

CONCLUSION

We began this journey in the wilderness with an Ethiopian eunuch and a scroll of Isaiah. I imagined this advisor to Queen Candace, a convert to Judaism, traveling to Jerusalem with his precious scroll — a sacred text containing the words:

For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast to my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a name better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:4–5 NRSV).

But, once in Jerusalem, he was told, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:1 NRSV).

Imagine the disappointment he must have felt, having traveled so far only to be rebuffed. He expected to receive in the house of YHWH a name better than son or daughter, instead he was shown the door. If only he’d had access to the other scrolls, the ones in which people like him were heroes.

Imagine him reading the scroll of Jeremiah and discovering another Ethiopian eunuch, the only servant of YHWH in corrupt Jerusalem willing to stand up for the prophet. Not only was Ebed-melech accepted by the prophet of YHWH, he was given a personal blessing for his bravery. Then our Ethiopian eunuch turns to the scroll of Esther, and discovers a eunuch who is responsible for the deliverance of the Jewish people from certain destruction. Here he learns never to be ashamed of who he is, but to accept his role. He hears Mordecai say, “Perhaps you have come . . . for just such a time as this” (Esth 4:14). And he accepts it for himself. Finally he

turns to Daniel — to the story of a eunuch who acts with the mercy and compassion of God. Understanding, as our Ethiopian eunuch does, the feelings Ashpenaz has for Daniel, he cries when Daniel returns his guardian's affection with conceit. But he also cries for himself, recognizing that he too can be a channel for God's mercy and compassion. Whatever the guardians at the temple may say, he has found himself reflected in Scripture as one worthy of God's attention.

Like that Ethiopian eunuch, those of us who are excluded from the Assembly may never be able to argue our way past the self-appointed guardians of God. No need. In the stories of Ebed-melech, Hathach, and Ashpenaz we find God reaching out to us. All those who are ritually beyond the pale are symbolically included in the story of humanity, represented by the stories of these three unlikely heroes.