

Chapter 1:

EUNUCHS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Before looking specifically at the three passages that will be the main focus of this project it is necessary to look more generally at the subject of the eunuch in the Hebrew Bible. Who were the סָרִיסִים (*sārîsîm*)? What was their role in society? And, what was their social standing? The answers to these questions will bear heavily on our reading of the stories of Ebed-melech, Hathach, and Ashpenaz. Although it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about a world so far distant from our own, and although we must be careful to recognize the cultural distinctions among the various books of the Hebrew Bible, we can nevertheless make some useful observations as we attempt to answer the questions the *sārîsîm* raise in our minds.

The Difficulty of Translation

The first question to be addressed when studying the *sārîsîm* is that of the proper translation of the word. Should סָרִיס (*sārîs*) be consistently translated “eunuch?”¹ Or can it also refer to non-castrated officials in the court of the king? Gene McAfee in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible* cites the common wisdom, “Context largely determines whether the Hebrew should be translated ‘eunuch’ or simply ‘official.’”² According to this way of thinking, the translator should look at the context of the story and decide if a translation of “eunuch” would cause difficulties for a modern reader — as in the case of Potiphar, a married *sārîs* mentioned in

¹ Here, and throughout, I use the word “eunuch” in the standard English sense of a man who has been castrated or emasculated.

² Gene McAfee, “Eunuch,” *OCB*, 205.

Gen 37: 39–40, or in cases where *sārîsîm* are seen commanding troops or acting with authority (1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6, 25:19; 2 Chr 18:8; Jer 52:25). However, this translation principle simply bows to modern stereotypes about eunuchs and does not actually answer the question of whether or not all *sārîsîm* were indeed castrated or emasculated. The most definitive answer to the question thus far has been Hayim Tadmor’s essay “Was the Biblical *sārîs* a Eunuch?”³ in which he argues for what he calls “the pan-eunuch view,” offering evidence for consistently translating *sārîs* as eunuch.

Tadmor begins with the axiom that the Hebrew *sārîs* was borrowed from the Akkadian *ša/šut rēši*. These court officials were often depicted in Assyrian monuments as beardless courtiers, and therefore may have been eunuchs.⁴ However, Tadmor points out that whether these officials were “merely young pages and clean shaven adults” or “emasculated males” is a matter of debate.⁵ As a scholar working in Akkadian, Tadmor’s hope is that an examination of the textual evidence in the Hebrew Bible will shed some light on the meaning of the Akkadian words from which *sārîs* was borrowed. So, in the body of his essay he works through groups of biblical texts that contain the words *sārîs/sārîsîm*, in an attempt to ascertain a definition for each.

³ Hayim Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *sārîs* 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, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 317–25.

⁴ A man castrated before the age of puberty does not develop secondary sexual characteristics, such as beard growth. Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* (trans. Margaret Crossland; London: Souvenir, 1998), 14–15.

⁵ Tadmor, 317–18.

The first of Tadmor's groups includes pre-exilic texts in which *sārîsîm* are portrayed in connection with or working in the queen's quarters of Israel or Judah.⁶ Associations between the courts of Israel and Judah and other western Asian and north-eastern African courts would lead to a conclusion that these *sārîsîm* were eunuchs. "It is very unlikely that any other males but eunuchs would be permitted to move freely in [the queen's] private quarters."⁷ For, as Tadmor points out, "in contemporary Assyria the only males permitted to enter the royal harem were eunuchs and the efficacy of their castration was periodically checked and verified."⁸ The most famous Israelite queen to be associated with eunuchs is Jezebel of Tyre (a region that was later part of Phoenicia), and though the practices of the court of Tyre are unknown, the later Phoenicians were the main source of harem eunuchs for the Greek city-states.⁹ Therefore, in cases where the *sārîs* is working in the queen's quarters of Israel or Judah, "eunuch" would be the most appropriate translation.

The second of Tadmor's groups is those pre-exilic texts that do not reference people working in the queen's quarters.¹⁰ One of these is particularly interesting, because *sārîsîm* appears in a list that includes men, women, and children.¹¹ "The *sārîsîm* are clearly a separate category

⁶ 2 Kgs 9:32, 24:12, 15; Jer 29:2.

