed, Jesus models the relationship. I conclude that Matthew's earliest audiences would have been primed for, though certainly not expecting, the final group who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.

The following section seeks to elucidate what elites, above all monarchs, expected of eunuchs and why they valued them so highly. It demonstrates why the quintessential attribute of eunuchs was πίστις and examines the consequences of disloyalty. I discuss many examples of eunuchs who served elites, including eunuchs in the LXX, where they are almost always associated with kings, for three reasons. First, in contemporary exegesis of Mt 19:12, there is little discussion about eunuchs in the LXX (or MT). Second, for the first evangelist, who drew extensively from the LXX and assumed many in his audiences also knew the scriptures, biblical eunuchs would have been familiar. Finally, Matthew expected his audiences to envision God as a slaveholding king. The eunuchs of Mt 19:12b signal enslavement at the highest level and prepare Matthew's audiences to make the choice to become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven and hence slaves of God.

They worked for monarchs and other elites.

Late first-century audiences would have been familiar with stories about eunuchs who served kings, queens, and emperors. The evangelist's audiences who shared a Jewish background



would have known about eunuchs in biblical narratives. The LXX mentions eunuchs forty-seven times, almost always in connection with a monarchy.<sup>467</sup>

For biblical authors, eunuchs were part and parcel of kingship. They served the most powerful monarchs of the ancient world, including Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia, as messengers, treasurers, household administrators, envoys, guards, military commanders, harem supervisors, and personal attendants, among other positions.<sup>468</sup> Eunuchs who served Israel and Judah's monarchs performed the same work as their counterparts in other countries.<sup>469</sup>

With few exceptions, biblical eunuchs *belong* to kings.<sup>470</sup> Writers make this clear in a couple of ways.<sup>471</sup> They refer to the “eunuch of” a particular king: Potiphar is the eunuch of Pharaoh (Gen 40:1: Πετεφρῆς ὁ εὐνοῦχος Φαραώ); Ashpenaz, the chief eunuch of King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 1:3: ὁ βασιλεὺς τῷ Ασφανεζ τῷ ἀρχιευνούχῳ αὐτοῦ); Hagai, the eunuch of King Ahasuerus (Est 2:3: τῷ εὐνούχῳ τοῦ βασιλέως). One eunuch has “king” hardwired into his name—“Nathan-Melech the eunuch,” in Hebrew (2 Kgs 23:11: סִירְטָח בְּלֶמְ-יָחִי meaning “gift of the king”), “Nathan, the eunuch of the king,” in Greek (Ναθαν βασιλέως τοῦ εὐνούχου). More often, LXX authors employ the third-person singular masculine genitive pronoun αὐτοῦ. Pharaoh is furious with “his two eunuchs” (Gen 40:2). Samuel warns that the king of Israel will give one-tenth of the people’s tithe to “his eunuchs” (1 Sam 8:15) and slaves.

Some biblical eunuchs have prominent positions. The book of Daniel refers to King Nebuchadnezzar’s chief eunuch (ἀρχιευνούχος) seven times in the first chapter (1:3,7,8,9,10,11,18). He appears as the fourth character in Daniel behind only King Jeokiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and God. Abiesdri (Old Greek 1:3,11,16) or Ashpenaz (Theodotion 1:3) receives his orders directly from Nebuchadnezzar.

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<sup>467</sup> The count comes from Tables 1 and 2, excluding Deut 23:2, Lev 21:20, and 1 Chr 28:1. Janet Everhart’s observation that “Hebrew Bible eunuchs are rarely found outside texts that relate in some way to the setting or concerns of monarchy” applies to eunuchs in the LXX as well as the MT. Eunuchs signal kingship. Janet S. Everhart, “The Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible: Uncovering an Alternate Gender” (Iliff School of Theology and The University of Denver, 2003), 107.

<sup>468</sup> Egypt (Gen 37:37; 39:1; 40:19-22), Babylonia (Dan 1:3,9-18; Jer 39:3; 52:25; 2 Kgs 20:18; Isa 39:7), Persia (1:10; 2:3,8,14-16,21; 4:5-16; 6:2; 7:9)

<sup>469</sup> Eunuchs associated with Josiah (LXX 4 Kgs 23:11), Jehoiachin/Jeconiah (LXX 4 Kgs 24:12,15; LXX Jer 36:2/NRSV 29:2), Zedekiah (Jer 52:25), Gedaliah (LXX Jer 48:16/NRSV 41:16), Ahab (1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Chr 18:8), and Jehu and Jezebel (LXX 4 Kgs 9).

<sup>470</sup> Exceptions include Wis 3:14; Sir 20:4; 30:20; Isa 53:3-5; cf. Est 4:4 (οἱ εὐνοῦχοι τῆς βασιλίσσης).

<sup>471</sup> It is quite possible that the eunuchs mentioned in these exceptions also “belonged” to kings; however, the author does not state it.

Eunuchs were thoroughly enmeshed in the life of Judah and Israel. They were among the highest officials of King Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, Jeconiah, Josiah, and Ahab’s retainers.<sup>472</sup> 4 Kgs 24:12 and 24:15 mention eunuchs with others in King Jehoiachin’s retinue—his mother, servants, captains, and leading men—whom Jehoiachin surrenders as captives to King Nebuchadnezzar. A eunuch who serves King Jehoram of Israel follows the king’s order to give the woman whose son Elisha resurrected the restoration of seven years’ worth of produce from her field and land as well as the property she lost during the famine (4 Kgs 8:6). Their proximity to the kings of Israel and Judah suggests that some eunuchs were at the heart of their respective community.

Ancient authors frequently mentioned the eunuchs of Achaemenid and Persian kings and satraps.<sup>473</sup> Xenophon wrote at length about Cyrus the Great’s eunuchs.<sup>474</sup> There were also stories about the eunuchs of the Achaemenid King Cambyses II, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes II, and Darius I, Darius II, and Darius III. Of Darius III, Herodotus claimed that Babylon and Assyria rendered to him an annual tribute of one thousand silver talents and five hundred boys to be made eunuchs (παῖδες ἑκτομῖαι πεντακόσιοι) (3.92).<sup>475</sup> According to Plutarch, a eunuch named Teireos who was captured with Darius III’s wife and witnessed her death subsequently escaped to tell the king about it. He assured the king that Alexander the Great would provide an honorable funeral (*Alexander* 30.2).

Greek and Latin sources associated both Darius III and Alexander the Great with Bagoas, a beautiful and/or treacherous eunuch.<sup>476</sup> The name Bagoas itself became a metonymy for the eunuch of a king.<sup>477</sup> Pliny the Elder even described a particular palm tree as a Bagoas:

The most famous of all is honoured by the name of the royal palm, because it used to be reserved for the kings of Persia alone; it grew only at Babylon in the Garden of Bagoüs—

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<sup>472</sup> 1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6; 23:11; 24:12,15; 25:19,21; Jer 36:2; 48:16 LXX; 1 Sam 8:15. A Fragment of the Martyrdom of Isaiah connects eunuchs with Manasseh (3.11)

<sup>473</sup> Curt. 6.3.12, 6.4.10, 6.5.23; Heliiodorus, *Aethiopica* throughout; Ael. 6.8 (although Bagoas is an Egyptian eunuch); Diod. Sic. 16.47, 48, 49, 50, 51; 17.5; Strabo 15.31; Plutarch, *On the Fortune of Alexander* 5.337e, 8.340c; Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* 2.14.5

<sup>474</sup> *Cyr.* 7.5.60-65. I will discuss Xenophon’s text in this chapter.

<sup>475</sup> Herodotus also wrote about eunuchs of the Persian kings Astyages (1.117), Xerxes the Great (7.187), and the Egyptian Pharaoh Amasis (3.4).

<sup>476</sup> Curt. 5.2.13-15; 6.5.23; 10.1.22-39; Ath. 13.603b; Diod. Sic. 17.5.3.7; Plut., *Alexander* 72

<sup>477</sup> Josephus claimed that Herod the Great killed a beautiful eunuch named Bagoas (*A.J.* 17.4.45). Bagoas is a trusted adviser to the Persian king Oroondotes in Heliiodorus’s novel *Aethiopica* and plays a prominent role. Cf. Quint. *Or.* 5.12.21.

the Persian word for a eunuch (*spado*), some of these having actually been kings in Persia. This garden was always kept within the precincts of the ruler's court. (*NH* 13 [Rackham, LCL])

It was a trope that Persian and other “eastern” kings could be influenced (or manipulated) by their powerful eunuchs. In Ctesias's *Persica*, Cyrus the Great's eunuch Petiscas held great power (μέγα δύναμαι) over him (FGH 688 F 3c 9). So too Xerxes the Great's eunuchs Natacas (εὐνούχων δὲ μέγιστον ἠδύνατο Νατάκας), Artapanus, and Spamitres, and Darius II's eunuchs Artoxares, Artibarzanes, and Athous.<sup>478</sup> Tacitus attempted to explain the power of eunuchs in foreign courts:

The most influential advocate, however, for the despatch of the secret legation by the Parthians was Sinnaces, a man of noted family and corresponding wealth; and, next to him, the eunuch (*ademptus*) Abdus: for among barbarians (*barbarus*) that condition brings with it not contempt (*despicio*) but actual power (*potentia*). (*Ann.* 6.31)

Tacitus assumed that his audiences would share his disdain for eunuchs.

Some kings allegedly spent a lot of time with their eunuchs. By Ctesias's account, King Ninyas

succeeded to the throne and ruled peacefully, not emulating in any way his mother's [Semiramis] fondness for war and her adventurous spirit. For in the first place he spent all his time in the palace, seen by no one except his concubines and attendant eunuchs, and sought luxury and idleness and the total avoidance of suffering and anxiety, thinking that the goal of a happy reign was to enjoy every kind of pleasure without restraint. (FGH 688 F 3c 1b [Llewellyn-Jones])

Ctesias also claimed that Assyrian King Sardanapallus's eunuchs were privy to his private, self-indulgent life in the palace. Only his eunuchs knew that Sardanapallus had created an elaborate funeral pyre to kill himself, his wife, and concubines; when others saw the smoke day after day, they assumed the king had been performing sacrifices (FGH 688 F 3c 1q). According to Dio

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<sup>478</sup> Natacas, Artapanus and Spamitres in FGH 688 F 3c 13; Artoxares, Artibarzanes, and Athous in FGH 688 F 3c 15

Chrysostom, Sardanapallus spent his life feasting and prancing about (ὑβρίζω) with eunuchs and women (*Or.* 77/78.29).<sup>479</sup>

Authors also associated eunuchs with queens. In Chapter 1, I mentioned the Persian Queen Atossa, who purportedly created the institution of eunuch slaves. Ctesias mentioned eunuchs close to or in sharp conflict with Queen Parysatis, the mother of Cyrus the Younger (d. 401 BCE) and Artaxerxes II. Parysatis's clever eunuch Sparamizes, the most powerful of her eunuchs (ὁ μέγιστον δυνάμενος τῶν Παρυσάτιδος εὐνούχων), helped her take revenge on the young Persian soldier who killed her son Cyrus (Plut., *Artaxerxes* 15.2). In biblical texts, both Jezebel and Esther had eunuchs (2 Kgs 9:30-32; Est 4:4). In the second century CE, Macedonian rhetorician Polyaeus claimed that Artemisia, the Queen of Caria, was a valiant general who used her eunuchs as part of a decoy. Artemisia celebrated a public sacrifice to the mother of gods with her eunuchs, women, and musicians while her soldiers hid nearby. When her curious enemies came to observe the religious procession, she took control of the city (*Stratagems* 8.53.4).

Beginning with Claudius, emperors were associated with eunuchs. The authors who wrote about these relationships had nothing positive to say about the relationships. Suetonius claimed that Claudius so valued Posides, his freedman eunuch, that he honored Posides with a military prize (the *hasta pura*) during his triumph after the conquest of Britain (44 CE) (*Claud.* 5.28). Juvenal quipped that just as a wealthy man bought expensive marble from Greece and other distant places to build lavish villas that rivaled the Temples of Fortune and Hercules, "our" Posides sought to outdo the Roman Capitol (14.91).<sup>480</sup>

A eunuch named Halotus may have served three emperors: Claudius, Nero, and Galba (r. 68 – 69 CE). He was a food taster for Claudius who allegedly administered the poison that led to the emperor's agonizing death.<sup>481</sup> Suetonius called Halotus one of Nero's most nefarious agents (*Neronis emissariis vel maleficentissimos*) whom Galba later honored with a splendid office, even though the Roman people demanded Halotus's punishment (*Galba* 7.1.15).

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<sup>479</sup> In the immediate context, dogs, horses, and other animals overeat, mate, and fight with each other over these pleasures, hence "prancing about" is an appropriate translation for Sardanapallus' ὑβρίζω.

<sup>480</sup> The Capitol was the Temple of Jupiter, which was repeatedly burned and rebuilt, each time on a grander scale. In Juvenal's lifetime, it burned down in 69, was rebuilt and rededicated by Vespasian in 75. It burned down again in 80 CE and was rebuilt on an even grander scale and rededicated by Domitian in 82.

<sup>481</sup> Suet., *Claudius* 5.44. According to Tacitus, Claudius's wife Agrippina was the mastermind, but Halotus administered the poison (*Ann.* 12.66). Suetonius had heard two accounts: either Halotus or Agrippina alone administered the poison.

Nero was notorious for his relationship with the eunuch Sporus, whom he purportedly married (Suet. *Nero* 6.28; Cass. Dio 63.4).<sup>482</sup> The short-lived emperors Vitellius (r. 69) and Galba were also known to covet eunuchs (Tac., *Hist.* 2.71; Plut., *Galba* 9). Although there are no references to Vespasian's eunuchs, one scholar argues that his moniker "mule trader" could be a witty reference to his former practice of trading in eunuchs.<sup>483</sup> Suetonius claimed of Titus that he stayed up all night with male prostitutes (*exoletorum*) and troops of eunuchs (*spadonum greges*) (8.2.7). I have already mentioned both Domitian's castration ban and his famous relationship with the eunuch Earinus, which I shall discuss shortly.

It was not only monarchs who coveted eunuchs. Authors wrote about other elite individuals who had, or wanted to have, eunuch slaves.<sup>484</sup> For example, Herodotus wrote that Harpagus, the general of the last Median King Astyages, sent his most loyal eunuchs (*πιστοτάτους*) to bury the newborn Cyrus the Great (1.117). In the book of Judith, a(nother) eunuch named Bagoas serves Holofernes, the commander-in-chief of the Assyrian [*sic*] king Nebuchadnezzar (2:4; 12:11).

They were valued for loyalty.

Monarchs valued eunuchs for their loyalty. By the first century, the "king's faithful eunuch" was a longstanding trope.

Diodorus Siculus's charming story about an encounter between Alexander the Great and a eunuch who had been loyal to Darius III illustrates:

A curious thing happened to the king when he was shown the precious objects. He seated himself upon the royal throne, which was larger than the proportions of his body. When one of the pages saw that his feet were a long way from reaching the footstool which belonged to the throne, he picked up Darius's table and placed it under the dangling legs. This fitted, and the king was pleased by the aptness of the boy, but a eunuch standing by was troubled in his heart at this reminder of the changes of Fortune and wept. Alexander noticed him and asked, "What wrong have you seen that you are crying?" The eunuch replied, "Now I am your slave as formerly I was the slave of Darius. I am by nature devoted to my masters and I was grieved at seeing what was most held in honour by your predecessor now become an ignoble piece of furniture." (17.66.4 [Welles, LCL])

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<sup>482</sup> I will discuss Sporus and Domitian's favorite, Earinus, later in this chapter. Nero was known to have other eunuchs. See also Tac., *Ann.* 14.59.

<sup>483</sup> Albert Brian Bosworth, "Vespasian and the Slave Trade," *The Classical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>484</sup> See, e.g., Tac., *Hist.* 3.40

Although Alexander was initially troubled by his own arrogance, he continued to use it as a footstool.<sup>485</sup>

Ctesias's account of a game of dice between Queen Parysatis and King Artaxerxes II over their eunuchs is rather less charming (FGH 688 F 3c 26). The game was Parysatis's idea; she wanted to acquire Artaxerxes's eunuch Masabates, whom she hated because he beheaded her son Cyrus the Younger and cut off his hand. Knowing that Masabates was not one of her husband's favorites, Parysatis suggested that they exclude their five most trusted (πιστότατος) eunuchs from the bet. Artaxerxes agreed. Parysatis played strategically, won, and claimed Masabates, whom she promptly sent him for gruesome torture and execution.<sup>486</sup>

Monarchs depended on eunuchs. Kings and queens entrusted them to carry out crucial tasks such as transferring gold, coordinating negotiations with other kingdoms, and managing temples. They appointed eunuchs to prominent positions as governors, bodyguards, and military commanders. The responsibilities they assigned to eunuchs reflected the level of trust that monarchs held. No one, Xenophon wrote, ever did more for their fallen masters in battle than faithful eunuchs. This is one of the reasons Cyrus filled *every* position of personal service to his body (πάντας τοὺς περὶ τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σῶμα) with eunuchs (Cyr. 7.5.65).

Often the work required extraordinary discretion. The only other eunuch in the New Testament serves as minister of the Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8:26-40). That he has responsibility for the queen's treasury and rides in a chariot to Jerusalem underscore her trust in him. Eunuchs' various responsibilities, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section of this chapter, include such work as nurturing newborn princes and princesses, commanding troops, and serving as a king's surrogates.

Eunuchs sometimes carried out highly sensitive work. Of the eunuch Bacchides, Plutarch wrote that Mithridates VI dispatched him to the hiding place of his wives, sisters, and at least one mother-in-law to kill them before his Roman enemies arrived (*Lucullus* 18.3). When Bacchides arrived, he asked each of the women to decide for herself which death would be the easiest and least painful. The king had confidence in Bacchides's ability to find the women during war and

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<sup>485</sup> Quintus Curtius has a similar account (5.2.13-15).

<sup>486</sup> She ordered that his executioners flay him alive first, then impale his body sideways on three stakes and stretch and peg his skin.

to carry out such dreadful work. The women, too, trusted Bacchides to the end, at least according to Plutarch.

Some eunuchs were loyal unto the monarch's death. Ctesias related that when Cyrus the Great was mortally wounded by Mithridates, some eunuchs tried to mount him on a horse to save his life. Cyrus attempted to walk by himself but could not, so they supported him. When he died, they stayed with his body on the battlefield, grieving (FGH 688 F 3c 20).

Other eunuchs were loyal unto their own death. Xenophon shared a story about beautiful Queen Panthea, who went into mourning after her husband Abradatas died in battle for Cyrus the Great. After Abradatas's eunuchs helped dig the grave, Panthea asked them to leave so she could grieve, then killed herself: "When Cyrus heard what the woman had done, he was filled with dismay and hastened to the place to see if he could bring any help. And when the eunuchs, three in number, beheld what had occurred, they also, standing in the spot where she had ordered them to stand, drew their daggers and drove them into their own breasts" (*Cyr.* 7.3.15 [Miller, LCL]). Similarly, Cassius Dio claimed that when Cleopatra was arrested, her eunuch gave himself to the serpents and leaped into a coffin after they bit him (51.14.3).

In the book of Judith, Holofernes's eunuch Bagoas demonstrates loyalty by doing precisely what Holofernes wishes, and doing so cleverly (e.g. 12:13). Although Bagoas does whatever Holofernes expects of him, he shows a brief lapse in judgment by allowing Judith unimpeded access to Holofernes. With none of Holofernes's own guards in sight, and with the assistance of her slave, Judith takes the opportunity she has worked and prayed for and beheads Holofernes with his own scimitar.<sup>487</sup> After Bagoas discovers Holofernes's headless body, he cries out in acute pain (14:16; cf. Mt 27:46) and seeks Judith immediately (14:17), presumably for retribution.

Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (circa 360s BCE) includes the lengthiest, most focused discussion in antiquity of eunuchs in a royal household. The narrative offers a fascinating perspective on why a king might view eunuchs as his most loyal, indispensable slaves. Xenophon invites auditors to enter Cyrus the Great's mind as he takes up residence in the palace in Babylon, the city he just vanquished, to contemplate his new position. Immediately after

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<sup>487</sup> God grants Judith's prayer that he take out his wrath on [Assyrian] heads through her (9:9). This action links Holofernes with Bagoas and suggests that Judith symbolically castrates the uncircumcised Holofernes.

expressing his piety by making offerings to the appropriate gods, Cyrus deliberates about his personal bodyguard. He knows he needs protection for the times when he is most vulnerable to attack, specifically when he dines, bathes, sleeps, and drinks wine (7.5.59). He reasons that eunuchs will make ideal bodyguards because they will be most faithful (πιστότατος). Xenophon writes that

...[Cyrus] looked around to see who were the most faithful (πιστότατος) men that he could have around him at such times; and he held that no man was ever faithful who loved (φιλέω) any one else better than the one who needed his protection (φυλακή).

Those, therefore, who had children or congenial wives or sweethearts, such he believed were by nature (φύσις) constrained (ἀναγκάζω) to love them best (μάλιστα φιλεῖν). But as he observed that eunuchs were not susceptible to any such affections, he thought that they would esteem most highly those who were in the best position to make them rich (πλουτίζω) and to stand by them, if ever they were wronged (ἀδικέω), and to place them in offices of honour (τιμή); and no one, he thought, could surpass him in bestowing favours of that kind.

Besides, inasmuch as eunuchs are objects of contempt (ἀδοξέω) to the rest of mankind, for this reason, if for no other, they need a master who will be their patron (εὐεργετέω); for there is no man who would not think that he had a right to take advantage of a eunuch at every opportunity unless there were some higher power to prevent his doing so; but there is no reason why even a eunuch should not be superior (πρωτεύω) to all others in fidelity (πιστός) to his master. (7.5.59-61 [Miller, LCL])

Xenophon's Cyrus is a literary construction of a Persian monarch by a sympathetic Greek author. We do not know what any monarch (or eunuch) actually thought about the loyalty of eunuchs. However, as Cyrus's views appear in other writings, I will examine his assertions that eunuchs were loyal because

- a.) they loved their masters/kings because they had no competing affections;
- b.) they wanted wealth and honorable offices;
- c.) they needed protection and patronage.

Cyrus views faithfulness (πιστός) as a natural corollary of love (φιλέω). He assumes that males naturally love their children, wives, or girlfriends, and that this love compels them to love those individuals the most. Although the translation "eunuchs were not susceptible to any such affections" is eloquent, it obscures the force of Xenophon's term στέρομαι. More literally, Cyrus observes that eunuchs were deprived or *made barren of* all of these (τοὺς δ' εὐνούχους ὁρῶν πάντων τούτων στερομένους). Στέρομαι has a semantic range that includes sterility or barrenness. For Cyrus, eunuchs were deprived of relationships to children, wives, and girlfriends



because they had been deprived of their testicles. There are three unstated assumptions: that males have a natural need to love, that eunuchs were castrated, and that the castration rendered them either unable to love (i.e., no sexual desire) or not allowed to love by society (e.g., regulations or pressure not to marry, adopt, or live together).

Other ancient writers shared Xenophon's assertions about why eunuchs were faithful. In the novel *Aethiopica*, for example, third- or fourth-century CE novelist Heliodorus explained why Ethiopians decided to spare the eunuch Bagoas's life after they captured him: "Bagoas they reckoned the satrap's greatest treasure; in the Persian court eunuchs are regarded as the king's eyes and ears, for having no children or kinsmen to deflect (μετασπῶ) their fidelity (πιστός) they are wholly (μόνο) attached (αναπτῶ) to the master who trusts (πιστεύω) them" (*Aethiopica* 8.17.4 [Hadas]). There is no competing loyalty. These eunuchs are bound exclusively (μόνο) to the king.

For Xenophon's logic to work, eunuchs must also be *unable* to love their masters. The male's natural need to love no longer exists. And, in fact, Cyrus does not say that eunuchs love their masters. He focuses rather on what he thinks they do need: wealth, honorable offices, and safety. The point about wealth gets picked up by many writers, although not in Cyrus's benevolent, paternalistic way. It plays out in the stereotype that eunuchs were greedy, which is a manifestation of their poor self-control.

Other texts indicate that kings honored eunuchs. Herodotus explained that "foreigners (βάρβαρος) value (τίμιος) eunuchs more than perfect men (ἔνορχος [literally, with the testicles in]), by reason of the full trust that they have in them" (8.105 [Godley, LCL]). In Plato's *Alcibiades I*, Socrates underlines how careful Persian kings are about the nurture of their children. Only the best (ἄριστος) eunuchs tend the newborn and form the limbs (μέλος) to make the child as beautiful (κάλλιστος) as possible. For this work, eunuchs are held in high honor (ἐν μεγάλῃ τιμῇ) (121d). According to Josephus, Herod the Great honored (τίμιος) three of his eunuchs before his son Alexander corrupted them with money (*B.J.* 1.7). In Chariton's romance, Persian King Artaxerxes II responds enthusiastically to his most trusted (πιστότατος) eunuch's recommendation to pursue the beautiful Callirhoe: "I am right (δικαίως) to regard (προτιμῶ) you above everyone else. You are indeed my kindest (εὐνούστατος) friend and true (ἀγαθός) guardian" (φύλαξ) (*Callirhoe* 6.4.8 [Goold]).

Finally, Xenophon reasoned that eunuchs needed protection from insults to their honor. A humorous fable illustrates how eunuchs could be objects of ridicule. In the first century, among first-century CE author Phaedrus's Latinization of Aesop's fables is one that concerns a eunuch engaged in litigation with a rude man (*improbum*). After attacking the eunuch with obscene (*obscena*) remarks and lascivious (*petulans*) invective (*iurgium*), the man brought up the eunuch's lost body part. "There now," said the eunuch, "is the one thing in which I am at a great disadvantage, that I have no testicular evidence (*testis*) of integrity (*integritas*). But why, fool (*stultus*), do you bring as a charge (*delictum*) against me that which is the fault of Fortune? What is really disgraceful (*turpis*) to a man is what he has deserved to suffer" (3.11 [Perry, LCL]). Phaedrus puns with the Latin terms *improbum*, which suggests licentiousness, *testis*, which connotes testicles, *integritas*, which denotes bodily wholeness, *stultus*, which hints at the rude man's sterility (its root *stolidus* and *sterilis* are cognates), and *delictum*, which refers to a lack or defect and might also evoke the term *delicatus*, a young boy or eunuch used for sex.<sup>488</sup>

They could be traitors.

Loyalty cannot be guaranteed. What was already a *topos* about slaves was intensified for eunuchs. Because the vast majority never chose to be castrated or enslaved, their faithfulness was always suspect. When monarchs relied on eunuchs for crucial jobs, they made themselves and their kingdoms vulnerable to disloyalty. If a eunuch became disloyal, a monarch or heir could lose power or die, sometimes at the eunuch's hands.

Literary examples abound of eunuchs who kill or attempt to kill monarchs or act as accomplices.<sup>489</sup> In biblical writings, three (in LXX, two) eunuchs throw Jezebel to her death. When King Jehu asks, "Who is with me?" they appear in Jezebel's window and instantly follow his command to throw her down (9:32-33). They then attempt to follow Jehu's order to bury the cursed daughter of a king but soon report back that only her skull, feet, and palms of her hands

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<sup>488</sup> See, e.g., Mart., *Spect.* 3.82.

<sup>489</sup> There were a few cases where a monarch lost power or died as the result of a eunuch's error or negligence (e.g., Holofernes's). In other cases, the author does not clarify if the eunuch acted treacherously. For example, Athenaeus wrote about the Median general Arbaces's determination to gain access to the Assyrian King Sardanapallus. He eventually convinced the eunuch Sparameizus to admit him. When Arbaces saw Sardanapallus wearing heavy makeup and jewelry, working wool with his concubines, depilated, and dressed in women's clothing, he stabbed him to death (12.529a).

remain (9:34-35). In the book of Esther, two of King Ahasuerus's eunuchs intend to kill him (Est 2:21-23; 6:2), but Mordecai informs Esther, who warns the king.

In popular stories, the eunuchs of Median and Persian kings also attempt regicide. In Ctesias's *Persica*, Cyrus the Great tells his influential eunuch Petisacas to escort the last Median king, Astyages, whom Cyrus deposed but who later became his father-in-law, back to the palace for a visit. After conspiring with one of Cyrus's officers, Petisacas instead leads Astyages into the desert to die of hunger and thirst (FGH 688 F 3c 9). Both Ctesias and Diodorus Siculus attribute the death of Xerxes I and his son Darius I to collusion between one of Xerxes's eunuchs and Artabanus, Xerxes's adviser or chief bodyguard. According to Diodorus Siculus, Xerxes's eunuch Mithridates conspires with the power-hungry Artabanus (one of his relatives) to kill the king and the three princes. They are partially successful. Mithridates escorts Artabanus into the king's bedroom, where Artabanus murders the king. Artabanus then convinces Prince Artaxerxes that his brother Darius killed Xerxes and helps Artaxerxes commit fratricide (11.69).<sup>490</sup> Ctesias also claimed that Xerxes's heir, Xerxes II, was killed by one of his half-brothers with the help of an influential eunuch named Pharnacyas. The two entered the king's chamber at night after a festival and killed the drunken, sleeping king (FGH 688 F 3c 15).

Only occasionally do authors provide a eunuch's motives. The eunuchs in Jezebel's window could have shifted allegiance from the queen to Jehu, the new king of Israel, but the author does not clarify. King Ahasuerus's eunuchs became indignant (MT רָצְפוּ;) or aggrieved (LXX λυπέω), but the author does not explain why. Petisacas's motives remain unstated. Manetho (fl. 280 BCE), an Egyptian high priest, claimed that although Pharaoh Ammanemês had a thirty-eight year reign, in the end his eunuchs murdered him. He offered no reason for the murder (or the late timing). Ctesias did not relate why King Xerxes's and Xerxes II's influential eunuchs escorted killers into the respective bedrooms. Diodorus Siculus's note that Mithridates was Artabanus's relative could suggest that loyalty to him supersedes loyalty to King Xerxes, but there is no certainty. Third-century CE author Diogenes Laertius claimed that Aristotle's father-in-law Hermias murdered his slave-master but provided no details.

Some eunuchs allegedly manipulated a power structure to replace the reigning monarch. By Ctesias's account, Queen Semiramis's son successfully conspired with a eunuch to remove

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<sup>490</sup> When Artabanus subsequently tried to kill Artaxerxes, the prince killed him.

her from the throne (FGH 688 F 3c 1b). Diodorus Siculus, Strabo (b. c. 64 BCE), Plutarch, Quintus Curtius, and Aelian all claimed that Bagoas replaced a Persian king with (another) Darius.<sup>491</sup> The eunuchs who allegedly plotted to kill Emperor Claudius and, before that, his father Drusus, supported aspirants to the throne. According to Tacitus, when Pretorian Prefect Sejanus wanted to consolidate his power, he conspired with the eunuch Lygdus to kill the aging Tiberius's only son Drusus with slow-acting poison (*Ann.* 4.8).

Other eunuchs conspired against kings because they wanted power for themselves. By Ctesias's account, Darius II's very influential eunuch Artoxares was caught in such a conspiracy, arrested, and killed (FGH 688 F 3c 15). Ctesias also claimed that when Cambyses II advanced on Egypt, the Egyptian king's most powerful eunuch Combaphis agreed to cede Egyptian bridges and share all Egyptian state-affairs if Cambyses made him governor of Egypt (FGH 688 F 3c 13). Cambyses obliged. According to Josephus, Herod the Great executed a eunuch named Bagoas along with other conspirators (*A.J.* 17.4).

A kingdom sometimes ended as a result of the eunuch's disloyalty. Polybius (28.21.1) and Diodorus Siculus (30.15.1) both claimed that Ptolemy IV suddenly abandoned his kingdom after being convinced to do so by his advisor, the eunuch Eulaeus. Diodorus Siculus also attributed the end of one Persian dynasty to Bagoas, who poisoned the Persian king Ochus (Darius II) and all his heirs, installed Darius as a new king, then tried to poison him, too (17.5.3.7).

A monarch who suspected disloyalty could test a eunuch's faithfulness. According to Plutarch, Artaxerxes I did just that. A eunuch warned him that conspirators, supported by the king's own son Darius, planned to enter his chamber at night and kill him in his bed. When Artaxerxes heard the eunuch's account, "he thought it a grave matter to neglect the information and ignore so great a peril, and a graver still to believe it without any proof" (*Artaxerxes* 29 [Perrin], LCL]). Artaxerxes ordered the eunuch to watch the conspirators closely. In the meantime, he removed part of the wall behind his bed and installed a curtain there. After the eunuch told him precisely when the conspirators would arrive, the king got in bed and waited. When the would-be assassins entered with swords drawn, Artaxerxes waited until he could see

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<sup>491</sup> Plut., *On the Fortune of Alexander* 2.5; Curt.6.3.12; Ael., *VH* 6.8. In Quintus Curtius, King Darius later kills Bagoas for plotting (6.4.10-11). According to Strabo, Bagoas murdered King Arses (*Geography* 15.24).

each man's face clearly, then made his escape through the curtain to the inner chamber and raised the alarm.

Eunuchs were notorious for plotting.

The aforementioned eunuchs plotted against the monarchs they served. Authors used such verbs as ἐπιβουλεύω (plot against), κατακαλύπτω (cover up), *insidio* (lie in ambush) and cognates<sup>492</sup> or described eunuchs' secretive dealings.<sup>493</sup> For example, after King Darius III's execution of Bagoas, he justified the killing to his countryman with the excuse that Bagoas had been plotting (*insidio*) against him (Curt. 6.4.11).

Not all plotting was treasonous. Some eunuchs schemed to achieve a personal outcome. Quintus Curtius's account of Bagoas is illustrative (10.1.22-39). Curtius claimed that upon Alexander the Great's assumption to power, the wealthy, noble Persian satrap Orsines honored the new king and all of Alexander's friends with exorbitant gifts, with one exception:

to Bagoas, a eunuch (*spado*) who had won the regard of Alexander through prostitution (*corpus devincio*), he paid no honour, and on being admonished by some that Bagoas was dear to Alexander, replied that he was honouring the friends of the king, not his harlots (*scortum*), and that it was not the custom of the Persians to mate with males who made females of themselves by prostitution (*stupro*). (10.1.26 [Rolfe])

Bagoas did not take this well. He began sharing false accusations about Orsines with other Persians. When there were no witnesses, he filled the king's credulous ears with lies about Orsines. Then, when he and Alexander visited the tomb of Cyrus the Great, Bagoas intimated that Orsines stole all of Cyrus's grave goods and regifted them to curry favor. An angry Alexander imprisoned and executed the innocent Persian satrap.

A plotting eunuch often received poetic justice. The two eunuchs who sought to kill King Ahaseurus were hanged by his orders (Est 2:23) while Mordecai received (belatedly) lavish public honors for exposing the eunuchs' plans (Est 6:1-11). After Petisacas led King Astyages into the desert to die, the king's daughter gouged out Petisacas's eyes, flayed him alive, and

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<sup>492</sup> For ἐπιβουλεύω and cognates, see e.g., FGH 688 F 3c 15, 688 F 3c 1b; Diod. Sic. 2.20; 11.69; Josephus, A.J. 11.4, 11.10; Plut., *Artaxerxes* 29 (Plutarch also uses κατακαλύπτω); Plut., *Caesar* 49.5; Ael. 6.8. *consciis* (conspirator) in Tac. *Ann.* 10.

<sup>493</sup> e.g., Curt. 10.1.26; Caesar, *Civil War* 3.108; Cass. Dio 42.36, 42.39

crucified him (FGH 688 F 3c 9). Diodorus Siculus claimed that King Darius III forced Bagoas to drink the poison that the eunuch prepared for him (17.5.3). He also reported that the eunuch Eulaeus and his co-conspirator Lenaeus, “as might be expected, soon met with the punishment that their folly (ἀφροσύνη) deserved” (frag. 30.15 [Walton, LCL]). According to Tacitus, a Parthian eunuch named Abdus took part in a secret legation to Rome behind the back of King Artabanus II. When the king discovered his treachery, he invited Abdus to a banquet and administered slow poison (*Ann.* 6.31-32).

An undercurrent was that eunuchs were amenable to bribes. Josephus, for example, wrote that Herod the Great’s son Alexander slept with and bribed his father’s beautiful eunuchs with great sums of money and the promise that they would soon have “the first” place in the kingdom when he ousted his father (*A.J.* 16.8.1).

They were a status symbol.

As discussed, slaves served as a visible indicator of prestige and wealth. In the Old Greek version of Esther, seven eunuchs escort Queen Vashti so the king can flaunt her beauty (Est 1:10-11). The author introduces the eunuchs by name, by title (i.e., τοῖς διακόνοις τοῦ βασιλέως Ἀρταξέρξου), and as eunuchs.<sup>494</sup> Prior verses established the king’s wealth and pomposity; his summons of seven eunuch servants accentuates his wealth and presumed power. The king repeats his command to the eunuchs two more times when Vashti refuses to come (Est 1:12,15). The third time, the enraged king solicits the advice of seven princes of Media and Persia. The seven named princes parallel the seven named eunuchs.

