

Elite or Emasculated Males? A Discussion of Eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible and Their Place within a Phallogocentric Society.

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Abstract:

This thesis centres around eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible, discussing the various ranks of masculinity they were placed in, the ideas surrounding their position within a 'third gender' category, and their place in religion, society, and relationships. This research has been briefly discussed in some aspects of previous Hebrew Bible scholarship, and some themes have been touched on, e.g., the relationship between disability studies and eunuchs. However, the topic of ancient Israelite eunuchs is one that is yet to be explored in great depth. This thesis studies biblical texts, along with commentaries and thematic studies. My results highlight that, perhaps, the label of 'third gender' is not appropriate when referring to eunuchs due to the lack of evidence suggesting they identified with anything except their birth gender, and that a more suitable label would be an effeminate or inferior man. Eunuchs maintained various roles that both ancient Israelite men and women would carry out, however this cannot be sufficient reasoning for a 'third gender' category.

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Chapter 1 – Topic Introduction

The Hebrew term for eunuch, סָרִיס, (*saris*) appears 45 times in the Hebrew Bible,¹ and in later biblical texts such as 4 Maccabees 10, Matthew 19, and Acts 8.² These 45 Hebrew Bible mentions are usually translated in 3 ways: eunuch (castrated man), chamberlain (an individual who manages a royal household), and officer. Although some of these references may appear conspicuous in their translation of *saris* as a castrated man, it is not the default for these men to have a genital disability. It is clear within the biblical texts that some of the mentions of eunuchs do describe a castrated man, yet we cannot make an assumption that every reference is describing a castrated man, similarly we cannot make the assumption that every reference indicates a chamberlain or officer.

There are no Hebrew Bible or ancient Israelite sources in which eunuchs speak for themselves; they usually appear as individuals, spoken about in third person by the author, which renders them difficult to research.³ By definition, eunuchs have a physical defining feature that in modern terms would be defined as a disability, yet they play a visible role in ancient Near Eastern society, which is intriguing because disabled groups were often marginalised or discriminated against in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ Studying this disabled group who played a key role within society thus has the potential to influence how we portray disabled groups in ancient history. Eunuchs are also important as they have come to be viewed as an ancestor for queer groups.⁵ Their lack of sexual functions and, perhaps, their appearance, would have marked them out as different to men, but also not women. The traditional view has been that gender in the Bible was written to be binary, often drawn from verses such as Genesis 5:2 ‘man and woman he created them’. However, modern scholarship now recognises that gender was as much a spectrum in the ancient Near East as it is today and gender portrayals are sometimes fluid in the Hebrew Bible; masculinity and femininity fluctuate for multiple characters.⁶ Where eunuchs fit into our conceptions of ancient gender, however, is a complex question. There are thus a multitude of avenues to

¹ David T. Adamo, “Ebed-Melech’s protest to King Zedekiah as a Model of Modern Protest Movement (Jr 38:1-17),” *Potchefstroom* 53.1 (2019): 1-8, 6. The most common references to eunuchs appear in Est, Jer, and 2 Kgs 20; 2 Kgs 20 and Isa 39 repeat the same narrative. Most references to eunuchs appear are occasional mentions rather than developed narratives.

² The 45 references to *saris* in the Hebrew Bible are; Gen 37:36, 39:1, 40:2, 7; 1 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6, 9:32, 20:18, 23:11, 24:12, 15, 19; 1 Chron 28:1; 2 Chron 18:8; Est 1:10, 12, 15, 2:3 (twice), 14, 15, 21, 4:4, 5, 6:2, 14, 7:9; Isa 39:7, 56:3, 4; Jer 29:2, 34:19, 38:7, 41:16, 52:25; Dan 1:7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 18, 2:48, 11:18.

³ Kathryn Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 42.

⁴ E.g., Lev 21:16-23 wherein various physical disabilities are listed as groups that are excluded from approaching the altar. 2 Sam 5:8 also states how the ‘lame and the blind’ cannot enter the house of Yhwh.

⁵ Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies, The Basics*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2019): 102.

⁶ Ideas of gender fluidity and flexibility can be seen in Raili Marling, “Strong Women and the Masculinity Crisis: Adulterous Appropriations of the Old Testament,” *Neohelicon* 40.1, (2013) 159 Helena M. Bolle, Stephen R. Llewelyn, “Intersectionality, Gender Liminality and Ben Sira’s Attitude to the Eunuch,” *Vetus Testamentum* 67.4, (2017) 560 Amy Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible: The Way the Bible Challenges its Gender Norm*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2017) 96 Esther Fuchs, “Biblical Feminisms: Knowledge, Theory and Politics in the Study of Women in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblical Interpretations* 16.3 (2008) 223.

explore with eunuchs, however there is very limited work on them as a group. This thesis will investigate the complex relationship between gender and eunuchs.

1.1 Eunuchs in Commentaries

While eunuchs appear in a number of biblical books, they are rarely dwelt on by commentators, which restricts analysis. For this thesis 56 commentaries were consulted and a few key aspects came to my attention.⁷

The primary aspect I noted being the language used to explain or describe eunuchs is often general – very few commentaries state what exactly constituted a eunuch; cautious phrasing indicates that the commentators are unclear on the details. For example, Robert Carroll states the references in Jeremiah ‘might mean’⁸ eunuch and similarly, Gerald Keown, Pamela Scalise, and Thomas Smothers suggest that the references ‘likely refers to’⁹ eunuchs. This signals a broader trend, where ‘might mean’ was used 27 times in relation to eunuchs.¹⁰ In addition, there was a noticeable tendency to skip over eunuchs entirely in some texts. Out of 56 commentaries, when a verse mentioned eunuchs the eunuchs were ignored 26 times, though other points within the verse were discussed.¹¹ For example, when Nathan-Melech is mentioned in 2 Kgs 23, commentaries regularly feature the horses and chariots of the sun, yet fail to discuss Nathan-Melech.¹² Similarly, commentaries focusing on Deut 23:1 were helpful in exploring physical disabilities, specifically crushed testicles and consequently fertility, and the various disabled groups excluded from the temple.¹³ However, very little was stated about where eunuchs fitted into such cases. In five cases, eunuchs were completely overlooked and omitted as the whole verse was ignored.¹⁴ Wider

⁷ E.g., G.H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings, The New Century Bible Commentary*, Vol II (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Publishing, 1984); Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, First Edition (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1998); Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28-39: A Continental Commentary*, Trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Richard L. Schultz, *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, (Ed. David G. Firth, H.G.M. Williamson, Nottingham: Apollos, 2009); Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (AOTC: Oxfordshire: Abingdon Press, 2005); Lester L. Grabbe, *Leviticus, Old Testament Guides* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). Admittedly, commentaries on Esther are a noticeable omission but minimal resources at the University of Nottingham and the limitations of Covid-19 made many of these impossible to access. See, however, comments on violence, survival, and importance in Francisco-Javier Ruiz-Ortiz, “The Dynamics of Violence and Revenge in the Hebrew Book of Esther,” *VT* 175 (2017): 753-743.

⁸ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah; A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 646.

⁹ Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 221.

¹⁰ Examples include Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form*, Trans. Millard C. Lind, (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2012) who uses סרס instead of eunuch or official, Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 646, who directly uses ‘might mean’.

¹¹ Robert L. Cohn, *Berit Olam: 2 Kings Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000) T.R. Hobbs, *2 Kings WBC* 13; (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

¹² E.g., Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings, A Continental Commentary*, Trans. Anselm Hagedorn, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) J. Robinsons, *The Second Book of Kings* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

¹³ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) Richard Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary, The Old Testament Library*, (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2002).