⁷ Tadmor, 319.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 121–22.

¹⁰ 1 Sam 8:15, 1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6, 23:11, 25:19; 1 Chr 28:1; 2 Chr 18:8; Jer 34:19, 38:7, 41:16, 52:25.

¹¹ "Then Johanan son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him took all the rest of the people whom Ishmael son of Nethaniah had carried away captive from Mizpah after he had slain Gedaliah son of Ahikam — soldiers [הַמְלָחָמִים וְנָשֵׁי וְיָלְדֵיָם *'anšê hammilḥāmāh*], women, children, and eunuchs, whom Johanan brought back from Gibeon" (Jer 41:16 NRSV).

alongside males, females, and minors and are rendered ‘eunuchs’ in the ancient and modern translations.”¹² Likewise, there are several instances where *sārîsîm* are juxtaposed against עֲרֵי־שָׂרִים (*śārîm*), the Hebrew word for officials,¹³ or against other types of courtly men,¹⁴ indicating they are not officials — at least in the usual sense. Jeremiah 38 is such a case: Verse 1 uses the standard *śārîm* when referring to the court officials, while Ebed-melech is called a *sārîs* in verse 7. There are also three instances where an individual *sārîs* is mentioned with no other context.¹⁵ In two of these (1 Kgs 22:9 and 2 Kgs 8:6) it is impossible to ascertain a proper translation. However, the similarity between Nathan-melech’s name (2 Kgs 23:11) and that of Ebed-melech (Jer 38:7, 8, 10, 11, 12; 39:16) has led translators to render his title “‘eunuch’ in both ancient and modern translations.”¹⁶

The most difficult of the pre-exilic texts is that of Potiphar, who is married. However, this fact should not preclude him from being a eunuch. For, while there is no direct *contemporary* evidence of eunuchs marrying, “there are examples of that practice in later empires where, in certain cases, the eunuchs married and adopted children.”¹⁷ Another possible solution to the Potiphar problem is to note that source-critical analysis suggests the story of Potiphar’s wife is a

¹² Tadmor, 320.

¹³ 2 Kgs 24:12; Jer 34:19; 1 Chr 28:1.

¹⁴ 1 Sam 8:15 (opposed to עֲבָדָיו/’*abādāyw*, translated “his courtiers” by NRSV); 2 Kgs 24:15 (opposed to הָאֱלֵי הָאָרֶץ/’*ēlê hā’areṣ*, translated as “elite of the land” by NRSV); 2 Kgs 25:19 and Jer 52:25 (opposed to אֲנָשִׁים מִן־הַמְּלָכָה/’*anāšîm mērō’ê pēnê hammelek*, translated “men of the king’s council” by NRSV, and הַסֹּפֵר/’*hassōpēr*, translated “the secretary” by NRSV, and אֶשְׁשִׁים/’*šiššîm* ’îš, meaning “sixty men”).

¹⁵ 1 Kgs 22:9 (= 1 Chr 18:8); 2 Kgs 8:6, 23:11.

¹⁶ Tadmor, 320.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

late addition. Lawrence M. Willis points out, “The source usually ascribed to E, connects quite smoothly from 37:36 to 40:2 (deleting also the references to Joseph as prisoner).”¹⁸ I would argue for a source-critical analysis that does less violence to the final form of the text. Simply by deleting 39:2-23, the story may be read as a coherent whole without the presence of Potiphar’s wife. The story of Joseph and Potiphar begins in chapter 37, is interrupted by the story of Judah and Tamar, and then resumes in 39:1, where the narrator reminds the reader that Joseph was bought by “Potiphar, an officer [*sārîs*] of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard” (NRSV). Skipping 39:2–23, the story continues, “Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt” (40:1 NRSV). The offending men are placed in custody (בְּמִשְׁמָר/bēmišmar),¹⁹ in the house of the chief of the guard (i.e. Potiphar), in the round house (בֵּית הַסֹּהַר/bêt hassōhar),²⁰ in the place (מִקְוֹם/mēqôm) where Joseph is confined. Without the story of Potiphar’s wife, there is no reason to assume this is a prison scene. Westermann says, “they [the cupbearer and baker] were under investigation, not serving a prison term.”²¹ Speiser also notes, “Joseph was not Potiphar’s prisoner but his duly acquired slave” and goes on to posit that he was merely “assigned to wait on the incarcerated courtiers.”²² In this

¹⁸ Lawrence M. Willis, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 53.