Authors made derisive comments about elite Romans who traveled with eunuchs as a conspicuous sign of status. Tacitus remarked that General Fabius Valens, who fought for and proclaimed Vitellius emperor, went to his last doomed battle with a large, slow-moving band of delicate concubines and eunuchs (*multo ac molli concubinarum spadonumque agmine*) (*Hist.* 3.40). Vitellius’s retinue was even worse. After his victory at the first Battle of Bedriacum (69 CE) in which he and Otho fought to become emperor, Vitellius headed back to Rome for the triumph: “As Vitellius drew nearer to the capital, his train exhibited the greater corruption;

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<sup>494</sup> They are neither named nor called eunuchs in 1:10 of the alpha LXX version of Esther. They are not mentioned as eunuchs until 1:12, and they vanish in 1:15.

actors, crowds of eunuchs (*spadonum gregibus*), and every other kind of creature that belonged to Nero's court mixed with his soldiers" (*Hist.* 2.71 [Moore, LCL]).<sup>495</sup>

The use of specialized slaves served as another indicator of status. In a scathing first-century satire attributed to Petronius, the wealthy freedman Trimalchio plays a ball game before his lavish dinner banquet. He has two eunuchs with him: one counts the balls that hit the ground, and the other holds a silver chamber pot for him. The narrator and his companion "stood and marveled (*miror*) at the display of luxury" (*lautitia*) (*Satyricon* 27 [Schmeling, LCL]).

Plautianus, the prefect of Emperor Severus who purportedly castrated one hundred noble Romans, did so because he wanted his daughter to have only eunuch attendants, especially those who could train her in music and art (Cass. Dio 75.14.5).

They were sexually desirable.

Many literary accounts, especially those written during the imperial period, attest to the desirability of beautiful young eunuchs. Prepubertal castration was the default for eunuch sex slaves.<sup>496</sup> Seneca the Elder quoted orator Labienus, who claimed that some slaveholders castrated boys to force them to submit to their lusts for a longer period (*Controversiae* 10.4.17). As mentioned, senatorial legislation during Nerva's reign called for the Lex Cornelia penalty (i.e., life deportation and sale of property) for "anyone who castrates (*castro*) a man for lust (*libido*) or for gain" (*promercium*) (DIG. 48.8.3).

According to Quintus Curtius, the late Darius III's cavalry commander presented Alexander with exorbitant gifts, including Bagoas, "a eunuch of remarkable beauty and in the very flower of boyhood (*specie singulari spado atque in ipso flore pueritiae*), who had been loved by Darius and was afterwards to be loved by Alexander" (6.5.23 [Rolfe, LCL]). Dan 1:4 depicts Daniel and his companions as beautiful (MT הַיָּפְיָוִת; LXX καλός) young men without blemish (MT בְּיָפְיָוִת; LXX μῶμος). Josephus assumed that some of Daniel's companions were made into eunuchs (ἐκτομίας). They were admirable to behold with bodies in their prime and beautiful features (ταῖς ἀκμαῖς τῶν σωμάτων καὶ ταῖς εὐμορφίαις τῶν ὄψεων ἦσαν περίβλεπτοι)

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<sup>495</sup> Paris has a eunuch (*semivir*) train in Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.215.

<sup>496</sup> Post-pubertal castration may have occurred but was the exception. See, e.g., Juvenal, *Satire* 6.273.

(A.J. 10.10.1). Josephus also claimed that Herod the Great had eunuchs whom he pursued without moderation (οὐ μετρίως ἐσπουδασμένοι) (A.J. 16.8.1).

Aelian claimed that the Persian King Artaxerxes was so bereft after the death of the eunuch Tiridates, “the most handsome and attractive man in Asia (κάλλιστος τῶν ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ καὶ ὠραιότατος γενόμενος),” the entire country went into mourning out of respect for the king (VH 12.1 [Wilson]). Queen Aspasia was the only one who could comfort him. She did so by visiting him in his baths, dressed as Tiridates. Because she looked even more beautiful as Tiridates, the king asked her to continue visiting him in that attire until his grief had waned, so she did.

First-century emperors received much (posthumous) attention for their relationships with beautiful eunuchs. When Tacitus related the rumor that the eunuch Lygdus helped assassinate Tiberius’s son Drusus, he explained that Lygdus was “dear (*carus*) to his master for his years and beauty” (*forma*) (Ann. 4.10).<sup>497</sup> Martial and the poet Statius both extolled the beauty of Earinus. Statius compared Domitian to Jupiter (3.4, line 18), and Earinus to Ganymede and Cupid. He repeatedly emphasized Earinus’s beauty. He is “shining with star of peerless beauty” (*egregiae praeclarum sidere formae*, line 26) with “radiant” (*fulgentibus*, line 30) shoulders and “boyish grace” (*puerile decus*, line 31). When Venus first sees him, she wonders if Earinus is one of her many sons. He is so lovely, she exclaims: “Shall you bear a mean dwelling and common yoke of servitude (*iugumque servitii vulgare*)? Far be it! I shall give this beauty (*formae*) the master it deserves!” (lines 34-35 [Shackleton Bailey and Parrott]) In her life, she has never seen or given birth to anything so “sweet” (*dulce*, 3.4.39). As Venus prepares to fly off in her swan-drawn chariot with Earinus, she remarks, “Boy, you are beyond them all; more beautiful only he to whom you shall be given” (lines 43-44 [Shackleton Bailey and Parrott]). Carole Newlands argues that Earinus’s beauty is his single important attribute; Statius assigns him no intellectual or moral qualities.<sup>498</sup>

More notorious was the relationship between Nero and the eunuch Sporus, whose name translates to “sperm” or “seed.” Suetonius’s over-the-top account describes Nero’s purported marriage to Sporus in a list of Nero’s depravities:

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<sup>497</sup> Martial has a character named Lygdus who is a beautiful tease of a boy. See Mart. *Spect.* 6.9; 11.73; 12.71.

<sup>498</sup> Carole Elizabeth Newlands, *Statius' Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 109-10.



Besides abusing freeborn boys and seducing married women, he debauched the vestal virgin Rubria. The freedwoman Acte he all but made his lawful wife, after bribing some ex-consuls to perjure themselves by swearing that she was of royal birth. He castrated (*exsectis testibus*) the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his house attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife. And the witty jest that someone made is still current, that it would have been well for the world if Nero's father Domitius had had that kind of wife. This Sporus, decked out with the finery of the empresses and riding in a litter, he took with him to the assizes and marts of Greece, and later at Rome through the Street of the Images, fondly kissing him from time to time. (6.28 [Rolfe, LCL])<sup>499</sup>

Other authors made similar claims about Nero and Sporus.<sup>500</sup> According to Plutarch, the short-lived emperor Galba desired Sporus so much that he sent for him while Nero's body was still burning on his funeral pyre (*Galba* 9).

Some authors disapproved of Romans who thought that young eunuchs were desirable. Quintilian argued that athletic, young male bodies were far more beautiful than eunuchs':

When the greatest sculptors and painters wanted to reproduce in statuary or painting the most beautiful bodies possible, they never committed the error of taking some Bagoas or Megabuxus as a model for their work, but found true beauty in the Doryphorus, who is equally well fitted for war and for the wrestling ring, or in the bodies of other warlike and athletic youths? (*Inst.* 5.12.21 [Russell, LCL])

They performed many roles.

Eunuchs who became the "boy toys" of elites did not necessarily have additional responsibilities. The majority of manmade eunuchs, however, handled a wide range of high-level tasks. This section provides an overview of the roles mentioned most often in literary sources.

Although I discuss each role separately, they often overlapped. That is, a eunuch may have had numerous responsibilities. Bagoas in *Judith* is a good example. As an administrator (ἐφεστηκὸς; 12:11), he was responsible for all of Holofernes's possessions (12:11; 14:13), including slaves. As a messenger, Bagoas delivered Holofernes's summons to *Judith* (12:13). Bagoas also guarded Holofernes's tent (13:1) and served as a personal attendant to both

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<sup>499</sup> Suetonius continued by asserting that Nero wanted to have sex with his mother, too, and found a concubine who looked like her.

<sup>500</sup> By Cassius Dio's account, Sporus was a freedman whom Nero castrated because he resembled Nero's deceased wife (62.28.3).

Holofernes (14:13) and Judith (12:15). Although many eunuchs were elite slaves, as slaves, they were still expected to do whatever the slaveholder wanted, whenever the slaveholder wanted.

### *Guardians and Gatekeepers*

Eunuchs guarded prisoners and women, palaces and temples. They served as personal bodyguards and armed gatekeepers. They protected a king's heirs.<sup>501</sup> Eunuchs who guarded a palace entrance sometimes died defending it (Hdt. 3.77).

Guardianship could be multifaceted. In Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch Abiesdri/Ashpenaz oversaw not only the nourishment of Daniel and his companions (Dan 1:9-16), he was personally responsible for selecting these attractive, strong, well-educated, wise, capable young Israelite noblemen for the king (Dan 1:3-4).<sup>502</sup> He chose and (forcibly) collected the captives, brought them back to the palace, renamed them, and supervised their life in the palace. He ensured that the young men thrived physically and received a thorough education in Chaldean language and literature. Although the biblical accounts do not mention it, the chief eunuch probably also ensured that they did not escape.

As harem guards and supervisors, eunuchs oversaw the activities of women associated with a king, not only wives but also sisters and mother, and controlled harem access, both for the women within and the approved visitors.<sup>503</sup> Eunuchs could assist with women's wardrobe, cosmetics, and entertainment.<sup>504</sup> In Esther, a eunuch named Gai in OG (2:8,14; cf. 2:3) and Bougaios<sup>505</sup>/Gogaios in AT (2:8/2:3), manages the king's harem guards the women. In OG, he helps them become more beautiful. Because Esther pleases him (in AT 2:9, more than every other woman), he takes excellent care of her by providing cosmetics and food (OG 2:9), advising her (OG 2:15), and giving her seven young female slaves (AT 2:9/OG 2:9).

The eunuchs who attempt to kill King Artaxerxes (OG 2:21 cf. OG 6:2; AT 6:3) serve as his chief bodyguards. Their position may bring them closer to the king than anyone else. The OG

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<sup>501</sup> For example, Herodotus wrote that when Xerxes the Great went off to war, he sent some of his sons to Ephesus with Hermotimus, his most honored eunuch, as their guardian (Hdt. 8.104).

<sup>502</sup> In TH, it is the steward Hamelsad, appointed by Ashpenaz, not Ashpenaz himself, who concedes to Daniel's request to have only vegetables and water. In the OG version, it is the chief eunuch himself who serves Daniel and his companions. In both accounts, the chief eunuch's last appearance mirrors his first: he brings the young men to Nebuchadnezzar again after their three years of education (1:18).

<sup>503</sup> See, e.g., Hdt. 3.130

<sup>504</sup> Philostr. VA 1.37

<sup>505</sup> Bougaios is probably a transliteration of Bagoas.

explains their motivation to kill Artaxerxes as jealousy of the king's promotion of Mordecai. After Mordecai alerts Esther of their plans, she warns the king, who interrogates, then hangs them (2:23).<sup>506</sup>

In Dio Chrysostom's discourse *Diogenes, or on Tyranny*, Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412/403 – c. 324/321 BCE) describes how an aging, fearful Persian king used his (armed, implied) eunuchs to protect himself from his own bodyguard:

He was forever fleeing from the unarmed to the armed and from the armed to the unarmed; from the people he protected himself by means of his bodyguard and from his bodyguard by means of his eunuchs (εὐνοῦχος). He had no one that he could trust (πιστεύω), nor refuge to which he could turn so that he might live a single day without fear. (6.38-39 [Cohon, LCL])

Some bodyguards may have acted as spies. Lucian used the following example as a warning:

The king has many ears and eyes, which not only see the truth but always add something more for good measure, so that they may not be considered heavy-lidded. You must therefore keep your head down while you are at table, as at a Persian dinner, for fear that an eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) may see that you looked at one of the concubines; for another eunuch, who has had his bow bent this long time, is ready to punish you for eyeing what you should not, driving his arrow through your cheek just as you are taking a drink. (*On Salaried Posts in Great Houses* 29 [Harmon, LCL])

Lucian's overzealous eunuchs are poised to eliminate any perceived threat to the king.

As gatekeepers, eunuchs could deny entry. In Plato's *Protagoras*, a eunuch slams the door on Socrates and his companion Hippocrates because he assumes they are Sophists (314D). Bribes could be helpful for gaining access.<sup>507</sup>

An inscription honors a eunuch temple guard (νεωκόρος) at the famous Temple of Apollo at Delphi on Mount Parnassus. The philosopher Hermippus of Smyrna attributed the maxim

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<sup>506</sup> Although the AT does not include these verses, both it and the OG include an addition (A) that precedes chapter 1. In each version of Addition A, both eunuchs are named (OG A12; AT A12). Mordecai has a dream wherein two dragons arise, ready to fight, amidst chaos, confusion, and darkness (OG A5/AT A4). Though any interpretation must remain speculative, the two dragons could represent the two eunuchs plotting assassination. Alternatively, the dragons might represent two powers, whether competing powers (i.e., the king's versus his eunuch bodyguards' or Mordecai's versus the eunuchs') or complementary (i.e., the king and Mordecai as defenders of the realm).

<sup>507</sup> FGH 688 F 3c 1b; 688 F 3c 1n; Chariton, *Callirhoe* 5.2.3

“Know Thyself” (γνῶθι σαυτὸν), inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple, to the eunuch Labys (frag. 47c line 3).<sup>508</sup>

### *Political Roles as Advisors, Surrogates, Leaders*

Eunuchs had influential positions as advisors to and surrogates of monarchs, and some led cities or countries.

Eunuchs advised kings about, and sometimes conducted, domestic and foreign affairs. By Ctesias’s account, a Paphlagonian eunuch not only advises the satrap Megabyzus, King Xerxes’s son-in-law, to make a treaty with King Artaxerxes I, he helps conduct the negotiations because Megabyzus was reluctant to go himself (FGH 688 F 3c 14). According to Josephus, one of King Herod’s three favorite eunuchs handled the most important affairs of state (τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἐν ταῖς ἀρχαῖς) (A.J. 16.8.1).<sup>509</sup> Plutarch claimed that Potheinus, the eunuch guardian of Ptolemy XIV, handled all of the king’s affairs (ὁ δὲ πάντα διέπων τὰ πράγματα) (*Pompeii* 77.2; cf. *Antony* 60.1).

As surrogates, eunuchs acted with savvy. In the T. Jos., a clever eunuch of Pentephris’s (i.e., Potiphar) wife is responsible for the purchase of Joseph. After hearing about Joseph from her eunuch, she told her husband: “Buy the young man, for I hear it said that they are selling him” (16). Although she promptly sends the eunuch to the Ishmaelites, he does not initially buy Joseph because the Ishmaelites wanted too much money. Pentephris’s wife insists: “Even if they are asking two minas, offer it. Do not be sparing of the gold; just buy the boy and bring him to me.” Knowing the asking price was inflated and that his mistress would pay whatever was necessary to acquire the young man, the eunuch ultimately purchases Joseph for eighty pieces of gold but tells Pentephris’s wife that he paid one hundred.<sup>510</sup>

Some eunuchs held positions as governors and satraps. According to Ctesias, the influential eunuch Combaphis became an Egyptian governor (FGH 688 F 3c 13). Diodorus Siculus claimed that a eunuch named Nicocles took over kingship of Cyprus after he assassinated its king (15.47.8). During his travels, first-century Neo-Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius of Tyana allegedly conversed with a eunuch governor appointed by the Medean King of Babylon,

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<sup>508</sup> On the inscription’s location, see Plato, *Charmides* 164E-165A; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.24.

<sup>509</sup> The same eunuch put the king to bed.

<sup>510</sup> Joseph knew about the discrepancy but kept silent so he would not disgrace the eunuch.

whom Apollonius described as “a sort of ‘King’s Eye’” (Philostr., *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.21; cf. Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 8.17.4).

Other eunuchs helped facilitate the transfer of power from one monarch to another. Ctesias claimed that a eunuch named Artoxares helped crown the Persian king Ochus (Darius II) against his will (FGH 688 F 3c 15). Diodorus Siculus wrote that Artaxerxes III (mis)placed his trust in his eunuch general Bagoas, who rose to great power by advising Artaxerxes on every matter. After the king’s death, Bagoas “designated in every case the successor to the throne and enjoyed all the functions of kingship save the title” (50.3.8 [Sherman, LCL]). Similarly, Quintus Curtius claimed that Darius III received his throne through the eunuch Bagoas rather than by succession (6.3.12).

A number of authors or their literary characters complained about eunuchs who exert power. Valerius Maximus referred to Gaurus, a eunuch of King Mithridates, as “lustful in compliance, criminal in command” (*libidosus obsequio, scelestus imperio adfecerat*) (*Memorable Doings and Sayings* 9.2.4 ext 3 [Shackleton Bailey, LCL]). Appian claimed that Mithridates’s subjects shouted at him that they wanted his son to be king, not an old man ruled by eunuchs (*The Mithridatic War* 12.110.530).<sup>511</sup>

### *Messengers*

Literary sources often depict eunuchs as messengers. They deliver invitations, instructions, warnings, and good or bad news.<sup>512</sup>

Eunuchs help Esther strategize with Mordecai to avert Haman’s planned genocide. The eunuch Hachrathaios carries messages back and forth between Esther and Mordecai (4:5-17).<sup>513</sup> After the Persian nobleman Araspas threatens to rape her if she will not accede to his advances, Queen Panthea sends her eunuch to Cyrus the Great for help. Cyrus responds by sending the eunuch to Araspas with a warning not to treat Panthea violently (*Cyr.* 6.1.34).

Eunuchs carried highly sensitive political information. In 4 Kgs 18:17, the Assyrian king dispatches his chief eunuch (Παφίς) to Judah along with two other delegates and a large army to

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<sup>511</sup> Cassius Dio attacked the senator Sempronius Rufus as a eunuch in power: “And—what was in the last degree disgraceful and unworthy of both the senate and of the Roman people—we had a eunuch to domineer over us” (77.17.2).

<sup>512</sup> Curt. 5.10; Philost VA 1.33,36; Hdt 3.77

<sup>513</sup> In Josephus’s account, the eunuch is also a Jew (*A.J.* 11.6.4)

warn King Hezekiah of Judah's dismal fate if they continue to ally with Egypt.<sup>514</sup> After Alexander the Great's defeat of Darius III, a eunuch prisoner-of-war who served Darius's wife reports to Alexander that she died as a result of the incessant marching and her grief (Curt. 4.10.18-20). In the Battle of Thermopylae, Themistocles sent the eunuch Arnaces, a prisoner-of-war, to Xerxes I with the message that the Greeks were about to destroy the only bridge over the Hellespont (Plut., *Themistocles* 16.2). When Xerxes responded by removing his troops from the area, the Greek forces immediately took possession of the bridge (Plut., *Aristides* 9.6).

Messenger jobs necessitated loyalty, discretion, and speed. An extant letter from Emperor Marcus Aurelius's wife Faustina illustrates. In 175, Faustina urged her husband to show no mercy for Gaius Avidius Cassius or his accomplices after Cassius proclaimed himself emperor. Faustina hoped to dispatch her letter immediately with "Caecilius the old eunuch, a man, as you know, to be relied on" (*fidelis*), but if that were not possible, she would send Caecilius to Aurelius with a verbal message (Faustina to Marcus 10.1, [Haines, LCL]). Faustina alerted Aurelius to what Cassius's wife, children, and son-in-law had been saying about him. Caecilius carried a message that could have but did not lead to death for the emperor's challenger and his family.<sup>515</sup>

Eunuchs were often armed. Herodotus wrote about the death of messengers who guarded the inner court. When the palace gate was breached, the eunuchs who carried messages to the king sprang into action to fight off the seven intruders but were stabbed to death (3.77).

### *Escorts*

Eunuchs also served as escorts. In Esther, King Ahaseurus orders seven of his eunuchs to escort Queen Vashti to his banquet (Est 1:10-11). A eunuch named Sha-ash'gaz conveys each concubine from the king's bedroom to a second harem the following morning (Est 2:14). A

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<sup>514</sup> Similarly, King Ahab summons a eunuch in his retinue when he and King Jehoshaphat ponder whether they should go to war (1 Kgs 22:9/ 2 Chr 18:8). The eunuch warns the prophet Micaiah to speak favorably to the king, which Micaiah initially does, but then promptly tells the truth by forecasting disaster. (1 Kgs 22:37-38).

<sup>515</sup> Aurelius declined to take vengeance. He responded to Faustina: "there is nothing that can commend an emperor to the world more than clemency. It was clemency that made Caesar into a God, that deified Augustus, that honoured your father with the distinctive title of Pius... 'The Gods protect me, to the Gods my loyalty is dear.'" (quoting Horace) (Haines, LCL).

eunuch escorts Esther to the king any time he wishes to sleep with her (Est 2:14). Others escort Haman to Esther's banquet (OG 6:14).<sup>516</sup>

Some escorting had to be conducted secretly. Livy and Cassius Dio both wrote about a eunuch named Ganymede who escorted Princess Arsinoë IV back to Egypt from Cyprus, where Julius Caesar installed her and her brother Ptolemy XIV as co-rulers under Roman guardianship (Livy 41; Cass. Dio 42.39.1).<sup>517</sup> By Dio's account, Ganymede managed her escape to the Egyptians, who promptly declared her queen.

Because escorting high-profile individuals carried risks, sometimes soldiers accompanied eunuchs. One risk was the escape or evasion of the escortee. Pharaoh Amasis II (r. 570 – 526 BCE) purportedly sent his most trustworthy eunuchs with a trireme (a warship with three tiers of oarsmen) to collect Phanes of Halicarnassus, a respected adviser and mercenary, before Phanes could defect to King Cambyses II (Htd. 3.4).<sup>518</sup> Another risk was capture. According to Appian, King Mithridates sent his daughters to be married to Scythian princes with an escort of eunuchs and a guard of 500 soldiers. Mithridates's soldiers betrayed him by killing the eunuchs and taking the women to Pompey instead (*The Mithridatic Wars* 12.108.516).

### *Military Leaders and Soldiers*

Eunuchs also held high-level military positions. One eunuch commanded the puppet King Zedekiah's army just before his execution by King Nebuchadnezzar's chief bodyguard (4 Kgs 25:19, 21; cf. Jer 52:25; cf. Potiphar's title in Gen 37:36). The first-century BCE biographer of Julius Caesar was impressed by the aforementioned Ganymede, who killed a veteran army commander at Arsinoë IV's behest and took control of the army. Ganymede increased the soldiers' bounty (*largitio*) and handled all of his other duties with diligence (*pari diligentia administrat*) (*The Alexandrian War* 4). According to Appian, Mithridates entrusted ten thousand

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<sup>516</sup> King Ahab sent a eunuch to escort the prophet Michaias to King Jehosephat (1 Kgs 22:9). In Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, the eunuchs who escorted Theagenes to the satrap's wife gave him instructions on etiquette along the way (7.18.2).

<sup>517</sup> Arsinoë IV co-ruled Ptolemaic Egypt with her brother. After an unsuccessful revolt against her sister, Cleopatra VII, she was taken as a prisoner-of-war by Julius Caesar. Mark Antony executed her in 41 BCE. Britannica Academic, s.v. "Arsinoë IV," <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Arsinoe-IV/9649>.

<sup>518</sup> The satrap Oroondates sent his trusted eunuch Bagoas with fifty horsemen to collect the captives Charicleia and Theagenes (Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 8.2.13).

men and fifty ships to the eunuch Dionysius and two other men (*The Mithridatic Wars* 12.76.332).

For some authors, eunuchs exemplified bravery in battle. Polybius wrote about Aristonicus, who was King Ptolemy V's (r. 204 – 180 BCE) eunuch but also friend (σύντροφος): “As he grew older he showed himself more of a man in courage and general character than eunuchs generally are (ἀνδρωδεστέραν εἶχεν ἢ κατ' εὐνοῦχον τόλμαν καὶ προαίρεσιν). For he was a born soldier (φύσει στρατιωτικὸς) and spent most of his time with military men and in the study of military matters” (*The Histories* 22.10.22). Appian introduced Alexander the Great's formidable foe, the eunuch Batis, as follows:

Alexander now determined to make his expedition to Egypt. Palestinian Syria (as it is called) had already come over to him, except for a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) named Batis, who was master of the city of Gaza; he procured a force of Arab mercenaries, and some time before had got ready grain for a long siege; trusting that the place could never be taken by assault, he decided not to admit Alexander into the city. (*Anabasis of Alexander* 2.25.4 [LCL])

Batis acted with foresight, military prowess, and leadership. In Arrian's account, Alexander and his Macedonian forces expended significant time, effort, and resources to defeat Batis, who with the inhabitants of his city courageously resisted Alexander.

Other authors decried eunuchs' power. According to Tacitus, Nero granted his eunuch Pelago power over the centurion who beheaded Plautus, Nero's rival. Tacitus likened Pelago's authority to a king's minion over his satellites (*satellitibus ministrum regium*) (*Ann.* 14.59).

### *Treasurers*

Eunuch treasurers became a literary trope. In Plutarch's biography of King Demetrius I (336 – 283 BCE), a would-be successor of Alexander the Great, the king jokingly refers to his rival King Seleucus (c. 358 – 281 BCE) as “Master of Elephants,” to King Ptolemy (c. 367 – 282 BCE) as “Admiral,” and to King Lysimachus (c. 355 – 281 BCE) as “Treasurer” (γαζοφύλακος). Although Seleucus and Ptolemy find their nicknames humorous, Lysimachus is outraged that Demetrius considers him a eunuch (σπάδων). Plutarch commented that it was customary to have eunuch treasurers, and that Lysimachus hated Demetrius for the insult (*Demetrius* 25).



Two biblical eunuchs manage a royal treasury. The first, Nathan, controls Judah's treasury (4 Kings 23:11). After King Josiah re-covenants with God, he destroys idolatrous objects by the entrance of the Lord's house. Near that entrance is the treasury (γαζοφυλάκιον) of the king's eunuch Nathan (Ναθαν βασιλέως τοῦ εὐνούχου). The second eunuch manages Ethiopia's financial assets. The Lucan evangelist offers a lengthy introduction of him as a man (άνήρ), an Ethiopian, a eunuch (εὐνούχος), and a minister (δυνάστης) of the Candace Queen of the Ethiopians who managed all of her financial assets (ἦν ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γάζης αὐτῆς; Acts 8:27).

The most notorious eunuch treasurer was Potheinus, who allegedly conspired to assassinate Pompey (106 – 48 BCE), the Roman general who, among other exploits, conquered Judea in 63 BCE. From the first century BCE, many accounts circulated about the eunuch who managed Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII's (r. 51 – 47 BCE) treasury.<sup>519</sup> In other accounts, eunuchs have access royal treasuries, though they may or may not manage them. Herodotus, for example, related that Darius I rewarded a physician who healed him with two pairs of golden shackles. He then instructed his eunuchs to take the physician to the king's women, who each took a vessel and filled it from a large chest of gold (3.130). Xenophon claimed that after Xerxes I executed Sataspes, the latter's eunuch escaped to Samos with a huge store of wealth. Other eunuchs shared insider knowledge of the precise location of a king's gold and silver (Hdt 3.130; FGH 688 F 3c 1b; Diod. Sic. 30.15.1).

### *Household Positions: Managers, Personal Attendants, Tutors*

Eunuchs held numerous roles within palaces and other elite households, from food tasting to tutoring princes. They had a range of important responsibilities. Xenophon described the

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<sup>519</sup> Appian claims that Pothinus managed Ptolemy funds (χορημία) (*Civil Wars* 2.12.84). By Julius Caesar's biographer's account, Potheinus managed (*procuratio*) the Ptolemaic kingdom (305 – 30 BCE) because of Ptolemy's young age (*Civil War* 3.108). Writers drew attention to two aspects of the assassination: its despicable nature (i.e., beheading) and a eunuch's involvement. During Hadrian's reign, Lucius Annaeus Florus called Potheinus and the eunuch Ganymedes monsters (*portenta*) (*Epitome of Roman History* 2.13.60). Other authors used Potheinus as a kind of negative benchmark to compare murderers. Martial likened Mark Antony, who used proscription lists to eliminate political rivals, to the "Pharian Pothinus" (*Spect* 5.69). Claudian had the goddess Roma herself compare eunuch consul Eutropius unfavorably with Pothinus: "The slaves of Egypt's kings have ever been a curse to the world; behold I suffer from a worse than Pothinus and bear a wrong more flagrant than that of which Egypt was once the scene. Pothinus' sword at Alexandria spilled the blood of a single consul; Eutropius brings dishonour on all" (Claudian, *Against Eutropius* 1.485 [Platnauer, LCL])

eunuchs and servants of Queen Panthea as serving her together, and the eunuchs and servants of her valiant husband Abradatas, as burying him together (*Cyr.* 6.4.11; 7.3.5). Potiphar had authority over Pharaoh's prison (*Gen* 40:7; 41:10). In Heliodorus's novel *Aethiopica*, the chief eunuch Euphrates binds Theagenes, torments him, and locks him up in a dungeon (8.6.2).

Kings and queens used eunuchs as personal attendants. In Ctesias's unflattering account, the Assyrian king Ninyas refuses to see anyone but his eunuch attendants and concubines (FGH 688 F 3c 1b). Eunuchs also attended monarchs in battle. A eunuch named Satibarzanes rushed around to find water for the king, who was desperate from thirst (FGH 688 F 3c 20). Some were trusted confidants.

Others served or tested food and drink. The eunuchs of Pharaoh who wronged (ἀμαρτάνω) him held positions as his chief cupbearer (ἀρχιοινοχόος) and chief baker (ἀρχισιτοποιός), respectively (*Gen* 40:1,2). Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch placed himself at risk by serving Daniel and his companions vegetarian options instead of the food appointed for them by the king (*Dan* 1:10; cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 10.10.2). Josephus claimed that Herod the Great used one beautiful eunuch as a wine pourer and another as a food server (*A.J.* 16.8.1).<sup>520</sup>

The possibility always existed that a eunuch might deliver drugged food or drink. Some allegedly did so at the behest of the slaveholder. Ctesias claimed that the Queen Mother of Artaxares II murdered his wife with her eunuch's assistance. She had her eunuch serve two halves of a bird: one for her, and a poisoned half to her daughter-in-law (FGH 688 F 3c 27). The eunuch of Pentephris's wife brought Joseph food "mixed with enchantments" that he carefully avoided (*T. Jos.* 6).<sup>521</sup>

Some eunuchs were tutors. The inscription of one statue in Delos dated between 129-117 BCE states that Antiochus was raised by Craterus, a eunuch at Cyzicus, with whom he and the household fled.<sup>522</sup> According to Julius Caesar's biographer, Ganymede served as Princess Arsinoe IV's tutor (*nutricius*) before he commanded the army (*The Alexandrian War* 4).

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<sup>520</sup> King Xerxes's eunuch serves dried Attic figs (*Ath.* 14.52c). The eunuch governor who waits on Apollonius of Tyana offers him a jar of Babylonian wine and roast pork and venison before he remembers that Apollonius abstains from wine and meat (*Philostr., VA* 1.21). In Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, the eunuchs of the satrap's wife send food on golden trays to Theagenes, a handsome young captive she is trying to seduce (7.18.1).

<sup>521</sup> For Halotus, see chap. 3, 159 and n. 483.

<sup>522</sup> Attalus.org. IDelos\_1547.

Josephus was grateful that Domitian punished the eunuch slave tutor (παιδαγωγός) of Josephus's son for making false allegations (*Vita* 429).<sup>523</sup>

Other eunuchs had less glamorous responsibilities. In the sixth century BCE, Greek tragedian Phrynicus had a foreign eunuch deliver the iambic prologue to *Phoenician Women* as he arranged seat cushions for a meeting of Persian royal magistrates.<sup>524</sup> As mentioned, one eunuch in the satirical account of the freedman Trimalchio held a chamberpot; the other picked up balls during a game (Petronius *Satyricon* 27). Martial wrote of a eunuch who paid close attention during his lazy master's massage so he would know exactly when to help him urinate (*Spect.* 3.82).

### **Mt 19:12b in Light of Matthew**

Of all the ancient preconceptions about manmade eunuchs, the one most relevant to Matthean context is the trope of the king's most loyal slave. In this chapter's final section, I focus on Matthew's characterization of "good" and "faithful" and elite slaves, particularly those who worked for kings, in light of Mt 19:12b.

Elite slaves in Matthew have their loyalty tested by God, the implied slaveholder. Matthew's audiences understood the expectations of slaves, both in the gospel and in the Roman world, and they knew that Jesus modeled enslavement for the heavenly king, who expected his slaves to be "good" and "faithful." The First Gospel encourages Jesus's followers to identify themselves with Jesus as slaves of God. The eunuchs of Mt 19:12b, who did not choose their enslavement, prepare the way for Matthew's audiences for the surprising identification with the eunuchs who did choose to become eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven.

#### Elite Slaveholders and Slaves in Matthew

Matthean kings are slaveholders. Herod Archelaus has slaves (παῖς), some of whom he confides in about his belief that Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead (14:2). The existence of others enslaved to Herod may be inferred. For instance, after Herod "commanded"

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<sup>523</sup> Josephus believed that Domitian honored him in continuity with his father Vespasian and his brother Titus.

<sup>524</sup> Phrynicus frag 8, line 1, cited in Edith Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions between Ancient Greek Drama and Society* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2006), 212.

(κελεύω) someone to decapitate John the Baptist, John's head "was brought" to him and "was given" to Herodias (Mt 14:6-11).<sup>525</sup> God is the implied king in the parable of the so-called unforgiving servant (δοῦλος; 18:23-35) and the parable of the wedding feast (22:1-14).

While Matthew's most prominent slaveholders include kings and wealthy landowners, slaves also serve chief priests, a governor, and a centurion. At least two enslaved females work in Caiphas's household (26:69, 71). In Gethsemane, one of Jesus's companions cuts off the ear of a slave of another chief priest (26:51). Matthew does not refer to Pilate's slaves directly, though they may be inferred from the reference to Pilate having Jesus scourged (27:26) before handing him over to his soldiers to be crucified and from Matthew's mention of the praetorium (27:27). As prefect of a Roman province (ἡγεμόν; 27:11), Pilate would have had many slaves at his residence.<sup>526</sup>

The evangelist depicts high-level slaves who either prove good and faithful to their master or fail to meet expectations. In the parable of the unforgiving slave, an enslaved man holds an immense responsibility for the king's property. Before the king tallied the amount of ten thousand talents and demanded payback, he entrusted the enslaved man with discretionary power over a staggering sum. Matthew's audiences may have assumed that the king granted the slave a massive peculium, that is, the authority to administer designated assets including money, other slaves (18:28-30), and perhaps land and goods. It was common practice in the Roman Empire for slaves to conduct business with their peculium on behalf of slaveholders but also to invest with it and thereby earn money to pay for their elusive manumission. As scholars often point out, the sum of ten thousand talents is so huge, it is difficult to fathom. That many talents would have weighed three hundred tons, which is roughly equivalent to sixty African male elephants.

In addition to having discretionary power to conduct the king's financial affairs, this slave also has authority over the king's other slaves. In fact, the two relationships (i.e., the king and the elite slave, the high-level slave and the low-level slave) are structurally equivalent: the slaveholder grants discretionary control over financial assets, calls for repayment, passes

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<sup>525</sup> The centurion's 'boy' is probably a valued slave; παῖς traditionally referred to slaves in republican and early imperial times. See Sandra R. Joshel and Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014). In Luke's version, he is a δοῦλος (Lk 7:2).

<sup>526</sup> According to Tacitus, L. Secundus had four hundred slaves at his estate in 61 CE when one of them murdered him (*Ann.* 14.3). Jonathan Edmondson, "Slavery and the Roman Family," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ed. Keith Bradley and Paul Cartledge, The Cambridge World History of Slavery (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 339.

judgment over the slave who cannot pay, and executes judgment. The only differences are in degree—the position of the slaveholder, the amount of the peculium, the severity of punishment (i.e., imprisonment alone vs. imprisonment with torture)—and in the nature of the initial judgment (i.e., forgiveness of debt vs. lifelong imprisonment unless full repayment occurs).

Matthew's early audiences would have recognized that the king still retained authority over all of his assets, including all enslaved people in the household. Even elite slaves like this man, whom the king entrusted with a fortune, were still slaves who could be sold like any others at the king's discretion, along with their dependents. They knew that the king honored the slave by entrusting him with ten thousand talents. They also knew that the enslaved man must demonstrate his loyalty or he would lose it all, including his life.