¹⁴ These comprise Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39 A Commentary*, Trans. R.A. Wilson (London: SCM Press, 1974); David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998); David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, *Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville: Liturgical

knowledge is sometimes used to gloss over lack of understanding. For example; A.S. Herbert's *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 40-66* references eunuchs in the 'oriental world'¹⁵ which, although offering an interesting idea, adds little to our understanding of biblical eunuchs as the contexts were so different. Reference to the Assyrian term for eunuchs, *ša rēši*, was mentioned six times in place of discussion of eunuchs in the Bible/ Israel, and it is clear that commentaries are often more comfortable repeating the general idea that the translation of eunuch, could also denote a high-ranking official or general; rather than always trying to distinguish the correct one themselves.

While commentaries overall were often underwhelming, a few sources do offer in-depth detail on eunuchs, most notably Jack Lundbom's *Jeremiah 37-52*, where he gives detailed analysis in discussion of Ebed-Melech and Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor's *2 Kings: A New Translation and Commentary*, where a succinct overview of eunuchs is given.¹⁶ These texts were helpful as they stated some brief information about eunuchs to give Ebed-Melech context and briefly discussed the link between eunuch and official.

It is evident that the discussion of eunuchs in commentaries leaves something to be desired. Apart from Cogan and Tadmor, the most helpful were written during the last twenty years, when the research into gender and queer studies came into fruition, but there remains a clear gap in scholarly understanding of eunuchs, their roles, appearances, gender and identity.

1.2 Eunuchs in Thematic Studies

While there is no direct monograph on eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁷ a few works offer useful discussions, though they are often focused on later periods of history or adjacent nations/ fields of study.¹⁸ They also tend to follow similar patterns and theme, including discussions of the lives, employment/ roles in society, attitudes towards eunuchs, and the relationships they had with masters, women, and society.

The four main themes coming out of this thematic literature are the Galli, masculinity, gender, and how the combination of these depicted the attitudes towards them in society, which provide the basis of discussion in this thesis. On masculinity, Susanna Asikainen's 'Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom' offers a helpful investigation into the effeminacy and inferiority of eunuchs, and the overt differences between average Israelite males and

Press, 2003); John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1965); R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39, The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

¹⁵ A.S. Herbert, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 40-66* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 133.

¹⁶ Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2004) Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *2 Kings: A New Translation and Commentary*, (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1988).

¹⁷ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 42.

¹⁸ Examples include Omar N'Shea, "Royal Eunuchs and Elite Masculinity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79.3 (2016): 214-221 Susan E. Haddox, "Masculinity Studies of the Hebrew Bible: The First Two Decades," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14.2 (2016): 176-206.

eunuchs.¹⁹ As the title suggests, however, the primary focus is eunuchs in the New Testament. Susan Haddox's *Masculinity Studies of the Hebrew Bible* offers a vital discussion of hegemonic masculinity and power.²⁰ She argues that eunuchs involuntarily surrendered masculinity through genital disability.²¹ Although this overlooks those who are born eunuchs, I agree with Haddox's view that eunuchs' lack of masculinity directly relates to their genitals as opposed to other factors. Another book that greatly aided the discussion was Colleen Conway's *Behold the Man*, which concentrates on the fluidity of gender and the creation of gender as a social construct and 'cultural contradiction'²². Yet again, however, this book focusses on New Testament eunuchs.

It is pertinent to note here that a considerable number of thematic studies refer back to the Galli, as the Galli offer a well-preserved textual example of eunuchs and their appearances, roles and gender performances.²³ However, the Hellenistic-Roman Galli date later than the eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible. They also seem to have differed from the portrayal of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible in their practise of self-castration as a form of gender fluidity and they often wore women's clothing.²⁴ In contrast, ancient Near Eastern eunuchs are not depicted performing or presenting with such gender fluidity; They generally appear on the male side of the gender spectrum. While the Galli may offer insights into the context of later New Testament eunuchs, therefore, they should not necessarily be a primary point of comparison for earlier Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern references.

The second topic recurring in secondary literature is masculinity and the boundaries that surround and divide the subject. The idea of emasculation and being excluded from any aspects of hegemonic masculinity appears frequently. Research shows that gender and the expectations, roles, and behaviours were used to maintain societal standards in the ancient world, in which hegemonic masculinity played a key role as the overriding source of power.²⁵ Men in power were able to maintain dominance and limit and regulate society, by having clear-cut categories for men and women, and elite males and average males.²⁶ In this way, even lower-class men were able to display superiority and control over their family. Eunuchs, as castrated men who often served others, could thus be viewed as being continually excluded from masculinity and divided between the two normative genders.

¹⁹ Susanna Asikainen, "'Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom': Matthew and Subordinated Masculinities," in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded* (Eds. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014), 67-87.

²⁰ Haddox, "Masculinity Studies," 184.

²¹ Haddox, "Masculinity Studies," 184.

²² Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

²³ Information on the Galli can be found in; Anna Rebecca Solevag, "No Nuts? No Problem! Disability, Stigma, and the Baptised Eunuch of Acts 8:26-40," *BibInt* 24.1 (2016), 81-99; A.E. Harvey, "Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom," *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), 1-7; Lynn E. Roller, "Galli," in *The Encyclopaedia of Ancient History* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2013), 2818-2819.

²⁴ Asikainen, "Eunuchs," 167. While Deuteronomy 22:5 states plainly how a woman should not wear a man's clothes, and men women's and if they were to wear the opposite sex's clothes then it would be 'abhorrent' to Yahweh, it does not connect these practises with eunuchs in any way.

²⁵ For further research into societal standards of men in Ancient Israel see Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality."

²⁶ Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality," 560.

A third prominent theme in literature is the role of eunuchs in society and the community in the ancient Near East and biblical texts. Eunuchs often appear in some texts occupying places in high office and being employed by the royal court e.g., 2 Kgs 9, 23, Jer 34, 38.²⁷ Wright and Chan argue that some eunuchs could maintain the ‘highest ranks of government and the military’²⁸, increasing their societal status regardless of their physical difference. Harvey disagrees, however, stating that some eunuchs were dependent solely on their master for survival and looked down upon by society for their ‘inferior social status’²⁹ demonstrated by their inability to defend themselves, a key masculine trait. This variance comes from differences seen in a wide range of texts, which present eunuchs both as royal servants, high ranking generals, or lowly slaves.³⁰

Related to this discussion of social roles and negative stereotypes, is the question of characterisation and perception of eunuchs in the biblical texts. This is also linked to our conceptions of ancient masculinity, as although eunuchs could appear in ‘masculine’ roles like soldiers, they were also often compared to women and traits associated with women which complicates perceptions of their masculinity. The variety of roles and ranks eunuchs held seems to be the common assumption found in secondary literature that eunuchs were an alienated/ negatively targeted group.³¹

The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to build on these previous works and offer a focussed study of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible that has so far been lacking in scholarship. Before I outline my approach, however, it seems sensible to briefly comment on masculinity and gender studies as this fairly new subfield of research is of central importance.

1.3 Gender Studies

The connection between gender and eunuchs is extremely complicated. As this thesis will show, various biblical texts associate eunuchs with opposing gender ideas, offering no consensus about which gender they should be placed with. Biblical scholarship surrounding gender in the ancient world, as well as with eunuchs, repeat three main ideas. The first centres around the topic of gender fluidity and debates the portrayal of gender in the Hebrew Bible with the ancient world.³² Although some texts in the Hebrew Bible portray gender to be a binary, two-group ideal, gender in the ancient Near East was more of a spectrum.³³

²⁷ Jacob L. Wright and Michael J. Chan, “King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practises,” *JBL* 131.1, (2012), 104.

