

**Beyond the Harem:
Stories of Three Unlikely Heroes**

by

John Tyler Connoley

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In memory of
Gina Armstrong

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)

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Abbreviations

- AB Anchor Bible
- au. trans. Author's Translation
- BDB* *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Francis Brown, R. Driver, and Charles Briggs. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.
- CANE* *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East.* Edited by Jack M. Sasson. 4 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995.
- EncJud* *Encyclopedia Judaica.* Edited by Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1971.
- HALOT* *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Edited by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. Translated by M. E. J. Richardson. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- MT Masoretic Text
- NASB New American Standard Bible
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version
- OAB* *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.* Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy. Oxford, 1989.
- OCB* *The Oxford Companion to the Bible.* Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan. Oxford, 1993.
- OHBW* *The Oxford History of the Biblical World.* Edited by Michael D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- WIS* *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament.* Edited by Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kramer. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

Preface

One of the earliest gentile converts to the Christian faith, as recorded in the biblical book of Acts, was an Ethiopian eunuch who served in the court of Queen Candace. According to the story, found in Acts 8:26–39, this man had been to Jerusalem to worship and was traveling home when Phillip happened upon him and evangelized him.

Before Phillip arrived, the eunuch had been reading Isaiah and probably thinking about his experience in Jerusalem. I imagine his experience among the Assembly was similar to my own within the Christian Church. He owned a scroll of Isaiah, and had probably read that eunuchs would be given “a monument and a name better than sons and daughters” (Isa 56:5 NRSV). But, when he arrived 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).

As a gay man, I experience a similar pull and push when studying the Hebrew Bible and interacting with people of faith. Sometimes I’m accepted and celebrated, and other times I’m rejected and despised. Regardless, it is important to make the journey to Jerusalem — to interact with people of faith and to study the Scroll. Part of that interaction, for me, is seeking out stories in the biblical text where sexual/gender minorities play a part, and giving voice to those often overlooked biblical players. This thesis is that sort of project.

In the following pages, I explore the implications of three stories from the Hebrew Bible in which eunuchs play key roles: Ebed-Melech’s rescue of Jeremiah from the well (Jer 38:1–13); Hathach’s intercession between Esther and Mordecai (Esth 4:1–17); and Ashpenaz’s agreement to feed Daniel and his friends only vegetables (Dan 1:3–21). For sexual/gender minorities, and

indeed for all who have found themselves excluded from the assembly of believers, these stories offer hope. As with many stories in the Hebrew Bible, the people God uses in these tales are not the ones we might expect. Ebed-Melech is a man of utter foreignness, who also happens to be the only good Yawhist in Jerusalem willing to help the prophet Jeremiah. Hathach is a person of dubious gender, but that is exactly who God needs for the task. Ashpenaz is a representative of the evil empire, whose unexpected deep love for Daniel gives the young Hebrew the courage to follow his God. All these individuals are sexual/gender minorities who belong to a class that was despised and rejected alongside children of incest and the offspring of illicit unions by the Deuteronomist, but they are also heroes of the biblical text. They have unheard stories that need to be told.

This is why, in my analysis, I begin by retelling each tale from the perspective of the eunuch. In so doing, I follow the lead of the ancient Rabbis, who opened up the spaces in the scrolls and filled them with midrash stories. I also follow the lead of modern feminists who have used the technique of midrash to give voice to the female characters who are so often silenced by biblical narrators. Beyond this, my intention is to honor these texts as story, and to allow readers to interact with them on that level, before trying to analyze and interpret more rationally. Of course my retellings are interpretations — any retelling is — and readers may agree or disagree with my re-imagining. In fact, I hope my retellings spark the imagination of readers, beginning a dialogue between the text, other readers, and myself.

After each retelling, I continue the dialogue with more traditional academic analysis. This is where I discuss what I observe in terms of “meaning” in the story. It is also where I explain why

I retell the story the way I do. Looking at plot, character, and language, I use such tools as narrative criticism, Hebrew-language analysis, historical reconstruction, form criticism, intertextuality, and the historical-critical method to dialogue with the stories on a more systematic level. But even so, my intention is still to dialogue with the stories as living stories — to interact with them and see where they lead us, not to pin them down and catalogue them like butterflies. My hope is that readers will bring their own interpretations to the text. The point is the conversation with the Scroll and with the community of faith.

For many of us, the lives of biblical eunuchs are part of a vague and distant past, of which we know little or nothing. Eunuchs have long been a class of misunderstood and even ignored individuals, and it is only recently that any in-depth research has been done into the history of these people. That is why I include an introduction to the eunuch in the Hebrew Bible, in Chapter One. This chapter introduces the subject of the biblical *sārîs* (eunuch) and explores what life might have been like for these individuals. It draws on research done by historians and sociologists working in many different regions and time-periods, rearranging and connecting their work to shed light on ancient western Asia. This chapter provides context for what follows, hopefully allowing the reader to recognize some of the cultural clues in the biblical text. I encourage readers to read this chapter first, then turn to the biblical texts themselves before reading my retellings and analyses. Chapters Two, Three, and Four may be read in any order. The structure I have chosen follows the Jewish order of the Hebrew Bible and is as arbitrary as any other ordering.

Finally, three technical notes: First, although I am aware the text we read today is the result of many editors and redactors working over centuries of biblical history, I have chosen to interact with the stories in their final forms. For my base text I use the Hebrew Masoretic Text (Leningrad Codex B19^A) as published in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Most of the English quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and citations for Psalms refer to the English versification. Second, I have used the terms “western Asia” and “north-eastern Africa,” instead of the euro-centric “Near East,” to refer to biblical territories. Finally, when referring to the name of God, I use the four-letter symbol “YHWH.” I do this in deference to those who do not pronounce the name of God, and as a personal reminder that God cannot be captured in a name.

Now let us turn our attention to the world of the biblical *sārîs*, a world thousands of years removed from our own.