Elite slaveholders in Matthew do not only punish disobedient slaves; they also care for loyal ones. The centurion actively seeks Jesus out to cure his boy (παῖς) of paralysis and torment (8:5-6). The man who owes ten thousand talents has a wife (though not by Roman law), children, and possessions, all of which Matthew's audiences would have understood as privileges granted to him by the king (18:25). In the First Gospel, slaveholders care for the physical needs of slaves. The king whose slave owes him ten thousand talents is also willing to release the man from that debt (18:27), at least initially. Elite Matthean slaveholders may avenge the murder of slaves, which also reflects on their own honor (22:6-7; cf. 21:40-41).

Matthew says little or nothing about the work or lives of the actual slaves who serve elites: the centurion's "boy" (παῖς), the two enslaved women (παῖδες: 26:69, implied in 26:71) who serve Caiaphas, and the slave of the chief priest advance the narrative by exemplifying Jesus's healing abilities and prophetic power but they receive no attention in their own right. And while Matthew underscores the centurion's concern about the boy/slave's paralysis and agony (8:6), he also highlights the centurion's elite position through Jesus's lavish praise of the centurion's faith (πίστις: 8:10-11). Slaveholders in Matthew determine what work should be done and delegate most of the work to their slaves. They make decisions about when, how, and by whom the physical work such as planting and harvesting will occur, and they call for horrific punishment at will.

## Good and Faithful Elite Slaves in Matthew

In the Matthean apocalyptic material (24-25), Jesus shares two parables about elite enslaved men with responsibilities similar to those of the high-level slave who owes ten thousand talents. In the first (24:45-51), a slaveholder (οικοδεσπότης) grants greater authority to a loyal and sensible slave (ὁ πιστὸς δοῦλος καὶ φρόνιμος) to manage other enslaved household members by providing for their nourishment (τροφή: food and/or wages) at the right time (24:45).<sup>527</sup> If the enslaved man handles his assigned work responsibly, the slaveholder will grant authority to the man over all of his possessions (24:47). If the slave is evil (κακός), beating fellow slaves and eating and drinking with drunkards (24:49), the slaveholder will return and cut him in pieces before sending his body parts to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (24:51).

In the second parable (25:14-30), before a man goes on a journey, he grants five talents to one slave, two to another, and one to a third. While the amount of eight talents is negligible compared with ten thousand, Matthew's audiences would have been surprised by the huge amount. One talent of silver was equivalent to roughly six thousand denarii. It would take a laborer who earned one denarius for a day's work (20:2) roughly nineteen years, working six days per week, to earn a single talent. Even the man who received one talent, then, had responsibility for a tremendous amount of money (25:15). The slaves with five and two talents invest the money and receive a good return, praise from the slaveholder—they are “good and trustworthy” (δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ) (25:21, 23)—increased trust and responsibility, and the promise of a reward: “entering joy,” which in the First Gospel means eternal life. The enslaved man who leaves in fear (φοβέω),<sup>528</sup> digs a hole, and hides his master's talent because he knows his master is a hard (σκληρός) person, receives sharp criticism (25:24-25) and severe punishment. The slaveholder calls him an evil (πονηρός), lazy (ὀκνηρός), and worthless

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<sup>527</sup> Compared to the Lucan evangelist, Matthew increases the responsibilities of slaves and makes their judgment and punishment more severe. For example, Luke introduces a faithful and sensible steward (οικονόμος 12:42) whom the lord places in charge of the servants (θεραπεία) to give them food rations (σιτομέτριον) at the proper time. Matthew emphasizes this slave's enslavement, referring to the slave overseer five times as an enslaved man (Mt 24:45,46,48,49,50), the fourth time as a “fellow slave” (σύνδουλος), compared to Luke's three (12:45,46,47). While both receive the horrific punishment of being cut into pieces, only Matthew's slave is destined for a place with hypocrites, weeping, and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>528</sup> His fear proves well grounded (25:30; cf 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51). The place of outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth is analogous to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (25:41) as well as the “goats” who failed to care for their brothers (25:32-33,41-46).

(ἀχρεῖος) slave and commands that he be cast into the outer darkness (Mt 25:30). It is a death sentence.

In both parables, the slaveholder tests the loyalty of his slaves. The enslaved men have two alternatives: to prove loyalty or disloyalty. Demonstrated loyalty prompts greater trust and increased responsibility. Disloyalty has grave consequences including torture, dismemberment, death, and damnation.

#### Metaphorical Enslavement in light of Mt 19:12b

In the First Gospel, Jesus speaks of two types of metaphorical enslavement: enslavement to God, and enslavement to one another. Matthew depicts Jesus as a king who, like his ancestor David, understands himself as a slave of God (12:18 παῖς; cf. Isa 42:1; Mt 20:27-28). Jesus exemplifies loyalty to his father, the king of heaven. Implicitly, he models πίστις throughout the First Gospel in the way that he lives and works. His faithfulness culminates on the cross when he entrusts himself to God (27:43: πέποιθεν ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν) in spite of his agonizing death.<sup>529</sup>

Jesus encourages followers to act as slaves to each other. Whoever wishes to be great (μέγας) among the disciples in Jesus's kingdom (20:21) must be their servant (διάκονος: 20:26); whoever wishes to be first among them must be their slave (δοῦλος: 20:27), just as (ὡσπερ) the Son of Man came not to be served (διακονέω) but to serve and to give his soul as a ransom for many (20:28). Jesus models both enslavement to God and enslavement to human beings. He, and his loyal followers, will experience eschatological reversals.

Matthew's early audiences who listened to Jesus's descriptions of enslavement and took his words to heart also wanted to become good and faithful slaves of God whom he could count on to be responsible, quick to follow orders, and prepared to accept greater responsibility. They knew that the most elite slaves were entrusted with the slaveholder's financial and human property. They, too, hoped to become elite slaves of God and earn praise and rewards in the kingdom of heaven. They, too, wanted to be in God's presence. They understood the rewards for loyalty and the consequences of disloyalty.

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<sup>529</sup> Matthew also links faithfulness explicitly to righteousness and eternal life (e.g., 5:6,19,20; 6:33; 8:11-12; 24:51; 25:26-30).

When Matthew's audiences heard Jesus's words about eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people (19:12b) immediately before his words about eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven (19:12c), they would have identified with both groups. They knew that Jesus's words in 19:12b were about elite eunuchs, many of whom were close to kings. They understood that kings depended on eunuchs for all kinds of work, and that eunuchs were either the most loyal, or the most treacherous. The eunuchs of 19:12b bespeak enslavement, loyalty, and the necessary subordination of personal and familial concerns. The Matthean Jesus has the same expectations of current and future disciples (e.g., 6:24; 19:27-29). However, eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people also represented proximity to the most illustrious people on earth. Those who served monarchs became part of the royal household. Some became indispensable. The eunuchs set the stage for followers of Jesus who made the difficult choice to demonstrate their own loyalty by making themselves eunuchs.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter, I provided a selective history of interpretation of Mt 19:12b. I also explained the circumstances under which boys and men became eunuchs as well as common methods and corporeal consequences of castration. I discussed preconceptions about eunuchs who were made eunuchs and argued that in Matthean context, they signal high-level enslavement to a king. When interpreted within the gospel's larger characterization of metaphorical enslavement to God, they remind early audiences of the necessity of undivided loyalty. These eunuchs primed Matthew's early audiences to make the choice to become eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven.

Ancient Christian exegetes used the eunuchs of Mt 19:12b as a foil for the self-made eunuchs of 19:12c. They distinguished the two groups on the basis of volition, self-control, reason, and the possibility of rewards. Many offered a metaphorical interpretation. Modern exegetes interpret these eunuchs literally, as castrated slaves or servants who more often than not worked in a foreign harem, and as counterparts to the rabbinic designation *saris adam*.

I argued that Matthew's earliest audiences would have interpreted the eunuchs of 19:12b literally, as castrated slaves or freedmen, but not necessarily as harem attendants. It was common



knowledge that elites, including emperors, valued attractive, prepubescent eunuchs. Matthew's audiences would have been familiar with the trope of the "king's most loyal eunuch" along with negative stereotypes about eunuchs as plotters, status symbols, traitors, and sex slaves. They would have known that eunuchs served in many different roles, including guardians, gatekeepers, advisors, surrogates, political and military leaders, messengers, escorts, soldiers, treasurers, household managers, and personal attendants.

## CHAPTER 4

### FOR THE HEAVENLY KING: THE EUNUCHS OF 19:12c

This chapter seeks to answer two questions:

1. How have commentators, both ancient and modern, interpreted Mt 19:12c (καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν)?
2. How might Matthew's earliest audiences have understood eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven?

Through at least the fifth century, Jesus's words about eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs would have conjured images of frenzied self-castration, foreign men who dressed as women, and flamboyant public worship of a goddess. Ancient Christians would have visualized the infamous *galli*, devotees of *Mater Magna*, the Great Mother, or one of her counterparts. In light of pervasive negative tropes about *galli*, Matthew's receptive listeners—particularly males—would have found Jesus's words disturbing, at best, and traumatizing, at worst. They would not have welcomed any comparison to *galli*.

What makes the image of *galli* more unsettling is the evangelist's addition of the phrase “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,” better translated “in order to gain the kingdom of heaven” in its narrative and historical context. Jesus juxtaposes the image of self-castrated eunuchs with an image of the kingdom of heaven, the locus of eternal life and eschatological rewards. In fact, he says that some eunuchs have *already* “eunuchized” themselves in order to gain the kingdom of heaven. Matthew used the aorist active indicative. Current and prospective adherents could not simply dissociate from the jarring image of *galli* with the kingdom of heaven. They may have experienced what Julia Kristeva coined ‘abjection’: their desire for the

kingdom of heaven suddenly had to reckon with the shocking prospect of self-castration and the attendant shame of being seen as *galli*.<sup>530</sup>

Nor does Jesus make a simple statement of fact. His words about self-made eunuchs are couched as an invitation to a select few: his disciples, with whom Matthew's early audiences would have identified. Not all have been given "this word" (τὸν λόγον τοῦτον: 19:11), and those to whom it has been given must make room for it (19:12d). The wording of Mt 19:11 closely resembles that of 13:11, when Jesus tells his disciples that knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been given to them, but not the crowds.<sup>531</sup>

Because the Matthean Jesus does not subsequently explain his enigmatic words to the disciples (as he does, for example, after the parables of the sower and the weeds of the field), ancient audiences and contemporary scholars have reached different conclusions about whether the self-made eunuchs should be understood literally or metaphorically. As I noted in the introduction and will further demonstrate in this chapter, throughout history, some Christian males took Jesus's words literally, as a recommendation to castrate themselves or to have themselves castrated.<sup>532</sup> Most, though, interpreted his words metaphorically, as a recommendation to renounce sex, marriage, or remarriage.

Even with the dominant metaphorical reading, exegetes have never agreed about what Jesus meant. Was he referring to remarriage after divorce, as Justin Martyr assumed and some scholars argue? Was he encouraging self-control? If so, did that include sexual self-restraint or abstinence for married couples, per Athenagoras of Athens and Clement of Alexandria? Was

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<sup>530</sup> Kristeva opens her essay on abjection with the following statement: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects.... What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." 1-2. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>531</sup> I will discuss the connection between Mt 19:11 and Mt 13:11 in greater detail in this chapter.

<sup>532</sup> I refer to male adherents because there is no indication that female adherents were castrated until the eighteenth century. In Skoptsy Christian communities in Russia, some females had the outer portion of the vagina and their nipples or breasts removed. Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5, 63-64.

Jesus recommending that some of his devoted followers remain unmarried virgins? Was he challenging or overthrowing patriarchal marriage practices, as some claim?

In this chapter, I argue that Jesus's words about eunuchs are a parable about the kingdom of heaven and, implicitly, about loyalty. Ancient Christians and modern exegetes have always struggled to make sense of Jesus's words because they are a parable. That is also why two interpretive streams—literal and metaphorical—have always existed in a tense relationship. Scholars assume rather than argue that the Matthean Jesus spoke about literal eunuchs in 19:12a-b and metaphorical eunuchs in 19:12c. Reading Mt 19:12 as a parable about the kingdom of heaven provides support for the consensus reading.

Further interpreting 19:12 as a parable about loyalty helps explain why some followers of Jesus castrated themselves and others chose not to have sex, marry, or remarry. The Matthean Jesus expects his followers to do whatever is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven, no matter the cost, and to subordinate all other relationships. Their loyalty must be to God and his kingdom. Eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs incurred significant costs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven and proximity to God. Whereas the first two groups did not choose to become eunuchs, the third group made that life-changing decision. They acted decisively to prevent themselves from engaging in πορνεία or adultery and/or to demonstrate their undivided loyalty to the kingdom of heaven. They anticipated the rewards that Jesus promised and embraced the opportunity to become eunuchs of the heavenly king.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section, “History of Interpretation,” establishes that ancient interpretations centered on self-control (e.g., σωφροσύνη; ἐγκράτεια) and volition. While many exegetes also interpreted Jesus's words as a recommendation to abstain from sex, marriage, or remarriage, other ancient Christian men elected to castrate themselves or have themselves castrated. In response, church authorities legislated against castration. Ecclesiastical rulings were consonant with Roman Imperial and subsequent legislation. Contemporary exegetes overwhelmingly interpret Jesus's words metaphorically, as a recommendation for some Christians to renounce marriage or remarriage to live as celibates.

There was a clear historical analogue to Matthew's voluntary eunuchs: *galli*. “Voluntary Eunuchs in Antiquity” clarifies who *galli* were, whom they served, and how Greek and Latin writings portrayed them. For the duration of the Roman Empire, *galli* threatened the values that elite Roman men, including prominent Christians, held dear. *Galli* challenged their beliefs about

masculine privilege and societal duties, especially the production of children in monogamous marriage and the management of households in service of the larger imperial or ecclesial community.

In the third section, “The Parable’s Punchline,” I conclude my case that 19:12 is a parable and expound the last three arguments I introduced in Chapter 1: a.) the Matthean Jesus pairs a shocking image with the kingdom of heaven to compel his audience’s attention; b.) the close parallels between Chapters 13 and 19 encourage a comparison between the eunuchs and the parable of the sower; and c.) almost all Matthean parables center on the kingdom of heaven.

In the final section, “Matthew’s Voluntary Eunuchs in Context,” I argue that Matthew’s voluntary eunuchs must be interpreted within Matthew’s broader narrative and historical context, especially the following verses about children (19:13-15), the difficulty of entering the kingdom of heaven and its rewards (19:16-30), and Jesus’s other words about self-amputation (5:27-32; 18:1-10), the kingdom of heaven, the consequences of engaging in illicit sex or adultery, and the expectation of eschatological recompense. When interpreted within the broader narrative, the decision of Matthew’s voluntary eunuchs becomes explicable. Their action was not based only on zeal for the kingdom of heaven. It was consonant with Jesus’s teachings and actions throughout the gospel.

### **Mt 19:12c-d: A Selective History of Interpretation**

#### An Introduction to Matthew’s Self-Made Eunuchs

In the history of church tradition and scholarship on Mt 19:12, the self-made eunuchs have received almost exclusive attention. While there are various reasons for this—the desire of the proto-orthodox church to eliminate the castration of clergy, for example, and scholarly preoccupation with celibacy—the narrative itself provides strong reasons to focus on the third group. Before I turn to the interpretive history, then, I will clarify the various ways that Matthew directs attention to the self-made eunuchs.

One way Matthew emphasizes them is by underlining the difficulty of self-eunuchizing. He sandwiches 19:12c between 19:11 and 19:12d, both of which indicate that Jesus directs his message to a select group. He begins with two qualifications in 19:11: “not everyone can accept

this teaching” and “but only those to whom it is given,” then adds a third in 19:12d: “let anyone accept this who can.”<sup>533</sup> Jesus’s use of the imperative (χωρείτω) when he tells his disciples that they must make room, or yield, to “this word” (τὸν λόγον τοῦτον), underscores the difficulty. In addition, deliberative rhetoric for the disciples’ comment “it is better not to marry” (οὐ συμφέρει γαμῆσαι: 19:10) nicely sets up Jesus’s response: he recommends something even more difficult than abstaining from marriage.<sup>534</sup>

Second, the qualifying clause “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” highlights the self-made eunuchs. The thrice repeated words εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες—interrupted by γὰρ in 19:12a and prefaced by καὶ in 19:12b and 19:12c—connect all three groups, but the separate prepositional qualifiers—“from mother’s womb” (my translation), “by people,” and “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”—differentiate them. If first-century rhetorician Quintilian happened to read or hear Mt 19:12, he would have identified the rhetorical use of a figure of speech based on addition (*adjectio*); the repetition of words at the beginning of a series of clauses adds force and emphasis (*acriter et instanter*). Quintilian would have also recognized ἐπάνοδος (*regressio*), by which Jesus simultaneously repeated clauses and drew distinctions among them (*Inst.* 9.3.35).

Third, there is a grammatical shift with the third group of eunuchs. Whereas the first and second groups take the aorist passive indicative—ἐγεννήθησαν and εὐνουχίσθησαν, respectively—the third takes the aorist active εὐνούχισαν. They were the actors; the others were acted upon. They could and did exert control over their bodies.

Finally, Matthew draws attention to the self-made eunuchs by crucial parallels he created between verses 19:11 and 13:11 and 19:12d and 13:9. I will elucidate this argument later in the chapter.

## Ancient Exegesis

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<sup>533</sup> W.D. Davies and Dale Allison note that the qualifications pile up. Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 21.

<sup>534</sup> In *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle categorized three types of rhetoric according to different listeners: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. He described deliberative rhetoric as “either hortatory or dissuasive; for both those who give advice in private and those who speak in the assembly invariably either exhort or dissuade” (1.3, 1358b.4 [Freese and Striker, LCL]). For Aristotle, deliberative rhetoric was usually oriented to the future. In his review of Matthew’s rhetorical strategies in the Sermon on the Mount, George Kennedy explains that the expression “it is better for you” (σοῦ συμφέρει), which is characteristic of classical deliberative rhetoric, supports the larger argument’s focus on self-interest. Kennedy, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 46.

The following section provides a selective review of both metaphorical and literal interpretations of Jesus’s words from the second century through late antiquity, with two caveats. First, evidence of Christian castration is spotty, indirect, and tendentious. The bulk comes from patristic writings and church rulings against castration. Second, only some accounts of Christian castrations specifically cite Mt 19:12. In such cases I infer that those who castrated themselves, or sought castration, did so on the basis of the eunuch verse. The inference, though, is justified.

The only other New Testament text that refers to self-castration cannot be read as an endorsement. In Gal 5:12, Paul wishes that his opponents—not his Galatian audience—would castrate themselves (ὄφελον καὶ ἀποκόψονται οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες ὑμᾶς) because they promote a different teaching on circumcision. I found no deuterocanonical or pseudepigraphal text that might be interpreted as a recommendation for self-castration. Mt 19:12 is singular. It also has early non-canonical attestation.

By the late first or early second century, Christian writers were already drawing inspiration from the verse. In his letter to the Smyrneans, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch<sup>535</sup> used the expression “the one who can make room, must make room” (ὁ χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω: my translation) immediately after warning his addressees that those who do not believe in the blood of Christ—even heavenly beings, glorious angels, and rulers, both visible and invisible—will be condemned (*Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 6.1). Ignatius did not mention eunuchs or ascetic living, but his awareness and rhetorical use of ὁ χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω indicate that the verse impressed him enough to use the phrase in a letter he composed while he was enchained in the custody of Roman soldiers (11.1).

Second-century Christians who were deemed heretics also found inspiration in Mt 19:12c. According to Clement of Alexandria, Basilides and his followers rejected marriage on the basis of this verse. They believed that “those who have made themselves eunuchs (εὐνουχίσαντες ἑαυτούς) for the sake of the eternal kingdom (ἔνεκα τῆς αἰωνίου βασιλείας) are making a choice of reasoned principle in their view because of the incidentals of married life; they are afraid of the amount of time spent in the provision of necessities” (*Strom.* 3.1.1

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<sup>535</sup> There is no scholarly consensus on Ignatius’s biographical details. In the early twentieth century, scholars argued for a martyrdom circa 110. Recently, scholars have argued for an early to mid-second century date. For discussion, see Paul R. Gilliam III, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Arian Controversy*, vol. 140, *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language*, (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2017), 6.

[Ferguson, LCL]).<sup>536</sup> Clement then complained about Basilides's followers lewd and hypocritical lifestyle; however, he offered no critique of their interpretation, and he closed by explaining what self-control (ἐγκράτεια; σωφρονεῖν) actually meant, including abstaining from marriage, which he approved.

Origen provided another account of a second-century "heretical" interpretation. He faulted the second-century teacher Marcion of Sinope for not being consistent in his interpretation. He should have either rejected the words about eunuchs as not actually from Jesus or interpreted them allegorically (*Comm. Matt.* 15.3). Marcion may have developed or had access to the earliest Christian canon. If Origen's account has any historical veracity, Marcion not only included Mt 19:12 in his canon, he interpreted Jesus's words literally. However, because Marcion had been excommunicated in the mid-140s, decades before Origen wrote, Origen's account is suspect. In Matthias Klinghardt's view, Origen leveled a typical charge of inconsistency against the Marcionites, in this case regarding asceticism and allegorization.<sup>537</sup> Further, Origen's words almost appear as an aside in his larger argument against a literal interpretation of Mt 19:12.<sup>538</sup>

Justin Martyr mentioned Matthew's self-made eunuchs at the conclusion of a list of Jesus's statements on self-control (σωφροσύνη) (1 *Apol.* 15).<sup>539</sup> After opening with the words Περί μὲν οὖν σωφροσύνης τοσοῦτον εἶπεν, Justin followed with Jesus's warnings in Matthew that one who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (5:28), that removing a right eye that scandalizes you is better than being cast into the eternal fire (18:9), and that whoever marries a woman who has divorced another man commits adultery

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<sup>536</sup> On the date of Basilides's teaching, see James A. Kelhoffer, "Basilides's Gospel and Exegetica (Treatises)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 59, no. 2 (2005): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570072054068366>.

<sup>537</sup> Professor Klinghardt was kind enough to respond in detail to a question I posed to him about this issue. He explained that Tertullian knew that the pericope in Mt 19 was not in Marcion's gospel: "Tertullian highlights the fact that he cannot refute the Marcionites' asceticism on the ground of their own writings only but instead must relate to Matthew which was in his bible, but not in the Marcionites'." Matthias Klinghardt, email to author, August 21, 2020. Jason BeDuhn also questions Origen's reliability for reconstructing Marcion's text. As he explains, Origen did not provide a close reading of Marcion's text and sometimes engaged with later Marcionites who cited texts that were not in Marcion's canon. Jason BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon*, Marcion's Scriptural Canon, (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013), 43-44.

<sup>538</sup> In Ronald Heine's words, "The Marcionite position is kind of a tack-on reference. Origen mentions their view, dismisses it, and moves on." Ronald E. Heine, "Origen and his Opponents on Matthew 19:12," in *Studia Patristica Vol LVI: Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), 124.

<sup>539</sup> 1 *Apol.* 15: 'Εἰσὶ τινες οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ ἐγεννήθησαν εὐνοῦχοι, εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν· πλὴν οὐ πάντες τοῦτο χωροῦσιν.



(5:32; 19:9). Notably, Justin used the verb ἐκκόπτω (cut out) for the scandalizing eye instead of Matthew's ἐξαίρειω (tear out), which makes his link between self-amputation of the right eye and self-castration of eunuchs more explicit than Matthew's.<sup>540</sup>

Justin's citation functioned in four ways. Self-made eunuchs helped bolster his claims that Jesus demands a high level of physical self-control, that he rejects people who commit adultery or desire to, and that he rejects those who remarry as sinners. Justin omitted (or perhaps did not know of) Jesus's divorce exception (παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας in 5:32; μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ in 19:9), which strengthened his case against remarriage. The self-made eunuchs also frame Justin's praise of some men and women who were disciples of Christ since childhood and remained pure (ἄφθορος) into their sixties and seventies.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Justin also provided the earliest reference to a Christian man who sought castration (1 *Apol.* 29). The young man filed a petition with the Alexandrian prefect Felix to have a surgeon remove his testicles (δίδυμος). When Felix flatly refused to subscribe the petition, Justin claimed that the man was content to remain unmarried according to his conscience and that of like-minded people (i.e., fellow Christians). Justin used this case to prove that Christians do not engage in mysteries that involve licentious sex (ἡ ἀνέδην μίξις).

The circumstances surrounding the young man's petition and Justin's use of it raise questions about castration practices in Roman provinces—in this case, Roman Egypt—the extent to which locals followed imperial castration bans, and whether other early Christian men were having themselves castrated in the mid-second century. Although there is no record of a declaration about castration by the reigning emperor Antoninus Pius, his respect for his predecessor Hadrian, and Felix's decisive rejection of the petition suggest that Pius followed imperial precedent.

Because most petitions were submitted in person and posted on long papyrus rolls for public display, and responses to these petitions were also posted publicly, the young man must have been quite motivated to have his testicles excised.<sup>541</sup> It is curious that Justin chose this case for his own petition to Pius. In addition to a defense of early Christian practices and asceticism,

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<sup>540</sup> Although it is possible to tear out testicles (see chap. 3, n. 397 for a recent example), as I argued in Chapter 3, excision was probably the standard method.

<sup>541</sup> Brandon Duane Cline, "Petition and Performance in the Apologies of Justin Martyr" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 2016), 16, 31.

Justin's account of the Alexandrian man may have been a subtle attack on *Mater Magna* worship. Justin lived in Rome, which was a center of the cult. The story about the would-be Christian castrate may also suggest that people were making a connection between castrated *galli* and castrated Christians that Justin sought to challenge.

Epiphanius claimed that the early second-century "heretics" Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes viewed themselves as self-made eunuchs who lived communally with women. According to Epiphanius, they justified their lifestyle as a rational decision to avoid marriage based on careful consideration of practicalities and cited Paul's words that it is better to marry than burn (1 Cor 7:9) and Plato's *Republic* (*Pan.* 1.32.4.2-5).<sup>542</sup> For Epiphanius, there was no question who the self-made eunuchs really were:

Who can these be but the noble apostles, and the virgins and monks after them? John and James, the sons of Zebedee, who remained virgin [*sic*], surely did not cut (ἀποτέμνω) their members (μέλος) off with their own hands, and did not contract marriage either; they engaged in the struggle in their own hearts, and admirably won the fame of the crown of this contest. And all the millions after them who lived in the world without spouses and won the fame of this contest in monasteries and convents. They had no relations with women, but competed in the most perfect of contests. (2.58.4.5-7 [Williams])

The author of the mid second-century Acts of John shared a colorful account of a young believer who castrated himself after committing adultery and parricide (48-54). His father had warned him not to pursue a co-worker's wife. In a fit of rage, the son kicked his father to death. Jesus's disciple John then found the young man rushing around with a sickle (δρέπανον), about to kill the woman, her husband, and himself. John asked him: will you stay away from the woman if I resurrect your father? He agreed. John successfully resurrected the father, but the

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<sup>542</sup> It is a convoluted passage: "But those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake <make this> choice, they say, because of the consequences of matrimony, for fear of the business <of earning> a living. <And by> 'It is better to marry than to burn; do not cast thy soul into the fire,' he says that the apostle means, 'Hold out and fear night and day lest you fall from continence. For a soul that is bent on resistance has a portion of the hope.'" (*Pan.* 1.32.4.4-5 [Williams]). The Greek reads οἱ δὲ ἕνεκα τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν ἑαυτοὺς εὐνουχίσαντες, διὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ γάμου συμβαίνοντα, φασί, τὸν ἐπιλογισμὸν <τοῦτον λαμβάνουσιν, τὴν περὶ τὸν πορισμὸν> τῶν ἐπιτηδείων ἀσχολίαν δεδιότες. <καὶ τῷ> «βέλτιον γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι, μὴ εἰς πῦρ ἐμβάλης τὴν ψυχὴν σου», φησὶ λέγειν τὸν ἀπόστολον· ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς ἀντέχων καὶ φοβούμενος, μὴ τῆς ἐγκρατείας ἀποπέσης. πρὸς γὰρ τὸ ἀντέχειν γινομένη ψυχὴ μερίζεται τῆς ἐλπίδος». Epiphanius quoted Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 3.1.1.2-3.3). Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis. Book I: Sects 1-46*, Second edition, revised and expanded. ed., vol. 63, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2009), 211n10.

young man suddenly castrated himself (μόριον ἀφαιρέω) and threw his genitals at the woman, exclaiming: “Because of you I became my father’s murderer, and the two of you, and myself! Here, have the cause (αἰτία) of all this! God has had mercy on me so that I will know his power.” (53, translation mine).<sup>543</sup> When he told John and the (Christian) brothers what he did, John reprimanded him and explained that the real source of his behavior was not his genital members but the unseen springs that stir up and bring out all shameful (αἰσχρός) things. The young man repented, having learned the cunning of Satan, and stayed close to John thereafter (54).

In the Acts of John, as in Justin’s story of the Alexandrian petitioner, a common thread emerges: a young Christian man viewed his testicles (δίδυμος: 1 *Apol.* 29) or genital members (μόριον: Acts of John 48) as the source of his licentious or adulterous behavior and sought or performed castration to remove the threat. Each had to learn, with the support of his larger Christian community, that castration was not a licit way to control dangerous sexual impulses. Each story also had a clear moral: for Justin’s audience, it was that Christians do not engage in illicit sex and mysteries (like the *galli*); for the audience of the Acts of John, it was that they must guard against Satan’s ability to stir up evil desires that lead to adultery and even parricide.

While second-century Christian philosopher Athenagoras of Athens did not cite the eunuch verse explicitly, Mt 19:9-12 is the ostensible background for the Christian virgins, eunuchs, and chaste husbands in the following discussion. “Therefore having the hope of eternal life,” Athenagoras wrote, Christian men

have contempt for the things of this life, including pleasures of the soul, each of us taking wives according to the traditions we established, only to beget children. For as the sower who has sown seed into the earth awaits the harvest, we do not sow more seed, and the limit of our desire is the begetting of children. Indeed you would find many among us, both men and women, who grow old unmarried in the hope of living closer to God. And if remaining as virgins and eunuchs (ἐν παρθενία καὶ ἐν εὐνουχία) brings [us] closer to God, whereas the arrival of thoughts and desires leads [us] away, we flee from the thoughts, and even sooner do we reject the deeds. (*Legatio pro Christianis* 33 [Pratten, ANF])<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Διὰ σὲ πατὴρ φονεὺς καὶ ὑμῶν τῶν δύο καὶ ἐμαυτοῦ ἐγενόμην. ἔχεις τὰ τούτω ὅμοια καὶ αἴτια. ἐμὲ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἠλέησεν ἐπιγῶναι αὐτοῦ τὴν δύναμιν.

<sup>544</sup> Athenagoras addressed the Embassy to emperor Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. On the work as a rhetorical piece rather than an actual address to the emperors, see P. Lorraine Buck, "Athenagoras's Embassy: A Literary Fiction," *The Harvard theological Review* 89, no. 3 (1996), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000031862>.

Athenagoras called his opponents adulterers (μοιχός) and pederasts (παιδεραστής) who abuse the eunuchs and once-married (τοὺς εὐνούχους καὶ μονογάμους).<sup>545</sup> He continued with a warning against remarriage directed at men: “For he who deprives himself of his first wife, even though she be dead, is a cloaked adulterer, resisting the hand of God, because in the beginning God made one man and one woman, and dissolving the strictest union of flesh with flesh, formed for the intercourse of the race” (Pratten, ANF). Athenagoras’s metaphorical interpretation echoes Justin’s use of Mt 19:12 to condemn remarriage and praise elderly Christian men and women who remained pure from childhood. Athenagoras’s account might be the first postbiblical use of eunuchs as a metaphor for Christian males who renounced sex and marriage.

For Clement of Alexandria, being a self-made eunuch was about exercising self-control (σωφρονέω) in general, with God’s help, and abstaining from sex and marriage in particular:

It is not just that it [self-discipline; ἐγκράτεια] teaches us self-control (σωφρονεῖν). It offers us the gift of self-control, a divine power and grace of God. I must tell you our people’s view of the matter. We bless abstention from sexual intercourse ([sic] εὐνουχίας) and those to whom it comes as a gift (δωρέομαι) of God. We admire monogamy (μονογαμία) and respect for one marriage and one only. We say that we ought to share in suffering and “bear one another’s burdens,” for fear that anyone who thinks he is standing firmly should in fact fall. It is about second marriages that the Apostle says, “If you are on fire, get married.” (*Strom.* 3.1.4 [Ferguson])

Elsewhere, Clement averred that a true eunuch is “not one who cannot, but one who will not, engage in pleasure” (*Paed.* 3.4.5).<sup>546</sup>

Some ancient Christian men found support for their castration in two lines of the *Sentences of Sextus*, a collection of more than four hundred fifty Greek aphorisms popular among Christians in the late second or early third century.<sup>547</sup> Line 13 reads: “Any member of the body that incites you not to exercise self-control (σωφρονέω), cast away (ρίπτω); for it is better

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<sup>545</sup> A literal interpretation cannot be ruled out definitively. Athenagoras could have paired virgins—instead of eunuchs—with the once-married. Gary Brower reads the eunuchs literally: “Given the context that ‘adulterers and pederasts’ are set in opposition to ‘eunuchs and monogamists’, it would seem that, since Greco-Roman polemic against eunuchs frequently grouped them with the sexually profligate, the apologist’s argument would have less force if the eunuchs in question were not physically eunuchs.” Brower, “Making Christian Eunuchs,” 207n53. Brower cites R.P.C. Hanson, “A Note On Origen’s Self-Mutilation,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 19, no. 1 (1965), <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007265X00269>.

<sup>546</sup> Εὐνουχος δὲ ἀληθής οὐχ ὁ μὴ δυνάμενος, ἀλλ’ ὁ μὴ βουλόμενος φιληδεῖν.

<sup>547</sup> On its popularity, see the introduction of Walter T. Wilson, *The Sentences of Sextus*, vol. 1, Wisdom Literature from the Ancient World, (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2012).

to live with self-control without the member than to be destroyed (ὀλεθρίως) with the member” (my translation).<sup>548</sup> The line may allude to Mt 18:8-9 and/or 5:29-30. The second, line 273, states that some people cut off (ἀποκόπτω) and cast away (ρίπτω) members (μέλος) for improved health. The author then remarks: “How much better [to do this] for the sake of self-control” (σωφρονέω).<sup>549</sup> When Origen argued against Christian men who were castrating themselves, he quoted in full both lines from Sextus, which he claimed were “approved by many” (*Comm. Matt.* 15.3).

Tertullian often referred to Matthew’s self-made eunuchs. As stated in the introduction, he claimed that both Jesus and Paul were voluntary eunuchs to be emulated if possible (*Mon.* 3.1; 5.7). He urged Christians to choose virginity over marriage, and for those already married, to refrain from sex. In a letter to his wife, Tertullian made the surprising claim that married men *and* women could be voluntary eunuchs if they agreed to abstain from sex: “How many, too, who in wedlock abstain, by mutual consent, from the use of marriage! They have made themselves eunuchs because of their desire for the kingdom of heaven!” (*voluntarii spadones pro cupiditate regni coelestis*) (*To His Wife* 1.6 [Le Saint, ACW]). In *On the Apparel of Women*, Tertullian praised many who “seal (*obsigno*) themselves up to eunuchhood (*spadonatus*) for the sake of the kingdom of God” (*regnum Dei*) and voluntarily relinquish an honorable, permissible pleasure (1.9 [Thelwall, ANF]). Extending Paul’s words about circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:29), Tertullian made another provocative claim about castration:

We are they upon whom the ends of the ages have met, having ended their course (*decucurrunt fines saeculorum*). We have been predestined by God, before the world was, (to arise) in the extreme end of the times (*in extimationem temporum*). And so we are trained by God for the purpose of chastising (*castigo*), and (so to say) emasculating ([sic] *castro*), the world. We are the circumcision (*circumcisio*) — spiritual (*spiritalis*) and carnal (*carnalis*) — of all things; for both in the spirit and in the flesh we circumcise worldly principles (*saecularia*). (1.9 [Thelwall, ANF])

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<sup>548</sup> πᾶν μέλος τοῦ σώματος ἀναπειθόν σε μὴ σωφρονεῖν ῥῖψον· ἄμεινον γὰρ χωρὶς τοῦ μέλους ζῆν σωφρόνως ἢ μετὰ τοῦ μέλους ὀλεθρίως.

<sup>549</sup> ἀνθρώπους ἴδοις ἂν ὑπὲρ τοῦ τὸ λοιπὸν τοῦ σώματος ἔχειν ἐρρωμένον ἀποκόπτοντας ἑαυτῶν καὶ ῥίπτοντας μέλη· πόσσοι βέλτιον ὑπὲρ τοῦ σωφρονεῖν;

Tertullian's comments about eunuchs evince a heightened eschatological expectation. Not only did he actively promote virginity and discourage procreation, Tertullian depicted God as the instigator of the castration of the world.