²⁸ Wright and Chan, “King and Eunuch,” 106.

²⁹ Harvey, “Eunuchs”, 6.

³⁰ The linguistic derivations of each term relating to eunuch, for example, the Akkadian meaning ‘he who is at the head’, and Greek meaning, ‘guardians of the bed chamber’ create a complex discussion of the exact role a eunuch was intended to play. Cogan, Tadmor, *2 Kings*, 112.

³¹ Bolle and Llewelyn, “Intersectionality,” 562, describe how the intention of various biblical texts was to “alienate him (the eunuch) from the community”.

³² David Tabb Stewart, “LGBT/ Queer Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible,” *CBR* 15.3, (2017): 289-314; Abdulhamit Arvas, “Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19.4, (2019): 116-136.

³³ See, for example, N’Shea, “Royal Eunuchs” and Solevag, “No Nuts?”.

The second point is that gender was malleable and constantly changing. Individuals and their genders are formed by a variety of influences and experiences in their community, family, and society.³⁴ Attitudes, roles, and appearances concerning gender were formed by society, they were not innate to humans – physical appearance, determined by hair and clothing, influenced social groups and their perceptions in terms of their gender and age.³⁵ Enrique Moral's research explores both the relationship between gender and society, and gender and individuals, and demonstrates that gender and sex are separate from one another, and the physical behaviours one performs prevails over the biological body in terms of perceived determined gender.³⁶

The final theme that was brought to attention was their genital disability potentially impacting how their gender was perceived by society. Although it was a possibility that eunuchs were portrayed to be a second-class group due to the 'flexibility and elasticity'³⁷ of their job roles and relationships with those above them, specifically in the royal court, it is likewise a possibility that they were alienated due to their disabled status impacting their perceived gender. There are various biblical texts suggesting that eunuchs were an outside group (e.g., Isa 56:1-8), as well as discriminating against those with disabilities, (e.g., Lev 21 and Deut 23), but the Hebrew Bible does not state that eunuchs were outcast strictly because of their gender ambiguity.³⁸

1.4– Masculinity Studies

The following theme that is synonymous with eunuchs in scholarship is masculinity, branching out from gender studies. Masculinity studies reveal the links, and lack of, to normative and hegemonic masculinity caused by eunuchs' gender. The eunuchs lack of/ stunted masculinity created an individual who although could be classed alongside men, was not seen to be entirely masculine or manly. I would argue there were two main aspects to this: the first being the lack of control they displayed. If castrated before puberty/ born with a genital disability, then a eunuch was likely infertile and would have no biological children to carry on his line and name. In addition, it seems unlikely that they would have had wives, limiting their ability to display control over a family household.³⁹ Additionally, by being 'dependent on their masters'⁴⁰ for protection and employment, eunuchs physically displayed to others that they were not in control nor could protect themselves, an

³⁴ Enrique Moral, "Qu(e)rying Sex and Gender in Archaeology: A Critique of the 'Third' and Other Sexual Categories," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23.3, (2016): 788-809, 796.

³⁵ Francesca Stavrakopoulou, "The Materiality of Life and the Sociality of Death: An Introduction," in *Life and Death: Social Perspectives on Biblical Bodies* (Ed. Francesca Stavrakopoulou; London: Bloomsbury, 2021): 1-24, 2.

³⁶ Moral, "Qu(e)rying Sex", 795.

³⁷ Richard J. Wassersug, Emma McKenna, Tucker Lieberman, "Eunuch as a Gender Identity," *Journal of Gender Studies* 21.3, (2012): 253-270, 261.

³⁸ Martti Nissinen, "Relative Masculinities in the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament," *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity* (Ed. Ilona Zsolnay; Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2017) 222-247 explores this idea well.

³⁹ This raises interesting questions about castration in later life and its potential impact on social hierarchies within the family if the castrated men already had wives and children, especially adults or older sons.

⁴⁰ Solevag, "No Nuts?" 86.

emasculating trait for biblical and ancient Israelite men. We might also consider the physical differences in eunuchs through their appearance, if they had been castrated before puberty/ born with a genital defect. Eunuchs, if born with a genital disability, may have often physically differed from the average man through their ‘beardless faces, high-pitched voices... and stature’⁴¹ presenting to others an emasculated and inferior status.

In addition, scholarship highlights that biblical history centres around hegemonic masculine men, further highlighting the lack of masculinity of eunuchs. The Hebrew Bible tells stories of men highlighting their masculinity through heroic and admirable actions, occasionally demonstrated through having power over other men. Men who do not fit into this mould or characteristics are labelled ‘emasculated’,⁴² effeminate or ‘unmen’⁴³. Hegemonic masculinity created a further boundary for eunuchs to pass in order to be seen as masculine or manly – consolidating their place outside of socially accepted masculinity. In addition to this, it must be noted that the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly use the terms ‘effeminate’ or ‘unmen.’

Hegemonic masculinity brings us to the final aspect noticed in literature surrounding masculinity. The existence of hegemonic masculinity, and femininity, implies the existence of non-hegemonic masculinity and femininity, proving further that gender is adaptable to society, and not monolithic.⁴⁴ The existence of non-hegemonic gender characteristics and behaviours allows for the eunuch’s place within society and the male gender to be solidified. Traditional and hegemonic masculinity represents solutions to problems caused by gender relations⁴⁵; men could not advance how masculine they were perceived to be without the elite men asserting their manliness first, establishing hegemonic men as problem solvers in times of peril.

1.5 Method

Building on the previous discussion, this thesis will use gender studies to demonstrate that eunuchs were not treated differently from the average Israelite male or woman by society because of their ambiguous gender. Rather, they were treated differently in ways that benefitted men; Eunuchs were able to maintain and operate in conjunction with their male equals.⁴⁶ Although there is evidence in the Hebrew Bible that those with physical disabilities were discriminated against, there is a lack of evidence suggesting that the ambiguity and ‘otherness’ of eunuchs concerning their gender affected them during their day-to-day lives.⁴⁷ The evidence demonstrating discrimination against eunuchs, I would argue, is linked

⁴¹ Arvas, “Early Modern,” 119.

⁴² Stewart, “LGBT,” 306.

⁴³ Susanna Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men, Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels*. (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 1-187, 26.

⁴⁴ Moral, “Qu(e)rying Sex,” 799.

⁴⁵ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19.6, (2005): 829-859, 838.

⁴⁶ Sarah Melville, “Eunuchs, Ancient Near East,” in *Encyclopaedia of Ancient History*, (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2013): 2561-2562, 2561.

⁴⁷ For example, in the biblical texts, there is no mention of the sexual uncertainty of eunuchs as if it created no issue for their masters and members of the royal court; Nissinen, “Relative Masculinities”, 233.

to both their genital disability and ambiguous gender as eunuchs are referenced alongside other disabled groups in terms of exclusion as opposed to being excluded alongside sexually differing/ ambiguous groups.

Using gender studies as the central focus was chosen because it was the biggest and most occurring theme throughout modern scholarship pertaining to eunuchs. Although disability studies are relevant, most comments on eunuchs are about gender or roles. Thus, this thesis uses gender to show the importance of disability in the discussion (see 3.4), though a full study of eunuchs and disability is beyond the limits of this thesis. Physical disability here is conceived with a view to its social implications, not the physical appearance or performance.⁴⁸ The aim of the thesis is not to offer a disability studies analysis of eunuchs, but rather to lay the groundwork for such a study to be done.