¹⁹ “בְּמִשְׁמָר does not describe a place, namely, the prison, but a situation, detention.” Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion S.J.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 74. This is consistent with *BDB*, which lists “guard, watch, observance” as possible denotations (1038).

²⁰ This phrase, usually translated “prison,” occurs only in this story, and means literally “house of roundness.” (*BDB* 690) The root סהר occurs only here and in Song 7:2, “Your navel is a rounded bowl” (NRSV).

²¹ Westermann, 74.

²² E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 306.

reading there is no need to excise references to the prison (round house), and there should be no objection to referring to Potiphar, the cupbearer, and the baker (all called *sārîs* by the narrator) as eunuchs.

Finally, Tadmor turns to postexilic uses of the word *sārîs*.²³ Isaiah 56:3–5 contains an “explicit reference to a *sārîs* as a castrate.”²⁴ Verse 3 tells the *sārîs* not to call himself “a dry tree” (עֵץ יָבֵשׁ יְבֵשׁ *yābēš*), a clear euphemism implying that his offspring will no longer *branch forth* and his *seed* is no longer fertile (common reproductive metaphors). In verse 5 the *sārîs* who keeps God’s covenant is promised a monument (גְּזֵזַת *yāzāt*) and a name. The word translated “monument” most commonly means hand or strength,²⁵ but is used as a euphemism for a phallus in the very next chapter.²⁶ The end of the verse says the name they are given “shall not be cut off” (NRSV), surely another allusion to the condition of the *sārîs* as eunuch. In fact the verb used here (כָּרַת/*krt*) is the same verb used in Deut 23:1, “one . . . whose penis is cut off [כָּרַת/úkrût]” (NRSV).

In another post-exilic text, Hegai and Hathach, the *sārîsîm* who help Esther, are clearly eunuchs, since they serve in the harem. In fact, the Babylonian and Persian milieus of *all* the other postexilic references to *sārîs/sārîsîm*, lend themselves to a translation of “eunuch.” The

²³ Isa 39:7; 56:3–4; Esth 1:10, 12, 15; 2:3, 14–15, 21; 4:4–5; 6:2, 14; 7:9; Dan 1:3, 7–11, 18.

²⁴ Tadmor, 321.

²⁵ BDB, 389–390.

²⁶ “and you have made a bargain for yourself with them,/you have loved their bed,/you have gazed on their nakedness” (57:8b NRSV). The last phrase is קָרַת יָדָא (yād hāzît). A note in the NRSV reads, “Or *their phallus*; Heb *the hand*.” (Italic in original.)

Assyrians, who had close ties to Babylon and ruled it in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E.,²⁷ were believed by Herodotus to have been the first nation in western Asia to castrate for non-religious reasons, and are generally accepted as having popularized the practice in the region.²⁸ The Persian penchant for using eunuchs in harems and in many parts of government is well-documented,²⁹ and the Greek historian Hellanicus of Lesbos claimed the Persians adopted the practice from the Babylonians.³⁰ Within the context of these cultures where the use of eunuchs was so widespread and pervasive, the translation of *sārîs* as eunuch is most reasonable.

Tadmor concludes there is no evidence that would militate against the term *sārîs* standing for eunuch in both pre-exilic and postexilic contexts, “and a point of semantics may be added to support it. It is very hard to imagine how *sārîs* could have borne two simultaneous meanings in Biblical Hebrew; that of royal courtier (not castrated) and that of (court) eunuch.”³¹ The evidence points to a translation of eunuch in all cases. However, knowing that the biblical *sārîs* is indeed a eunuch leads to other questions about the daily lives of these biblical eunuchs.

Physical Characteristics of Eunuchs

The first question that often arises in discussions about biblical eunuchs is that of how eunuchs would have looked and sounded. The physical manifestations of eunuchism in the body

²⁷ John A. Brinkman, “Assyria,” *OCB*, 63; William W. Hallo, “Babylon,” *OCB*, 71.