Eusebius famously claimed that as a young man, Origen castrated himself because his interpretation of 19:12 was too absolute and immature (ἀπλούστερον καὶ νεανικώτερον ἐκλαβόν) (*Hist. eccl.* 6.8.1-2). Although his self-castration demonstrated his immaturity, it also gave proof of his extraordinary faith and continence. Eusebius thought Origen had two goals: to fulfill the savior's saying, and to prevent unbelievers from spreading slander about the fact that he spoke with women about divine matters as well as men. His self-castration demonstrated an imperfect and youthful mind (φρενὸς μὲν ἀτελοῦς καὶ νεανικῆς), but it also gave proof of Origen's great faith and self-control (σωφροσύνη).

Some early and medieval Christians accepted Eusebius's claim, as have many contemporary scholars.<sup>550</sup> There are, however, good reasons to doubt Eusebius. Epiphanius, one of Origen's critics, did not believe he castrated himself. Epiphanius had no faith whatsoever (οὐ πάνυ πιστεύω) in the two exaggerated (ὑπέρογκος) stories he had heard (*Pan.* 2.63.3.13), namely, that Origen severed (ἀποτέμνω) a nerve so he would not be "disturbed by sexual pleasure or inflamed and aroused by carnal impulses," and that he applied a drug to his genitals (μόριον) to dry (ἀποξηραίνω) them up (2.63.3.11-12 [Williams]).

Eusebius himself provided another reason to doubt his claim. After sharing his opinion of Origen's "bold act" (τόλμημα), Eusebius mentioned a provocative letter from Bishop Demetrius about Origen. Eusebius explained that Demetrius originally respected Origen and appointed him as catechist in Alexandria when Origen was a teenager. When Origen's fame spread and he was invited to teach, Demetrius took umbrage because he had not (yet) ordained him. However, the most distinguished bishops in Jerusalem and Caesarea ordained Origen anyway. Demetrius became incensed, and "through lack of any other ground of accusation Demetrius spread grave scandal about the deed that he had committed long ago when a boy . . . ." (*Hist. eccl.* 8.6.5 [Oulton, LCL]).<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> Heine, "Origen and his Opponents on Matthew 19:12," 123n2, listing many scholars who agree that Origen castrated himself. See also Hester, "Postgender Jesus," 33; Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson, "Guarding Entry," 230.

<sup>551</sup> Heine, *Origen's Commentary on Matthew*, 3.

The most compelling reason to doubt Eusebius's claim comes from Origen's own writings. In *Comm. Matt.*, he devoted extended attention to refuting a literal reading of 19:12. As Ronald Heine puts it, "Origen does not just present an allegorical reading and dismiss the literalist. He argues intensely against the literalist reading. The bulk of the five chapters devoted to the eunuch sayings in the *Commentary on Matthew* is an argument against the literalist reading of these sayings."<sup>552</sup>

*Comm. Matt.* reflects Origen's "mature thought"<sup>553</sup> and interpretive philosophy. Origen viewed the scripture as a unified whole and practiced figurative interpretation<sup>554</sup> by comparing "spiritual with spiritual" (1 Cor 2:13).<sup>555</sup> Accordingly, for passages that were especially difficult to interpret like 19:12, he drew from other biblical texts. Paul's words "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6) helped Origen elucidate 19:12. He offered three scriptural examples to prove why the letter (i.e., a literalist reading of 19:12) must be rejected: Jesus's instruction to sell your cloak and buy a sword instead (Lk 22:35-36), to greet no one along the way (Lk 10:4), and to cut out your right eye, hand, or foot (Mt 5:30; 18:8) (*Comm. Matt.* 15.1-2).

Origen recognized and discussed competing interpretations of 19:12. He knew that some people interpreted 19:12a-b as physical eunuchs, but 19:12c non-literally. While he approved of their interpretation of the third group, he pointed out their inconsistency: all three eunuch groups must be interpreted figuratively. For Origen, taking the eunuch verse literally is a misinterpretation of the spirit of the words. Those who castrated themselves had misinterpreted scripture. They exposed themselves to shame before both Christians and outsiders. To produce self-control (ἐγκράτεια), one of the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22-23), requires preserving the male body given by God. Self-castrators will suffer because they will be barred from entering the

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<sup>552</sup> Heine, "Origen and his Opponents on Matthew 19:12," 124.

<sup>553</sup> Heine, *Origen's Commentary on Matthew*, 1.

<sup>554</sup> Ronald Heine argues that "figurative interpretation" more accurately describes Origen's non-literal biblical interpretation than "allegory," which can also be dismissive. Origen rarely used the Greek terms for allegory; he typically referred to his biblical interpretation as tropological (primarily) or anagogical (secondarily). Heine, *Origen's Commentary on Matthew*, 18.

<sup>555</sup> Heine, *Origen's Commentary on Matthew*, 14-16. Origen learned this method very early in his career from a Jewish teacher who offered Origen a rich metaphor for scriptural interpretation. The teacher compared exegesis to a house that has many locked rooms. Each room has a key in front of its door, but the keys do not match up to the rooms. Interpreting scripture is like searching for the correct key for each room, and that means searching the whole scripture (i.e., the rest of the house) to find the matching keys. Discussed in Heine, *Origen's Commentary on Matthew*, 15.

church of God (a reference to LXX Deut 23:2's ἐκκλησία κυρίου) and experience physical consequences including hair loss, heaviness in the head, and dizziness (15.3).

Origen conceded that there are plausible arguments to interpret all three castrations as physical, but he chose not to explain or refute them lest the arguments encourage any men to become eunuchs (15.5). Origen interpreted figurative eunuchs as those who abstain from sexual pleasure (αφροδισία), licentiousness (ἀσελγεια), and impurity (ἀκαθαρσία). The correct interpretation of 19:12c is someone who takes up the living word, sharper than any double-edged sword (Heb 4:12)—the sword of the spirit (Eph 6:17)—to castrate the passionate part of the soul by reason without touching the body (15.4). All who ask for a rational sword from God will receive it that they may make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (15.5).

In his mid-fourth-century *Commentary on Matthew*, Bishop Hilary of Poitiers encouraged his congregation to be like a eunuch (*eunuchus*) in word (*sermo*) and will (*voluntas*) (19.2 PL 9:1024). There were eunuchs by nature (*natura*), force (*necessitas*), and volition (*voluntas*). The eunuch by volition became so with hope of the heavenly kingdom. Christians should become eunuchs if they are able. Although Hilary did not clarify if he meant literal or metaphorical eunuchs, his language of likeness (*circa eunuchos; nos similes effici*) suggests the latter.

Also in the mid-fourth century, Basil of Ancyra wrote about Christian men who lived in community with virgins. He was horrified that quite a few interpreted Jesus's words about eunuchs literally and castrated themselves (*On Virginity* 61 [PG 30, 793]). They misunderstood the Lord's words. If they knew Isa 56, he explained, it should have been obvious to them that the Lord was referring to mystical castration (μυστικός εὐνουχίας). Removing body parts does not remove the desire. In fact, Basil knew of women, including virgins, who were raped by eunuchs.<sup>556</sup> True brothers in Christ do not castrate themselves. Truly chaste men and women live together in community like brothers and sisters from the same womb. Ideally, they will live as angels on earth. Basil also applied a metaphorical interpretation of the three eunuch groups to virgins: some virgins were by nature self-controlled (σώφρων), others because their father

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<sup>556</sup> One eunuch even attempted to rape a “canonical virgin of the church” (παρθένος τις τῆς ἐκκλησίας κανονική; PG 30, 796). When he was unsuccessful, he bit her all over her body. Susanna Elm discusses this case, which may be the first use of the title “canonical virgin of the Church” in Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1994), 122-24



decided for them, and others chose for themselves (57 [PG 30, 784-785]). Although all were welcome, the self-selected virgins would receive the greatest rewards (66 [PG 30, 803-804]).<sup>557</sup>

In a passionate homily on Matthew, John Chrysostom held that self-made eunuchs are those who choose virginity (παρθενία) and self-control (ἐγκράτεια) over marriage (62 [PG 58, 599]). Whereas the first two groups would have no reward, those who make themselves eunuchs will receive rewards and crowns. Chrysostom took a forceful position against literal self-castration. Citing Paul's words in Gal 5:12 (I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!), he claimed that men who castrate themselves are under a curse. They commit the same illegal acts as Greeks who castrate themselves. Self-castration is the work of demons. It is satanic. He begged his congregation to flee from such lawlessness and warned them that lust would only increase after castration. Reason alone (λογισμός μόνος), not excision (ἐκτομή) of members (μέλος), quelled desire.

In his *Commentary on Matthew*, Jerome interpreted the third group as spiritual (*spiritualis*) eunuchs in contrast with the first two groups of fleshly (*carnalis*) eunuchs (*Comm. Matt.* PL 26:135-136). Because the third group chose to be eunuchs for Christ, they will receive the reward (*praemium*) of chastity (*pudicitia*). Chastity is a battle, Jerome explained. Men should consider whether they have enough strength to be virgins. Jerome interpreted Jesus's words "the one can make room, must make room" (19:12d) as "he who can fight, let him fight, let him conquer, and let him triumph" (19:12 [Scheck]).

In one of his sermons, Gregory of Nazianzus described self-made eunuchs as self-taught, virtuous people (*Or.* 37.16 PG 36:301). No father, mother, priest, bishop, or professional teacher taught them how to live virtuously. They taught themselves through reason and developed a habit of virtue (αρετή). They cut off passions to the point that vice was nearly impossible. Gregory concluded his sermon by exhorting the congregation to cut off all passions, both physical and spiritual.

Bishop Ambrose of Milan knew about and condemned self-castrated eunuchs (*Vid.* 13.75, PL 16:285-286). Self-castration was an "evil violence," not the virtuous (*virtutis*) deed that some Christians claimed it was. Those who struggled to live a sexually abstinent life deserved praise.

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<sup>557</sup> Discussed in Julia Kelto Lillis, "Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity" (PhD diss Duke University, 2017), 112-13.

While Christ did not command chastity, he recommended it over marriage.<sup>558</sup> For Ambrose, those who make themselves eunuchs—that is, who choose to live continently—do so of their will, not under compulsion. A castrated man had no sexual inclinations to resist, so there was no virtue to be gained by living continently. Preserving God’s gift of the whole [body] was good, Ambrose explained, and continence was achieved through the will. Like Jerome, Ambrose turned to battle language: ascetic men are “conquerors” who “gain the victory.” Self-castrators were “defeated” and “weak” (13.76).

Augustine drew from 19:12 c-d in numerous contexts, including his autobiographical reflections. Here I highlight a few. In *Confessions*, after expounding on his youthful lust and sexual improprieties, Augustine regretted that he did not follow Paul’s recommendations to avoid marriage (1 Cor 7:28, 32-33) and sexual relationships (1 Cor 7:9). “I should have paid more careful attention to these voices,” he lamented, “and if I had become a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of the heavens, I would now be anticipating your embraces with more pleasure” (2.3 [Hammond, LCL]). Augustine claimed in *Contra Faustum* that voluntary eunuchs were young men and women who removed the desire to marry from their hearts and who served as eunuchs of the king’s palace within the church (30.4). In *Holy Virginit*y, Augustine averred that Jesus’s words were self-evident: “What truer, what clearer word could have been spoken? Christ, the Truth, the Wisdom, and the Power of God, proclaims that they who, by a holy resolve, have refrained from taking a wife make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (23).<sup>559</sup> In the same treatise, Augustine interpreted 19:12 through Isa 56:5 to argue against other Christians who believed that the kingdom of heaven was an earthly, present kingdom. He insisted that the everlasting name was not an earthly reward but a heavenly reward for holy eunuchs (*sancti spadones*) who abstained from sexual relations (25).<sup>560</sup> He did not know exactly what the everlasting name would be, but certainly “some special and eminent glory” that the multitude would not possess, even though they would live in the same kingdom and same house with the eunuchs.

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<sup>558</sup> Ambrose did not take a rigorously ascetic stance. As Marcia Colish argues, he encouraged moderation. He also valued marriage, though he urged spouses to practice sexual moderation. Marcia L. Colish, “Ambrose Of Milan On Chastity,” in *Chastity: A Study in Perceptions, Ideals, Opposition*, ed. Nancy van Deusen (Boston, MA: Brill, 2008).

<sup>559</sup> Augustine, *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*. trans. John McQuade (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

<sup>560</sup> Augustine also referred to them as holy ascetics (*continentibus sanctis*).

Shenoute of Atripe (c. 348 – 465), abbot of the huge White Monastery in Upper Egypt (2,200 men and 1,800 women),<sup>561</sup> directed the monastic community to expel and shame self-castrated monks immediately after their castration:

Therefore I am instructing you also about the following matter: If you again catch any people within your community doing the foolish deed of cutting off their male organ so that they might live in purity, you must place them on a bed, since they are polluted by the blood of their wound, and take them out to the road, just as we said to do, when we gathered together to listen, and they will be an example or a symbol to everyone who passes by. If you wish, for God's sake, you may give them into the custody of their relatives so that they might not die in our environs. But if they do not have relatives, take them to a populated place and leave them there. Only do not allow them to dwell in your community. (*Ouevres* 1:66 [Krawiec])<sup>562</sup>

Shenoute's directive makes it clear that some monks in the White Monastery had already castrated themselves. Their purported motivation was to live a pure life. Shenoute viewed them as a threat to his large community and to his own authority. The example of their public shunning would reveal to both community members and passers-by that the White Monastery rejected self-castrated monks.

Nevertheless, Shenoute found a metaphorical interpretation of self-made eunuchs useful. He described the women and men of the White Monastery as virgins and eunuchs who did not have children or renounced the ones they had and gave up their material possessions to "follow the worthy path that they were called to" (*Ouevres* 1:24 [Krawiec]). The monks were "eunuchs who do not have children through intercourse but instead are 'fathers' to many children of God" (*Ouevres* 1:24 [Krawiec]).

### *Clerical Responses to Christian Castration*

In addition to imperial castration bans, the formative church legislated against castration. The first ban, the aforementioned Canon 1 promulgated at the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325, inspired others. The *Apostolic Tradition*, a collection of Christian prescriptions on

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<sup>561</sup> Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute & the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3. Rebecca Krawiec, "Shenoute," in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

<sup>562</sup> Krawiec, *Shenoute & the Women*, 127.

moral conduct, liturgy, church organization, and discipline attributed to Hippolytus, a third century Christian theologian and martyr, circulated widely in the Byzantine Empire (330-1453 CE).<sup>563</sup> The Sahidic (Coptic) version lists one who castrated himself among other potential catechumens who should be cast out as defiled (Canon 16.20).

A significant expansion of clerical legislation occurred in the *Apostolic Canons*, a collection of eighty-five canons attributed to the apostles and appended to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth-century work that addressed liturgical, ethical, and ritual issues.<sup>564</sup> Canon 21, like Canon 1 of Nicaea, allowed for a man who was born a eunuch or made so by the violence of others to become a bishop if he were otherwise worthy. Canons 22 and 23 proscribed self-castration for prospective and existing clergy. They were self-murderers; a man who castrated (ἀκρωτηριάζω) himself was an enemy to the work of God and must not be admitted to the clergy (22), and a current cleric must be deposed (23). Canon 24 extended the ban to laymen. The penalty for a lay self-castrator was excommunication for three years for plotting against (ἐπίβουλος) his own life.

Roughly a century later, circa 500 CE, Canon 7 of the Second Synod of Arles drew from Nicaean Canon 1 by prohibiting those who knowingly cut off a body part from becoming clergy (*hos qui se carnali uitio repugnare nescientes abscidunt ad clerum pervenire non posse*) (*Concilia Galliae CPL 1777*).<sup>565</sup>

### Contemporary Exegesis

With few exceptions, contemporary scholars interpret Matthew's self-made eunuchs in light of the preceding verses about divorce, marriage, and remarriage (Mt 19:3-11). Hence, I briefly review this narrative material. I begin, though, with Mt 19:1-2, as these verses help

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<sup>563</sup> Only a few fragments of the Greek text are extant. Recent scholarship suggests a provenance of Syrian Antioch between 375 and 380 CE. Hippolytus of Rome, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 1, 5-6, 9, 90.

<sup>564</sup> Marcie E. Lenk, "The Apostolic Constitutions: Judaism and Anti-Judaism in the Construction of Christianity" (PhD diss, Harvard University, 2010), 6-11.

<sup>565</sup> This canon appears in all nine manuscript traditions of Arles II. The ban against self-castration remains canonical, although the Latin term used—*mutilo*—may denote other forms of self-modification or self-injury. Under the Code of Canon Law, Book IV, concerning the order of ordination, 1041.5 states that the following are irregular for orders, with irregularity defined as a perpetual impediment: "a person who has mutilated himself or another gravely and maliciously or who has attempted suicide" (*Ad recipiendos ordines sunt irregulares qui seipsum vel alium graviter et dolose mutilaverit vel sibi vitam adimere tentaverit*). *De Ecclesiae Munere Sanctificandi*. Vatican.va

establish the polemical exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees on grounds for divorce and the ensuing conversation between Jesus and his disciples about divorce, remarriage, eunuchs, children, and the costs and rewards of discipleship. Then, I turn to the remainder of Chapter 19, less the verses on children (19:13-15) addressed in Chapter 2. There are excellent reasons to interpret Matthew's self-made eunuchs in their larger narrative context, though few scholars have done so.<sup>566</sup>

### *Narrative Context of Matthew's Eunuchs*

#### *Opening Context: Mt 19:1-2*

As Chapter 19 opens, Jesus has left Galilee and entered the boundaries of Judea on the other side of the Jordan (19:1). He has just concluded "these words" (τοὺς λόγους τούτους), a reference to his sharp answers to questions posed by his disciples as a group—"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (18:1)—and by Peter—"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (18:21). With vivid imagery, Jesus warned them of eternal punishment for three unacceptable behaviors: failing to turn (στρέφω) and become like children, becoming a stumbling block for these little ones, and refusing to forgive their brothers. For these failures, respectively, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven (18:3), they will be thrown into the eternal fire/hell of fire (18:8-9), and they will be tortured (18:34). Jesus's blunt words recall those of John the Baptist (3:8-12) and the prophets.

Upon arrival in Judea, Jesus cures large crowds who have followed him (19:2). Here the term ἀκολουθέω—"follow one, go after or with him, freq. of soldiers and slaves" (LSJ) refers to literal following, though the term often characterizes discipleship in the First Gospel (e.g., 19:21, 27-28).<sup>567</sup> Some Pharisees also come to Jesus, but to test (πειράζω) rather than follow him (19:3).

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<sup>566</sup> Collins provides a helpful list of narrative parallels between 19:3-12 and 19:16-26. Collins, *Divorce*, 122-24. Other exceptions include Nolland, *Matthew*, 777-82; Halvor Moxnes, "A Man's Place in Matthew 19:3-15: Creation and Kingdom as Transformative Spaces of Identity," in *Finding a Woman's Place: Essays in Honor of Carolyn Osiek*, ed. David L. Balch and Jason T. Lamoreaux (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011); R Jarrett Van Tine, "Castration for the Kingdom and Avoiding the αἰτία of Adultery (Matthew 19: 10-12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>567</sup> Matthew uses ἀκολουθέω both literally and metaphorically. Jack Dean Kingsbury argues that two factors differentiate literal from metaphorical following in Matthew: personal commitment and cost. Examples include 4:20, 22; 8:19, 22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21, 27-29. Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Verb Akolouthein ("To Follow") as an Index of Matthew's View of his Community," *Journal of Biblical literature* 97, no. 1 (1978),

Matthew implicitly connects these Pharisees with the devil, the first one to test Jesus (4:1, 3; cf. 16:1; 22:18, 35).<sup>568</sup> The structurally parallel opening of 19:2 (καὶ ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ ὄχλοι πολλοί) and 19:3 (καὶ προσῆλθον αὐτῷ Φαρισαῖοι) highlights the contrast between the crowds and Pharisees. Matthew associates the former with acceptance, following, and Jesus’s healing; the latter, with hostility, testing, and Jesus’s criticism (19:8). The geographic setting of Judea across the Jordan River (τὰ ὄρια τῆς Ἰουδαίας πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου) recalls John the Baptist’s fiery encounter with Pharisees and Sadducees in the wilderness of Judea (ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας; 3:1) by the Jordan, where he preached repentance and baptized large numbers of people. When John’s rivals came to him, he called them a brood of vipers and told them that Jesus would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. Hearing the verbal cues in 19:1-3—the Jordan in Judea, the large crowds, and testing—Matthew’s audiences were primed for another polemical exchange.

*Scholars’ Context: Mt 19:3-11*

Matthew’s Pharisees begin their test with the question “[i]s it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (19:3). They are testing Jesus’s interpretation of Deut 24:1, which assumes a man’s right to divorce if he discovers “something objectionable” (MT עָרַוּת רָבָרָב; LXX ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα) in his wife. In Matthew, the term “lawful” (ἐξεστὶ: better, “permitted”) typically refers to the correct interpretation of divine will (12:2, 4, 10, 12; 14:4; 27:6; cf. 20:15; 22:17). Jesus responds with insulting words—“Have you not read” (οὐ ἀναγινώσκω)—implying that the Pharisees, who are Torah experts, do not know their own scriptures.<sup>569</sup> He then quotes from Genesis to remind them that at the beginning, the creator “made them male and female” (19:4; Gen 1:27). “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his

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<https://doi.org/10.2307/3265836>. I found no examples of ἀκολουθέω with a negative valence, with the possible exception of Peter following Jesus at a distance (26:58), and I would argue that following has a positive valence in Matthew, even in literal examples. Following Jesus often leads to healing (e.g., 8:1; 9:27; 12:15; 14:13; 19:2; 20:29).

<sup>568</sup> See Collins, *Divorce*, 110; Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 58-59. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 378.

<sup>569</sup> For the verb ἀναγινώσκω, LSJ has as its primary definition, “know well, know certainly.” Jesus makes similar points in 12:3,5; 21:16,42; 22:31. Boris Repschinski notes that the phrase οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε occurs only in controversy stories, and that this is a “much more forceful counter-accusation” than that in Mark. Boris Repschinski, *The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew: Their Redaction, Form and Relevance for the Relationship between the Matthean Community and Formative Judaism*, ed. Wolfgang Schrage and Rudolf Smend, *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, (Göttingen, DE: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 173. Jesus’s shaming of his opponents culminates in chapter 23, when he calls Pharisees and scribes “hypocrites” six times (23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; cf. 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 24:51), among other names.

wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (19:5; Gen 2:24).<sup>570</sup> The Pharisees counter with a second question: “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” (19:7) to which Jesus responds with a second insult: Moses’s words were a concession, not a command, which their hardheartedness (not their ancestors’) prompted (19:8).

Jesus concludes the exchange with his authoritative interpretation of “something objectionable” that permits divorce: “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (μη̄ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ), and marries another commits adultery” (19:9). The Pharisees then drop out of the scene. The disciples, who have been listening, respond that if such is the case (αἰτία) of a man (ἄνθρωπος) with his wife, it is better not to marry (19:10). Jesus replies that not all can make room for “this word” (τὸν λόγον τοῦτον), only those to whom it has been given (19:11). “This word” hearkens back to “these words” of 19:1, which Jesus directed to his disciples to warn them about behaviors that would lead to eternal torture instead of entry into the kingdom.

Mt 19:1-11, then, presents Jesus’s debate with the Pharisees as another controversy over correct interpretation of scripture. “This word” (19:11) returns the focus to the disciples, who had just heard “these words” (19:1) of warning from Jesus about the grave consequences of certain misbehaviors.

#### *Expanded Context: Mt 19:16-30*

In the remainder of Chapter 19, Jesus answers three questions posed by a wealthy young man about what he must do to have eternal life and two more questions from his disciples about who can be saved and the rewards of following. The structure recalls that of Chapter 18, when disciples questioned Jesus about their relative status in the kingdom of heaven and the appropriate response to each other’s repeated sins.

When a young man approaches Jesus to ask what good thing (ἀγαθός) he should do so that he may have eternal life (19:16), Jesus responds with a different question, exactly as he did with the Pharisees (19:3-5). He asks, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who

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<sup>570</sup> Matthew’s wording in 19:4 is identical to LXX Gen 1:27: ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς. In 19:5, it is very close: καὶ εἶπεν ἕνεκα τούτου καταλείπει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ κολληθήσεται τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν. LXX Gen 2:24: ἕνεκεν τούτου καταλείπει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ προσκολληθήσεται πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν.

is good” (19:17). He then tells the young man to keep the commandments if he wishes to enter into life. Jesus’s use of the imperative (τήρησον) signals to the disciples and Matthew’s audiences that keeping the commandments is mandatory. Obtaining eternal requires obedience to the Decalogue.

“Life” is a metonymy in Matthew for the “kingdom of heaven.” One aspires to find the way to, enter into, and inherit life (7:14; 18:8-9; 19:16-17, 29; 25:46). The conversation with the young man connects back to Jesus’s statement about other people associated with the kingdom of heaven—eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs (19:12c) and children (19:13-15)—and precedes Jesus’s statement about others who belong in the kingdom—the disciples (19:28) and anyone else who has left family and possessions for Jesus’s name’s sake (19:29).<sup>571</sup> The young man seeks guidance on how he, too, may have eternal life.

Not satisfied with Jesus’s answer about the commandments, he asks: “Which ones?” (19:18). Jesus names six: do not murder, do not commit adultery (οὐ μοιχεύσεις), do not steal, do not testify falsely, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself (19:18-19). The words about adultery in 19:18 reinforce Jesus’s earlier warning about adultery (μοιχάω) in 19:9. His instructions about keeping the commandments also flow from his recent citation of the Genesis verses about God’s will for male and female (19:4-6).

The young man affirms that he has kept these, then asks a final question: “What do I still lack?” (19:20). Jesus responds that if he wishes to be perfect (cf. 5:48), he must go, sell his possessions, and give to the poor, and he will have treasure in heaven. Then, he must come and follow Jesus (19:21). An obvious link with 19:12 is the term heaven (οὐρανός), but there is another, more subtle connection. To fill his lack (ὑστερέω) and be perfect—that is, complete (τέλειος)—the young man must give away his earthly possessions to receive treasure in heaven. Voluntary eunuchs paradoxically became complete when they made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. They may lack literal or metaphorical testicles (as noted in Chapter 3, the term ὑστερέω is suggestive of sterility), but they do not lack what is essential to enter the kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>571</sup> The connections are by no means limited to Chapter 19. Warren Carter has provided convincing reasons to read Chapters 19 and 20 together. Carter, *Households and Discipleship*.



The young man apparently does not obey Jesus's instructions or accept his invitation to discipleship. After hearing "the word" (τὸν λόγον) he leaves, grieving, because he has substantial property (19:22). "The word" further connects the pericope to 19:11-12, when Jesus told his disciples that not all can make room for "this word" (19:11). The young man apparently did not make room for Jesus's words (cf. 19:12d); to him it was not given (19:11).

Jesus continues his instruction and, as before (19:3-10), Matthew shifts the audience from the original interlocutors to the disciples. It is almost impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, he warns (19:23-24). The disciples, stunned, ask, "Then who can be saved?" (19:25). Jesus consoles them: with God, all things are possible (δυνατός; 19:26). Again, Jesus's words connect to earlier verses: God (implied) has given "this word" to some, but not all (19:11), and some who are able to (δύναμαι) make room, must make room (19:12d).<sup>572</sup>

Jesus's words may not be consolation enough for Peter, who reminds him that the disciples have left everything and followed him—precisely what Jesus just told the young man to do. Peter asks, "What then will we have?" (19:27). The disciples expect something in return for everything they have given up. Rather than challenging Peter, Jesus confirms that they will be rewarded at "the renewal of all things" (παλιγγενεσία) with twelve thrones and the power to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). Indeed, everyone who has left "houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake" will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life (19:29). Jesus concludes with the statement "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (19:30). 19:29-30 reflect another eschatological reversal: those who sacrifice family and personal possessions on earth will be richly rewarded in heaven.

### *Introduction to Contemporary Scholarship*

The following selective review covers commentaries, articles, and chapters written about Mt 19:12c-d since the 1957 publication of an influential article by Josef Blinzler.<sup>573</sup> Scholars uniformly interpret Matthew's third group of eunuchs metaphorically.<sup>574</sup> The vast majority

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<sup>572</sup> Raymond Collins helpfully points out that in 19:11 and 19:26, Matthew uses the rhetorical device *contradictio* to emphasize the second part of each clause (i.e., "those to whom it is given" over "not all" in 19:11; "for God all things are possible" over "for mortals it is impossible" in 19:26). Collins, *Divorce*, 125.

<sup>573</sup> Blinzler, "Mt 19,12."

<sup>574</sup> In 2008, Halvor Moxnes considered a literal interpretation "a possibility" in Moxnes, "Body, Gender," 173. In a 2004 article, however, he did not: "Thus, I am *not* arguing that Jesus and some of his disciples were eunuchs, i. e.

understands Jesus's words as a recommendation for some to choose a life of celibacy instead of marriage or to forego remarriage after a spouse has committed adultery or sexual impropriety. Following Blinzler, some argue that Jesus responded to a personal taunt that he and his disciples were eunuchs. Others find in Jesus's words a challenge to patriarchal, heterosexist, or kyriarchal norms. I begin with a brief assessment of scholars' views on the relationship of 19:12c to 19:12a-b and reserve discussion of historicity for the following section.

### *Connecting the Clauses: Mt 19:12a, b, and c*

While no consensus exists on the relationship between 19:12a, b, and c, many see a movement leading to the third group.<sup>575</sup> For Francis Moloney, 19:12c is "entirely new" in comparison with the familiar rabbinic categories represented by 19:12a-b: eunuchs of the sun and eunuchs of man, respectively.<sup>576</sup> Similarly, Dale Allison understands the first two groups as standard rabbinic categories that introduce the third, "novel" eunuchs, with whom the emphasis lies.<sup>577</sup> James A. Kleist claims that the first two well-known groups act as a foil to introduce Jesus's "new teaching" about celibacy.<sup>578</sup>

The novelty thesis is unconvincing. While there is no rabbinic counterpart to Matthew's self-made eunuchs, for early audiences, Jesus's unexpected mention of self-castrated eunuchs would call up an image of noisy male worshippers of the goddess Cybele in brightly colored, feminine clothing. As J. David Hester writes, "[i]f Jesus' logion sets 'natural' and involuntary eunichism over against eunichism 'on account of the kingdom', the most 'natural' reception of this

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castrated. If that had been the case, I think there would have been much more controversy around it. But I think that the saying is one that causes 'gender trouble' because it presents a challenge to the masculine role taken for granted by most interpreters." Moxnes, "Jesus in Gender Trouble," 40.

<sup>575</sup> Witherington III, *Matthew*, 365. A. E. Harvey, "Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom," *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 1 (2007): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2007.00302.x>. John Nolland believes the first two groups lend a sense of comprehensiveness to the listing and underscore the evangelist's concern about missing or lost "male potential." Nolland, *Matthew*, 777-78.

<sup>576</sup> Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," 51.

<sup>577</sup> Allison, "Matt 19:12," 4.

<sup>578</sup> James Kleist quotes Lagrange's statement that "en prend occasion pour un *nouvel* enseignement" but provides no citation details. Kleist, "Eunuchs," 447. The original source is probably the prominent early twentieth-century biblical scholar Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Madison, WI: J. Gabalda, 1923). Another proponent of the novelty thesis is Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 501. William Heth asserts that "though 'for the sake of the kingdom' the people of God in the OT married and bore children, a new economy has been inaugurated by the life and words of Jesus Christ: there are Christians who will remain unmarried 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this let him accept it (Matt 19:12c-d)." Heth, "Unmarried (Matthew 19:12)," 59.

text in the context of Mediterranean religious practices was that it was a reference to ritual castration.”<sup>579</sup>

Other scholars, following Blinzler, find a progression from bad (19:12a) to worse (19:12b) to worst (19:12c) with the weight falling on the third; paradoxically, though, Jesus praises the third group.<sup>580</sup> There are two problems with this argument. First, for many in the Roman Empire, congenital eunuchs would have been equally, or perhaps more, troubling than self-made eunuchs. As discussed in Chapter 2, people with congenital anomalies could be viewed as a serious threat to society (though not to early Jewish society) and killed. Second, because Matthew’s audiences would have identified the second eunuch group as slaves, they would not have been particularly alarmed by that group, although they might have viewed these eunuchs as unfortunate. As noted, both Justin Martyr and Epiphanius inverted 19:12a and b, which may reflect their greater familiarity with eunuch slaves. Slavery was part of everyday life in the Roman Empire. Nor does the Matthean Jesus challenge enslavement; rather, he finds it a useful metaphor for human relationships with other humans and with God.

Several argue that the eunuch verse resembles a proverb. Leo Perdue considers 19:12 the only New Testament example of a numerical proverb.<sup>581</sup> Such proverbs create a relationship between several items that share an attribute. Numerical proverbs may be enigmatic, with the final element illuminated by the others. Perdue also classifies 19:12 as an aphorism, that is, “a subversive saying wearing the disguise of a proverb” that aims to “shock, disorient, and throw into disarray its hearers.”<sup>582</sup> He argues that the proverbial, aphoristic form of 19:12 attempts to justify Jesus’s and John the Baptist’s single status. According to Dale Allison, 19:12 resembles a proverb in which the first two lines describe concrete, everyday facts, and the third presents a more abstract truth.<sup>583</sup> For Allison, the proverb serves to introduce the third group of eunuchs, a novel group.

Jacques Dupont describes Mt 19:12 as a *mashal* (משל) based on the common use of comparison in wisdom literature. Accordingly, an author presents several images for comparison

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<sup>579</sup> Hester, "Postgender Jesus," 30.

<sup>580</sup> Blinzler, "Mt 19,12," 259, 55. Witherington III, *Matthew*, 365.

<sup>581</sup> Perdue, "Wisdom Sayings," 5, 13, 28.

<sup>582</sup> Perdue, "Wisdom Sayings," 5, 13, 28. Similarly, Dewey, "Unkindest Cut," 116. following Perdue.

<sup>583</sup> Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 22.

but highlights the final, unexpected image.<sup>584</sup> Following Dupont, Moloney describes the lines as a typical *mashal* form with a “rhythmic spiraling” that leads to 19:12c.<sup>585</sup> He notes that the rhythm makes the verse easy to remember and leads to the “punch line” at the end, the self-made eunuchs. Perdue classifies numerical proverbs as a specific form of *mashal* found in wisdom literature. As he explains, *mashal* is a broad term with an etymological meaning of “similitude” or “rule” that encompasses all sapiential literary forms, including the “proverb (1 Sam 10:23); byword (Ps 49:5), figurative discourse (Isa 14:4), parable (Ezra 17:2), and wisdom psalm (Ps 49:5)” as well as the variety of literary forms in the Book of Proverbs.<sup>586</sup>

Perdue, Allison, Dupont, and Moloney are among the few scholars who assess Mt 19:12’s rhetorical features. Their work highlights the verse’s distinctive proverbial form; however, they stop short of calling the verse a parable, even though the LXX regularly translates לִשְׁמֵרָה as παραβολή, that is, parable. Identifying Mt 19:12 as a parable helps situate the verse in its larger Matthean context, where Jesus often speaks in parables.

### *Matthew’s Self-Made Eunuchs as Celibates*

There are two main formulations of what I shall call the celibacy thesis. According to the first and dominant view, Matthew’s self-made eunuchs were single followers of Jesus who voluntarily renounced marriage to live a celibate life. Proponents argue that Jesus encouraged some disciples who had never been married to forego marriage. As Craig Keener puts it, Jesus responded to the disciples’ “remark about *first* marriages, not *remarriages*. Some who are called to live the sort of life the disciples were living with him would, like him, be better unmarried and be able to live this way for the Kingdom.”<sup>587</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> Dupont, *Mariage et divorce*, 191-92.

<sup>585</sup> Moloney, “Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy,” 50-51.

<sup>586</sup> Perdue, “Wisdom Sayings,” 5.

<sup>587</sup> Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 46.