Focussing primarily on gender allows us to show the importance of researching eunuchs and to complicate our conceptions of a binary ancient society. In this regard, the key texts that have informed this study are Kathryn Ringrose's *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*, and Helena M. Bolle and Stephen R. Llewelyn's *Intersectionality, Gender Liminality, and Ben Sira's Attitude to the Eunuch*.⁴⁹ Although both focus on later contexts, I am using their model of roles, responsibilities and how eunuchs 'transcend conventional social boundaries'⁵⁰ of gender expectations.

1.6 Organisation

The following analysis will be organised thematically, and each biblical text treated in turn, in order to try and build an overall understanding of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible. The thematic approach has been chosen over a redactional approach as it allows for each reference of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible to be treated as separate texts which can be researched and explored individually and then collectively in what they mean for gender, masculinity, society, and cult in the ancient Near East.

First, chapter 2 focusses on the Hebrew terminology pertaining to eunuchs, what each translation means in terms of how the individual became a eunuch, and why סריס is difficult to translate directly without further characters and context. Key references to eunuchs are also discussed, specifically Isa 56:1-8, Jer 34:19-20, 41:16, Est 4, and their location in the text and ordering in narrative.

Thereafter, chapter 3 turns to a discussion of eunuch's role in society. We will focus especially on responsibilities and how these differed, though not negatively, from the average Israelite man and women. The themes of gendered attributes and employment are referenced here.

⁴⁸ Other aspects of eunuchs that scholarship mentions but I do not comment on within this thesis are the physical aspects of eunuch genitalia; the surgery of how a young boy became a eunuch, or the details of how an aggressor would have castrated those he had captured/ wanted to punish.

⁴⁹ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*; Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality."

⁵⁰ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 165.

Chapter 4 then considers eunuchs' physical appearance and the effect this might have had on their relationships with those around them. It gives a brief mention of the physical aspect of their genitalia and related matters such as circumcision, sexual intercourse and celibacy, and the topic of infertility. This area, of course, overlaps with masculinity, but the aim here is a focus on the physical body. The topic of appearance and cosmetics and its relation to gender and society has attracted some attention in biblical scholarship but little has been done on the physical appearance and dress of eunuchs.⁵¹ This closest analysis available is on the Galli, but as noted above, it is methodologically suspect to over-rely on the Galli in the reconstruction of Hebrew Bible/ Iron Age eunuchs. Little research has been done on biblical eunuchs' appearance due to the varied interpretations of eunuch, and the complex ways in which a man could become a eunuch.

Chapter 5 explores why eunuchs confuse gender categories, and how not being restricted to male or female labels and attributes effected the eunuchs' perceived masculinity and the biblical writers' interpretation of them. Although I argue a eunuch's gender is not a concept that portrays them to be a negative group, it must be discussed as an area of debate and complexity. Also in this chapter is an analysis of a key example of gender fluidity taking a central place within society where few of the main characters undertake the roles and characteristics assumed at both – namely Queen Jezebel and her eunuchs (2 Kgs 9). This chapter is placed in the midst of the thesis as prior knowledge of society and eunuchs is required to understand how and why their place in society and gender was disrupted and not straight-forward. Eunuchs consistently 'confuse categories'⁵² and blur the boundaries of gender norms, and this chapter aims to highlight the use of a 'third gender' category and fluidity of gender.

Chapter 6 focuses masculinity, and hegemonic masculinity, and their links between masculine roles, physical aspects, and expectations and the male gender. This chapter looks into a eunuch's place within the boundaries of masculinity, and considers biblical mentions of not being classed as male, e.g., Deut 23:1, Jer 41:16, and how the resulting implications.

Chapter 7 then turns to religion and the relationships eunuchs have with Yhwh, the temple, and the possibility of becoming holy men, before I offer concluding remarks.

⁵¹ For scholarship on cosmetics, dress, and appearance in the ancient Near East see; Laura Quick, *Dress, Adornment and the Body in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Laura Quick, "She Made Herself Up Provocatively for the Charming of the eyes of Men' (Jdt 10.4): Cosmetics and Body Adornment in the Stories of Judith and Susanna," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 28.3 (2019): 215-236; Rosanne Liebermann, "Clothing and Body Modification in the Hebrew Bible" *Religion Compass* 15.3 (2021); 1-15; Antonios Finitsis, *Dress and Clothing in the Hebrew Bible: For All Her Household Are Clothed in Crimson* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁵² Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1995), 133.

Chapter 2 – Hebrew Vocabulary and Key Examples

2.1 – Hebrew Vocab

The Hebrew word סָרִיס, meaning eunuch, originates from the Akkadian term, *sha rēshi*, meaning ‘he who is at the head’.⁵³ Eunuch is a particularly difficult term to define accurately in the Hebrew Bible as it has been used in contexts where it is uncertain if the intended definition describes a castrated individual or uncastrated. The translation could equally denote an individual’s class status, they could have been an ‘high state official’⁵⁴ or have a physical disfigurement. The English word ‘eunuch’ derives from the Greek, *eunouchos*, εὐνοῦχος, and is a reference to the oldest aristocratic role eunuchs played in Greek society, guardians of the bed chamber.⁵⁵ The Greek, εὐνοῦχος, and Latin term, *spado*, in addition to various other translations, were all used to describe a castrated man in ancient texts as well as men who had been born with mutilated genitals.⁵⁶ Both Greek and Latin use gendered language with masculine, feminine, and neuter options, but eunuchs are gendered masculine in Greek, and masculine in Hebrew.⁵⁷ Eunuchs are thus grammatically masculine – and perhaps socially associated with female attitudes and language. Interestingly, in the New Testament, Matthew 19:12 separates eunuchs into three groups; those from birth (סָרִיס הַמָּה), punishment (סָרִיס אָדָם), and eunuchs who have mutilated their genitals by choice for the ‘sake of the kingdom of heaven’. No such delineation exists in the Hebrew Bible but Matthew offers a range of interpretive frameworks for thinking about eunuchs that it helpful to remember.

There are four Hebrew terms used to directly describe eunuchs: These are *saris* (סָרִיס),⁵⁸ *saris hamma* (סָרִיס הַמָּה), *saris adam* (סָרִיס אָדָם), and *rab-saris* (רַב־סָרִיס).⁵⁹ *Saris* (סָרִיס) translates to ‘he of the head’, which is an ‘ancient term for personal servant’⁶⁰ or slave, and is often used to distinguish from *sa ziqni* (זִקְנָן), which translates to either the bearded one or an elder.⁶¹ The differentiation between these two terms is essential as eunuchs were

⁵³ Cogan, Tadmor, *2 Kings*, 112.

⁵⁴ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52*, 529.

⁵⁵ Kathryn Ringrose, “Eunuchs in Historical Perspective,” in *History Compass* 5.2 (2007): 495-506, 496. The LXX refers to eunuchs as *eunouchos* and the 31 references to eunuch are; Gen 39:1, 40:2, 7; 1 Sam 8:15, 1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6, 9:32, 20:18, 23:11, 24:12, 15, 25:19; 2 Chron 18:8; Est 1:10, 12, 15, 2:3, 14, 15, 21, 23, 4:4, 5, 6:2, 14, 7:9; Isa 56:3, 4; Jer 29:2, 41:16, 52:25. There are 14 verses that reference *saris* that the LXX does not include which are Dan 1:7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 18, 2:48, 11:18 and Est 2:23 as these are omitted from the LXX, 1 Chron 28:1; Isa 39:7; 34:7, 19.

⁵⁶ 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* 17.3 (2010): 213-243, 241.

⁵⁷ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 34.

⁵⁸ Examples of *Sa Resi*; Es 1:10, 12, 15, 2: 3, 14, 5:4, 5, 6:14, 7:18.