²⁸ Greenberg, 121.

²⁹ Piotr O. Scholz, *Eunuch’s and Castrati: A Cultural History* (trans. John A. Broadwin and Shelley L. Frisch; Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 81–2.

³⁰ John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 134.

³¹ Tadmor, 322.

of a eunuch depended a great deal on the type of operation performed on him, and on the age at which it was performed. Generally, eunuchs were either castrated by having their testicles removed or disabled in some way (sometimes by crushing), or emasculated by having the entire member (penis and testicles) removed.³² If the operation was performed before the age of puberty, the eunuch would not develop the secondary characteristics of his sex — that is, deepening of the voice, beard growth, male-pattern baldness, etc. Castration or emasculation at a young age also led to other abnormalities caused by the imbalance of hormones created by a lack of testosterone. Eunuchs were known to develop fatty deposits on the hips, neck, and breasts, and to tend toward obesity. They were also frequently associated with gigantism, since the secretions of their pituitary gland were not counteracted by testosterone levels.³³ Men castrated or emasculated after puberty would experience a lessening of the sex drive, thinning of the beard, fattening of the body, and even heightening of the voice, though to a lesser extent than younger men.³⁴ There are also accounts of eunuchs living unusually long lives, though how (or if) this could be a result of castration is unclear. Emasculation, of course, was the most severe of the operations, and resulted in a high mortality rate. Castration was less severe, though infections in the wound were a genuine concern and could lead to death.

³² Charles Humana, *The Keeper of the Bed: The Story of the Eunuch* (London: Arlington Books, 1973), 14–15.

³³ Barbier, 14–15.

³⁴ Taisuke Mitamura, *Chinese Eunuchs: The Structure of Intimate Politics* (trans. Charles A Pomeroy; Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970), 36–37.

Social Roles of Eunuchs

Discussion of the social roles of eunuchs often begins with the etymology of the word eunuch, which comes from the Greek εὐνοῦχος (*eunouchos*) meaning literally “keeper of the bed.” In this context, eunuchs are associated with harems where they were employed as guards and servants.³⁵ However, beginning the discussion here has the two disadvantages of Greco-centrism and of ignoring the wider range of roles available to west-Asian and northeast-African eunuchs.

It is certainly true that eunuchs were employed by wealthy men in the women’s quarters of their homes in ancient western Asia and north-eastern Africa. As I’ve already mentioned, in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find a story of eunuchs serving in Jezebel’s quarters in the palace of Judea (2 Kgs 9:32). We also find eunuchs serving Queen Esther in the Persian palace located at Susa (Esth 2; 4).

One common explanation for the use of eunuchs as women’s attendants is that eunuchs were considered “safe” chaperones, since they could not produce children with the women they served. However, a more nuanced approach to the role of eunuchs in the harem sees eunuchs, generally, as guardians of sacred boundaries.³⁶

In the book of Esther, eunuchs not only serve the queen. They also serve in the virgins’ quarters, in the king’s quarters, and as guards at the gate of the palace. In other ancient west-

³⁵ Gary Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 33; and Humana, 21.

³⁶ Although I look to many sources for my reading of ancient biblical cultures, my understanding of eunuchs as guardians of sacred boundaries was influenced by Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Asian and northeast-African cultures, we find them serving as priests to the goddesses Astarte, Anath, Ishtar, Anahita, Atargatis, and Cybele.³⁷ Later, in Islamic societies of the same region, eunuchs guarded important tombs in Medina, Cairo, Mecca, and Jerusalem.³⁸ In all of these examples, eunuchs stand at the thresholds between worlds — between the royal and the mundane, between the sacred and the profane, between men and women, and between the living and the dead.

That eunuchs stand at many thresholds is easy to ascertain; *why* they are found there is more difficult to determine. Perhaps, the association with thresholds is a natural outgrowth of the eunuch's place between the sexes. In every culture, ancient and modern, where castrates are found, these men are referred to as “neither men nor women.” As mentioned above, this is true of the biblical *sārîs*, who are listed separately from men, women, and children in Jer 41:16. It is also true of the court eunuchs in ancient China, the Castrati in Enlightenment Europe, and the Hijra in modern India.³⁹ In all of these societies, eunuchs are given boundary-crossing access to areas normally segregated by sex. And in all such cases they also, by virtue of their ambiguous gender, become associated with otherworldliness and with the ability to guard the doors between worlds.