Scholars differ on the reason the Matthean Jesus made the recommendation. Some interpret his words as a self-reference to his unmarried status.<sup>588</sup> Lucien Legrand makes the point emphatically:

In the concrete context of Jesus' celibate life, it is easy to find out to whom the third category refers. When the disciples heard that saying, they could only think of Jesus himself and possibly also of John the Baptist. It is clear that Jesus here speaks of his own case and explains it. He does not advocate self-mutilation; he sets up his own example.<sup>589</sup>

Accordingly, Jesus encouraged some followers to emulate his asexual, unmarried lifestyle. In John Meier's words, Mt 19:12c-d is a "veiled invitation to and praise of celibacy because of the kingdom [that] makes sense only if a celibate Jesus is speaking it."<sup>590</sup>

Several scholars find additional support in one or more of the following statements of Paul to the Corinthians: that all people could be as he is (1 Cor 7:7), that the unmarried and widows might remain as he is (1 Cor 7:8), and that a married man and woman have divided loyalties and anxiety in comparison with the unmarried (1 Cor 7:32-34).<sup>591</sup> Some claim that Paul knew about Jesus's celibate lifestyle.<sup>592</sup> Others assert that when Jesus spoke about self-made eunuchs, he referred to himself as well as Qumran celibates or John the Baptist.<sup>593</sup>

One problem with this claim is that there is no definitive evidence that Jesus was unmarried. Given his intense focus on his mission to prepare people for the kingdom of heaven,

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<sup>588</sup> Blinzler, "Mt 19,12," 261; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 501; Allison, "Matt 19:12," 5. Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," 42-60; Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185. Meier, *Matthew*, 216; Keener, *And Marries Another*, 46; Osborne, *Matthew*, 707. "Presumably" for Nolland, *Matthew*, 781.

<sup>589</sup> Lucien Legrand, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (New York, NY: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 40. Quoted in Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs," 338n9.

<sup>590</sup> John Meier notes that the New Testament "never explicitly states that Jesus was celibate." Meier, *Matthew*, 216. For Ben Witherington, Jesus may have used the line to justify his own single state to his disciples and others. Witherington III, *Matthew*, 365.

<sup>591</sup> Evans, *Matthew*, 342, referring to 1 Cor 7:7-9,17. Meier, *Matthew*, 216. Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 184-85; Talbert, *Matthew*, 234. Cf. William R.G. Loader, "Does Matthew's Handling of Sexuality Issues Shed Light on Its Context?," in *The Gospel of Matthew at the Crossroads of Early Christianity*, ed. Donald Senior (Leuven, BE: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2011), 581.

<sup>592</sup> Hare, *Matthew*, 222-23. Davies and Allison recognize an "undeniable" similarity between Jesus's lifestyle and Paul's but find no evidence that Paul knew of Jesus's words about eunuchs. Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 24.

<sup>593</sup> Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 227; Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 19; Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185; Talbert, *Matthew*, 234. Blomberg, "Exegesis of Matthew 19: 3-12," 185, crediting Kodell. Ulrich Luz finds a parallel between the Qumran Essenes and Mt 19:3-9 on the basis of the belief in lifetime marriage but not necessarily on the basis of celibacy. Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 494. Donald Trautman posits that the Essenes' celibate lifestyle inspired John the Baptist to follow suit. Trautman, "Eunuch Logion," 112.

his promise of rewards for anyone who leaves family members to follow him, his lukewarm response to his natal family, and the fact that Matthew and other canonical authors, including Paul, never mention that Jesus had a wife, it is reasonable to infer (but not conclude) that the Matthean Jesus was single. Further, ascetic movements not only existed in the first century, they thrived.<sup>594</sup>

Some scholars argue that foregoing marriage allowed for unimpeded service to the kingdom of heaven.<sup>595</sup> For example, Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri describe eunuchs for the kingdom as “persons who forego married life in order to devote themselves entirely to Jesus and the spread of his message. Their station in life enables them to serve the Lord without distraction (1 Cor 7:32-35) and to live on earth as the angels do in heaven (22:30). Jesus invites every person who can accept the gift of celibacy to accept it.”<sup>596</sup> John Nolland interprets voluntary eunuchs in light of Matthew’s larger context, particularly 18:8-9 and 19:16-29, which clarify that “any sacrifice is worth making for the kingdom of heaven” and that followers must be ready to leave everything.<sup>597</sup> For Jerome Kodell, dedicated service to the kingdom of heaven occurs almost as a compulsion. The choice to live celibately is not a rational decision based on “cool calculation of the possibilities” but rather a “response to an experience of the kingdom, being seized, grasped, swept away by Christ.”<sup>598</sup> While Kodell may be correct that the decision was not dispassionate, there is no reason to assume that voluntary eunuchs necessarily made their choice without considering the possibilities or using reason. In Gethsemane, Matthew presents Jesus as the model decision-maker: he recognizes the difficulty of drinking his own cup, repeatedly prays about it, experiences agony, and ultimately concedes to doing God’s will, not following his own desire (26:36-46).<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> See, e.g., Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*; Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls*; Loader, *Philo, Josephus, Sexuality*.

<sup>595</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 496; Allison, "Matt 19:12," 5. Rudolf Schnackenburg writes that “Jesus’ own renunciation of marriage is for the purpose of total dedication to the proclamation of the Reign of God and his sacrifice for human beings, and this motive is also decisive for disciples who follow him in that renunciation.” Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185. For Daniel Harrington, 19:12c “supplies the proper motivation for celibacy—dedication to the kingdom of heaven” Harrington, *Matthew*, 274. Meier, *Matthew*, 216.

<sup>596</sup> Mitch and Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 243.

<sup>597</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 781.

<sup>598</sup> Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 22. Similarly, Trautman argues that celibacy was a “natural consequence” more than a type of renunciation or asceticism. “The disciple has been so totally permeated with the kingdom of God that he cannot live any other way.” Trautman, "Eunuch Logion," 115.

<sup>599</sup> Jesus does not want to ponder his difficult choice alone; he seeks out and expects the support of his closest three disciples.

Scholars who interpret these eunuchs as single followers of Jesus who forego marriage typically read 19:10 or 19:12 as the referent of “this word” (τὸν λόγον τοῦτον) in 19:11, although some claim that Jesus referred back to his teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in 19:4-10 or 19:9. If the referent is 19:10 (“The disciples said to him, ‘If such is the charge of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.’”), Jesus addressed the disciples’ question directly. He essentially told them, “You’re right. For some, it’s better not to marry, but not everybody can accept this.” He then gave them an example of eunuchs who do not marry or have children.<sup>600</sup>

This claim falters for two reasons. First, it rests on the assumption that eunuchs did not (or could not) marry or have children, which I disputed in Chapter 2. Second, it misses clear connections between 19:11 and 19:12, which are tightly linked by two qualifiers: “not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given” and “let anyone accept this who can.” Each qualifier contains χωρέω: once in 19:11 (οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον τοῦτον) and twice in 19:12d (ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω). The causal conjunction γὰρ in 19:12 strengthens its connection to 19:11. By contrast, there is no obvious connection between 19:10 and 19:12.<sup>601</sup>

Other scholars interpret the referent of “this word” as Jesus’s teaching on marriage in 19:9 or 19:4-9.<sup>602</sup> Ulrich Luz, for example, argues that “not every man is capable of making room for Jesus’ marriage halakah in his own life. This requires a special grace of God.”<sup>603</sup> As further support, he points out that in Matthew, οὗτος with λόγος always refers to preceding material.

This interpretation is also problematic. If “this word” refers back to Jesus’s teaching on marriage, it implies that committing to a lifelong monogamous marriage was somehow onerous. John Nolland quips that “[f]idelity to marriage can hardly be called castration.”<sup>604</sup> Nor is committing to a single marriage as dramatic (at least with respect to the Matthean narrative) as

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<sup>600</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 706; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 723; Keener, *Commentary on Matthew*, 471. Senior, *Matthew*, 215. Meier, *Vision of Matthew*, 138. For W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, Jesus wanted to qualify the special nature of the calling to celibacy. It was not a generalized recommendation, hence 19:12 was a qualification of 19:10, not an endorsement. Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 20-21.

<sup>601</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 777.

<sup>602</sup> Collins, *Divorce*, 120-22, considers 19:9 the referent. For Ben Witherington, the referent is Jesus’s teaching about marriage. Witherington III, *Matthew*, 364. William Albright and Christopher Mann find the referent in 19:4-11 because it “removes the burden of supposing that Jesus recommended abstention from marriage for the Kingdom’s sake, and the gar (for) would support this interpretation better.” Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 226. Patte, *Structural Commentary*, 267.

<sup>603</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 500.

<sup>604</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 781.

castrating oneself or committing to live as an unmarried ascetic; the first was banned in imperial times, the second, penalized. Further, the two Genesis verses cited by Jesus suggest that marriage is a good thing that God instituted for human beings during creation: God created them male and female [in God's image; Gen 1:27], and a man and woman should be joined (κολλάομαι: literally, "glued together") as one flesh (Gen 2:24). Divine will is not the problem here; humans' infidelity to spouses and to divine will is. Also, from the Matthean Jesus's perspective, *everyone* should follow divine will. And while Luz correctly notes that οὗτος with λόγος refers to preceding material in the first gospel, elsewhere, Jesus uses λόγος for what immediately follows. In 21:24, he states, "I will also ask you one question" (λόγος) right before his provocative question: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

Because the qualifiers bind 19:11 and 19:12, the referent for "this word" cannot be solely 19:9, 19:10, or 19:4-9. While a double referent of 19:10 and 19:12 is possible,<sup>605</sup> the most logical referent is 19:12 for several reasons. First, Matthew established strong links between 19:11 and 19:12, as discussed. Second, the qualifiers in 19:11 and 19:12d signal something that is difficult to accept. The difficulty is obvious with 19:12c, particularly with a literal interpretation. Gaining entry into the kingdom is difficult. Jesus urges people to strive for (ζητέω) the kingdom of heaven (6:33), and strive they must.

Third, there is ancient support for this interpretation. Basilides's followers connected "this word" with the eunuch verse in the early second century. Justin also made the connection explicit by substituting the qualifier "let anyone accept this who can" with "not everyone can accept this teaching" (19:11) (1 *Apol.* 15). For Justin, "this word" was Jesus's saying about eunuchs. And although few scholars are aware of Origen's extended commentary on this passage, he, too, understood the referent of 19:11 as 19:12. Origen concluded at the end of his argument against a literal interpretation of all three eunuchs groups that "it is a great power to make room for (χωρέω) [19:12d] the castration (εὐνουχισμός) of the soul by reason, which not

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<sup>605</sup> Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 184-85; Trautman, "Eunuch Logion," 111. John Nolland finds a double referent; "this word" refers back to the disciples' comment in 19:10 but also points forward to 19:12. The disciples did not realize how truly they spoke. Jesus expected everyone to grasp his saying, but that did not mean that everyone must become a celibate. Nolland, *Matthew*, 776-77. Arthur Dewey finds a different double referent: 19:9 and 19:12. Dewey, "Unkindest Cut," 114.



everyone can make room for, except those to whom it has been given” [19:11] (*Comm. Matt.* 15.5, my translation).<sup>606</sup>

Some scholars seek to determine the historical setting that prompted Jesus’s words.<sup>607</sup> Following Justin Martyr’s rendition of the eunuch saying, Josef Blinzler proposed that 19:11 originally followed 19:12a-c prior to Matthean redaction:

εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως  
καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων  
καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν  
οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον τοῦτον ἀλλ’ οἷς δέδοται

Per Blinzler, Matthew added “let anyone accept this who can” (ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω) to create a conclusion. The repetition of χωρέω allowed for a nice connection between 19:11 and 19:12. As further support, Blinzler noted that “this word” refers only to preceding material. According to Blinzler, the evangelist also added 19:10 to connect Jesus’s eunuch saying with the previous material on marriage and divorce.<sup>608</sup>

According to the second formulation of the celibacy thesis, argued in detail by Jacques Dupont in 1959, the eunuchs of Mt 19:12c were married Christian men who, after their wives engaged in sexual impropriety, separated or divorced and never remarried. They were so dedicated to marital fidelity, they could not remarry.<sup>609</sup>

Scholars initially failed to engage Dupont’s thesis until Quentin Quesnell’s later endorsement. Quesnell claims that Jesus could not have approved of his disciples’ statement (19:10) immediately after teaching them about the indissolubility of marriage (19:3-9).<sup>610</sup> “This word,” then, refers back 19:9 or 19:3-9: only those to whom it is given can make room for Jesus’s prohibition of remarriage after divorce. 19:12c-d drives home the point that the marital bond is permanent.<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Μεγάλη δὲ δύναμις τὸ χωρεῖν τὸν ἀπὸ λόγου τῆς ψυχῆς εὐνουχισμόν, ὃν οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν, ἀλλ’ οἷς δέδοται.

<sup>607</sup> Kodell, “Celibacy Logion.”; Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs.”; Dewey, “Unkindest Cut.”; Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson, “Guarding Entry.”

<sup>608</sup> Robert Gundry also views 19:10-11 and 19:12d as Matthean redaction. Gundry, *Matthew*, 381-82.

<sup>609</sup> Dupont, *Mariage et divorce*.

<sup>610</sup> Quentin Quesnell offers a number of examples where Jesus refutes or corrects his disciples in Matthew and finds it “redactionally inconceivable” that Jesus approves their words in 19:10. Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs,” 343-44.

<sup>611</sup> Hare, *Matthew*, 223.

Robert Gundry takes Dupont's thesis even further. "In the larger context and because of near insistence on marriage in Jewish society," he claims, "Matthew portrays the single life of Christian men who have not remarried after divorcing their immoral wives as an act of discipleship;" Jesus sought "full acceptance" of these men into the brotherhood of Christians.<sup>612</sup> In addition to being anachronistic—there were no hard and fast categories of Jews and Christians in the late first century—this interpretation downplays Jewish ascetic practices, blames wives for immorality, and hints that divorced men would have been rejected by Jewish society unless they remarried. Gundry does not provide evidence to support his claim that Matthew depicted such behavior as an act of discipleship.

Based on his interpretation of αἰτία in 19:3 and 19:10 as a legal "charge" as in 27:37 instead of "case" or "situation" and the close parallels between 19:3-12 and 5:20, 27-32, where Jesus requires self-amputation to prevent adultery, R. Jarrett van Tine also endorses a version the Dupont thesis, but the charge is against the man who divorced his wife. He proposes the following translation of the disciples' statement: "If such, as you say, is the charge [i.e., adultery] against the man with respect to his wife, then it is not better for that man to marry another."<sup>613</sup> Such a reading makes the disciples sound a little dense (i.e., of course it is not better for that man to marry another if he would be guilty of adultery). The translation of αἰτία as "charge" would also make the Pharisees' reference to Deut 24:1 confusing. The Deuteronomic text does not suggest that the husband charged his wife with a crime, and Deut 24:2 states that she may marry another. For the Pharisees' scriptural reference to make sense, κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν in 19:3 should be translated "for any reason." The second part of Van Tine's thesis—that Matthew created clear thematic, structural, and verbal links between 19:3-12 and 5:20, 27-32 so that they need to be read together—is convincing.

Making oneself a eunuch, whether interpreted literally or metaphorically, is a self-selected act in Matthew. The evangelist distinguishes the three eunuch groups on the basis of how they became eunuchs: the first two groups had no choice. The third group stands out, in part, because the verb is reflexive. For a loyal, divorced (after πορνεία) follower of Jesus, however, remarriage was not a legitimate choice (19:9); choosing remarriage meant choosing to

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<sup>612</sup> Gundry, *Matthew*, 383. Cf. Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 19-23.

<sup>613</sup> Van Tine, "Castration for the Kingdom and Avoiding the αἰτία of Adultery (Matthew 19: 10–12)."

defy God's will. When applied to the second version of the celibacy thesis, Jesus's qualifications in 19:11 and 19:12d that not everyone will be able to make room for this word, but only those to whom it has been given do not make good sense. They suggest that only certain followers will be able to remain single after divorce.<sup>614</sup> Another weakness with the second version of the celibacy thesis is that there is no intrinsic connection between eunuchs and remarriage.<sup>615</sup>

Several scholars accept both versions of the celibacy thesis. Donald Senior, for example, claims that Jesus referred to men and women who forego marriage, to pious Christian women who, after their husbands divorced them, did not remarry, and to later missionaries and others who wished to imitate Jesus's lifestyle.<sup>616</sup> These scholars do not concur about the referent for "this word."<sup>617</sup>

The translation of the preposition *διά* in the phrase *διά τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν* factors into some exegesis. Scholars explain that the preposition *διὰ* may have a causal (i.e., because of, on the basis of) or final (i.e., in order to gain, for the sake of) sense.<sup>618</sup> If causal, the kingdom of heaven is the reason that some of Jesus's followers became celibates; they made themselves eunuchs *because of or on the basis of* the kingdom of heaven. For Warren Carter, the causal translation is more appropriate because the reign of God is already partly present for the disciples.<sup>619</sup> He and other scholars argue that in Matthew, *διά* always has a causal sense.<sup>620</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> There was societal pressure to remarry for Roman citizens, as discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>615</sup> Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 21, citing Sabourin (52).

<sup>616</sup> Senior, *Matthew*, 215-16. See also Heth, "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying'," 188-93; Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 70-71, 88.

<sup>617</sup> For William Heth, the referent is Jesus's statement about divorce and remarriage (19:9) Heth, "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying,'" 185. Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 69-70. Referent is the disciples statement in 19:10: "Presumably," for Senior, *Matthew*, 215.

<sup>618</sup> Nolland discusses the different translation options but does not refer to one as final and the other as causal Nolland, *Matthew*, 777. The LSJ does not frame the discussion as causal vs. final: "dia with acc. 2. of things, to express the Cause, Occasion, or Purpose, δι' ἐμὴν ἰότητα because of my will, Il.15.41; "Διὸς μεγάλου δ. βουλάς" Od.8.82; δι' ἀφραδίας for, through want of thought, 19.523; "δι' ἀτασθαλίας" 23.67; δι' ἔνδειαν by reason of poverty, X. An.7.8.6; δ. καῦμα, δ. χειμῶνα, ib.1.7.6; "δι' ἄγνοιαν καὶ ἀμαθίαν" Pl. Prt.360b, etc.: freq. also with neut. Adjs., δ. τί; wherefore?; δ. τοῦτο, δ. ταῦτα on this account; δι' ὃ, δι' ἃ on which account; δ. πολλά for many reasons, etc.

3. ἕνεκα, to express Purpose, δι' ἀχθηδὸνα for the sake of vexing, Th.4.40, cf. 5.53; δ. τὴν τούτου σαφήνειαν with a view to clearing this up, Pl.R.524c, cf. Arist.EN 1172b21; αὐτὴ δι' αὐτὴν for its own sake, Pl.R.367b, etc.

<sup>619</sup> Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 70n4, citing Blinzler (269), Moloney (49), and Mt 4:17-22; 12:28. .

<sup>620</sup> Carter and Kodell claim that Matthew never uses *διά* in a final sense, although Kodell inexplicably cites Mt 10:22 as an exception (i.e., "and you will be hated by all because of my name). Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 21-22. Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 70n4; Blinzler, "Mt 19,12," 261-64. Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 23n115. Collins, *Divorce*, 128-29. Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," 49.

If, on the other hand, *διά* has a final sense, the kingdom of heaven was the goal of the self-eunuchizing. Some of Jesus's followers made themselves eunuchs *in order to gain* or *for the sake of* the kingdom of heaven. The NABRE translation adopts this translation: "Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it."<sup>621</sup> Notably, the NABRE has removed all eunuchs.

The most logical choice for *διά* is "in order to gain." The qualifiers make it clear that Jesus's words do not apply to everyone; it is only given to some. The decision is voluntary. In other contexts, Matthew uses *διά* with the accusative in several ways: in the expression *διά τοῦτο* with a causal sense (therefore, for this reason), as the interrogative *διά τί* (why), and in two verses, with a final sense. Because Greek prepositions are notoriously fluid, it is difficult to make the case that in Matthew, *διά* *always* has a causal sense.

I would argue that Mt 24:22 also has a final sense. In Matthew's rendition of Mark's apocalypse (Mark 13:20),<sup>622</sup> Jesus makes the following statement: "And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect (*διά δὲ τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς*) those days will be cut short" (24:22). Matthew removed Mark's *ἀλλά* from *ἀλλά διά τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς*. An interpretation of 24:22 with a final sense of *διά* helps the first evangelist make his point that without the elect, no human being will escape the worst tribulation in history (24:21) and be saved. Fortunately, God will cut the days short with the goal of saving his elect. Comparison of 24:22 with the Epistle of Barnabas 4:3 illustrates this type of interpretation:

τὸ τέλειον σκάνδαλον ἤγγικεν, περὶ οὗ γέγραπται, ὡς Ἐνώχ λέγει. Εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ δεσπότης συντέτηκεν τοὺς καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ἡμέρας, ἵνα ταχύνη ὁ ἠγαπημένος αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν κληρονομίαν ἦξῃ,

The final stumbling block has drawn near, concerning which it has been written, as Enoch says: For this (purpose) the master has cut short the seasons and the days, *so that* his beloved may hasten and come to the inheritance.<sup>623</sup>

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<sup>621</sup> Raymond Collins made this point about the older NAB translation. Collins, *Divorce*, 290en136. For the final sense, see also Dupont 200-211, cited in Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 70.

<sup>622</sup> καὶ εἰ μὴ ἐκολόβωσεν κύριος τὰς ἡμέρας οὐκ ἂν ἐσώθη πᾶσα σὰρξ ἀλλὰ διὰ τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς οὓς ἐξελέξατο ἐκολόβωσεν τὰς ἡμέρας.

<sup>623</sup> My translation. W.D. Davies and Dale Allison list this verse with many other examples of God hastening salvation. Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*, 351..

The final sense of *διὰ* in both 24:22 and 19:12 supports Matthew's consistent depiction of the kingdom of heaven as a desired eschatological goal that must be sought after and worked for with righteous behavior. John Nolland also argues that Matthew's "wider concern about entering the kingdom, entering life, and having eternal life" favors this translation of *διὰ*.<sup>624</sup> As we have seen, a number of patristic writers embraced such a reading. Tertullian claimed that some married couples became voluntary eunuchs by mutually consenting to abstinence. They made their decision because of their desire for the celestial kingdom (*voluntarii spadones pro cupiditate regni coelestis*) (*To His Wife* 1.6). And many ancient exegetes interpreted the eunuch verse in light of heavenly rewards.

In a recent article for the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, Stephen Llewelyn, Gareth Wearne, and Bianca Sanderson argue that in its Aramaic form, the preposition ܘܢ in place of *διὰ* can denote direction toward, and that *χωρέω* can indicate a sense of movement.<sup>625</sup> Such movement is true of *χωρέω* in Mt 15:17 (*πᾶν τὸ εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸ στόμα εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν χωρεῖ...*). Llewelyn et al. offer the following reconstruction of the original saying:

There are eunuchs who have been so from birth,  
and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others,  
and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs.  
Into the kingdom of Heaven let the one who can enter, enter.<sup>626</sup>

However, their construction misses another crucial connection between 15:17 and 19:12: *κοιλία*. Their translation removes Matthew's link between mother's womb in 19:12a and *χωρέω* in 19:12d (and in 19:11).<sup>627</sup>

A serious problem with both versions of the celibacy thesis is that, at the time of Matthew's redaction, self-made eunuchs were rarely characterized as celibates, however one defines 'celibacy.' As classicist Walter Stevenson explains, Matthew had better terminological options than *εὐνοῦχος* for celibate:

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<sup>624</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 777.

<sup>625</sup> Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson, "Guarding Entry," 239-41.

<sup>626</sup> Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson, "Guarding Entry," 241.

<sup>627</sup> The authors do not mention *κοιλία* in the article.

...it is not clear that the author intended us to substitute ‘celibate’ or ‘incapable of marriage’ [referring to REB translation] every time we see εὐνοῦχοι. If Matthew wanted ‘celibate’ he could have written ἄγαμος, as Paul did in Corinthians 7.32, or παρθένος, as in Apocalypse 14.4 [and in Mt 1:23 of Mary, and in 25:1,7,11], or ἀποπαρθένευσας, or something more specific. ἄγαμος is very precise, ἀποπαρθένευσας implies heroic asceticism, and παρθένος would draw up images of humble, maidenly purity [cf. Rev 14:4], while εὐνοῦχος certainly could not do the same for Matthew’s contemporary readers. All these terms can roughly mean ‘celibate,’ but, as Origen’s apparent misunderstanding shows, the author of Matthew’s Gospel made a great mistake writing εὐνοῦχος if he really meant ‘celibate.’<sup>628</sup>

Stevenson’s humorous remarks point to another problem: the imprecision of celibacy terminology. Stevenson’s various interpretations of celibate, which I infer from his comments, highlight the problem. He mentions self-imposed male asceticism, female virginity (although a παρθένος need not be a female or a virgin), and Origen’s castration. He focuses primarily on sexual activity or inactivity, not abstention from marriage.

Like Stevenson, some biblical scholars employ celibacy terminology to denote sexual abstinence.<sup>629</sup> In discussing the referent for 19:11, for example, Craig L. Blomberg concludes, “so also there are people whom God enables to live celibate lives even though they are physically capable of sexual relations.”<sup>630</sup> Some scholars view celibates as those who abstain from marriage and sex.<sup>631</sup> Daniel Patte illustrates this perspective when he writes of 19:11-12 that “even though one is deprived of the goodness of sexual union and marriage, celibacy is good: far from denying the goodness of relationship with others, it is adopted for the sake of one’s relationship with others in the realm of the kingdom.”<sup>632</sup> For others, celibacy refers to single status; these scholars rarely discuss the issue of sexuality.<sup>633</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> Walter Stevenson, "Eunuchs and Early Christianity," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (London, GB: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2002), 124-25. See also Hester, "Postgender Jesus." Witherington also notes that ἄγαμος was the usual descriptor for someone who lived a ‘celibate’ life. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 30.

<sup>629</sup> Although Rick Talbott rejects the celibacy thesis, he uses the term to refer to sexual abstinence: “The eunuch saying did not justify celibacy or the renunciation of marriage for males” Talbott, "Kyriarchy," 39. Nolland, *Matthew*, 777-82.

<sup>630</sup> Blomberg, "Exegesis of Matthew 19: 3-12," 185.

<sup>631</sup> Heth, "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying'." See too Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 169-70.

<sup>632</sup> Patte, *Structural Commentary*, 267-68. Yet he is not entirely consistent with his definition. He also writes, just prior to the quoted material, “[y]et Jesus affirms that giving up sexual relationship—celibacy—for the sake of the kingdom is good” (267). Similarly, John Meier writes: “Yes, replies Jesus [to his disciples], it is true for certain people that marriage is not the vocation to choose. Besides the obvious cases of physical castration, there is the case

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, defines 'celibacy' in this way:

1. the state of not being married
2. a. abstention from sexual intercourse  
b. abstention by vow from marriage

Other dictionaries offer similar definitions. To be celibate, then, denotes several states of being and behaviors that may or may not be related. While "celibacy" has a broad semantic range, scholars who use celibacy terminology for Matthew's eunuchs rarely clarify their use; they assume that their readers share their understanding.<sup>634</sup>

Celibate terminology raises more questions than it answers, irrespective of historical time period and cultural context, such as: Are children celibate? Are divorcees, widows, and widowers, and do they remain celibate if they have sexual relations? Is celibacy a temporary or permanent state? How long must one abstain from sexual relations or marriage to be celibate? Do age, gender, and physical ability to engage in particular (hetero?) sexual activities matter? If a female abstains from sexual relations while menstruating, is she celibate? Are married couples who do not have sexual relations, for any reason or length of time, celibates? Must celibacy be volitional? The more I researched eunuchs, the more obfuscatory I found celibacy terminology.

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of the man who freely chooses total abstinence because his life has been totally overwhelmed by and enveloped in the Kingdom of God." Meier, *Vision of Matthew*, 138.

<sup>633</sup> Francis Moloney's article attempts to prove that Jesus was celibate (i.e., unmarried). Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," 42 and passim; Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 227. Allison, "Matt 19:12," 2; Senior, *Matthew*, 216; Keener, *And Marries Another*, 46; Keener, *Commentary on Matthew*, 470; Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185; Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 19; Davies, *Matthew*, 133. That Ben Witherington views sexuality as distinct from celibacy may be inferred from the following statement about eunuchs in "oriental cults" and "celibates of the Qumran community": "The attitudes toward sexuality and celibacy reflected in such cults and communities were not compatible with the mainstream of rabbinic thinking since most rabbis found castrated men abhorrent and viewed non-castrated celibates as violators of God's commandment to procreate." Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 30. R.T. France implies sexual renunciation: "It [19:12c] uses the model of the eunuch to describe those who do not marry and have children." France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 724. Douglas Hare mentions "continence" in Hare, *Matthew*, 223.

<sup>634</sup> Many scholars employ 'celibacy' terms in the title of an article, a commentary section or subsection about Matthew 19. Trautman 1966, "The Eunuch Logion of Matthew 19,12: Historical and Exegetical Dimensions as Related to Celibacy;" "Marriage and Celibacy (19:3-12) in Hare, *Matthew*, 219.; "Marriage and Celibacy in the Light of the Kingdom; 19:1-12 [Mk 10:1-12] for Meier, *Matthew*. Blomberg 1990, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12;" Davies 1993, "Divorce and Celibacy: 19:3-12;" Davies and Allison 1997, "Monogamy, Divorce, Celibacy (19.1-12);" Luz 2001, "Divorce and Celibacy (19:1-12);" France 2007, "Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy (19:3-12);" Moloney 1979, "Matthew 19:3-12 and Celibacy: A Redactional and Form Critical Study;" "Marriages and States of Celibacy Fit for the Kingdom (19:3-12)" in Nolland, *Matthew*. "Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy (19:3-12)" in Talbert, *Matthew*. "The Place of Celibacy (19:10-12)" in Osborne, *Matthew*.

Another problem with both versions of the celibacy thesis is that scholars default to a metaphorical interpretation without actually arguing for it. As one example, Rudolf Schnackenburg claims, “[s]elf-mutilation is certainly not being recommended; ‘eunuchs’ is a matter of metaphorical imagery.”<sup>635</sup> He then moves directly to the issue of renunciation of marriage. Scholars also do not explain their shift from a literal interpretation of the first two eunuch groups to a metaphorical reading of the third.<sup>636</sup>

Even scholars who demonstrate familiarity with accounts of the self-castrated devotees of the goddess Cybele usually stop short of considering any relationship to Matthew’s self-made eunuchs.<sup>637</sup> As I clarified in Chapter 1, εὐνοῦχος almost always denoted a castrated male in ancient writings, and εὐνουχίζω, castration. Authors before Philo and the first evangelist did not interpret εὐνουχίζω as “to turn into a celibate.”

The strongest argument for a metaphorical interpretation (not including my own argument that the verse is a parable) is that the Matthean Jesus spoke metaphorically in other contexts. He compared his rivals to dangerous snakes and animals (e.g., ravenous wolves [7:15]; brood of vipers [12:34; 23:33; cf. 3:7]) and used positive metaphors for his followers and disciples (e.g., salt of the earth [5:13]; light of the world [5:14]; fruit-bearing seed [13:23]). He viewed the heart as the source of evil designs (διαλογισμός), including adultery and illicit sex (15:17-20), yet he did not recommend cutting out the heart, as Epiphanius pointed out.

Scholar Jacques Dupont’s comparison of Jesus’s words about voluntary eunuchs with Paul’s words about circumcision of the heart is a helpful way of framing Mt 19:12c, particularly in light of Tertullian’s similar comparison: “En parlant d’une castration volontaire en vue du Royaume des cieux, Jésus vise non une opération physiologique, mais une disposition d’âme; il parle de gens qui sont «eunuques» par le coeur.”<sup>638</sup> According to Dupont, Jesus speaks of “eunuchs of the heart.”

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<sup>635</sup> Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185.

<sup>636</sup> John Nolland is a notable exception. To support his interpretation of self-made eunuchs as sexually abstinent, he argues that the motivational phrase in 19:12c creates asymmetry, which makes the third clause stand apart, that the previous discussion on marriage and divorce suggests a self-denial of sexuality, and that the use of harsh eunuch imagery is particularly appropriate in view of Jewish concerns about marital and sexual abstinence. Nolland, *Matthew*, 780-81.

<sup>637</sup> Some exceptions include Brower, "Making Christian Eunuchs."; Halvor Moxnes, "Body, Gender and Social Space: Dilemmas in Constructing Early Christian Identities," *Identity Formation in the New Testament* (2008): 174. Hester, "Postgender Jesus," 31-32, 36.

<sup>638</sup> Dupont, *Mariage et divorce*, 197.



### *Matthew's Self-Made Eunuchs as an Insult*

Josef Blinzler made an argument in 1959 that gained much traction. Blinzler proposed that after Jesus's Jewish opponents called him 'eunuch' as a slur, Jesus adopted the derogatory term. Subsequent scholars have extended the argument. Jerome Kodell claims that Jesus turned 'eunuchs' into a vocational term, comparable to 'Christians' in Antioch and 'Puritans' in New England.<sup>639</sup> In Francis Moloney's view, Jesus responded not just once to his opponents' insult; his statement about eunuchs became a regular refrain to those who criticized his celibate lifestyle.<sup>640</sup> Halvor Moxnes argues that Jesus and his followers may have been seen as a group of *galli* because at least some had left their households and male roles. Jesus responded to his opponents by embracing the eunuch as an ideal figure for the kingdom.<sup>641</sup>

At first glance, Blinzler's thesis appears plausible. People do insult Jesus, John the Baptist, and the disciples in the First Gospel. They say that John the Baptist has a demon (11:18), and they call the Son of Man a glutton and drunkard (11:19). Earlier, Jesus warned his disciples: "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" (10:25)

Under closer examination, however, Blinzler's thesis does not stand. First, it has no historical basis. There is no evidence that Jesus's enemies called him a eunuch; the prominent third-century apologist Tertullian did, but not as an insult. Blinzler's claim that the Pharisees or scribes would have reproached Jesus and his disciples also rests on the faulty assumption that Jews collectively believed it was an obligation to marry and produce children.<sup>642</sup> As discussed, there was a variety of Jewish perspectives on child-bearing in the first century, which Blinzler himself recognized. Another flaw, again, is that self-made eunuchs were rarely considered celibates until later Christian writings. Furthermore, even if Jesus's enemies called him and his disciples *galli*, the insult would have served a different purpose, namely, to mock them as

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<sup>639</sup> Kodell, "Celibacy Logion," 19.

<sup>640</sup> Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," 52. As noted, Justin Martyr and Epiphanius preserved a slightly different version of Mt 19:12, from which Moloney infers that the eunuch logion—an independent saying—became solidified in the tradition with Jesus's frequent repetition.

<sup>641</sup> Davies and Allison, *Exegetical Commentary Vol. 3*; Moxnes, "Body, Gender," 174; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 488. Collins, *Divorce*, 111-12; Trautman, "Eunuch Logion." Blinzler's hypothesis is a possibility but not certain for Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 185.

<sup>642</sup> He claims that the term eunuchs would not sound good to Jewish and Greek ears. Blinzler, "Mt 19,12," 257.

effeminate, sexually profligate, flamboyant in worship, or generally un-Roman. Blinzer's thesis also relies on slim textual evidence, primarily Mt 11:19 and a scattering of non-Matthean texts.

### *Matthew's Self-Made Eunuchs as Subversives*

Some have argued that Mt 19:12 conveys anti-patriarchal, anti-heterosexist, or otherwise egalitarian features. Arthur Dewey's article for the Jesus Seminar provides an early example. For Dewey, the disciples' response to Jesus in 19:10 "registers the unsettled assumptions of a patriarchal society, now in collision with a vision of equality within the marriage relation."<sup>643</sup> Eunuchs were outsiders to the family hierarchy.<sup>644</sup> Dewey endorses L. William Countryman's assessment that when Jesus forbade divorce, all men effectively became eunuchs who could no longer hold their hierarchical position within the family.<sup>645</sup>

Another early proponent of the thesis that Matthew's eunuchs subvert patriarchal and hierarchal values, Warren Carter interprets eunuchs as socially marginal, androgynous figures whose inability to produce offspring placed them outside traditional marriage and household structures. Eunuchs serve as a metaphor for some members of Jesus's alternative, more egalitarian household.<sup>646</sup> Specifically, divorced disciples who must not remarry and single disciples who choose not to marry should embrace the marginal identity of eunuchs: "As eunuchs for the kingdom, they 'acknowledge and resolve' the hierarchical understanding of male-female relationships into an identity which unifies male and female."<sup>647</sup>

Carter claims that the Matthean Jesus rejects hierarchical marital relationships based on male superiority over subordinate females in favor of permanent unions based on mutuality.<sup>648</sup>

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<sup>643</sup> Dewey, "Unkindest Cut," 114.

<sup>644</sup> Dewey, "Unkindest Cut," 115.

<sup>645</sup> Dewey, "Unkindest Cut," 115, 20. Dewey cites Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, 176. He finds further proof of this undermining in the following verses about children (19:13-15) the rich young man (19:16-22), and the disciples' subsequent exchange with Jesus (19:24-26). The children, who were the "most insignificant" in the ancient hierarchy, are "drastically reappraised. The given family hierarchy is being overturned."

<sup>646</sup> Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 81-82. He cites Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, 150, 88.