⁵⁹ Examples of *Rab-Saris*; 2 Kgs 18:17, Jer 39:3, 13. I would like to thank Laura Quick for suggesting the research into potential other terms used to reference eunuchs throughout the Hebrew Bible which would create an interesting dynamic within the thesis, however due to word count constrains this idea has not been possible.

⁶⁰ Omar N’Shea, “Royal Eunuchs and Elite Masculinity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79.3 (2016): 214-227, 214.

⁶¹ N’Shea, “Royal Eunuchs”, 214. *Sa Ziqni* derives from זִקְנָן meaning old, elderly. David J.A. Clines, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2009), 103. Examples of זִקְנָן meaning beard in the Hebrew Bible include Lev 13:30, 14:9, 21:5, Isa 7:20, Eze 5:1.

described physically to be distinct from the average man by their ‘visible beardless faces’⁶². In Jer 38, Ebed-Melech (עבד־מֶלֶךְ) is an example of a eunuch as slave or servant, whose name translates to ‘King’s slave/ servant’.⁶³ We do not know how Ebed-Melech came to serve in this position. It is possible he was given or sold to the King when a young boy, or as he is said to be a Cushite (הכּוּשִׁי), he could have been captured in war either as a eunuch or made one. He is interesting because even as a slave, he is able to speak freely to the King in the narrative and knows where the King will be in the household. Ebed-Melech as a personal servant suggests that perhaps the role of eunuchs in the royal court was essential.

Only the term *saris* is used within the Hebrew Bible to describe a eunuch, whether that was a man who was castrated, employment description, or title. Other texts, such as the Yemavot and Mishnah Zavim, are used to display examples of other terms that have been used to describe eunuchs. They offer a framework for thinking about the process of how an individual would become a eunuch and consequently how this affected their place in society/how others interpreted their character. Equally, by using texts set later than the Hebrew Bible as a framework this may show how ancient communities understood eunuchs in a range of ways.

A *Saris Hamma* (סריס המה) is a congenital eunuch, translating approximately to a eunuch from the moment they saw the sun, i.e., a born eunuch⁶⁴ – otherwise known as a ‘natural eunuch’, a man who is classed as legally male and was born with a penis but no viable testicles.⁶⁵ A *Saris Hamma* was categorised by being a man who had no signs of sexual maturity at the age of 20⁶⁶; However, he was not considered an individual between the boundaries of gender and is not considered a woman – showing that a ‘natural’ eunuch was male, and not someone with an indetermined gender. The *Saris Hamma* is treated as a male in his behaviour and relations, yet regarded as a female or female-like by the men above him.⁶⁷ This term is not used within the Hebrew Bible however one example of a סריס המה being referenced is in the Yevamot 79b where Rabbi Akiva explains a *Saris Hamma* to be a eunuch ‘by natural causes, who was entirely lacking in sexual capacity from birth’.

Saris Adam (סריס אדם) was a man who had been made a eunuch, through punishment; He had no viable testicles or penis.⁶⁸ Isaiah 56:3-5 is likely an example of this as there are references to genitals being ‘cut off’ and subsequent (in)fertility. The punishment of emasculation through genital mutilation, a form of violent control at the hands of the

⁶² N’Shea, “Royal Eunuchs”, 219.

⁶³ Interestingly, the LXX originals do not contain the reference to eunuch here (see *BHS*), but there seems no reason to delete it from the Hebrew as the other textual versions clearly retain it.

⁶⁴ *Saris Hamma* derives from המה meaning to be hot, inflamed, the sun. Clines, *Dictionary*, 122.

⁶⁵ Lev, “Treat Him as a Man,” 214.

⁶⁶ Stewart, “LGBT,” 306.

⁶⁷ Lev, “Treat Him as a Man,” 243. An example of this is the Ethiopian eunuchs of Acts 8:26-40. As the eunuch had no knowledge of Jesus and could not understand the scripture, we might assume that he had no access/ been excluded from the temple, following from the laws set in Deut 23:1. There are no references to the Ethiopian eunuch being wealthy, well clothed or knowing the law, as an official would, it seems more likely that ‘eunuch’ in this instance means a castrated man and not official.

⁶⁸ Stewart, “LGBT,” 306.

mutilator, created an individual seen as socially inadequate as he had lost his ‘manhood’,⁶⁹ and was seen as effeminate by becoming a victim – he had become a passive, penetrated man.⁷⁰ Being able to father children and carry on the family name was quintessential in biblical society, and a requirement for kingship. The threat of king Hezekiah’s sons being made eunuchs (2 Kgs 20:16-18) was thus a serious one which would have disqualified the entire family from kingship. A prime example of *סריס אדם* being referenced is in the Mishnah *Zavim 2* where two types of eunuchs are discussed, the first being *saris adam*, described as “castrated by man”, and the second being *saris hamma*, “a eunuch from the time of seeing the sun”. This shows a clear distinction between two translations of the types of a castrated eunuch.

Rab-Saris (רב־סריס) is translated to variously as chief-officer, chief eunuch, or high-ranking official. This translation is particularly intriguing as its occurrences in the texts do not specify whether the man would be castrated or not. The term could mean both or could refer solely to an uncastrated man who was employed in a high-up role by the royal family. If it did include castrated and uncastrated men, then arguably, it may not have been as socially discouraging to have mutilated genitals as we may first think, if men without viable testicles or penises could hold high masculine ranks whilst not having the physical embodiment of masculinity. English translations of Jer 39:3 mention *Rab-Saris* as chief official showing the difference in translations as well as status difference because the *Rab-Saris* would have been a higher rank than official. Additionally, in Jer 39:13, ‘Nebushazban’ is listed as the *Rab-Saris*. 2 Kings 18:17 also mentions *Rab-Saris* along with a commander, *tartān*, and chief of the officers, *rabshâqêh*, showing a distinct association with other high masculine rank within the royal family.

2.2 – Three Meanings

Following from this, eunuch appears to have three possible interpretations in scholarship. The first is eunuch as a role or title; wherein it could have a double meaning to designate an officer or official, the individual potentially being, but not by default, both an official and castrated man. However, there might be instances in the Hebrew Bible that allows the reader to distinguish between a castrated man and high-ranking official, for example Potiphar in Gen 37 is described as ‘one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard’ (Gen 37:36). In this example it is likely that eunuch (*סריס*) is translated to mean official here because we learn later on in the story (Gen 39) that Potiphar has a wife and as Neil Moran writes, it would have been incredibly unlikely for a castrated man to have taken a wife.⁷¹ Although, as mentioned in section 4.2, it is a possibility that Potiphar was a eunuch in terms of a man who was an official as well as a eunuch by ‘nature’ through celibacy, which could explain why his wife was so enthused about having sexual relations with Joseph.

The second interpretation is eunuch as a castrated man who may or may not be an officer/official. A man whose genitals have been castrated or are deformed from birth, through

⁶⁹ Cogan, Tadmor, *2 Kings*, 112.

⁷⁰ Haddox, “Masculinity Studies,” 180.