³⁷ Greenberg, 96, 98, 105, 187; Toni Craven, “Atargatis,” *WIS*, 513.

³⁸ Marmon, Preface, ix–x.

³⁹ Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 43–44; Barbier, 17; Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Blemont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990), xxiii.

Piotr O. Scholz, in *Eunuchs and Castrati: A Natural History*, writes of another possible explanation for the between-ness of eunuch status. He points to the fact that a castrated man cannot bear children. Castrates, he posits, were thought to have less of an attachment to this world, because they had no progeny for whom to provide. As he puts it, “they were no longer part of this world,” though “they were not yet part of another.”⁴⁰ This would explain their frequent representation in temple cults, and later as the guardians of tombs.

This lack of progeny also provides the basis for another common function of eunuchs — that of court official. As already mentioned, the *ša/šut rēši* were Assyrian court officials, probably eunuchs, represented on monuments as beardless men. The Persians are also known to have promoted eunuchs to positions of authority, including generals in the army. For example, “According to Xenophon, Cyrus the Great (sixth century B.C.E.) preferred eunuch military officers because their loyalties were not divided between their sovereign and their families, and because they could not harbor dynastic ambitions by fathering children (*Cyropaedia* 7.60–65).”⁴¹ Eunuchs, it seems, were thought to be more trustworthy than other men who could father children. This might explain why Genesis portrays Pharaoh as having a eunuch captain of the guard (Gen 37:36) and eunuchs for baker and cupbearer (Gen 40:2). That eunuchs were sometimes given general access to the king is also evidenced by the seven named eunuchs who attend King Ahasuerus in Esth 1:10, and by Bigthan and Teresh, two eunuchs who almost

⁴⁰ Scholz, 90.

⁴¹ Will Roscoe, “Precursors of Islamic Male Homosexualities,” in *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (ed. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe; New York: New York University Press, 1997), 68.

assassinate the same king in Esth 2:21–23. Likewise, Daniel and his friends are examples of eunuchs being given great authority in the Persian empire.⁴²

The role of eunuchs in the particular courts of Judah and Israel is more difficult to ascertain. As already mentioned, we know Jezebel of Israel kept eunuchs as attendants in her royal quarters. Eunuchs are also mentioned among the people carried off with Jehoiachin of Judah's mother and his wives by the Baylonians (2 Kgs 24:12–15). Eunuchs are portrayed performing various court functions, from fetching the prophet Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:9) to restoring a woman's possessions (2 Kgs 8:6). One eunuch is said to have commanded soldiers during the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah (2 Kgs 25:19; Jer 52:25). They are also mentioned alongside David's mighty warriors and his warriors (1 Chr 28:1), though the late dating of the book of Chronicles may make the use of *sārîsîm* in this instance anachronistic.

There is no evidence that trade in eunuchs was wide-spread in Israel and Judah, and one of the few eunuchs who is mentioned by name, Ebed-melech, is specifically said to be of foreign origin (Jer 38:7). Though castration is mentioned as a form of punishment in many of the legal codes of the surrounding regions, including the Code of Hammurabi,⁴³ there is no such legislation in the legal codes of the Hebrew Scriptures. And Deut 23:1 can even be read as an

⁴² The debate over whether Daniel and his friends were indeed eunuchs goes back as far as the ancient Rabbis. However, if, as I have argued, *sārîs* is to be translated “eunuch” in all instances, then the man assigned to educate Daniel and his friends is called the “chief eunuch” (רַב־סָרִיס *rab sārîs*) in Dan 1:3 and “official of the eunuchs” (סָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ *sar hassārîsîm*) in Dan 1:9, 18. This would lead to the conclusion that those assigned to him were also eunuchs. Furthermore, the fact of Daniel and his friend's eunuchism has been read for centuries as the fulfillment of Isa 39:7, “Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (NRSV; Collins, 135).

⁴³ Scholz, 74.

injunction against the practice. In short, eunuchs were a part of royal life in the later kingdoms of Israel and Judah, though they did not play as integral a role as they did in Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia.