<sup>647</sup> Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 89. He refers to a quote by Orlando Patterson, who asserted that a eunuch's body "both acknowledged and resolved symbolically most of the conflicts surrounding male-female relationships. The eunuch appeared to be both male and female, both weak and strong, both dirty and pure, both a sex object (as homosexual and heterosexual lover) and asexual, and both mother and wife." Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 326. Similarly, Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 383-84.

<sup>648</sup> Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 61-63; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 379-84.

The Pharisees' question about the right of a man to divorce his wife for any cause (19:3) reveals a concern about "unrestricted male power over a woman."<sup>649</sup> For Carmen Bernabé, the Pharisees participate in the "casuistry" of the "prevailing schools of thought, which shared a common, taken-for-granted starting point: inequality, submission, the power of men over women, and the supremacy of the interests of the patriarchal household over individuals."<sup>650</sup> Although Bernabé does not name the casuistic prevailing schools, a safe guess would be the historical Schools of Hillel and Shammai, which are often mentioned in Matthew commentaries in reference to the Pharisees' questions.

Bernabé's claims about the Pharisees cannot be sustained. There is no narrative evidence that they sought power over and submission of women. If anything, they sought power over Jesus by testing (πειράζω) him. They ask two questions: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause (κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν)?" (19:3) and "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" (19:7). Their questions do not demonstrate patriarchal power over women. If historical Pharisees did have a conversation with the historical Jesus about grounds for divorce, that would not be surprising; divorce was a point of discussion and debate among Jews (including Paul, himself a Pharisee), early Christians, and the larger Roman world. Nor is it surprising that Matthew would paint Pharisees and other Jewish leaders in an unfavorable light. Matthew's hostility toward most Jewish leaders—here, evident in "testing" and "your hardheartedness"—should not be weighted too heavily in assessments of historical Pharisees.

The argument that the Matthean Jesus overturned the hierarchical institution of family by forbidding divorce also falters.<sup>651</sup> It rests on the assumption that without the ability to divorce their wives, men could no longer maintain their authoritative position in the household. A husband's authority did not rest exclusively or even primarily on his right to divorce. And again, both male and female citizens in the Roman Empire, including Jewish citizens, could divorce, although Augustan marital legislation certainly discouraged the practice.<sup>652</sup>

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<sup>649</sup> Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 60. Carter repeats the point about the Pharisees inquiry about "unrestricted" or "unrestrained" power of a husband over his wife (61-62, 64, 71, 87). Douglas Hare makes a similar point about husbands' "arbitrary power" to divorce. Hare, *Matthew*, 221.

<sup>650</sup> Bernabé, "Eunuchs and Predators," 132. Similarly, Blomberg, "Exegesis of Matthew 19: 3-12," 173.

<sup>651</sup> Rick Talbott argues that Mt 19:12 challenged kyriarchal household structures. Talbott, "Kyriarchy."

<sup>652</sup> Contra Gundry, *Matthew*, 381. Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 487n6.

Nor is it clear how Jesus or Matthew promoted egalitarianism and empowerment of women—or disempowerment of men—by insisting that women and men must stay married with the exception of *πορνεία*. The Matthean Jesus’s restriction on divorce could just as easily solidify a husband’s hierarchical position by preventing his wife from leaving. There was no way out of an abusive or otherwise unhealthy marriage for the wife—or for that matter, the husband—who took Jesus’s words to heart. Carter draws attention to the “male-centered focus” of the Pharisees in 19:3-9, but the disciples’ question and Jesus’s responses to his interlocuters are no less androcentric.<sup>653</sup>

There is insufficient evidence to support the claim that Matthew promotes (radical) egalitarianism. Although Matthew does seek to flatten certain hierarchical relationships in Jesus’s community of disciples<sup>654</sup> (e.g., 23:11), there remain other Matthean passages that presuppose and express hierarchical and patriarchal relations.<sup>655</sup> Matthew clearly envisions a heavenly hierarchy with God at the apex. Jesus also holds an extraordinarily high position (19:28; 28:19-20). His male disciples also assume authority and high status in the heavenly realm. Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom and conferred on him the power to bind and loose (16:19), then extended this power to the disciples (18:18) before promising them twelve thrones (19:28). Matthew’s kingdom of heaven is distinctly tiered, masculine, and patriarchal. Contra these scholars who interpret Mt 19:12 as a text with certain egalitarian features, Joseph Marchal suggests that 19:12 may naturalize and normalize practices of castration and the social stigmatization of eunuchs.<sup>656</sup>

### *Other Interpretations of Matthew’s Self-Made Eunuchs*

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<sup>653</sup> Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 59.

<sup>654</sup> Warren Carter argues that Matthew creates an alternative community of disciples committed to Jesus. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 7-14 and passim.

<sup>655</sup> So too Richard S. Ascough, "Matthew and Community Formation," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson, S.J.*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 124.

<sup>656</sup> Marchal’s treatment of the eunuchs of Matthew and Acts is cursory; he devotes more attention to Galatians, Paul, and Paul’s audiences. He does not consider any Matthean narrative context. Marchal, "Staging Conversations."

Other interpretations of 19:12c-d have received less attention or little support. Several scholars argue that the evangelist inserted 19:9 to address an influx of Gentiles into Matthew's Jewish-Christian community who, like those in Corinth (1 Cor 5:1), were unfamiliar with the Jewish tradition that forbade marriages to kin relations (i.e., Lev 18:6-18). Scholars who take this position interpret πορνεία as incest (as in Acts 15:20, 29). Hence, Matthew's community needed to take action against the incestuous marriages of some proselytes.<sup>657</sup> While the incest interpretation is possible—only the Matthean Jesus states that “not one letter (ἰὼτα), not one stroke of a letter (κεράϊα), will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (5:18)—because the first evangelist had a flexible interpretation of the law and prophets (e.g., 12:1-7, 9-21; 15:15-20) and the Gentile mission was increasingly important, the incest thesis is unlikely.

Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson argue that 19:12c should be interpreted along with other Matthean sayings about entry to the kingdom and metaphors about discipleship as a journey. They claim that Matthew's self-made eunuchs should be understood as royal guards or gatekeepers who control access to the king and kingdom. They perform a function not unlike Peter with his keys to the kingdom and the Pharisees and scribes, who should guide and teach but block access to the kingdom.<sup>658</sup> While the authors rightly focus on the kingdom of heaven, they narrow a reading of LXX eunuchs to gatekeepers and messengers when in fact they served in various capacities, as the last chapter demonstrated.

### *Summary of Scholarship*

As this section has demonstrated, contemporary exegetes overwhelmingly interpret the self-made eunuchs metaphorically and with respect to the preceding verses (Mt 19:3-11). Most understand Mt 19:12c-d as Jesus's invitation for some dedicated followers to embrace an unmarried, asexual lifestyle in service to the kingdom. Many also endorse Josef Blinzler's proposal that the historical Jesus spoke about eunuchs in response to a personal attack that he and his disciples were eunuchs. Others argue that Jesus challenged patriarchal or heterosexist

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<sup>657</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *Theological Studies* 37, no. 2 (1976): 210-11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056397603700201>. Meier, *Matthew*, 216. Fitzmyer adds CD 4:20-21 and 5:8-11, in light of 11QTemple 57:17-19, as support. Fitzmyer, "Matthean Divorce Texts," 221. For objections, see Blomberg, "Exegesis of Matthew 19: 3-12."

<sup>658</sup> Llewelyn, Wearne, and Sanderson, "Guarding Entry."

attitudes in favor of equality in marriage. A scholarly minority interprets the eunuch verse as Jesus's difficult teaching that his followers should not remarry after divorce.

### Voluntary Eunuchs in Antiquity

#### *Galli*

Few men in the Roman Empire castrated themselves or elected to be castrated. Yet some did choose to become eunuchs: *galli* (singular *gallus*), devotees of the mother goddess *Cybele* (κυβέλη) or one of her regional manifestations. Matthew and his audiences would have heard about, and perhaps seen, these men who were notorious for self-castration and distinctive public worship practices. While there are scattered references to other voluntary castrates in the early Roman Empire, *galli* represent the clearest historical analogue to Matthew's self-made eunuchs.

*Cybele* worship originated in Phrygia (west central Anatolia) during the second millennium BCE. By the common era, the goddess was worshipped throughout Anatolia, Greece, Mesopotamia, North Africa, and Roman Italy.<sup>659</sup> Adherents in Roman Italy knew her as *Mater Deum Magna Idaea* (Great Idaean Mother of the Gods)—*Mater Magna* or *Mater* for short. In Syria, she was *Dea Syria* or *Atargatis*. Worshippers valued her support of human and agricultural fertility. A fierce protector, the goddess was associated with mountains and wild animals, especially lions. For Epicurean poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus,<sup>660</sup> she was the earth itself and author of life:

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<sup>659</sup> Lynn E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 1-2. On clay votives of the third and second centuries BCE, see Robert Coates-Stephens, "Notes from Rome 2014–15," *Papers of the British School at Rome* (2015). An inscription found by the entrance to the palaestra in Herculaneum celebrated the rebuilding of a temple to Cybele in 76 CE, with Vespasian as the benefactor. Robert Caudill, "Mothers of the Gods: A Case for Syncretism in the Cybele and Isis Cults at Pompeii" (Doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University, 2015), 5-6, and passim. Archaeological excavations of an ancient temple of *Mater Magna* in the Roman port town of Ostia produced extremely well-preserved statuary dating from the first century BCE to the second century CE. Among the material remains were friezes of lions, bulls, and pine trees as well as statues of Attis, including an extraordinary statue of the reclining Attis measuring 5.25 ft long and 3.67 ft tall that now resides in the Vatican's Gregoriano Profano Museum. Douglas Boin, "A Late Antique Statuary Collection at Ostia's Sanctuary of Magna Mater: a Case-Study in Late Roman Religion and Tradition," *Papers of the British School at Rome* (2013): 259-60.

<sup>660</sup> Scholars have not been able to date Lucretius. The only certain date is February 54 BCE, when Cicero wrote a letter to his brother in which he praised Lucretius's poem. Peta G. Fowler and Don. G. Fowler, *Lucretius* (Titus Lucretius Carus) in *OCD*.

First, the earth contains the first bodies from which the springs, rolling coolness along, industriously renew the illimitable sea, and she contains the source of fires. For in many places the crust of the earth burns aflame, while from the depths come the fiery eruptions of Etna. Then further, she contains the means to raise up bright corn and fruitful trees for the races of mankind, the means to produce rivers and leaves and fruitful pastures for the mountain-ranging brood of wild beasts. Therefore she alone is called Great Mother of the gods (*Magna deum Mater*), and Mother of the wild beasts, and maker of our bodies. (*On the Nature of Things* 2.589-99 [Rouse and Smith, LCL])

*Mater Magna*'s most prominent temple in Italy, located on the Palatine Hill in Rome, was dedicated with great fanfare in 191 BCE and rebuilt and rededicated in 3 CE by Emperor Augustus after a fire.<sup>661</sup> During the annual *Megalesia*, a week-long festival in Rome, adherents celebrated *Mater Magna* with chariot races and gladiator combats, plays penned for the occasion by famous playwrights, and feasts. *Galli* actively participated in public processions, including the *Megalesia*'s opening, when they carried a statue of the goddess in her chariot drawn by lions.<sup>662</sup> A number of emperors issued coins with *Mater Magna* on the obverse: Domitian, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus (r. 218 – 222 CE). Marcus Aurelius issued a valuable gold aureus with *Mater Magna*.

*Mater Magna* was closely associated with her self-castrated consort Attis. In statuary and terracotta figures, Attis usually appears as a young shepherd with a pointed Phrygian cap.<sup>663</sup> Over time, he came to be worshipped alongside *Mater Magna*. Claudius inducted him into the

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<sup>661</sup> Several Latin and Greek sources describe Cybele's dramatic introduction to Rome in 204 BCE. Though the accounts differ, they agree on several points: first, the goddess was invited to Rome after elite Roman men consulted the Delphic Oracle and Sibylline Books; second, she arrived by ship to a large public ceremony; and third, she received temporary housing in the goddess Nike's temple while her own temple was under construction. The object escorted to Rome was a small, dark stone that had fallen from the sky. For accounts of her arrival, see especially chapter 9 of Lynn E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999). The temple was temporarily abandoned in 410 CE, then reused until the 17th century.

<sup>662</sup> For discussion of the *Megalesia*, see Roller, *God the Mother*, 288-89, 98-99. Plautus wrote a play for the festival's inauguration in 194 BCE, Terence wrote four plays for the festival in the 160s BCE. Roller, *God the Mother*, 279, 88. During *Dea Syria*'s annual spring festival, the goddess's *galli* appeared and acted just like Cybele's: they cut themselves with knives and whips, participated in frenzied dancing, swung their long hair around, played music, dressed like women in ostentatious clothing, and purportedly castrated themselves. Lightfoot provides a comprehensive list of parallels J. L. Lightfoot, *Lucian's On the Syrian Goddess*. trans. J.L. Lightfoot (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2003), 506-09.

<sup>663</sup> A large number of Attis terracotta heads and figurines were found in Tarsus, some dating to the Hellenistic period. In almost all, he wears a Phrygian cap (CCCA 1.804-853). Already in the second century BCE, Attis was popular in Rome, and in the Palatine shrine, his figurines outnumber those of the goddess by ten to one. Roller, *God the Mother*, 277.

Roman pantheon. By the end of the second century CE, the city of Rome honored Attis's death—and possibly, his resurrection—with a major festival, the *Hilaria*.<sup>664</sup>

Accounts of Attis's self-castration vary. According to a tradition that circulated widely during late republican and early imperial times, Attis and Cybele had a fiery relationship that ended with Attis castrating himself in a state of madness and regret.<sup>665</sup> By Ovid's (43 BCE – 17 CE) account in *Fasti*, Cybele became enamored of the handsome young man from Phrygia and wanted him to guard her temple (4.223-225). She made Attis promise to remain a boy (*puer*) forever. Attis swore fidelity to her but subsequently lost his virginity to the tree nymph Sagaritis. Enraged, Cybele killed her, and Attis went mad (*furit*) (4.226-233). He rent his body with a sharp stone, cried out "I have deserved it! With my blood I pay the penalty that is my due. Ah, perish the parts that were my ruin! Ah, let them perish" (*pereo*), then castrated himself with the stone (4.237-240 [Frazer and Goold, LCL]). For Ovid, Attis's "madness set an example, and still his unmanly ministers [i.e., *galli*] cut their vile members while they toss their hair (*mollesque ministri caedunt iactatis vilia membra comis*) (4.243-44 [Frazer and Goold, LCL]).<sup>666</sup>

While *Mater Magna* received a formal invitation to move to Rome (in 204 BCE), a gracious welcome, a temple, and an annual festival, her *galli* were treated with contempt. They were ridiculed by authors for their exuberant public worship, effeminacy, foreignness, and, above all, their self-castration.

*Galli* were known for their fervent worship: they danced, shouted, swung their long hair, begged, flagellated themselves, dressed like women, and played musical instruments. An epigram attributed to the Hellenistic poet Erycius (c. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) about a *gallus* of Rhea, one of *Cybele*'s appellations, highlights some of these tropes: "The long-haired priest of Rhea,

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<sup>664</sup> Lightfoot, *Lucian's On the Syrian Goddess*, 358. The worship of Attis did not originate in Phrygia but later, in Greece. Roller, *God the Mother*, 178.

<sup>665</sup> Roller, *God the Mother*, 241. See Lynn E. Roller's summary of literary traditions in Chapter 8. See also Jacob Latham, "'Fabulous Clap-Trap': Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the *galli* at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Religion* 92, no. 1 (2012): 86-87, <https://doi.org/10.1086/662205>. Sarolta A. Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 60-61. Jan N. Bremmer, "Attis: A Greek God in Anatolian Pessinous and Catullan Rome," in *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2008).

<sup>666</sup> According to Pausanias, the people of the western Achaean city Dyme told their own version of what happened to handsome Attis and his prospective father-in-law, the King of Pessinus. Enraged about Attis's upcoming wedding, Agdistis (another regional name for *Cybele*) appeared during the marriage song and made both men go mad and castrate themselves. Regretting the outcome, she convinced Zeus to prevent Attis's body from rotting (*Description of Greece* 7.17.11-13).



the newly gelded (ὁ νεήτομος), the dancer from Lydian Tmolus [a mountain in Phrygia] whose shriek is heard afar, dedicates, now he rests from his frenzy, to the solemn Mother who dwells by the banks of Sangarius [a Phrygian river] these tambourines, his scourge armed with bones, these noisy brazen cymbals, and a scented lock of his hair” (*Greek Anthology* 6.234 [Paton, LCL]). Erycius accentuated the *gallus*’s raucous worship with “shriek...heard from afar,” “his frenzy,” “these tambourines,” “his scourge armed with bones,” and “these noisy brazen cymbals;” his femininity with “long-haired,” “dancer,” and “a scented lock of his hair;” and his foreignness with “Lydian Tmolus” and “the banks of Sangarius.” The English translator invited a comparison of this “gelded” *gallus* with a castrated horse. The more neutral νεήτομος, a combined term from νέος—young or new—and τέμνω—cut—can be interpreted in two ways: a newly castrated male, or a male castrated when young.

Like Erycius, many writers commented on the sounds of *galli*’s worship and their manic state. In a poem in *The Greek Anthology*, a collection of poetry compiled in the first century CE, an elderly *gallus* described as “womanly Alexis” (θῆλυς Ἄλεξις) dedicates to Cybele his piercing cymbals (κύμβαλά τ’ ὀξύφθογγα), deep-toned pipe (βαρυφθόγγων τ’ ἀλαλητὸν αὐλῶν), and echoing tambourines (τυμπανά τ’ ἠχίεντα), all of which the poet relates to the *gallus*’s earlier madness (μανία; μαίνομαι) (6.51). In another poem in the same collection, elderly Clytosthenes dedicates his hand-beaten tambourines (ἄραξόχειρα...τὰ τύπανα), sharp, hollow-rimmed cymbals (κύμβαλ’ ὀξύδουπα κοιλοχείλεα), and the double-pipe (διδύμους τε λωτοὺς κεροβόας) through which he shouted for joy (ἐπολολύζω) in his madness (λυσσητήρ) (6.94).<sup>667</sup> Lyric poet Catullus (c. 84 – c. 54 BCE) described a new *gallus* singing and playing the tambourines in a state of raging madness (*furēnti rabie*) (63). Author and philosopher Lucius Apuleius (c. 124 – c. 170 CE) sharply caricatured *galli*. In *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius’s protagonist-turned-donkey describes a wandering group of begging *galli* who rave (*bacchur*) and fill the area with their harsh howls (*absonis ululatibus*) (8). One of them shouts like a prophet (*vaticinatione clamosa*) to fake divine inspiration.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> This poem was composed by the anthology’s compiler Philippus of Thessalonica. Another poet in the anthology mentions a cernus and tambourines (*Greek Anthology* 7.709). Pindar has cymbals and castanets (*Dithyrambs* 70b); Euripides, tambourines (*Bacchae* line 59); Menander, tambourines, flute, and cymbals (*Theophrorumene* lines 41, 47, 51); Virgil, tambourines and Berecynthian boxwood (*Aeneid* 9.619).

<sup>668</sup> Material evidence indicates that Cybele processions indeed drew notice. A wall painting on a shop in central Pompeii (IX.7.1) depicts a large, colorful procession for an enthroned Cybele. The larger-than-life goddess holds a

The *galli*'s public self-flagellation was a particular focus.<sup>669</sup> Apuleius's donkey describes a dramatic performance of self-injury in an attempt to trick a wealthy landowner into providing hospitality and money:

...Sometimes they bit their own flesh with their teeth, and finally they all began slashing their arms with the two-edged blades they were carrying.... [One *gallus*] snatched up the utensil which is the distinctive attribute of these half-men (*semivir*), a whip with long tassels made of twisted strips of woolly hide studded with numerous sheep's knucklebones, and he scourged himself hard (*sese commulco*) with strokes of its many knots, fortifying himself with miraculous obstinacy against the pain from the gashes. You could see the ground growing wet with the filthy, effeminate blood (*spurcitia sanguinis effeminati*) from all this slashing of swords and lashing of whips. I was struck with considerable alarm when I saw this generous profusion of gore from so many wounds. I was afraid that by some chance the foreign goddess's stomach might get a yearning for ass's blood, as some humans' stomachs yearn for ass's milk.

At last, however, when they had grown tired, or at least sated with self-laceration (*sui lanio*), they ceased their butchery (*carnificina*) and took up a collection. (8.28 [Hanson, LCL])<sup>670</sup>

While Apuleius's narrative allowed audiences to laugh about the bloody demonstration of biting, arm slashing, and whipping, Seneca the Younger's mid-first-century CE tragedy *Agamemnon* prompted the opposite. In it, a chorus of Trojan women recite an escalating list of expressions of mourning. The *galli*'s self-flagellation happens at the end, just before the hero Cassandra's tears: "not if the crowd should slash their arms like the unmanned men (*molles viros*) in sorrow with you—the crowd that are stirred by the strident flute and beat their breasts in honour of the tower-crowned mother, to mourn for Phrygian Attis. There is no limit, Cassandra, to tears, since what

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tambourine under her left arm and a golden patera for libations in her right hand. She wears a mural crown that denotes her status as city protector, a purple robe with white tunic, and two small lions sit at her feet. Fifteen priests, priestesses, and musicians with tympani, flutes, and cymbals accompany her, as does a bust of Dionysius. Four young men with garlands in their hair stand next to a wooden ferculum (a bier with spindles for carrying) with a statue of a seated, enthroned Cybele. She also wears a net of prophecy on the lower section of her purple cloak. See John R. Clarke's discussion in John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 BC-AD 315* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 89-94. See also Thomas Fröhlich, *Lararien- und Fassadenbilder in den Vesuvstädten: Untersuchungen zur volkstümlichen pompejanischen Malerei*, vol. Ergänzungsheft 32 (Mainz, DE: Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung 1991), 332n63 T. 59.2.

<sup>669</sup> Ruurd R. Nauta, "Catullus 63 in a Roman Context," in *Catullus' Poem on Attis: Text and Contexts*, ed. Ruurd R. Nauta and Annette Harder (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), 98.

<sup>670</sup> The donkey describes the *gallus*'s false confession of sins just before his frenzied self-punishment. Plutarch claimed that *galli* lashed themselves for trespassing (πλημμελέω) against the Mother (*Reply to Colotes* 33, 1127C).

we suffer has surpassed limit” (690 [Fitch, LCL]).<sup>671</sup> For Seneca, the *galli*’s ritual self-flagellation functions as a ritual expression of collective grief.<sup>672</sup>

Most authors highlighted the effeminacy of *galli*. Philo expressed disgust at their bright clothing, make-up, jewelry, and feminine hairstyles: “Mark how conspicuously they braid and adorn their hair,” he complained, “and how they scrub and paint their faces with cosmetics and pigments and the like” (*Leg. 1* 3.7 [Colson, LCL]).<sup>673</sup> Some referred to *galli* with derogatory names such as ‘half-men’ (*semiviri*, *semimares*).<sup>674</sup>

The stereotype of *galli* as womanly males made the term particularly effective as a slur.<sup>675</sup> In *Aeneid*, Virgil (c. 70 – c. 19 BCE) described an insult against Rome’s famed ancestors that was so offensive, Jupiter intervened. While Aeneas was away seeking reinforcements for his besieged Trojan soldiers, Numanus Remulus taunted the Trojans. He boasted about his soldiers’ masculine prowess: our people, he claimed, train boys from birth to be men, whereas Aeneas’s soldiers are actually *galli*:

But you wear embroidered saffron and gleaming purple; sloth is your joy, your delight is to enjoy the dance; your tunics have sleeves and your turbans ribbons. Phrygian women, indeed!—for Phrygian men you are not—go over the heights of Dindymus [a Phrygian mountain associated with Cybele], where to accustomed ears the pipe utters music from double mouths! The timbrels call you, and the Berecynthian boxwood of the mother of Ida: leave arms to men, and quit the sword. (9.610-615 [Fairclough and Goold, LCL])

The insult spurred Aeneas’s son, who had never fought in battle, to pray for Jupiter’s aid. The god guided the inexperienced young warrior’s arrow directly to Numanus’s head. This became a

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<sup>671</sup> Cited by Nauta, “Catullus 63,” 98n44.

<sup>672</sup> Earlier, the chorus opened by sharing this wisdom: “It helps to mingle tears with tears. Cares wound more deeply the people they afflict in private; it helps to mourn one’s losses in common” (665 [Fitch, LCL]).

<sup>673</sup> On their brightly colored robes, see also Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 8.29.

<sup>674</sup> *Semiviri*: Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 8.28; Mart., *Spect.* 2.20; Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.99; Seneca the Younger, *Epistle* 108.7; Octavius 23. *Semimares*: Ovid, *Fasti* 4.183. Μαλακός (little dove): *Greek Anthology* 7.222. τρυφερός: *Greek Anthology* 7.222. See also Lynn E. Roller, “The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,” *Gender & History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 550, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00075>.

<sup>675</sup> This was not a new practice. According to third-century CE biographer Diogenes Laertius, third-century BCE Skeptic philosopher Arcesilaus responded to a question about why many students switch over to Epicurean schools but Epicurean students do not leave for other philosophical schools. Arcesilaus quipped: because men may become *galli*, but *galli* never become men (ἐκ μὲν γὰρ ἀνδρῶν γάλλοι γίνονται, ἐκ δὲ γάλλων ἄνδρες οὐ γίνονται.) (*Lives* 4.6.34).

turning point in the war (9.625-635).<sup>676</sup> It is the comparison to the *galli*'s effeminate attire and foreign practices that draw Aeneas and Jupiter's ire.

Archaeological evidence, though scant, indicates that some *galli* did wear clothing typically associated with women. In Kyzilos, a city in northwestern Anatolia, a *gallus* named Soterides dedicated a stele to the mother goddess to thank her for facilitating the escape of his partner, who became a prisoner-of-war after fighting for Julius Caesar during the 46 BCE naval battle of Thapsus, a port town in modern Tunisia. Soterides wears a long gown and veil as he prepares a sacrifice. He appears to be wearing a stola, commonly associated with women.<sup>677</sup> A third-century CE sarcophagus of a *gallus* or *archigallus* (a chief *gallus*) in a cemetery near Ostia shows him reclining, beardless, with heavy jewelry, long robes, and a Phrygian cap.<sup>678</sup>

During the Republic and Empire, associating *galli* with the east, typically Phrygia, allowed authors to distance themselves. Some writers presented the foreignness of *galli* etymologically. Accordingly, the *galli* originated from a Phrygian river named Sangarius or Gallus. In Ovid's *Fasti*, the Gallus is a flowing river of madness (*insana*) about which the muse Erato warns twice: "Who drinks of it goes mad" (*qui bibit inde, furit*) (4.365-366 [Frazer and Goold, LCL]). *Galli* could not become Roman citizens, and Roman citizens should never emulate *galli*.<sup>679</sup>

Most troubling about *galli* was their purported self-castration. In the late Republican period, Catullus wrote a poem that eloquently conveys why an elite male would never choose to become a *gallus*. In Poem 63, the young man Attis journeys by sea to Phrygia. The moment he

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<sup>676</sup> Discussed by Grant A. Nelsestuen, "Numanus Remulus, Ascanius, and Cato's Origins: The Rhetoric of Ethnicity in Aeneid 9," *Vergilius* 62 (2016). It is unclear what motivates Jupiter's instantaneous response: the shame, Ascanius's promise, or something else. Ascanius promises Jupiter "yearly gifts in your temple, and set before your altar a bullock with gilded brow, snowy white, carrying his head as high as his mother, that already can butt with his horn and can spurn the sand with his hoof" (9.630 [Fairclough and Goold]). For the *galli*'s effeminacy, see also Jacob Abraham Latham, "Roman Rhetoric, Metroac Representation: Texts, Artifacts, and the Cult of Magna Mater in Rome and Ostia," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 59/60 (2014): 53.

<sup>677</sup> Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, Wisconsin Studies in Classics, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 220-21. The stele is now in the Louvre (Pl 99). Also mentioned in Roller, "Eunuch Priest," 544. Scholars have referred to Markus as Soterides's "friend" or "companion," Will Roscoe, however, notes that *symbios* commonly referred to a life partner such as a spouse. Will Roscoe, "Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion," *History of Religions* 35, no. 3 (1996): 203.

<sup>678</sup> Shelley Hales, "Looking for Eunuchs: The *Galli* and Attis in Roman Art," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (London, GB: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2002), 93. Roller, "Eunuch Priest," 547. on epigrams in the Palatine Anthology. *Gallus* is a eunuch (6.219.5), a half-woman (6.217.9), recently castrated (6.234.1); long dainty tresses, either plaited or loose, women's clothing, perfume (6.234.5), high-pitched voice, hysterical (feminine) dancing.

<sup>679</sup> Roller, *God the Mother*, 301.

arrives, he is overtaken by “raging madness” (*furenti rabie*: 63.4), cuts off his testicles with a piece of flint rock, picks up a timbrel, begins to sing, and leads a group of *galli* in a sprint toward Cybele’s home on a forested mountain. Upon arrival, they all fall into an exhausted sleep, famished. When Attis wakes up the next morning, the madness has vanished. He realizes what he has done and immediately runs back to the shore. Gazing at the sea in tears, Attis recalls his home and everything he has lost:

Where or in what location should I think of you lying, my country?  
My very eye yearns to direct its gaze toward you,  
While my mind is free from fierce madness for a space.  
Shall I be carried far away from my home to these groves?  
Shall I be away from my homeland, my wealth, my friends, my parents?  
Shall I be away from the forum, the wrestling-school, the stadium, the gymnasium?  
My poor, poor spirit, I must lament again and again.  
For what kind of shape is there which I have not passed through?  
I have been a young man, a youth, a stripling, a boy,  
I was the flower of the gymnasium before, the glory of the oil-bottle;  
My doors were crowded, my thresholds were warm,  
My house was clad with flowery garlands,  
When I came to leave my bedchamber at sunrise.  
Shall I now be spoken of as the servant of the gods, the handmaid of Cybele?  
Shall I be a Maenad, a mere part of myself, a sterile man?  
Shall I haunt the chilly regions of green Ida, clothed with snow?  
Shall I spend my life under the lofty peaks of Phrygia,  
Where the hind lives in the woods, where the boar wanders the groves?  
Now, now my deed gives me pain, now, now it gives me regret.<sup>680</sup>

The poem is remarkable not only for Catullus’s sensitive treatment of Attis and his use of first-person, but because the poet addresses so many costs of becoming a *gallus* from an elite male perspective. Living a life of exile in a cold, foreign land inhabited by dangerous animals to serve a powerful goddess who terrifies him, Attis loses his homeland, friends, male lovers, parents, possessions, favorite activities and venues, social esteem, beautiful home, happiness, fertility, and masculinity. Catullus uses feminine verb forms for Attis after his castration and draws attention to his physical transformation; as a new *gallus*, Attis has “snow-white hands (63.8),

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<sup>680</sup> Translation by Stephen Harrison in Ruurd R. Nauta and Annette Harder, eds., *Catullus' Poem on Attis: Text and Contexts* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), 5-7; Nauta, "Catullus 63," 5-7.

tender fingers (63.10), and rosy lips (63.74).”<sup>681</sup> Post-castration, Attis describes himself as fragmented: “I, part of myself” (*ego mei pars*, 63.69), and twice as a female slave of Cybele (*famula* 68, 90; the second time, as her lifelong slave).<sup>682</sup>

Most authors claimed that *galli* castrate themselves as a sign of devotion to *Mater Magna* and in imitation of Attis. By Lucian’s memorable account, *galli* castrate themselves in a provocative public spectacle:

During these days they are made Galli. As the Galli sing and celebrate their orgies, frenzy falls on many of them and many who had come as mere spectators afterwards are found to have committed the great act. I will narrate what they do. Any young man who has resolved on this action, strips off his clothes, and with a loud shout bursts into the midst of the crowd, and picks up a sword from a number of swords which I suppose have been kept ready for many years for this purpose. He takes it and castrates himself and then runs wild through the city, bearing in his hands what he has cut off. He casts it into any house at will, and from this house he receives women's raiment and ornaments. Thus they act during their ceremonies of castration. (*De Dea Syria* 51 [Fowler and Fowler])

Christian authors also derided *galli* and the goddess they worshipped. Tertullian mocked an arch-eunuch for his conduct after Marcus Aurelius’s death. Even though the emperor died on the March 17, 180, according to Tertullian, the arch-eunuch issued a typical call for prayers for the emperor’s safety on March 24 while slashing his muscles. “O sluggish messengers! O sleepy-headed postal service!” Tertullian wrote: “It was your fault that Cybele failed to hear earlier of the Emperor’s death, to prevent Christians from laughing at such a goddess! Jupiter too would hardly be in a hurry to let his own Crete tumble before the Roman fasces—forgetting that cave on Ida, the cymbals of the Corybantes, that too delicious odour of his nurse there!” (*Apology* 25 [Glover and Rendall, LCL]).

According to literary sources, *galli* castrate themselves in a frenzy with a piece of flint, a pottery shard, a sacrificial knife, or a sword. However, I found evidence of a different tool and

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<sup>681</sup> See Nauta, "Catullus 63," 92, 92n22. Nauta notes that feminine forms were found in Roman invective but also for Cybele’s attendants; scholars often miss these references and assume women, not eunuchs, are the referent (93).

<sup>682</sup> Roller, "Eunuch Priest," 551-52. She describes Catullus’s use of Attis as “a metaphor for an individual [*sic*] totally estranged from his social milieu. He is physically separated from his (unnamed) home by his journey to Phrygia; culturally separated from his normal life by abandoning the cultivated world of the city for the dark forest [!] and wild beasts, the world of the goddess; and bodily separated from his former life as a whole person by the act of emasculation (he calls himself *pars mei*, ‘part of myself’, 63.69).” On the likelihood that Catullus’s (Greek) Attis had male lovers, see Nauta, "Catullus 63," 95-97.

ritual in Roman Britain. In 1840, near the end of a civil engineering project to deepen the Thames near London Bridge, workers discovered two pieces of an elaborately decorated, eleven-and-one-half inch bronze tool. Upon his first examination of the instrument, British archaeologist Charles Roach Smith misidentified it as an ancient forceps. He deduced from the intricately carved gods and animals on the blades and the object's discovery near other Roman religious objects with signs of intentional damage that it was originally used in religious ceremonies. Smith argued that early Christians broke these objects and threw them into the Thames.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> Alfred G. Francis, "On a Romano-British Castration Clamp used in the Rites of Cybele," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 19 (1926): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003591572601901705>. Charles Roach Smith, "Bronze Forceps Found in the Bed of the Thames," *Archaeologia, or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* 30 (1844).



Castration clamp from Roman Britain  
British Museum. Record #1856,0701.33  
Reproduced with permission from the Trustees of the British Museum  
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

In 1926, British surgeon Alfred G. Francis identified the instrument as a broken castration clamp used in *Mater Magna* practices.<sup>684</sup> He identified Cybele with her turreted crown and Attis (the latter misidentified as Juno by the British Museum) atop stallions at one end of each blade, and Cybele's lions on the other. The clamp, he argued, originally worked as follows: with the clamp open and the patient supine, the penis was placed through the oval opening, safely out of the way. The scrotum and testicles were then pulled forward, between the two

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<sup>684</sup> Francis, "Castration Clamp," 96. Francis, among others, challenged the British Museum's former label of this instrument as "A Pair of Brays for the Nose of a Victim."



blades of the open clamp. The clamp was closed firmly, then a connecting bar was inserted through the base and secured with a nut. The serrated blades held the soft tissue of the scrotum and testicles in place and temporarily blocked the blood supply. Someone made a quick cut at the base of the scrotum and removed both testicles. The blades remained closed to allow for cauterization of the blood vessels and perhaps a few sutures with a bronze needle and flax thread. The well-designed instrument reduced the risk of hemorrhage and prevented the open skin of the scrotum and severed spermatic cords from retracting.

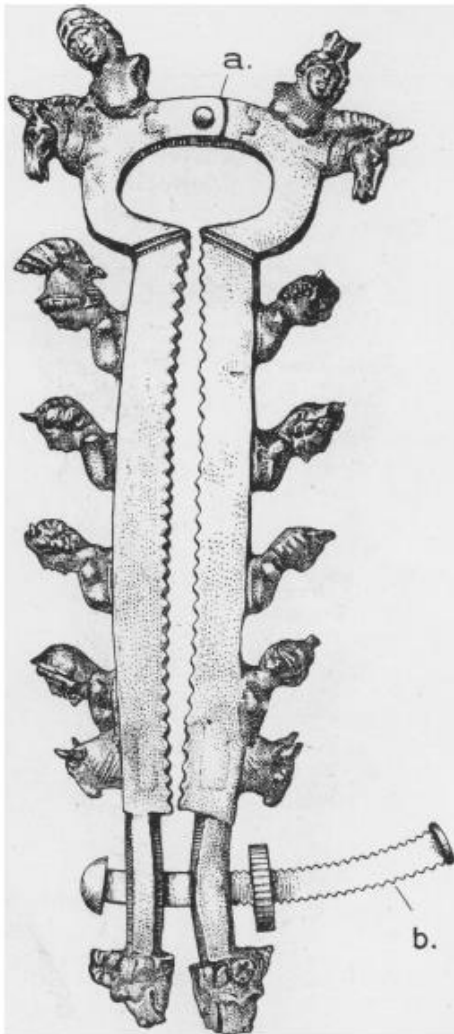


FIG. 3.—Conjectural restoration of Clamp from Thames.  
(a) Hinge. (b) Connecting-bar.