⁷¹ Neil Moran, “Byzantine Castrati,” *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 11.2 (2002): 99-112, 107.

punishment, or accident. If abandoned by their family due to their genital deformity, these eunuchs could often exist in a place ‘outside of family’⁷² and have little possibility of being a part of their biological family and descendants, if castrated from birth or before becoming a father. It is a possibility that a man could be both a eunuch and father if he was castrated after having children. An example of a eunuch with no access to heritage could be (נתן־מלך) ‘Nathan-Melech’, the king’s eunuch in 2 Kgs 23:11, whose name translates to ‘gift/given to the King’. This eunuch seems to have no access to his birth name, if he was given one, and is only to be known as the king’s property. Castrated eunuchs had no ability to create their own family, and were likely to have had replacements or inheritors rather than children.⁷³ This is particularly interesting as it shows eunuchs following the social norm and creating a family of their own, even if the children were not biologically theirs – contradicting the belief that eunuchs lived ‘outside of family’⁷⁴, as they may have created a family that is not based from biology. Often servants of the royal court, eunuchs held close relationships with the women of the royal household as it was their ‘role to attend to the princesses’.⁷⁵ Without working genitals, the king and men of the court did not need to worry about eunuchs interfering with the royal bloodline and as a result, eunuchs were able to enter female dominated spaces and work alongside both men and women.⁷⁶

The final interpretation is a natural eunuch or ‘eunuch by nature’.⁷⁷ These were individuals of any gender or age;⁷⁸ who became eunuchs either by abstaining from sex or castrating/mutilating their genitals. An example of this group is the *Galli*, ‘priests of the Phrygian goddess Cybele’⁷⁹ who would self-castrate themselves and adapt a gender fluid way of living, by dressing as women and not performing the normative male duties – these eunuchs are researched in depth in chapter 5. It must be noted that the interpretation for ‘natural eunuch’ is a perplexing title as this title appears as if it would link closer to a eunuch who was born with a genital disability ‘naturally’ since birth.

2.3 – The Contrast of Passages

There are a multitude of references to eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible, from saving innocent men from a cruel death (Jer 38), to betraying their queen and throwing her to a painful death (2 Kgs 9). There are four biblical references that are particularly captivating on the topic of eunuchs as they each place eunuchs in a list, but rank them differently in terms of importance and place them within different social categories. Moreover, the attitudes portrayed in these verses contrast positively with the general attitudes towards eunuchs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. This chapter will explore each of Isa 56:1-8; Jer 34:19-20; 41:16, Esther 1-7, and establish the importance of word order as well as social placement. Although there are many references to *saris* that could be compared with one another, I

⁷² Solevag, “No Nuts?”, 86.

⁷³ Janet S. Everhart, “Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 72.4 (2010): 688-698, 693.

⁷⁴ Solevag, “No Nuts?”, 86.

⁷⁵ Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah, A Commentary*, (OTL; Kentucky: John Knox, 2008): 435.

⁷⁶ Solevag, “No Nuts?,” 86.

⁷⁷ Ringrose, “Eunuchs,” 496.

⁷⁸ Ringrose, “Eunuchs,” 496.

⁷⁹ Asikainen, “Eunuchs,” 167.

have chosen four passages here that are the most relevant to the interpretations of *saris*. Isaiah 56 distinctly references eunuchs as castrated men, Jer 34 and Esther both display various men as potentially being both officials and castrated, and Jer 41 exhibits eunuchs to be a gender fluid group, not associated with either men or women. The comparison between these four references creates an interesting and complex debate surrounding eunuchs and *saris*.

The four verses chosen all include the Hebrew term סריס yet contain differing contextual hints as to how to understand *saris* therein. The verses do not give a direct translation of *saris* but are used within their context to give an interpretation by looking into what is happening within the verse, what the context of the verse is, and what the primary focus of the verse is. Isaiah 56:1-8 uses סריס to mean a eunuch as a castrated man, made clear by references suggesting a form of genital disability/absence. Thus, Isa 56:3 comments on the eunuch being a 'dry tree'; a clear comment on the eunuch's inability to reproduce children in the form of metaphorical offspring. It also makes light of the eunuch having a name which will not be 'cut off' (56:5) which suggests it refers to a man's genitals being forcibly removed. A translation of eunuch as officer or chamberlain is irrelevant in these verses. Jer 34:19-20 I have interpreted to translate to both eunuch as a class status and castrated man, however it is apparent from other Hebrew Bible texts that these are not exclusive terms; it would be curious for the text to translate the groups listed in those verses as 'officials of Judah, officials of Jerusalem, and officials'. It could be that this specific translation of סריס signifies castrated men as a group amongst officials. However, it could be equally argued that סריס here denotes a different role entirely and should be translated to soldier, chamberlain, or perhaps other job titles as opposed to castrated man. While Jer 34 places the *saris* amongst groups of men, Jer 41:16 places the *saris* behind women and children in the list of those being saved. From the use of *saris* in this context I would argue that these are eunuchs with a genital deformity/ castrated as they are not associated with the men at the beginning of the verse and even a lower-class man would be seen as greater than women and children. The eunuchs in Est 1-7 I believe denote both soldiers and guards and castrated men, as opposed to chamberlains. The eunuchs within these chapters worked for the King to protect him and the royal family – a role which chamberlains would be unable to fulfil. Some of the eunuchs within these verses could have been castrated men as they worked closely with the princess and were allowed in their chambers – something an average Israelite man would have been unable to do. In addition, their roles as protection and security within the royal court allows for the interpretation of *saris* as guard or soldier.⁸⁰

2.3.1 – Isaiah 56:1-8

Isaiah 56 addresses two groups – foreigners and eunuchs – in a chapter that states the covenant would be extended to all who obey Yhwh. Both groups are referred to as 'outcasts' (Isa 56:8) and are mentioned specifically in an attempt to show the gifts Yhwh will

⁸⁰ One example of eunuchs in Est whose role was to guard and protect include Bigthan and Teresh who "guarded the threshold" (2:21). An example of eunuchs who had a close association and connection with women include Hegai who was in "charge of the women" (2:3), and Shaashgaz who commanded the concubines (2:14).

bring them if they follow the laws stated. Indeed, in this rhetoric, they appear as a group superior to average families as they are promised an 'everlasting name and monument' (Isa 56:5) which would be greater than 'sons and daughters' (Isa 56:5) which the average person would have. The text thus identifies them as on the fringes of society and advocates for their inclusion. Yet, although framing them as 'outcast', this does not mean they were necessarily a small group; there were evidently enough for the author to identify them as a distinct category. Although mentioned around royalty with some frequency, eunuchs were likely unwanted in wider ancient Israelite society due to their lack of ability to reproduce and take on this assumed masculine role.⁸¹ There was a heavy social stigma surrounding not being able to fulfil one's assumed societal role, and so it would not be unreasonable to assume this is one of the reasons they were so disliked.⁸² In addition to this, their association with royalty may have contributed to social disdain as they could have reminded people of frivolity and wealth post-monarchy. Isaiah 56 is post-exilic, the monarchy had failed, so, perhaps, the references to eunuchs in Isa 56 are an attempt at social acceptance by following societal and religious expectations.

When looking into the location of eunuchs in the lists, it is particularly interesting that they are listed together with the category of foreigners. Although both were seen to be unwanted groups, foreigners are mentioned first in verse 3 'do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord...' and then again in verses 6-7, 'and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord'. It is possible that the repetition of foreigners being accepted by Yhwh shows that they were the group society feared most and that eunuchs were less stigmatised than foreigners.⁸³ Or perhaps eunuchs were mentioned second in an attempt to highlight that foreigners were not entirely unfavourable, but eunuchs were. I am inclined to agree with the former.⁸⁴

It is without question from this chapter that the eunuchs referred to are castrated men. Verse 3 makes this clear when Yhwh says to 'not let the eunuch say 'I am just a dry tree'', an obvious reference to the eunuch's inability to reproduce and have children, which would

⁸¹ There are multiple texts and stories within the Hebrew Bible to suggest that eunuchs were sought after for employment, specifically, members of the royal court often employed eunuchs; examples of this include the twelve eunuchs mentioned in Esther, who all maintain various roles throughout the palace, such as Mehuman and Zethar, two of the King's eunuchs.

⁸² It is important to note that although various biblical quotes portray eunuchs to be a stigmatised group, there are examples of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible portraying them to be sought after and wanted within the royal courts.