Social Status of Eunuchs

In every society where eunuchs have existed, they have had an ambiguous social status. Though they have often attained prominent positions in the courts and houses where they served, they have nevertheless been regarded with disdain by the general population. This is also true of the biblical *sārîsîm*. Particularly in Israel and Judah, they served in prominent positions as officials and messengers, and in the women's quarters of some queens, but were excluded from the assembly of YHWH by the Deuteronomist.

Deuteronomy 23:1 states, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (NRSV). Although this verse does not use the word *sārîs*, the reference is to castration and emasculation and is likely intended to include eunuchs who were intentionally castrated or emasculated (i.e., *sārîsîm*).⁴⁴ As I have already demonstrated, the use of eunuchs was widespread in ancient western Asia, and this would have been the milieu in which the text was written. Likewise, there is no reason to suspect that tragic accidents of this sort (which are extremely rare) were any more common in those days than they are today. It is much more likely that the writer was thinking specifically of *sārîsîm* and included accidental eunuchs only peripherally.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 210; OAB, 247OT.

In the same passage where eunuchs are excluded, two other groups are prohibited from entering the assembly of YHWH: the offspring of illicit unions,⁴⁵ and Moabites and Ammonites (and their offspring).⁴⁶ Though biblical evidence suggests these prohibitions were not consistently enforced (for example King David was the grandson of a Moabite⁴⁷), these verses do show that eunuchs were thought of as sexual and moral outcasts. In Deuteronomy, they are associated with the offspring of an incestuous union between Lot and his daughters (Moabites and Ammonites), and with illegitimate children. Like these other people-groups, eunuchs bear their moral inferiority simply because of who they are, and not because of something they themselves did or are doing.⁴⁸ As a result, they are unable to throw off their status by changing their actions, as they could if they were excluded for acting improperly.⁴⁹

The surrounding regions of western Asia and northern Africa had no such moral prohibitions against eunuchs. However, the status of eunuchs was nonetheless lowered by their ambiguous gender and by their inability to reproduce. Piotr Scholz says of eunuchs in this region and later in Europe, “castrated men remained isolated and alienated in a society that ultimately held them in

⁴⁵ Deut 23:2.

⁴⁶ Deut 23:3.

⁴⁷ Ruth 4:18–22.

⁴⁸ This is assuming the eunuch was made a eunuch by someone else — as most were. However, we also know from historical records that some priestly cults practiced self-castration and emasculation (Greenberg, 105–6).

⁴⁹ What is meant by “the assembly of YHWH” is unclear. The phrase is only used four times outside of Deuteronomy 23 — twice in Numbers, where it refers to all the children of Israel who went up from Egypt (Num 16:3; 20:4), once in Mic 2:5 where the reference is ambiguous, and again in 1 Chr 28:8 where the phrase is juxtaposed alongside the nation of Israel in a list. In Neh 13:1–3, we find one example of Deut 23: 1–6 being applied strictly to exclude people from the nation of Israel. What is important is not the exact “assembly” from which eunuchs were excluded, but the fact that they *were* excluded and placed in a category with the offspring of illicit unions.

contempt.”⁵⁰ Will Roscoe says they were “in effect a class of elite slaves, often purchased or captured aliens,” and also points out that their use in official positions had the effect of weakening the power of hereditary nobility, thus putting them at odds with the aristocracy. “Hence the aristocracy is often the source of the most virulent denunciation of eunuchs.”⁵¹ Charles Humana states, “With few exceptions, historians and writers of many societies in which they [eunuchs] were found described them as ‘malicious,’ ‘corrupt,’ ‘scheming,’ and . . . ‘capricious, quick to take offence, temperamental and impulsive.’” He also quotes N. M. Penzer (*The Harem*, 1936) as stating that “eunuchs have been described as ill-tempered, morose, childish, petulant, revengeful, cruel, and arrogant; and on the other hand as simple, credulous, harmless, fawning, fond of pleasure, and very generous in their dealings.”⁵² Of course, eunuchs could not, as a class, encompass all of these characteristics, but the lists show the genuine dislike that eunuchs engendered in the community at large. It is the same sort of dislike and distrust that is today often leveled at the class of individuals labeled homosexual or transgender. Both the exclusion from the assembly found in Deuteronomy and the dislike found in other societies can be easily explained if we accept that eunuchs were a class of sexual/gender minority.