Sketch of original hypothesized castration clamp

Reproduced with permission from The Royal Society of Medicine.<sup>685</sup>

Several similar Roman clamps have been discovered in Europe, though they may be misidentified.<sup>686</sup> I believe I have identified a second Cybele testicular clamp in an unexpected location: Leavenworth, Washington, a small tourist town modeled on a Bavarian village. The Roman era castration clamp is on display with over 6,000 colorful nutcrackers in the Nutcracker Museum.

The 14” Roman bronze clamp dates between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It was discovered in the remains of a Roman villa between Rome and Naples.<sup>687</sup> While the clamp is not as elaborately decorated as the one in the British Museum, each arm has two intricately carved, reclining lions—an animal associated with Cybele—as well as what may be lion heads on the ends. There is a uniform design carved along each blade, and the hinge remains intact. The arms include openings for a connecting piece. I hypothesize that the lions facing each other on each side would have provided a frame for the inserted testicles and scrotum, as if Cybele’s lions observed each castration.

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<sup>685</sup> Francis, "Castration Clamp," 108.

<sup>686</sup> See, e.g., Alfons Kolling, "Römische Kastrierzangen," *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt*, no. 3 (1973).

<sup>687</sup> Arlene Wagner, email to author, October 7, 2020



Roman bronze clamp with lions  
Reproduced with permission from Arlene and George Wagner

If I am correct, this identification lends support to Francis's determination about the nature of the clamp in the British Museum. The existence of testicular clamps such as these casts doubt on sensationalist ancient accounts that *galli* castrated themselves in a public, frenzied state.

As Francis noted, the Roman British clamp indicates signs of heavy use—the right shank had been broken and carefully repaired, and the holes for the connecting piece were worn. Also, prospective *galli* who used a testicular clamp to assist with testicular excision likely received assistance. As a solo endeavor, such a castration would have been difficult, though not impossible.

Taking my lead from Francis’s evaluation of the elaborately decorated tool, I wondered if there might also be a ritual knife or scalpel used in these castrations. A search of ancient Roman knives decorated with a lion head revealed that there are indeed such knives, and knife handles, dating to the early Empire. The Roman knife below, now in the British Museum, has a carved lion head made of bronze, it is 8.5 inches long, and has a possible provenance of the first or second-century CE in the Gallo-Roman city *Fanum Martis* (now Corseul) in northwestern France. An ornately carved bronze bracket with Cybele, Attis, two lions, and a pinecone was discovered in the temple in *Fanum Martis*.



Roman bronze knife with lion  
British Museum. Record #1941,0231.1  
Reproduced with permission from the Trustees of the British Museum  
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Strabo provided a fascinating eyewitness account of *galli*, one aspect of which has recently been corroborated by archaeologists. Strabo wrote about his visit to the Plutonium in

Hierapolis (near modern Pamukkale, Turkey). The Plutonium, named for the god of death, is a grotto below the Temple of Pluto that emitted a deadly gas that instantly killed sacrificial animals. According to Strabo, though, *galli* were unharmed:

Now to those who approach the handrail anywhere round the enclosure the air is harmless, since the outside is free from that vapour in calm weather, for the vapour then stays inside the enclosure, but any animal that passes inside meets instant death. At any rate, bulls that are led into it fall and are dragged out dead; and I threw in sparrows and they immediately breathed their last and fell. But the *Galli*, who are eunuchs, pass inside with such impunity that they even approach the opening, bend over it, and descend into it to a certain depth, though they hold their breath as much as they can (for I could see in their countenances an indication of a kind of suffocating attack, as it were),—whether this immunity belongs to all who are maimed (πεπηρωμένων) in this way or only to those round the temple, or whether it is because of divine providence, as would be likely in the case of divine obsessions, or whether it is the result of certain physical powers (δύναμις) that are antidotes against the vapour. (13.4.14 [Jones, LCL])

Strabo provides no explanation about what might have given them powers to resist the vapor. There is indeed such a grotto, and it continues to emit carbon dioxide in noxious levels that kill birds and animals that happen to get too close. A 2018 study of the concentration of CO<sup>2</sup> found that at night, the levels sometimes reach 91 percent, which would quickly kill a person within one minute.<sup>688</sup>

In addition to *galli*, there are scattered references to other eunuchs who served in temples. However, it is unclear how they became eunuchs, whom they served, and what they did. There may have been a eunuch temple guard (νεωκόρος) at the famous Temple of Apollo at Delphi. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the third century BCE philosopher Hermippus of Smyrna wrote of a eunuch named Labys who guarded the Temple of Apollo at Delphi with its famous oracle (frag. 47b 3). Ctesias claimed that Xerxes the Great sent the eunuch Matacas to plunder and profane that temple (FGH 688 F 3c 13). Strabo wrote about other eunuchs who were called Megabyzi who served at the Temple of Hecate with some young women (παρθένος). According to Strabo,

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<sup>688</sup> Hardy Pfanz et al., "Deadly CO<sub>2</sub> gases in the Plutonium of Hierapolis (Denizli, Turkey)," *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 11, no. 4 (2019/04/01 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-018-0599-5>.

the Megabyzi were highly honored (ἐν τιμῇ μεγάλῃ) and sought out for the position (and presumably, the castration) (14.1.23).

### **The Parable's Punchline**

In Chapter 1, I elucidated eleven reasons Mt 19:12 should be interpreted as a parable. I recapitulate those here, then fully develop the last three:

1. Like other Matthean parables, Mt 19:12 is enigmatic.
2. Jesus shares concealed wisdom with privileged insiders.
3. Jesus expects active reception of his parables. Not everyone will be able to make room for this word (Mt 19:11), but “the one who can make room, must make room” (ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω: 19:12d, my translation).
4. Eschatological reversals are characteristic of Matthean parables.
5. Many Matthean parables feature three components. In almost all, the third element is most important.
6. Like other Matthean parables, Mt 19:12 relies on repetition and parallelism.
7. Matthean parables often have a punch line, lesson, or warning that comes at the end.
8. Origen provides patristic support. He read Mt 19:12 as a parable.
9. Jesus pairs something distasteful or shocking with the kingdom of heaven to compel his audience's attention.
10. Matthew created close parallels between verses 19:11 and 13:11 and 19:12d and 13:9 that encourage a comparison to the parable of the sower.
11. Almost all Matthean parables center on the kingdom of heaven.

The ninth reason to count the eunuch verse among the parables is Matthew's connection of something alarming with the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the wicked tenants, for instance, culminates in the expulsion and murder of the householder's son (21:33-43). Similarly, the king's invited guests murder the slaves who delivered the invitation (22:1-14). Other

Matthean parables present unpleasant sights and smells: leaven (13:33), the toilet (ἀφεδρών: 15:17), and the withered fig tree (21:18-22; 24:32-25).<sup>689</sup>

Matthew's early audiences would have associated self-made eunuchs with manic self-castration, effeminate dress, and ostentatious public worship of *Mater Magna*, yet Matthew linked an image of self-made eunuchs with an image of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew was a careful redactor. He knew that his auditors would visualize *galli*, but he did not want them to imitate their worship.

The Matthean Jesus categorically rejected showy displays of piety. In the Sermon on the Mount, he warned disciples and crowds not to practice their righteousness in front of people to be noticed (θεάομαι) lest they receive no reward from their father in heaven (5:48-6:1). Jesus then provided explicit directions about how to give alms, pray, and fast privately, which their father in heaven would notice in secret and recompense (6:2-18). Later, he sharply criticized Pharisees and scribes for doing all of their works to be noticed (θεάομαι) by people. They love to have preeminent seats at banquets and in synagogues, to be greeted in the market, and to be called rabbi by people (23:5-7). The Matthean Jesus who was incensed by this behavior would never encourage his followers to worship God as *galli* purportedly worshipped the Mother of Gods.

It was not their enthusiastic worship but their wholehearted devotion to the goddess and popular perceptions about *galli* that made them such an effective, albeit disturbing, image for Matthew. Their castration in honor of a goddess who was strongly associated with fertility proved that they would never be unfaithful to her.

The tenth reason Mt 19:12 should be interpreted as a parable concerns the close parallels Matthew created between verses 19:11 and 13:11 and 19:12d and 13:9:

- 19:11 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον τοῦτον ἀλλ' οἷς δέδοται  
But he said to them, not everyone can make room for this word but only those to whom it is given.
- 13:11 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὅτι ὑμῖν δέδοται γινῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς ασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν ἐκείνοις δὲ οὐ δέδοται

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<sup>689</sup> The connection to the kingdom of heaven is implicit in the parables of defilement and the fig tree. It may be inferred from Jesus's comment "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (15:13) and his warning about eschatological judgment (24:32-35), respectively.

But answering, he said to them, to you has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven but to them it has not been given.

19:12d ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω

The one who can make room, must make room

13:9 ὁ ἔχων ὄτια ἀκουέτω

The one with ears, must hear

The verses in Chapter 13 follow the parable of the sower whose seed fell on four types of soil (13:3-8). The seed failed to thrive in the first three cases but produced an abundant crop—one hundred, sixty, and thirtyfold, respectively—in the fourth (13:8). Verse 13:11 answers the disciples' question, "Why do you speak to them [large crowds] in parables?"

Following the parable's logic, Jesus is the sower (cf. 13:37), the one who hears "the word" of Jesus, understands it, and produces fruit is the good soil (13:23), and the seed that produces abundantly in good soil is knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (also the "word" of the kingdom of heaven: 13:19). Extending this logic to Chapter 19, Jesus is the sower, the one to whom it has been given (19:11) and who makes room (19:12d) is the good soil, and the seed that produces abundantly in good soil is "this word" (19:11) of Jesus about eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (19:12c).

Matthew invites a comparison between the parable of the sower and the parable of the eunuchs in a number of ways:

1. It is an invitation to insiders. Only they will be able to hear (13:9) or make room (19:12d).<sup>690</sup>
2. The disciples pose their concern directly to Jesus (13:10; 19:10), and he responds directly to them (13:11; 19:11).
3. Jesus's teaching that only some will be able to hear/make room for is encapsulated by "the word of the kingdom" (τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας; 13:19) or "this word" (19:11), which is also connected to the kingdom of heaven with 19:12c.

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<sup>690</sup> Craig Keener claims that 13:11 and 19:11 are not analogous because 13:11 describes what already happened "rather than a call to a way of life. If it were analogous to 19:11-12, then 19:11-12 would imply that all believers already have the grace to avoid marriage; but the 'let him accept' calls for action, whereas 13:11 does not." Keener, *And Marries Another*, 45. However, Keener neglects 13:9 and its parallels with 19:12d. The disciples have just heard the parable of the sower, and Jesus is about to reveal its meaning privately to them. Although many have longed to hear (and see), only the disciples are blessed to hear his words (13:16-17). Jesus indeed calls his disciples to action: he expects them, too, to produce much fruit (13:23).



4. Jesus uses the perfect passive of δίδωμι to describe the “word” that not everyone has been given.
5. Jesus expects his disciples to listen and understand. He uses the imperative hear (ἀκουέτω in 13:9; ἀκούσατε in 13:18) and make room (χωρείτω in 19:12d) for his word. “Let the one” in most English Bibles is a poor translation of Matthew’s present active imperative in both 13:9 and 19:12d.
6. “The kingdom of heaven” is object (13:11) or goal (19:12c) of the word that has been given to some but not all.
7. The “knowledge of the mysteries of heaven” (γνῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας)/“word” is what he just taught them. 19:12d and 13:9 can only point backward. They must hear his teaching about the good soil producing 100, 60, or 30 grain (13:8). They must hear about the congenital, manmade, and self-made eunuchs (19:12).<sup>691</sup>

Before they even heard the object of “this word” that only some have been given (19:11), Matthew’s attentive listeners could predict that Jesus was about to impart hidden knowledge concerning the kingdom of heaven to his disciples—and to themselves, as privileged insiders—that not everyone has ears to hear (13:13, 16-17). Matthew primed them for Jesus’s mysterious words about self-made eunuchs.

Of the characteristics Mt 19:12 shares with other Matthean parables, none is more conspicuous than Jesus’ words about the kingdom of heaven. The following section seeks to demonstrate why Matthew’s self-made eunuchs made themselves eunuchs in order to gain the kingdom of heaven.

### **Matthew’s Voluntary Eunuchs in Context**

Why did Matthew’s self-made eunuchs become eunuchs?

In the gospel of Matthew, extreme measures are sometimes necessary to obtain entry into the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus tells the disciples and crowds in the Sermon on the Mount, “for

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<sup>691</sup> There is probably also a connection between the good soil that produces one hundred fruit (13:8,23) and the one-hundred fold (ἐκατονταπλασίων) that followers receive after they have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or lands (19:29).

the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7:14). Matthew’s self-made eunuchs learned how to find the narrow gate, and they took the hard road.

The eunuchs of Mt 19:12c knew that disloyalty could lead to eternal punishment, and they acted decisively to prevent that outcome. This is true for both literal eunuchs who castrated themselves and metaphorical eunuchs who foreswore marriage, sex, or remarriage.

They believed that the kingdom of heaven was so valuable, it was worth any sacrifice. They knew that it was like a treasure concealed (κρύπτω) in a field that a person found, covered back up, and joyfully sold everything to buy (13:44), and like a merchant in search of fine pearls who sold all of his possessions to buy a pearl of great value (13:45-46).

There was one overarching reason some of Jesus’s followers became eunuchs—to obtain entry into the kingdom of heaven—and two specific impetuses that were not mutually exclusive. Some made themselves eunuchs because they wanted to stop themselves from engaging in adultery or πορνεία. They acted decisively to prevent stumbling. Others made themselves eunuchs from a desire to serve the kingdom of heaven exclusively. They acted to foreclose any potential competing loyalty (i.e., to a spouse, children).

### *The Kingdom of Heaven as Goal*

The Matthean Jesus tells his followers to strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness (6:33-34). Striving for the kingdom is more important than providing for (μεριμνάω) food, drink, and clothing (6:25-34). Their Father in heaven knows they need these things, too. They must place their faith in him and pray that his kingdom will come (6:10). His kingdom is a highly desirable place associated with feasting (8:11), treasure and reward (5:12; 6:20; 13:44; 19:21), and joy (25:21,23).

There is only one alternative, and it is bleak. Hell is the negative incentive. John the Baptist foretells God’s coming wrath (3:7) with unquenchable fire (3:10-12). Jesus warns his disciples and crowds about “fiery hell” that awaits anyone who says “you fool!” to a brother (5:22,29-30). In hell, unfaithful humans will receive corporal punishment, forever.

### *What are the benefits*

There are some earthly benefits to striving for the kingdom. For his original followers, somatic thriving was certainly one. When Jesus proclaimed “good news of the kingdom,” he

healed all kinds of diseases (4:23-24; 9:35). He empowered his disciples to do the same, and to cast out demons, raise the dead, and cleanse people with leprosy while proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come near (10:1-7). Another, and one not to be underestimated, is becoming a member of the community of disciples.

The most important rewards of following Jesus, however, are deferred. They cannot be enjoyed until after the final judgment. The centurion and many other righteous Gentiles will feast in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (8:13). Matthew invites his audiences to imagine themselves in a royal banquet hall, privileged to share food with God's most faithful. As Warren Carter has argued, the evangelist strives to build a community of disciples.<sup>692</sup> Matthew's inviting depictions of the kingdom of heaven, combined with Jesus's extensive use of sibling language and his repeated address of God as father, encourage prospective adherents to align themselves with Jesus.

Matthew's self-made eunuchs, like the twelve disciples, also anticipated remuneration in heaven for the earthly costs they incurred. Like the authors of Sirach, Tobit, 4 Ezra, 1 Enoch, Testament of Abraham, 2 Baruch, and other New Testament texts (e.g., Paul, the Synoptics, James), Matthew expected God to pay back people at judgment from his heavenly treasury for their righteous deeds.<sup>693</sup> The Matthean Jesus encourages followers to store up treasures in the divine treasury by giving alms and behaving in other self-abnegating ways. God the Father holds the wages of the righteous in heaven for them until judgment.

The theme of recompense appears prominently in Matthew, both implicitly, with Jesus's promises, and explicitly, with the terms ἀποδίδωμι (17x), μισθός (9x), θησαυρός (8x), and κληρονομέω (3x). Sincere followers of Jesus anticipate divine recompense for their earthly costs. Peter articulates the twelve disciples' collective desire most explicitly, followed by a question that appears only in Matthew: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (19:27; cf. Mk 10:28; Lk 18:28). The particle ἄρα can express "the anxiety of the

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<sup>692</sup> Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 7-14 and passim.

<sup>693</sup> Nathan Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin: The Economy of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche, (Berlin, DE: De Gruyter, 2013). Whereas all major English translations of as "from your father," the primary lexical definition of παρά with the dative renders "with your father." Applying Eubank's corrected translation of the phrase παρά τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν in 6:1 to the NRSV's translation of the verse, for example, renders "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward [μισθός] with your Father in heaven." Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 74.

questioner” and in later usage always has “inferential force,” according to LSJ. Peter expects an answer, one that will reassure him and the others that they have not left everything and followed Jesus in vain. Jesus does reassure them. He makes three promises in quick succession. The first he directs only to the twelve: “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (19:28).<sup>694</sup> Jesus offers his disciples a remarkable vision of their future in which they will share his glory and status in the kingdom of heaven and his (delegated) power to determine people’s eternal fate. He invites them to view themselves as future princes of Israel, sitting on thrones next to his. Honor and extraordinarily high status in the greatest of all kingdoms would surely appeal to his male followers (cf. 18:18; 16:18-19).

Although not everyone will have the privileges of thrones and power, faithful followers will receive over one hundred times more than what they left, a quantifiable amount, and they will inherit (κληρονομέω) eternal life (19:29; cf. 25:34). The term κληρονομέω appears in Roman wills. Appian, for example, claimed that when Romans heard Julius Caesar’s will, they became incensed that his murderer Brutus would have been named a secondary, alternate heir (κληρόνομος) to Caesar’s primary heir and posthumous adoptee, Octavius (*Civil Wars* 2.143; cf. Mt 21:38). Jesus’s followers had every reason to be hopeful about their inheritance and to interpret his words literally.

Jesus does not clarify precisely what a hundredfold might be, and Peter does not ask a follow-up question. Because the hundredfold is set against their forsaking of homes, brothers, sisters, father, mother or farms, material substitutions are implied.<sup>695</sup> Matthew presents God as generous in his recompense, even when humans have not earned the amount that they will receive.<sup>696</sup> Like Mark, Matthew does not mention leaving (ἀφήμι) a wife (Mk 10:30; cf. Lk 18:29). Because Jesus just told Pharisees and his disciples that no one should leave his wife

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<sup>694</sup> The term ‘renewal’ (παλιγγενεσία)—more literally, the re-genesis (γένεσις and πάλιν)—occurs only here and in Titus 3:5, occasionally in Philo, Josephus, and the Stoics, and rarely in later Christian literature. David C. Sim, “The Meaning of ‘palingenesia’ [Greek] in Matthew 19.28,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 4.

<sup>695</sup> Cf. Mk 10:29-30, where they receive earthly compensation now and eternal life later. See also Job 42:12-17.

<sup>696</sup> Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing*, 37-38.

except for πορνεία (19:9), such an addition could undermine his words.<sup>697</sup> Matthew does, though, add “father” (cf. Mk 10:30; Lk 18:29).

Jesus promises his followers that many of the first will be last, and the last, first (19:30; 20:16). After experiencing indignities on earth, self-made eunuchs for the kingdom might well wish to be “first” in the kingdom. The first round of day laborers who meet a landowner before dawn, ready to work in his vineyard, are not only the last ones to receive wages; they also watch successive groups of other men receive exactly the same denarius they had agreed to in the morning. The last group worked just one hour whereas the first toiled in the heat all day, with no extra compensation (20:1-16). Mrs. Zebedee’s gutsy request provides another example. When she asks for special status for her sons in Jesus’s kingdom, Jesus informs his disciples that whoever wants to be first among them will be their slave (20:21-27). Enslaved persons were “last” in terms of earthly status. A third example of inverted firsts occurs when Jesus insults chief priests and elders: prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners will enter the kingdom while they (21:3) must now watch as these underwhelming people receive their original place and its privileges.<sup>698</sup>

Other divine compensation in Matthew has no direct monetary value but nonetheless heartens followers: comfort for those who mourn (5:4), satiety for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6), mercy for the merciful (5:7), the opportunity to see God for the pure in heart (5:8), and the title “sons of God” for peacemakers (5:9). Jesus encourages his followers to earn their wage (μισθός), that is, to become “sons of your father in heaven” (5:45). As children of God and siblings of one another, Jesus’s faithful adherents anticipate their future home in the kingdom of heaven. Eternal belonging in God’s household presents the greatest recompense.

### *Obtaining Entry*

#### *What one must do to enter the kingdom of heaven*

To enter the kingdom of heaven in Matthew, Jesus’s followers must be faithful to God’s will, no matter how difficult that may be. Jesus is their model. He also provides a compass:

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<sup>697</sup> καταλείπω in 19:5; χωρίζω in 19:6; ἀπολύω in 19:9; cf. 19:3,7,8,9. Mark has a similar exchange with the Pharisees and his disciples about divorce, marriage, and adultery (Mk 10:2-12).

<sup>698</sup> However, the “first” in the parable Jesus tells the chief priests and elders is one of two sons; he initially refuses to work in his father’s vineyard, but repents, then works, whereas the second son agrees to work but does not.

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (22:37-39; citing Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes specific characteristics and behaviors that merit entry to the kingdom: being poor in spirit (5:3; cf. 19:23-24), being persecuted for the sake of righteousness (5:10), keeping and teaching the commandments (5:19), being more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), and doing the will of the father in heaven (7:21; 21:31). He links the kingdom of heaven with good seed that bears grain (13:24,26,38), good fish (13:48), laborers in a vineyard (20:1), a nation that produces good fruit (21:43), and five prudent young women who attend a bridegroom (25:1-2). In 18:1-4, Jesus tells the disciples that they must abase themselves like children if they wish to enter the kingdom of heaven. In 19:21-22, he tells a rich young man that to be perfect, he should sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow him. When the man leaves, despondent, Jesus warns his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (19:23-34).

The Matthean Jesus describes the righteous behavior of sheep at the judgment who will inherit the kingdom (25:32-34): they cared for his brothers by feeding them when they were hungry, giving them something to drink when they were thirsty, inviting them in when they were strangers, clothing them when they were naked, visiting them when they were sick, and coming to them when they were imprisoned (25:35-40). Most of these references indicate that for humans to enter or live in the kingdom of heaven, they must behave righteously on earth. If they do not do the will of God, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

#### *What are the costs*

The Matthean Jesus expects that many of his adherents will incur significant costs as they strive to enter the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus actively recruits male disciples to join his eschatological work, he encourages them to leave their closest kin and property to follow him (4:18-22; cf. 19:21-29). Chapter 2 discussed the diminishment of earthly households in light of the eschaton. Jesus’s followers must subordinate or sever all other relationships.

19:29 extends Matthew's destabilization of earthly families. Earlier, Jesus disabused his disciples of the notion that he came to bring peace; rather, he came with a sword "to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." (10:35-36; citing Mic 7:6) Peter's words' "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (19:27) may at first appear petulant, but there is an unspoken violence underlying them. The disciples left family members, family occupations, and homes to follow Jesus. They suffered, but they were not the only ones. If Matt 10:35-36 and 19:27 are more than hyperbole, families were broken and factionalized. Throughout Matthew, much leaving and suffering occurs for Jesus's sake (5:11; 10:18, 39; 16:25), God's sake (19:5), and the kingdom's sake (19:12). There appear to be no eschatological rewards for those family members who were left behind and no earthly rewards for anyone.

Jesus himself demonstrates the costs of following divine will. Although fully cognizant of his Father's plans for his death, Jesus agonizes over it (26:27-45). By the end of his three prayers, and the disheartening behavior of his disciples, Jesus is nonetheless resolute. He will remain faithful to God's will and face his death in spite of betrayal, humiliation, pain, and death. His words on the cross demonstrate both his agony and his faithfulness (27:46). Through Jesus, Matthew underscores how extraordinarily difficult it can be for a human being—even the man beloved by God and intentionally created as King David's successor—to remain faithful. Active suffering, with the attendant risk of physical destruction, is an inextricable part of life for the Matthean Jesus, his immediate followers, and prospective disciples.

Jesus uses a vivid image to warn the twelve that he is sending them into danger to do God's work: they are to see themselves as sheep in the middle of a pack of wolves (10:16). Following him will lead to suffering and death (10:38-41; 16:25-26). They will be mistreated, betrayed, flogged, persecuted, and hated by everyone for his name's sake (10:16-22; 24:9). Repetition of these warnings enhances their rhetorical force. Although James and John Zebedee have not yet drunk Jesus's cup, and Jesus questions their ability to do so, they intend to; Jesus's prediction that they will indeed drink his cup confirms that they, too, will experience suffering and death (20:22-23; cf. 26:39, 42, 44; 26:27-29). After Peter promises that he will never deny Jesus, even if he must die with him, the eleven make the same promise (26:35). While not one

fulfills it (at least, not initially: 26:21-25, 40-45, 48-50, 56, 69-75; 27:3-5), each voices his willingness to die with Jesus.

The body—in whole or in part—may need to be destroyed. Jesus’s followers must not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; they should fear the one who can kill the soul and body in hell (10:28). Protagonists in Matthew consciously, and repeatedly, choose self-abnegation and risk bodily destruction for the kingdom. John the Baptist lives alone in the wilderness, dressed in a scratchy camel’s hair garment and leather belt. His diet consists of locusts and honey (3:4). As a biblical prophet like Elijah (11:14; 17:10-12), John speaks divine truth to people, bluntly, even in the face of death. His declaration of Herod Antipas’s wrongdoing directly to that king leads to John’s imprisonment and beheading (14:1-12). As we shall see in the following section, there are also times when self-destruction of an offending body part becomes necessary for eternal salvation.

Jesus’s words in 16:24-28 distill precisely what Jesus, and his Father, expect of loyal followers:

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

#### *The Decision: Making the Cut to Prevent Adultery and πορνεία*

Adultery is a grave matter in the First Gospel. Jesus is explicit about its consequences in the Sermon on the Mount: if a man commits adultery, or even looks at a woman with lust, his body may spend eternity in hell (5:29-30). πορνεία also destroys marriages (5:32; 19:9). Jesus links both πορνεία and adultery with other evils, including murder (15:19).

Matthew’s self-castrated eunuchs acted decisively to prevent themselves from engaging in these proscribed behaviors. They jeopardized their corporeal wholeness, procreative potential,



masculine social status, and existing relationships. Short of a lengthy, shameful death, the earthly costs could not have been much higher.

The voluntary sacrifice of property and progeny was not advisable in an imperial world based on patriarchal household units and succession, yet the Matthean Jesus promoted it. Males who voluntarily castrated themselves—or had someone else do it—and had no medical reason to do so faced legal risks. Both civil and ecclesial bodies legislated against castration and eunuchs. At least four emperors—Domitian, Nerva, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius—banned castration within imperial borders. From the late first century through at least 533 CE, castration was illegal, with penalties ranging from loss of property to execution for voluntary castrates and doctors who performed castrations.

And yet some males did choose. They had good reason.

*Why were μοιχεύω and πορνεία so dangerous?*

For Matthew’s early audiences, μοιχεία commonly referred to the sexual violation of a female of respectable status, that is, of a married woman, an honorable young woman, or a widow.<sup>699</sup> Augustan legislation criminalized both *adulterium*, that is, sex with someone else’s wife, and *stuprum*, sex with a respectable boy, young woman, or widow.<sup>700</sup>

Jesus first mentions adultery in reference to the biblical commandment “You shall not commit adultery” (Mt 5:27; Ex 20:14 [LXX 20:13]; Deut 5:18 [LXX 5:17]). For a follower of Jesus, the first problem with adultery is that it is in direct violation of God’s commandment. That is never a good thing.

The second problem is that with Jesus’s extension of the commandment to the eyes, adultery is frightfully easy to commit. He warns his disciples and crowds that looking at a woman with lust is equivalent to committing adultery with her in the heart (5:28), that divorcing a woman, with the exception of πορνεία, causes her to commit adultery, and that whoever

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<sup>699</sup> Lexicons define μοιχεύω and cognates in two main ways: literally and metaphorically. In a literal sense, the terms refer to adultery. For example, LSJ’s primary definition of μοιχεύω reads “commit adultery with a woman, debauch her,” and BDAG’s first entry for μοιχάω reads “be caused to commit adultery, be an adulterer/adulteress, commit adultery.” Metaphorically, the terms refer to idolatry. The LSJ lists “to be unfaithful to God” under its first definition of μοιχάω after “have dalliance with” and “commit adultery.” Similarly, as its secondary definition of μοιχάω, BDAG has “be guilty of infidelity in a transcendent relationship, be unfaithful.” See also Kyle Harper, “Porneia: The making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012): 366, 80.

<sup>700</sup> Adolf Berger, Barry Nicholas, and Susan M. Treggiari, “adultery, Roman” in OCD

marries a divorced woman commits adultery (5:32). Jesus’s opening words “but I say to you” (λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν) in Mt 19:9 recall his earlier warnings about the eyes, desire, adultery, and divorce in 5:28 and 5:32.

Other formative Christian and rabbinic writings connect a man’s lustful eyes with adultery. The author of 2 Peter denounces false teachers with eyes “full of adultery” (μεστοὺς μοιχαλίδος) who entice people with unsteady souls (2:14).<sup>701</sup> Rabbinic and patristic sources caution that adultery can be committed with the eyes.<sup>702</sup> Tannaitic Rabbi Tarfon recommended that a man caught masturbating should have his hand severed upon his navel (*b. Nid.* 13b). When other rabbis questioned him about the man’s belly being split open in the process, Rabbi Tarfon responded: “It is preferable that his belly be split open, and he should not descend into the pit of destruction.” Rabbi Tarfon’s logic corresponds exactly with Matthew’s: as a therapeutic act, amputating an offending body part in life will save a man from a more severe eternal punishment.<sup>703</sup>

Not many today would equate a desiring gaze with adultery or illicit sexuality, and many scholars interpret Matthew’s verses as metaphorical. Such interpretations, however, miss the import of Jesus’s warning for ancient audiences. Matthew’s verses cohere with widespread conceptions of vision. According to one reigning ocular theory, the eyes, which are made of fire and water, actively emit rays toward objects. The gaze of a lover was not merely poetic or hypothetical; it was active and potent.<sup>704</sup> As Plutarch explained at a small dinner party of elite Roman men, “[v]ision provides access to the first impulse to love, that most powerful and violent experience of the soul, and causes the lover to melt and be dissolved when he looks at those who

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<sup>701</sup> One can also commit πορνεία with the eyes in Testament of Issachar 7.2 and Testament of Benjamin 8.2, cited by Charles E. Carlston and Craig A. Evans, *From Synagogue to Ecclesia: Matthew's Community at the Crossroads*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 210n103.

<sup>702</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Simeon, son of Lakish, said that “any one who commits adultery physically with his body shall be called an adulterer, but we say to you, that anyone who commits adultery with his eye shall be called an adulterer” (Pesikta Rabbati 24; Levit Rabba 23). In his homily on Mt 5:27-28, Chrysostom warned men that they must not allow their eyes to wander away from their wives to behold another woman’s beauty. The look harms both the wife and “her on whom you have looked, by touching her unlawfully. Since, although you have not touched her with the hand, yet have you caressed her with your eyes; for which cause this also is accounted adultery...” (*Homily* 17 [Prevost and Riddle, ANF]).

<sup>703</sup> Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 53. Moss notes that many Markan scholars cite this text.

<sup>704</sup> This theory is often called extramission, and sometimes emission.

are beautiful, as if he were pouring forth his whole being towards them” (*Table-Talk* 681 [Clement and Hoffleit, LCL]).

μοιχεύω and πορνεία are related but not interchangeable.<sup>705</sup> πορνεία denotes prostitution in Classical and Hellenistic texts. The LXX also uses πορνεία for prostitution and metaphorically, for idolatry (e.g., Ezek 23). For Josephus and Philo as well, πορνεία means prostitution.

Increasingly in Jewish and Christian texts like the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, however, πορνεία denotes other sexual behaviors that the authors considered unacceptable.<sup>706</sup> As a fascinating example, the dying patriarch in the T. Reu. warns his sons, grandsons, and brothers that because women are evil (πονηρός: 5:1) and more susceptible than men to the spirit of πορνεία, they scheme in their heart against men, seduce their minds first through their adornment, use their glance to inflict poison, and then take them captive (αίχμαλωτεύω) through their doings (5:3). Ishay Rosen-Zvi argues that the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs participate in a new discourse of πορνεία as a mental struggle waged by men against female temptation.<sup>707</sup> For the author of the T. Reu., πορνεία features prominently. A spirit of deceit (πλάνη) rooted in nature (φύσις) and the senses (αἴσθησις: 3:3), πορνεία is activated with the help of Beliar and his spirits (2:2; 3:2). A man needs divine help to conquer πορνεία; he must purify his mind first so God may enter, then liberate him.<sup>708</sup>

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<sup>705</sup> In the New Testament, terms with the root πορν appear fifty-six times, often in reference to female prostitutes (e.g., Lk 15:30, and frequently of the “great whore” [personified Rome] in Rev 17-18), but also to sexually immoral men (e.g., 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10), sex outside of marriage (e.g., 1 Cor 7:2), incest (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1), and spiritual fornication (1 Cor 6:17-18). Seven vice lists include πορνεία (2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Mk 7:21; Mt 15:9; Rev 9:21; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5). The semantic range of πορνεία terminology is not unique to the New Testament; it is amply illustrated in the LXX, the Testaments of the Patriarchs, Philo, and later Christian literature. Harper, “Porneia: The making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” 369-83.

<sup>706</sup> David Wheeler-Reed, Jennifer W. Knust, and Dale B. Martin, “Can a Man Commit πορνεία with His Wife?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018): 384, 87.

<sup>707</sup> Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Bilhah the Temptress: “The Testament of Reuben” and “The Birth of Sexuality,”” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 96, no. 1 (2006): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2005.0098>. He challenges Foucault’s assertion that the birth of sexuality occurred with Christianity by showing how Jewish Hellenistic writings, in particular the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, already engaged in this discourse well before early Christian texts. His insightful, thought-provoking article would have benefited from a direct engagement with the *Testaments*’ contested authorship upfront rather than in footnote 109 (of 112 total).

<sup>708</sup> Rosen-Zvi, “Bilhah the Temptress,” 84-85. Clement of Alexandria made a similar claim about the necessity of God’s help to overcome desire (ἐπιθυμία) (*Strom.* 3.7.57).

By the time Matthew wrote, *πορνεία*'s semantic range included not just prostitution but also fornication, unchastity, idolatry, exogamy (or miscegeny),<sup>709</sup> adultery, and female temptation.<sup>710</sup> Occasionally, an author interpreted *πορνεία* as a reference to a married couple's sex if it was motivated by lust instead of procreation. For David Wheeler-Reed, Jennifer Knust, and Dale Martin, that is how *πορνεία* should be interpreted in Matthew.<sup>711</sup>

An overview of Matthew's adultery and *πορνεία* language will help clarify how the first evangelist used these terms and why they were so dangerous. The term *μοιχεία* and its cognates occur nine times in Matthew; *πορνεία* and cognates, five. The following list includes every occurrence:

- 5:27 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery (*μοιχεύω*).'
- 5:28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust (*ἐπιθυμέω*) has already committed adultery (*μοιχεύω*) with her in his heart.
- 5:32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity (*πορνεία*), causes her to commit adultery (*μοιχεύω*), and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (*μοιχάω*).
- 12:39 But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous (*μοιχαλίζ*) generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."
- 15:19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery (*μοιχεία*), fornication (*πορνεία*), theft, false witness, slander.
- 16:4 "An evil and adulterous (*μοιχαλίζ*) generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Then he left them and went away.
- 19:9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (*πορνεία*), and marries another commits adultery (*μοιχάω*).
- 19:18 He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery (*μοιχεύω*); You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness;"
- 21:31 "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes (*πόρνη*) are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

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<sup>709</sup> Wheeler-Reed, Knust, and Martin, "Commit *πορνεία*," 388, referring to Tobit 4:12 and 1 En 10:9-10.