⁸³ Trito-Isaiah often portrays foreigners to be a disagreeable and unwelcome group who 'create problems', but believe that once the foreigners have accepted the laws of the covenant, they can be integrated within their community. Gerda De Villiers, "The 'Foreigner in our Midst' and the Hebrew Bible," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75.3 (2019): 1-7, 4.

⁸⁴ Foreigners were classed as a minority group as they were categorised as anyone who was not a descendant of Israel or follower of Yhwh. Disliking and avoiding foreigners is mentioned frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible, e.g., 'the descendants of Israel separate themselves from all foreigners' (Neh 9:2) and 'our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our houses to aliens' (Lam 5:2). Perhaps foreign people were mentioned first, and therefore disliked less than eunuchs as they could become followers of Yhwh, whereas eunuchs had limitations on being able to visit religious buildings, 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord' (Deut 23:1).

have ‘resonated with the community’s anxiety’⁸⁵ about their future. The reader is prompted to consider the association between the fate of the eunuch and the fate of the community if they are not accepted when following Yhwh’s commands.⁸⁶ Wright and Chan argue that eunuchs were likely to ‘sever ties with their biological families’⁸⁷ in order to completely integrate themselves with the royal household – a eunuch’s usual place of employment, either by choice or when they were sold as slaves as children.⁸⁸ Eunuchs had no ability to have biological descendants and therefore carry on their name, and so the promise of a name would have significantly influenced their opinions on following Yhwh and his laws, as no longer would ‘power and influence die with them’.⁸⁹ The recognition that eunuchs could have not have children here shows that being given a name and therefore a place in history may have been tempting for eunuchs to follow Yhwh as well as convincing the community to accept the eunuchs who follow Yhwh.

Furthermore, being promised a monument and name ‘In my house and in my walls’ (Isa 56:5) is quite provocative as Yhwh’s ‘house’ is the temple, somewhere disfigured men and women were not welcome or encouraged to go to. Leviticus 21:16-23 lists groups of men and women who ‘shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar’ (Lev 21:23), as they have various disabilities, from having a ‘blemish in his eyes’ to a ‘mutilated face’. ‘Crushed testicles’ is mentioned in Lev 21:20, and refers to eunuchs. The rhetoric of Isa 56 flips this picture on its head; the excluded will be included.

In addition, the reference to ‘everlasting name that shall not be cut off’ (Isa 56:5) seems to be a play on words alluding to castration. While this could be interpreted as not cutting eunuchs off from their place in society, I believe it is also a comment on the physical ability to produce a family, and therefore name, through the eunuchs lack/ disfiguration of genitals. Notably, the term ‘cut off’ implies two forms of castration; castration through punishment or choice. Perhaps this text was intended for those who had committed a serious crime and had been punished by ‘surrendering masculinity through a genital injury’⁹⁰ and Yhwh was instructing them to follow him to be saved from exile and ostracism. Equally, the text could have been implying that although they had mutilated their bodies, this will not affect Yhwh and the community’s acceptance of them and that if they followed Yhwh they would be redeemed for their actions. With the addition of this text, although castration was imposed on the eunuch, he can now declare his personal responsibility.⁹¹

2.3.2 – Jeremiah 34:19-20

Jeremiah 34:19-20, meanwhile, places eunuchs in a group completely different to Isa 56. Whereas Isa 56 places them alongside outcasts, Jer 34 associates them with groups of

⁸⁵ Wright and Chan, “King and Eunuch,” 117.

⁸⁶ Wright and Chan, “King and Eunuch,” 118.

⁸⁷ Wright and Chan, “King and Eunuch,” 108.

⁸⁸ Examples of eunuchs being seen in royal courts include 2 Kgs 9:32, 23:11, Est 1:10, 12, 15, 2:3, 14, 15, 21, 4:4, 5, 6:2, 14, 7:9, and Jer 38:7.

⁸⁹ Bolle and Llewelyn, “Intersectionality,” 557.

⁹⁰ Haddox, “Masculinity Studies,” 184.

⁹¹ Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III 56-66, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol 3 (Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 15.

socially accepted masculine men. Eunuchs, here, are placed in between ‘officials of Judah and Jerusalem’ and ‘priests’ – two masculine groups who had fundamental and necessary roles within society. I would argue in agreement with Silverman that eunuchs were linked with masculinity and were perceived as an emasculated male, not an ‘alternative form of masculinity’.⁹²

The notability of eunuchs being associated with accepted ranks of men allows us to consider the link between hegemonic masculinity and eunuchs. In a society “dominated by men”⁹³ being associated with domineering masculinity would have been more socially elevating than femininity. This raises the question of how socially deterring it was to have a genital disability; In a society where masculinity was determined by agency and control, perhaps lacking functioning genitals was not paramount to masculinity.

Indeed, the list in Jer 34 leads us to question what is at stake, gender or class? Jer 34 could show that gender did not entirely dictate an individual’s worth as the groups mentioned listed not in terms of a gender hierarchy, but hierarchy of social rank. If so, eunuchs are included among these groups of men as they maintained high rank within their positions, rather than due to masculinity.⁹⁴

The placement of eunuchs in this group is also of interest as they are placed before holy men. Priests were one of the most important and recognisable groups in biblical society so eunuchs being placed before them suggests that they too were a recognisable and central group to society and among the key elite men, which differs considerably to Isa 56. Here, they are placed behind officials, expressing again the hierarchy of men and that military men would come before any and all groups of men. This substantiates the idea that eunuchs had a key role to play in elite biblical society, they were valuable and relevant members of society whose contribution was fundamental, just as officials and priests’ role and contribution was.

This verse is also important linguistically as two different words are used to delineate between the officials (שָׂרִים) of Judah and Jerusalem and the eunuchs (סְרִיסִים). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, סְרִיס is translated to mean both official *and* eunuch but in this instance both terms are mentioned, and it would seem strange to translate ‘officials of Judah and officials of Jerusalem and officials’.⁹⁵ This clearly indicates that ‘eunuch’ as a class status is the intended translation here and this has implications for the translation of סְרִיס in similar groups elsewhere, סְרִיס could indicate a distinct difference between officials and eunuch as individuals.

⁹² Erik K. Silverman, “Anthropology and Circumcision,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33.1 (2004): 419-455, 424. It is important to note here that it is technically a possibility that women were included in groups of ‘chiefs’ of ‘officials’, as, grammatically, women would not be signified explicitly unless there were no men in the group. But it is very unlikely that in this verse eunuch is mentioned in social groups of men and women and most other lists of societal groups tend to be male.

⁹³ Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 214.

⁹⁴ Though admittedly, these things overlap.

⁹⁵ Examples of סְרִיס meaning ‘official’ include Est 1:10, 12, 15, 2:3, 14, 4:4, 5, 6:14, 7:18.

On the contrary to this, Jer 34:19-20 could be using *saris* to refer to an administrative role and class status as opposed to castrated individuals. The use of *saris* here may reference men who are chamberlains or military officials as their role within society which could explain why they had been placed before 'priests' due to their participation in the social elite. This could also explain why they had been associated with groups of men as the translation of *saris* could mean officials or a class status men would predominantly have – as opposed to eunuchs being seen as male and therefore being associated with priests and other officials.