⁵⁰ Scholz, 115.

⁵¹ Roscoe, 65.

⁵² Humana, 29.

Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Eunuchs

Contemporary scholars advocating for the acceptance of homosexuals in religious life often state that the word “homosexual” is a twentieth century construct and cannot be applied to biblical literature. The Bible, it is argued, has nothing to say about whether or not homosexuality is sinful, because the concept of homosexuality did not exist until the 1890s.⁵³ Transsexuality, it is similarly argued, is an even newer concept and has no counterpart in ancient literature.⁵⁴

This is true, as far as it goes. However, the fact that eunuchs as a class fell outside the general parameters set for males and females should by now be clear. In fact, I would argue that the label “eunuch” carried with it many of the connotations and denotations today associated with transgenderism and transsexuality, and that eunuchs as a class were associated with homosexuality — even if the modern psychological meanings of those concepts were not as clearly delineated as they are today.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, doctors in Europe and the United States began performing and perfecting operations that could significantly change the bodies of individuals who felt a sense of dysphoria in the gender assigned them at birth. The people who underwent such operations and/or hormone therapies to “change their sex” were called transsexuals, and the

⁵³ The word “homosexual” was coined by Karl Maria-Kertbeny in 1869, and the concept of homosexuality as an innate sexual drive directed toward members of the same sex was developed by psychiatrists and sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably Sigmund Freud. David Halperin, “Homosexuality,” in *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia* (ed. George E Haggerty; New York: Garland, 2000), 450–1.

⁵⁴ The term “transsexualism” was introduced by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1923, and did not become part of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* until 1980. Carole-Anne Tyler, “Transsexualism,” in *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia* (ed. George E Haggerty; New York: Garland, 2000), 891.

notion of transsexuality found its way into the popular western mind in 1952 when the story of Christine Jorgenson made headlines in western newspapers.⁵⁵ Transsexualism first became widely acknowledged in the scientific community in 1966, with the publication of Dr. Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*.⁵⁶ Since that time, a community has grown up around the clinical notion of gender identity, and people who cross genders (or who vary from cultural gender norms) have come to be known as transgender.⁵⁷

Transsexualism would seem to be a modern phenomenon fueled by modern medical capabilities if not for the fact that gender-variant individuals have been a part of so many cultures throughout history and throughout the globe. In fact, clinicians now point to castration as the most widely-used and effective medical operation for male-to-female transsexuals before the advent of modern medicine.⁵⁸ And historians have begun more and more frequently to refer to the cross-dressing eunuch priests who served in some ancient temples as “transsexual priests.”⁵⁹

While it would be irresponsible to characterize all biblical eunuchs as transsexuals, it is certainly true that a biologic male who experienced dysphoria in his assigned gender would find some relief by becoming a eunuch. And, though most eunuchs had no choice in being castrated,

⁵⁵ Randi Ettner, *Gender Loving Care: A Guide to Counseling Gender-Variant Clients* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 16–17; Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 6–7.

⁵⁶ Ettner, 15.

⁵⁷ Within the transgender community there is debate over whether the proper term should be transgender or transgendered (with an “ed”). I prefer transgender, because it does not carry with it the connotation of something having been done to an individual, but more that of a state of being.

⁵⁸ Ettner, 5–6.

⁵⁹ Feinberg, 40–41.

they nevertheless found themselves in a societal role between the sexes that in many ways resembles what we today would call transgender.

That eunuchs have long been associated with homosexuality is also easily demonstrated by a survey of literature containing references to eunuchs. In ancient western Asia, the Sumerian myth “Innana’s Descent into the Netherworld” includes a section on the creation of eunuchs, and says they “do not satisfy the lap of women.” They were specifically created, the myth purports, because they can resist the wiles of women.⁶⁰ In India (a culture with many ties to western Asia, particularly Persia), the *Kama Sutra* contains a chapter on the proper way for a eunuch to sexually satisfy a man.⁶¹ Likewise the hijra of Pakistan and India (modern eunuchs whose role in society once included being harem keepers for the emperor, much like the eunuchs in the Hebrew Scriptures⁶²) are said to be “impotent” even though they regularly have sex with men. In this case, impotence specifically refers to a hijra’s inability to be aroused by women, and serves as a close synonym to the modern western notion of homosexual identity.⁶³ There are also records that King Darius III of Persia and Artaxerxes both kept eunuchs in their harems as sexual

⁶⁰ Samuel Noah Kramer, “‘Inanna’s Descent into the Nether World’ Continued and Revised,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 4 (1950), 200.