<sup>710</sup> Lexical definitions for *πορνεία* and cognates also include literal and metaphorical entries. The LSJ lists "prostitution, fornication, unchastity" as its primary definition of *πορνεία* and "idolatry" as its secondary. BDAG's first two entries for *πορνεία* are "unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication" and "participation in prohibited degrees of marriage, fornication," respectively. For its third entry, BDAG lists "immorality of a transcendent nature, fornication."

<sup>711</sup> Wheeler-Reed, Knust, and Martin, "Commit *πορνεία*," 389. The authors cite Tobit 8:7 (394), 1 Thess 4:3-6 (396), Tatian Fr 5, and Clement's broad category of *πορνεία* and his statement that a man who has sex with his wife for pleasure adulterates the marriage (Paed 2.10) (397-8). See also the authors' helpful overview of Jewish attitudes about licit sex during Hellenistic and Roman times on pages 389-393, including footnotes.

21:32 “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes (πόρνη) believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Matthew, like Paul and Mark, distinguishes μοιχεία from πορνεία (Mt 5:32; 15:19; 19:9; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Mk 7:21).<sup>712</sup> However, it is not immediately apparent how he differentiates the two, so a closer look at 5:32, 15:19, and 19:9 is necessary.

5:32 and 19:9 include Matthew’s exception clauses: παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας and μη ἐπι πορνεία, respectively. The clauses have puzzled scholars because they appear only in Matthew, and πορνεία is a notoriously slippery term. Dale Allison argues that Matthew’s addition of the exception clauses helps explain Joseph’s initial plan to divorce Mary.<sup>713</sup> The first evangelist presents Joseph as a righteous man who, when he learns of Mary’s pregnancy, plans to divorce her privately so he will not disgrace her (1:18-19). For Matthew, that is what an honorable Jewish man should do when his betrothed has had sex with someone else. Because of the exception clauses, Joseph’s plan to divorce Mary does not contravene Jesus’s teaching on lifelong marriage. Without Matthew’s exception clauses, Joseph would be guilty of μοιχεία if he divorced his betrothed.

Allison claims that for his argument to work, πορνεία must mean adultery. That is less convincing because, as we have seen, πορνεία is a capacious term. Matthew never shares Joseph’s or Mary’s understanding of the circumstances that led to her pregnancy. Maybe Joseph assumed that she had been seduced or raped, or voluntarily engaged in sex with another man, or prostituted herself. Matthew does not say.

Other scholars claim that πορνεία in the exception clauses refers to the woman’s sexual behavior. Because Matthew specifically addresses men in both verses (i.e., divorcing “his wife,” not vice versa), they argue, the woman is to blame.<sup>714</sup> Kyle Harper avers that Matthew uses

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<sup>712</sup> The Markan original has a different order and includes seven other evils (italicized): “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, *avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly*” (Mk 7:21-22). Matthew adds false testimonies (ψευδομαρτυρία).

<sup>713</sup> Dale C. Allison, “Divorce, Celibacy and Joseph (Matthew 1.18-25 and 19.1-12),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 15, no. 49 (1993), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X9301504901>.

<sup>714</sup> David Janzen argues that the Matthean Jesus spoke about divorce with just cause, and the only just cause was *porneia*, that is, when a woman had sex during her betrothal or marriage with someone other than her husband. David Janzen, “The Meaning of *porneia* in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23, no. 80 (2001): 79. Wheeler-Reed, Knust, and Martin, “Commit *πορνεία*,” 393.

πορνεία instead of μοιχεία in the exception clauses because the former evokes a woman's shame and Mt 19:9 recalls Deut 24:1 (ἄσχημον πράγμα).<sup>715</sup> Halvor Moxnes explains that men in Matthew's community risked dishonor after a wife's infidelity: "It is a man's honor and his power to protect his property and to secure a legitimate offspring that is at stake. This must have been an issue of great concern for Matthew's community, since he brings it up all together three times, every time focusing on the sexual unfaithfulness of the wife."<sup>716</sup>

The argument that the fault for πορνεία lies with the woman is not strong enough. Neither exception clause actually specifies who engaged in πορνεία, hence it could be the female, the male, or both parties. We might infer that the woman is to blame in 19:9 because the man initiates the divorce (19:9), but Matthew does not tell us. The guilty party is also unclear in 5:32 but could refer to the male given Jesus's sharp warning in the preceding verses about a male viewer's sexual desire for a woman who is not his wife and the necessary response (5:28-30).

Jesus's warning about μοιχεία and πορνεία in Mt 15:19 is part of his response to Peter's request that Jesus explain the parable. The larger context is defilement (κοινόω). Jesus explains that the heart is the center of defiling behaviors, including μοιχεία and πορνεία. There is a possibility that Matthew speaks of incestuous marriages, but there is not enough evidence from this verse to draw that conclusion.

In addition to the three uses of πορνεία in 5:32, 15:19, and 19:12, Matthew also mentions female prostitutes (πόρναι in 21:31-32). Most prostitutes were slaves or former slaves, and they were widely disparaged, especially by upper classes. At the same time, prostitution was tolerated, ubiquitous, and highly visible in the Roman Empire.<sup>717</sup> Because the tax collectors and prostitutes believed John, who came in the way of righteousness (ἐν ὁδοῦ δικαιοσύνης), they will enter the kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders. Again Matthew juxtaposes a righteous man—this time John—with a πορν term. The irony would be clear to Matthew's audiences: the chief priests and elders in the temple, who should be the most righteous men, are not as righteous as the prostitutes, who live unrighteously by engaging in illicit sex.

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<sup>715</sup> Harper, "Porneia: The making of a Christian Sexual Norm," 375-76.

<sup>716</sup> Moxnes, "A Man's Place," 109.

<sup>717</sup> Thomas McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 60.

We can now make four inferences about πορν- terminology in Matthew. First, it does appear to involve illicit sexuality. Second, it is opposed to righteousness. Third, it originates in the heart. Finally, that πορνεία is the only permissible grounds for divorce in Matthew indicates that it caused irreparable damage to the marital bond (5:32; 19:9).

When the rich young man asks Jesus which commandments he must observe so that he may obtain eternal life (ἵνα σχῶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον: 19:16), Jesus restates the commandment about adultery (19:18). He also affirms the young man's understanding that he must act in certain ways in order to obtain eternal life with the words "but if you wish to enter into life (εἰ δὲ θέλεις εἰς τὴν ζωὴν εἰσελθεῖν), keep the commandments" (19:17). To receive eternal life in Matthew, Jesus's followers must keep the commandments. They dare not commit adultery.

The synoptic writers extend the meaning of μοιχεία to include remarriage after divorce (Mk 10:11-12; Mt 19:9; Lk 16:18). Matthew goes even further by having Jesus claim that divorce *is* μοιχεία: when a man initiates divorce, he implicates his wife in adultery, and when he marries a divorced woman, he commits adultery (5:32).<sup>718</sup>

We have seen that Matthew understands adultery in several ways. Like πορνεία, μοιχεία originates in the heart. μοιχεία also manifests through a lustful look. A man not only implicates himself when he breaks the adultery commandment by divorcing his wife or marrying a divorced woman (except for πορνεία), he implicates the woman. The greater breach of faith is his unfaithfulness to God. When he breaks a commandment, he is unfaithful to God.

There is another way Matthew understands adultery: as an indication of infidelity to God. In his repeated statement about Jonah's sign (12:39; 16:4), the Matthean Jesus speaks of an evil (πονηρός) and adulterous (μοιχαλίζ) generation (γενεά). In the first statement, Jesus refers to some scribes and Pharisees (12:38). Because they have not repented and accepted that something "greater than Jonah" and "greater than Solomon" is here, "this generation" will be judged and condemned (12:41-42). Similarly, when Jesus repeats the expression "evil and adulterous generation" (16:4), he addresses Pharisees and Sadducees who came to test him (16:1).

Matthew's understanding of adultery is consonant with his understanding of marriage as divinely instituted. God instituted marriage at creation for human beings. A violation of the marital bond is a violation of divine will for humanity. Following Moses, the Matthean Jesus

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<sup>718</sup> Fitzmyer, "Matthean Divorce Texts," 207; Harrington, *Matthew*, 87.

reminds followers that they must remain faithful to their spouses. That loyalty is crucial, but it is not sufficient. They must remain loyal to God lest they, like some Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees, face condemnation at the judgment.

### *Amputation as Therapy*

Given the threat of eternal punishment for infidelity, Matthew's self-made eunuchs made a dramatic decision. Metaphorical eunuchs—that is, ascetics—committed to permanent abstention from sex, marriage, or remarriage. Literal eunuchs made the decision to castrate themselves or have themselves castrated. Further examination of Matthean narrative context, in light of societal practices and beliefs about amputation, will help clarify why literal eunuchs came to their decision and why the majority concluded that Jesus spoke metaphorically.

On two occasions prior to 19:12, Jesus encourages self-amputation and prompt removal of an offending body part. The first instance is the threat of adultery when a man looks at a woman with lust. Jesus tells his disciples and crowds to pluck out (ἐξαιρέω) and throw away (βάλλω) a right eye that causes you to stumble (5:29) and to cut off (ἐκκόπτω) and throw away a right hand that causes you to stumble (5:30). Jesus also tells disciples to cut off and throw away a hand or foot that causes you to stumble (18:8) and pluck out and throw away an eye that causes you to stumble (18:9).

Both times, Jesus provides a compelling reason: “it is better for you to lose one of your members (μέλος) than for your whole body (ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου) to be thrown into hell” (5:29-30; ἀπέρχομαι instead of βάλλω in 5:30). With “lose one of your members,” the NRSV obscures the Greek ἀπόλλυμι, which is better translated “destroy one of your members.” In the parable of the wedding feast, for example, the enraged king did not “lose” those murderers and burn their city; he destroyed them (ἀπόλλυμι: 22:7). In Chapter 18, Jesus is even more explicit: “it is better it is better for you to enter life maimed (κυλλός) or lame (χωλός) than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire” (τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον) (18:8) and “it is better for you to enter life with one eye (μονόφθαλμος) than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire” (τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός) (18:9), respectively. The intentional self-destruction of a body part that causes one to stumble facilitates entry into the kingdom of heaven.

In both texts, Jesus's graphic language drives home the point that what people do in life determines where and how they will spend eternity. The pain of self-destruction of body parts



now, on earth, pales in comparison to one's entire body burning eternally and to being permanently shut out of the kingdom of heaven.

A common thread in these self-amputation texts is the language of scandal (σκανδαλίζω). When Jesus's words about self-amputation are interpreted within broader Matthean as well as LXX context, two things become clear: the gravity of scandalizing, and the necessity of acting quickly and decisively to prevent the scandal.

In extant writings prior to the first century, σκανδαλίζω terminology appeared almost exclusively in the LXX, and thereafter, predominantly in Christian writings.<sup>719</sup> LSJ translates σκανδαλίζω as “to make to stumble, give offence or scandal to” and σκάνδαλον as “a trap or snare laid for an enemy” and metaphorically, as “a stumbling-block, offence, or scandal.” In the LXX, σκάνδαλον denotes a trap, one that often leads people away from the Lord. σκανδαλίζω warns against idolatry (directly, as in Jdg 2:3, or indirectly, as in Josh 23:13), the mistreatment of people (e.g., Lev 19:14; Ps 50:20), and twice, sexual impropriety (Sir 9:5; PsSol 16:8).

Matthew uses σκανδαλίζω and its cognates more than any other New Testament author (19x).<sup>720</sup> σκανδαλίζω language warns Jesus's followers not to entrap others (16:23; 17:27; 18:6,7; cf. 11:6) and to guard against their own entrapment (13:21; 18:8,9; 24:10; 26:31,33; by adultery and impermissible remarriage: 5:29-30). The terms also denote evil or faithless people (13:41,57; 15:12). Causing fellow followers of Jesus to stumble is so grave, drowning in the sea's depths with a millstone around one's neck is preferable (18:6), and while some stumbling blocks are necessary (ἀνάγκη), Jesus explains, the person responsible is cursed (18:7). At the close of the age, the Son of Man will send his angels to gather all stumbling blocks and people who break the law and throw them into the furnace of fire (13:41-42).

Scholars uniformly claim that the Matthean (or historical) Jesus speaks metaphorically in all the self-amputation texts (Mt 5:29-20; 18:8-9; 19:12); however, they assume rather than argue

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<sup>719</sup> A TLG word index search of “σκανδαλ” produced 5,315 results. Of those dated prior to the common era, all but two are found in the LXX. Two Athenian writers—Cratinus and Aristophanes—used the same phrase: σκανδάληθρ' ιστάς ἐπῶν: Cratinus, frag. 457 and Aristophanes, *Acharnenses*, line 687. Aristophanes used the term to refer to “verbal pitfalls.”

<sup>720</sup> σκανδαλίζω: Mt 5:29,30; 11:6; 13:21,57; 15:12; 17:27; 18:6,8,9; 24:10; 26:31,33(2x). σκάνδαλον: 13:41; 16:23; 18:7(3x)

that his language could not be literal. Jesus uses “graphic hyperbole,” explains one.<sup>721</sup> Another writes of Mt 5:29-30 that “the three examples (a sexual thought, plucking out the eye, removing the hand) are so extreme that a literal interpretation of these sermonic examples can hardly have been intended – by either Jesus or Matthew.”<sup>722</sup>

Recently, Candida Moss has argued for a literal interpretation of the Markan Jesus’s words about removing a hand, foot, or eye (Mk 9:43-48).<sup>723</sup> The primary contexts for amputation in antiquity were martial and medical, and Mark’s logic accords with the widespread understanding in antiquity that amputation was a therapeutic measure to save life.

Doctors performed amputations as a life-saving measure in cases of gangrene, that is, when a lack of blood flow causes tissue death due to injury, chronic disease, or advanced infection. Examination of a recently discovered amputated femur (thigh bone) in the Isola Sacra necropolis south of Rome indicates that some second-century CE amputations were successful. That particular individual survived the procedure and may have lived for months or years afterward.<sup>724</sup>

Amputation, however, could be fatal, and surgery was the last resort.<sup>725</sup> In the early first century, Celsus explained that patients often died during surgery, but when gangrene had spread and medications failed, cutting off the impacted limb was the only option. Writing from his hometown of Chaeronea in the Roman province of Achaia (modern Greece), Plutarch noted that people paid for amputation when a hand or foot became putrid (σήπω) (*On Borrowing* 831d).<sup>726</sup> On the other side of the Mediterranean Sea in Alexandria, Philo had a different perspective. He claimed that doctors never mentioned the treatment beforehand so the patient would not become disheartened: “For what sensible doctor would say to his patient, ‘Sir, you will be subjected to the knife, the cautery or amputation [τετμήση, κεκαύση, ἀκρωτηριασθήση]’ even if it will be

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<sup>721</sup> Referring to Mt 5:29-30 and 18:6-9, Evans, *Matthew*, 124, 330. Of Mt 18:8-9, Evans writes that “Jesus’ grotesque recommendations, of course, are not to be taken literally” (331). Similarly, for Raymond Collins, Jesus uses a “graphic metaphor” Collins, *Divorce*, 118.

<sup>722</sup> Carlston and Evans, *Synagogue to Ecclesia*, 210. These verses were not hyperbolic for the Skoptsy. In addition to Mt 19:12, they cited Mt 18:8-9 and Lk 23:29 to explain their self-castration Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale*, 19.

<sup>723</sup> Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 41-65.

<sup>724</sup> David S. Weaver et al., “A Surgical Amputation in 2nd Century Rome,” *The Lancet* 356, no. 9230 (2000): 686, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(05\)73840-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)73840-X).

<sup>725</sup> Vivian Nutton, “Medicine,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History XI: The High Empire, A.D. 70-192*, ed. Alan K. Bowman (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 948.

<sup>726</sup> Also cited by Moss, *Divine Bodies*, 52.

necessary that he should submit to such operations. No one” (*The Unchangeableness of God* 14 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL]. The training and experience of doctors also varied. Healers could be wise women, court physicians, or even root cutters. As one scholar of Roman medical archaeology explained,

There were no regular courses of medical teaching to be undertaken, no examinations to be passed, no qualifications to be gained, no controlling body and no general agreement on standards or required skills. In effect, there was no restraint on anyone who wished to set up himself (or herself) as a healer, and levels of ability evidently varied widely.<sup>727</sup>

Prospective amputees may have compared the surgical risks to the risk of death from the underlying health problem. Many probably sought divine guidance and support for a successful outcome.

That amputation was the go-to treatment of last resort for diseased body parts may also be inferred from oratorical writings. Cicero compared the necessity of killing immoral tyrants to amputating a diseased limb: “And this may be done by proper measures; for, as certain members are amputated (*amputantur*), if they show signs themselves of being bloodless and virtually lifeless and thus jeopardize the health of the other parts of the body, so those fierce and savage monsters in human form should be cut off from what may be called the common body of humanity” (*On Duties* 3.6 [Miller, LCL]). Similarly, Quintilian offered the following as one of two ordinary similes: “As doctors amputate limbs which disease has alienated from the body (*ut medici abalienata morbis membra praecidant*), so wicked and dangerous men, even if they are related to us by blood, must be cut off” (*amputandos*) (*Inst.* 8.3 [Russell, LCL]). In an attempt to convince his audience that the things people fear most can be beneficial, Seneca the Younger wrote:

But if you will reflect that for the sake of being cured the sick sometimes have their bones scraped and removed, and their veins pulled out, and that sometimes members are amputated which could not be left without causing destruction to the whole body, you will allow yourself to be convinced of this as well,—that ills are sometimes for the good of those to whom they come. (*On Providence* 3.2 [Basore, LCL])

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<sup>727</sup> Ralph Jackson in “Holding on to Health? Bone Surgery and Instrumentation in the Roman Empire,” in *Health in Antiquity*, ed. Helen King (London, GB: Routledge, 2005), 97.

In each case, the rhetorician depends on his audience's familiarity with the amputation of diseased body parts as a dangerous but potentially life-saving measure of last resort.

Given their understanding of Jesus's words about self-amputation, Matthew's self-castrated eunuchs made a perfectly reasonable decision. They knew that their eternal salvation depended on preventing sexual desire that led to adultery or πορνεία. Bodily wholeness was unnecessary in the kingdom of heaven and might even impede their entry.

They were in good company. The young Alexandrian man in Justin's account sought the same thing. The adulterer in the Acts of John acted on it. The *Sentences of Sextus* recommended excision of offending parts, as did Rabbi Tarfon. Origen accused Marcion of a too-literal interpretation. Then Origen himself was accused of a too-literal interpretation. Philo provided an even closer analogue to Mt 19:12c:

And so, to my thinking, those who are not utterly ignorant would choose to be blinded rather than see unfitting things, and to be deprived of hearing rather than listen to harmful words, and to have their tongues cut out to save them from uttering anything that should not be divulged. Such things have been done before now. Certain wise men, they tell us, while being tortured on the wheel to induce them to reveal secrets have bitten off their tongue, and so contrived a worse torture for their torturers, who found themselves unable to obtain the information which they wanted. It is better to be made a eunuch than to be mad after illicit unions (ἐξευνουχισθῆναι γὰρ μὴν ἄμεινον ἢ πρὸς συνουσίας ἐκνόμους λυττᾶν). All these things, seeing that they plunge the soul in disasters for which there is no remedy, would properly incur the most extreme vengeance and punishment. (*The Worse Attack the Better* 48 [Colson and Whitaker, LCL])

Philo understood castration as a solution for rampant sexual desire when the alternative was eternal punishment.

Self-amputation—even the desire for it—could also demonstrate obedience to God. In a charming passage in *Genesis Rabbah*, a fourth or fifth century rabbinic commentary on Genesis, Isaac and Ishmael argue about whom God loves more (55:4). Each uses his circumcision as proof. Isaac asserts that God loves him more because he was circumcised at eight days. Ishmael counters: no, God loves me more because I could have protested my circumcision at age thirteen but did not. Isaac cries out that he wishes God would appear and tell him to cut off one of his limbs, and he would not refuse. God *then* interjects to say that even if he tells Isaac to sacrifice himself, Isaac will not refuse. The argument sets the stage for Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac.

*The Decision: Making the Cut to Serve the Kingdom with Undivided Loyalty*

I have discussed the gospel's self-amputation texts and how they might have guided Matthew's self-castrated eunuchs to their decision. There was an equally compelling reason to make oneself a eunuch, whether literally or metaphorically. Although the marital bond is sacred in Matthew, it is not eternal. Self-made eunuchs chose a different bond. They chose to serve the kingdom of heaven. As self-made eunuchs, they determined to be loyal to God, the heavenly king. They relinquished their freedom to create competing bonds on earth.

When Jesus teaches in the Temple shortly before his death, some Sadducees approach him with a question about the resurrection (22:23). They ask Jesus about a hypothetical Levirate marriage scenario in which an original husband, his seven brothers who subsequently marry the widow, and the woman herself all die childless (μη̄ ἔχων τέκνα: 22:24; μη̄ ἔχων σπέρμα: 22:25). In the resurrection, the Sadducees ask Jesus, whose wife will she be, since she married all of them?

The first part of Jesus's response sheds light on one aspect of eternal life: "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven"<sup>728</sup> (22:30). Angels in Matthew perform God's work in heaven and on earth by speaking to righteous humans on God's behalf (1:20,24; 2:13,19; 28:5), by ministering to Jesus (4:11) and possibly to "little ones" (18:10), by rolling back Jesus's tomb stone (28:2), by serving as legions when called for duty (26:53), and by supporting work associated with the final judgment: reaping (13:39), gathering stumbling blocks and lawbreakers and throwing them into hell (13:41), severing the wicked from the righteous (13:49), gathering the elect throughout heaven (24:31), and accompanying the Son of Man in glory (16:27; 25:31). Angels' only purpose is serving God. They do not marry. They do not have sex. They do not generate children. They sound a lot like eunuch slaves.

Although Matthew remains silent about Jesus' marital status, the evangelist gives audiences no reason to believe he had a wife or children. Almost always on the move and with no place to lay his head, he demonstrates exclusive loyalty to his father's will up to, during, and

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<sup>728</sup> This interaction is less polemical than others between Jesus and Jewish leaders in the First Gospel. Matthew does not state that the Sadducees "test" him (cf. 16:1,6,11,12).

after his death. Knowing that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near (4:17) and that the age is coming to an end (28:20; cf. 13:39-40, 49; 24:1-51), Jesus dedicates his life to saving God's people. From a less lofty standpoint, he also had no time to fuse himself with a woman (19:4-6), create new children, and serve that family, nor would he choose such a hypocritical path for himself when he promises rewards for those who leave children, etc., to follow him (19:29). Tertullian was not far off the mark when he referred to Jesus and Paul as eunuchs.

Matthew's self-made eunuchs understood that marriages endured only until death or the eschaton. They chose a more permanent bond. They promised exclusive loyalty to the kingdom of heaven rather than a spouse. They chose the existence that enslaved eunuchs did not.

### **Concluding Remarks**

For contemporary scholars, it is self-evident that the Matthean Jesus spoke about metaphorical eunuchs—so self-evident, in fact, that they do not argue for a metaphorical over a literal reading. With a notable exception—Origen of Alexandria—ancient exegetes did not argue for their metaphorical interpretations, either. Yet they contended with literal interpretations in a different way: they faced Christian males in their communities who were castrating themselves or having themselves castrated. Justin Martyr wrote sympathetically about a potential castrate. Subsequent Christian leaders were less sanguine. Origen, Basil, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Shenoute all complained about Christians who castrated themselves. Clerical anti-castration bans provide further evidence that early church leaders struggled with clergy and laity who interpreted Mt 19:12c literally.

The existence of *galli*, eunuch devotees of the goddess *Mater Magna* or one of her counterparts, further distinguishes ancient from modern exegesis. In the Roman Empire, worship of the mother goddess was well established and widespread. Many scholars do not recognize just how shocking the image of her *galli* would have been for Matthew's early audiences when juxtaposed with the kingdom of heaven. *Galli* were notorious for noisy, boisterous worship in colorful feminine attire. By some accounts, they castrated themselves publicly in a frenzied state to signal their loyalty to the goddess, in imitation of her self-castrated consort Attis.

Both ancient and contemporary exegetes have interpreted Jesus's words about self-made eunuchs metaphorically, as an invitation to certain followers to abstain from sex, marriage, or

remarriage. Early interpreters also focused on self-control (e.g., σωφροσύνη; ἐγκράτεια), volition, and above all, heavenly rewards.

Ultimately, I came to agree with Origen's assessment that followers of Jesus who interpreted the self-made eunuchs literally did not understand that "Jesus spoke these words as well in parables (ταῦτα ἐν παραβολαῖς ἐλάλησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς) and in a spiritual manner" (πνεύματι εἴρηται) (15.1 [Heine]). In this chapter, I completed my argument that the Matthean Jesus's words about eunuchs are a parable about the kingdom of heaven and implicitly, loyalty. In their Matthean context, the self-made eunuchs are best interpreted metaphorically. In order to gain the kingdom of heaven, they acted decisively to prevent themselves from engaging in πορνεία or adultery and/or to devote themselves fully to the kingdom.

Matthew's self-made eunuchs knew what was at stake before they made their life-changing decision. They knew that their eternal life hung in the balance. Their action fully concurred with Jesus's words about the difficulty of entering the kingdom of heaven (19:16-30) and self-amputation (5:27-32; 18:1-10). Because they understood its exceeding value, they accepted the earthly costs. They unlocked the mystery of the parable.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

“We might be better off thinking less about what they ‘mean’ and more about what they can ‘do’: remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb . . . .”<sup>729</sup>

In late-nineteenth century Russia, Petr Latyshev described his experience of receiving a Skoptsy total castration (the “major seal”)<sup>730</sup> along with thirty or forty others: “Burning with the desire as soon as possible to wash our feet, according to the commandment of Jesus Christ, hurrying toward the kingdom of the living God, turning away from darkness toward life, we had ourselves castrated.”<sup>731</sup> The surgeons cut off “the bodily parts no longer needed in the new life, one after the other, so in one fell stroke blood flowed, the soul rejoiced, the body was purified!”

Latyshev’s desire, excitement, and joy are undeniable. For most of us, his decision to have his external genitals cut off is profoundly disturbing.

Following Matthew’s narrative logic, Latyshev’s choice makes sense. To obtain entry into the kingdom of heaven sometimes requires drastic measures, from leaving behind family members to cutting off body parts. Latyshev eagerly sought his new life in God’s kingdom. He destroyed the parts of himself that were preventing him from reaching eternal life.

Since the early second century, ardent followers of Jesus have interpreted Matthew’s eunuch verse in sharply divergent ways. Some have renounced sex, marriage, or remarriage to dedicate their lives to the kingdom of heaven. Others have castrated themselves, or had themselves castrated, to prevent πορνεία or adultery.

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<sup>729</sup> Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 4.

<sup>730</sup><sup>730</sup> The “minor seal” was removal of the testicles. The “major” or “royal” seal included the penis and testicles. Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale*, 13, 18, 69.

<sup>731</sup> Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale*, 169, 267n67-69. Engelstein translates from two different letters. The Skoptsy were a devout group of Russian Christians who participated in ritual castration and ablation. The Skoptsy existed from the mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth century.



When I struggled to interpret Mt 19:12 within its narrative and historical context, what finally emerged was a parable about the kingdom of heaven and loyalty (πίστις). That is not what I expected, but I am glad nonetheless. In exegesis of this verse, there always seems to be an implicit question: *Was Jesus really talking about literal eunuchs?* Whatever the case, some Christians always have taken his words literally. We do well to remember that. What Matthew's parable of the eunuchs can 'do' for Matthean scholars is

### ***Remind***

Matthew gives us three groups of eunuchs, not one. When we focus only on Matthew's self-made eunuchs, we miss the others and a rich history of reflections about them. More than that, we miss the chance to learn about the lives and challenges that faced congenital and enslaved eunuchs in the Roman world. Issues of sexuality, marriage, procreation, and gender are fraught in the twenty-first century. They were no less so in the first.

### ***Provoke***

The Matthean Jesus speaks in parables so that people will not understand him. He encourages self-abnegation and self-amputation. He promises substantial rewards to followers who leave behind their family members, homes, and livelihood to follow him. He tells disciples to take up their cross and follow him. He, and his ministry, are destabilizing. His words about eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs provoked ancient audiences and they provoke us now. As they should.

### ***Refine***

Describing eunuchs from mother's womb as males who have a "defect," "deficiency," or "deformity" is unhelpful, even harmful. It does not advance scholarship on Matthew's eunuchs and it perpetuates ableism. And for scholars trained to read primary texts closely, why have mother's wombs vanished in articles and commentaries about Mt 19:12? Finally, numerous tannaitic texts show that eunuchs were members of early Jewish communities who had wives, sex lives, and ritual responsibilities. It is time for biblical scholars to desist from the damaging, inaccurate claims about Jewish (or Israelite or rabbinic) abhorrence and exclusion of eunuchs.

### ***Confront***

Whether scholars prefer a historical approach, as I admittedly do, or use their expertise to comment on contemporary issues, Matthew's eunuchs should challenge the assumptions that we make about bodies—especially other people's bodies—relationships, and loyalties. For example, although babies born with atypical genitals or phenotypes are not put to death as some were in Roman antiquity, the assumption remains that *something is wrong* that requires quick intervention (e.g., surgical and pharmacological).

### ***Disturb***

What disturbed a first-century audience about eunuchs is not necessarily what disturbs a twenty-first century audience. In the evangelist's world, there was nothing particularly disturbing about a king with slaves.

For a twenty-first century audience, enslavement is a big problem. Eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people were *created* to be *exploited*. Elite positions notwithstanding (and I would argue that this makes the enslavement more insidious), they represent yet another example of enslavement in a gospel that is still foundational for Christians. Scholars must not skip over this group of eunuchs; they are part of the larger fabric of enslavement that is woven into the First Gospel.

### Suggestions for Future Research

There is a reception history (or a few) waiting to be done on Mt 19:12. The selective history of interpretation I offered was a sketch. An expanded history would contribute to a scholarly reimagining of the eunuch verse. I stumbled across some wonderful reflections on eunuchs by the Byzantine archbishop Theophylact (c. 1050 – c. 1126) and a charming exegesis by Thomas Aquinas that led to his affirmative answer to the question of whether eunuchs merited an aureole, the small golden crown granted as a heavenly reward of distinction for certain virtuous behaviors.<sup>732</sup> Alternatively, a modern reception history might focus on the appeal

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<sup>732</sup> The aureole appears in late medieval and early Renaissance art as a small golden crown, often held over the individual's head by two angels. In Botticelli's [Madonna del Magnificat](#), the virgin Mary writes the Magnificat with Jesus in her lap as angels hold the *aureole* above Mary's golden *aurea*. See Edwin Hall and Horst Uhr, "'Aureola super Auream': Crowns and Related Symbols of Special Distinction for Saints in Late Gothic and Renaissance

of Mt 19:12 in Imperial Russia. Latyshev was not the only one drawn to Matthew's eunuch verse. Leo Tolstoy opened his shocking 1890 novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* with two epigraphs: Mt 5:28—"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."—and Mt 19:10-12.<sup>733</sup>

Future work on the eunuchs of 19:12c should be extended by theoretical approaches to and historical research on body modification, asceticism, mystery language, and ritual. As one example, some followers of Jesus who made themselves eunuchs may have interpreted their literal or metaphorical castration as some ancient Jews understood their circumcision. Because Matthew says nothing about Jesus's circumcision (cf. Lk 1:59; 2:21), we should question its absence in a gospel whose protagonist declares: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (5:17-18).

Scholarship on Matthew's eunuchs would be enhanced by interdisciplinary research and conversations that include intersex perspectives.<sup>734</sup> Such work should attempt to "historically situate both eunuchs and intersex people, without losing sight of how constructions of meaning are tied to power dynamics."<sup>735</sup> It is my hope that more nuanced readings of Mt 19:12a by New Testament scholars will provide some encouragement to intersex individuals who read Matthew and to Christian communities that welcome and support intersex and other non-binary people.<sup>736</sup> As I interpret Mt 19:12, particularly 19:12a, in its historical and narrative context, there is indeed hope. If, as I have argued, the eunuchs of Matthew 19:12a were engendered that way from mother's womb, their very existence as intersex individuals reflects God's creative work.

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Iconography," *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 4 (1985). The issue of rewards itself, which appears so frequently in ancient exegesis of Mt 19:12, merits further investigation.

<sup>733</sup> In an epilogue, Tolstoy again cited Mt 19:10-12 to help explain why Christianity called for complete chastity. In the novella, the protagonist confesses how and why he murdered his wife in a fit of jealous rage. It was translated into English in 1890 and censored in the U.S. See Peter Ulf Moller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoj and the debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, trans. John Kendal (New York, NY: E.J. Brill, 1988). Tolstoy maintained that falling in love and having sexual intercourse were appropriate for (non-human) animals but degrading for people and that Christ never instituted marriage (epilogue 298, 304).

<sup>734</sup> Susannah Cornwall's edited volume has already started this process from the standpoint of theology. Susannah Cornwall, ed., *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text, and Society* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>735</sup> Marchal, "Staging Conversations," 43.

<sup>736</sup> Marchal is more pessimistic about the value of Mt 19:12a. However, there is much to be said about Matthean narrative context, which Marchal did not consider.

Another area that merits scholarly attention is transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming perspectives on eunuchs. As a colleague pointed out to me, it is possible that some eunuchs were trans women before the idea of transitioning existed. She wonders if

[c]reating the category of eunuch allows (again, from the perspective of this trans-laywoman) scholars and writers of antiquity to conceptualize what may have been just trans women, and since (I imagine) the medical procedures available to trans women at the time were frankly limited, becoming a eunuch may have been an outlet for those who were dysphoric enough to need it.<sup>737</sup>

There is a curious account in Josephus about a(nother) eunuch named Bagoas who was executed by Herod the Great along with some Pharisees. It is a story of intrigue and revenge. It also has a messianic flavor. Bagoas had been promised that he would become “father and benefactor of him who would some day be set over the people with the title of king, for all the power would belong to him and he would give Bagoas the ability to marry and to beget children of his own” (A.J. 17.4 [Marcus and Wikgren, LCL]).

Mt 19:12 invites questions about eschatology, messianic expectations, and hopefully, future research. As I write this conclusion, it is exactly twenty years after 9/11. I do not often think about the horror of that day, of the flames, of people jumping out of skyscrapers to their deaths below, of a plane full of people preparing to crash into a field, of first responders rushing into the World Trade Center to save lives, even when it meant their own.

I am not comparing 9/11 with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70. However, the memory of 9/11 does shrink the vast distance a little, at least for me. I am reminded that trauma is universal,<sup>738</sup> and that the world can be a deeply frightening and unstable place to live. An examination of the reception of Isa 56:3-5 and Wis 3:14 in the wake of the 70 CE destruction, enslavement, and deportation and in the context of eschatological expectations, ideas about barrenness and eunuchs, and messianic movements would further elucidate Matthew’s eunuchs and eschatological vision.

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<sup>737</sup> Mina Shedd, email to author, June 2, 2021.

<sup>738</sup> Although the experience and understanding of trauma and pain are culturally and historically specific. See, e.g., Talal Asad, "Agency and Pain: An Exploration," *Culture and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01438300008567139>.

## Concluding Remarks

Ancient and modern exegetes have focused intently on Mt 19:12c-d and claimed that Jesus spoke of metaphorical eunuchs. My interpretation of Mt 19:12 as a parable supports a metaphorical interpretation. However, the formative church and later church bodies struggled for centuries to stamp out the practice of castration among their members and leaders. The repeated clerical and civil proscriptions, which have been neglected by scholars, challenge our assumption that Christians who understood Mt 19:12 literally and castrated themselves or had themselves castrated were anomalies. There were Christian eunuchs from the second century through the twentieth. Clerical rulings would not exist if Christian men were not getting castrated. As we saw in the writings of Justin Martyr, the Acts of John, Origen, and Eusebius, Christians who castrated themselves purportedly did so because they wanted to control their sexual desire and live virtuously.

In closing, Matthew's parable of the eunuchs is about more than literal or metaphorical eunuchs, more than asceticism or castration. At core, Jesus's message is about faithfulness to God. In the First Gospel, Jesus always prioritizes his father's will and works doggedly to prepare people for the kingdom's arrival. He discourages any competing loyalties. Eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs demonstrated their loyalty to the kingdom of heaven. They promised to follow the first and great commandment to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind (22:27-28). The third group had a choice to make to enter into the joy of their master (25:21), and they embraced it.

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