⁶¹ Vatsyayana, *The Complete Kama Sutra: The First Unabridged Modern Translation of the Classic Indian Text* (trans. Alain Daniélon; Rochester, Vermont; Park Street, 1994), 183–96.

⁶² Nauman Naqvi and Hasan Mujtaba, “Two Baluchi *Buggas*, a Sindhi *Zenana*, and the Status of *Hijras* in Contemporary Pakistan,” in *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 265.

⁶³ Roscoe, 74.

partners.⁶⁴ And Sirach 30:20, written around 180 B.C.E. in a west-Asian milieu, says that embracing a girl makes a eunuch groan.

If one is willing to look outside ancient western Asia, it is even easier to find associations between eunuchs and what we would today call homosexuality. The Greek satirist Lucian compares a eunuch with a concubine to a deaf man with a flute, a bald man with a comb, and a blind man with a mirror.⁶⁵ Quintus Curtius, Alexander the Great's historian, reports that Alexander's palace included "herds of eunuchs, also accustomed to prostitute themselves [like women]."⁶⁶ Alexander the Great is also said to have fallen deeply in love with a eunuch named Bagoas, who was a lover of Darius III.⁶⁷ And the Roman playwright Juvenal states, "When a soft eunuch takes to matrimony . . . it is hard *not* to write a satire."⁶⁸

My intention is not to imply that the biblical *sārîsîm* should be thought of in the same way as modern transsexuals, homosexuals, or even as transgenders. However, given the fact that eunuchs were associated with concepts that closely mirror modern ideas of transgenderism and homosexuality, issues of gender identity and sexual orientation must be addressed when discussing stories of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible whenever the biblical stories make such discussions reasonable.

⁶⁴ Greenberg, 123.

⁶⁵ *Lucian, Volume III* (trans. A.M. Harmon; London: William Heinemann, 1921), 197. Italic added.

⁶⁶ Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander, Volume II* (trans. John C. Rolfe; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 51.

⁶⁷ Scholz, 82.

⁶⁸ *Juvenal and Persius* (trans. G. G. Ramsay; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 5.

Ebed-melech, Hathach, and Ashpenaz

In this project we encounter three eunuchs who represent a range of possibilities for the biblical *sārîs*. They live in different nations, at different times, and as I have fictionalized them they have different ways of relating to their eunuch status.

Ebed-melech is a slave, emasculated by a greedy merchant who recognized that a “clean-shaven” boy would fetch more money. By a series of coincidences, Ebed-melech, a native of Cush, ends up living in the court of Judah and serving as tailor to the king. Of the three characters, he is the least comfortable in his role as eunuch. His emasculation would be incidental to his story if not for the fact that it emphasizes his status as an outsider, and increases the irony that he would be the only good Yahwist in the Jerusalem court willing to help Jeremiah.

Hathach is a traditional boundary-crossing/keeping *sārîs*. Having been employed in the queen’s quarters of the Persian palace in Susa, Hathach thrives on the ambiguously gendered nature of the role of eunuch. And, in the end, it is Hathach’s very ability to live between the worlds of male and female that makes it possible for Hathach to help Esther save her people.

Ashpenaz is one of the thousands of foreign-born men who were captured by the Babylonians, castrated, and conscripted to serve as officials, army officers, and slaves in the Babylonian empire. Like Hathach, he has learned to thrive in the role of eunuch. For him, the position provides the freedom to step outside the usual sexual roles assigned to men. Rather than mourn his inability to marry and have children, he delights in the task of educating the handsome

young men imported to serve and advise the king. And, it is his feelings for Daniel that paved the way for the young Hebrew to reject the king's food without thought of repercussions.

Let us turn now to the stories of these three remarkable individuals.