2.3.3 – Jeremiah 41:16

Eunuchs also appear in Jeremiah 41:16, which again differs from the aforementioned examples. In this verse, a few groups of people are listed, whom Johanan apparently brought back from Gibeon: 'soldiers, women, children, and eunuchs', גברים אנשי המלחמה ונשים וטף וסרסים.⁹⁶ In contrast to Jer 34 where eunuchs are among officials and priests, and Isa 56 where they are favoured, here the eunuchs are mentioned at the end of the list after soldiers, women, and children which is interesting for a variety of reasons. Initially the placement of eunuchs in this verse raises interest as it excludes them from the three 'main' groups in society; Men (represented in the masculine 'soldiers'), women, and children. Their mention after children, suggests a perceived lack of importance within society. Additionally, unlike Jer 34:19-20 they are not grouped with men; They are not placed next to or associated with the masculine group 'soldiers' and so have been placed outside of masculinity and traditional groups. The men ('soldiers') are placed at the beginning of the list as they held the most significance for the patriarchal society, especially as their job was to protect the city/ land, so they would have been seen as the most important due to their heightened masculinity by 'maintaining male honour'⁹⁷ through warfare.

A final reason why placement of eunuchs is thought-provoking in Jer 41:16 is because they are not associated within a category of women; This could mean that eunuchs were perceived to be of less importance than women and children.⁹⁸ The latter is interesting as adults are rarely referred to after children elsewhere and children here probably signifies both boys and girls. If so, the eunuchs are almost a fourth group – man, woman, those with potential to be men and women and those without. It may be that eunuchs are conceived of here as a separate group that functioned outside of the boundaries of masculinity and existed outside of the gender binary pair of men and women that society depended on.⁹⁹ If they were not associated with men or women then perhaps, they were limited to more of a gender fluid group between men and women. Isa 56:1-8 and Jer 34:19-20, although

⁹⁶ The MT reads 'soldiers, men of war, women, children, eunuchs' but BHS notes that 'men of war' (אנשי המלחמה) is probably an addition so it is not included here.

⁹⁷ Ovidiu Creanga, "Variations on the Theme of Masculinity: Joshua's Gender In/ Stability in the Conquest Narrative (Josh. 1-12)," *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (Ed. Ovidiu Creanga, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2010), 83-109, 87.

⁹⁸ T.M. Lemos, "'Like the Eunuch who does not beget', Gender, Mutilation and Negotiated Status in the Ancient Near East," *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, (Eds. Candida R. Moss, Jeremy Schipper; New York: Palgrave, 2011), 47-67, 50.

⁹⁹ Arvas, "Early Modern," 117.

differing in the details, locate eunuchs ‘recognisable class[es] of people’,¹⁰⁰ whereas Jer 41:16 places them in an unknown third gender group. This may be of interest in discussions about authorship if it indicates that two different scribes’ perception of society.

Alternatively, it may point to eunuchs’ rhetorical fluidity and their ability to impact a textual argument, perhaps because their uniqueness catches the eye (or ear). In this light, it could be a possibility that eunuchs were saved to signify totality; If everyone had been saved by Johanan, then eunuchs were not saved specifically or with any intention, they were saved alongside the other groups within society.

2.3.4 – Esther 1-7

Whereas most royal narratives mention eunuchs sparingly, the book of Esther is full of them. Twelve are mentioned by name and their role within the palace features throughout the story.¹⁰¹ On the one hand, this could suggest that they held a level of importance as the biblical writers had intentionally remembered and recorded their names. Equally, it could indicate a level of literary creation, wherein the eunuchs help fuel the construction of the Persian court as exotic and different. The eunuchs mentioned are often referenced with what roles they carried out in the royal court, for example Hegai, (Est 2:3), Shaashgaz (Est 3:14) and Hathach (Est 4:5) are referred to as the king’s eunuchs. As the eunuchs in Esther worked for the king and royal family for protection, it is likely here that סרִיס translates for the majority of references to soldiers and guards, and occasionally to castrated men: Est 2:21 it explicitly states “Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king’s guards, who guarded the threshold”, showing the reader that these eunuchs were soldiers used for protection and security.

However, although it is likely that the eunuchs mentioned were royal guards, some eunuchs maintained close relations with the female members of the royal court. Esther 4:4 is a distinct example of this as the young women, the female servants, and eunuchs are sent together to alert Esther of Mordecai’s actions. By associating young women with eunuchs, the perceived masculinity of the eunuch is reduced, their connection and association to a female group portrays the eunuch to be an effeminate group as men would have avoided ‘excessive engagement’¹⁰² with women. Their link to young women highlights to the readers that eunuchs are within or close to the same category as women.

Whereas Isa 56 and the two Jeremiah references place the eunuchs with men or in their own group, Esther 4:4 locates eunuchs next to the ‘female servants’ (נַעֲרָה), a group of women whose role was to serve the queen/ princesses. There are two potential reasons for this; First, female servants and eunuchs were grouped on the basis of function; They both served the royal household and held special relationships with the queens.¹⁰³ A second

¹⁰⁰ Harvey, “Eunuchs,” 7.

¹⁰¹ The eunuchs mentioned in Est are Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, Carkas, Hegai, Shaashgaz, Bigthan, Teresh, and Hathach; they are mentioned throughout Est but introduced in books one to four.

¹⁰² Susan Haddox, “Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities,” *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, (Ed. Ovidiu Creanga, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2010), 2-19, 4.

¹⁰³ This will be further addressed in the third chapter surrounding which positions eunuchs held and why.

reason could be that the author of Esther believed eunuchs to be an effeminate or non-masculine group of men who could not be compared to men. It is possible that due to their status in the royal court and ability to have close relations to the females, they were seen to 'resemble a woman, whilst not being a woman'.¹⁰⁴

If we translate סרִיס to mean both castrated man and soldier in this extract, then this is interesting in its contradictions, eunuchs were associated with female-orientated groups, femininity, servitude yet were also associated with aggression, violence, and dominance as guards of the royal members and palace. Although the various job roles of eunuchs would have varied within the palace, it is intriguing that elite males and emasculated males are both denoted with the same term as it shows a man could be an elite and have a high social status, but equally be emasculated within a gender spectrum.

2.4 – What does this mean?

After looking at only four biblical texts it is apparent that the role, gender, and attitudes towards eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible are complex. It is difficult to establish a consistent view of eunuchs from a biblical perspective as they are narratively deployed and arranged in various groups throughout the Hebrew Bible. Isa 56 lists eunuchs with foreigners, Jer 34 lists them as men and a social group, and then as a separate gender group in Jer 41, and Esther places them alongside female groups. Eunuchs were evidentially a collection of people that went against gender norms, and were discriminated against in various biblical texts,¹⁰⁵ because of their 'inability to procreate'¹⁰⁶ and therefore carry on the family name, and lack of 'superiority'¹⁰⁷ caused by their lack of/ hindered masculinity. Regardless these texts indicate that eunuchs were a societal group who were worthy of saving and inclusion.

In addition, a further reason as to why the Hebrew Bible has contrasting views on eunuchs is due to the various aspects of a eunuch's life. Other groups implicitly evoke certain views, for example, men were seen as superior to women, free men were superior to slaves, and priests were superior to unclean men. The appearance of eunuchs in royal courts and high offices suggest it was not entirely socially debilitating to be a eunuch, although for many people it was unlikely to be a common choice to be one. In contrast to this, eunuchs often held distinguished roles and 'occupied high offices'¹⁰⁸ within the royal court because of their gender fluidity causing them to be perceived as loyal and trustworthy around women as they were incapable of starting a rebellion by forming their own dynastic line. It is interesting, however, that we rarely see eunuchs mentioned in non-elite contexts in the Hebrew Bible, which raises questions about poorer eunuchs and their ability to hold societal roles and offices. In addition, we might consider whether poorer people would have been able to afford healthcare to permit them to survive castration.

¹⁰⁴ Ringrose, "Eunuchs," 497.

¹⁰⁵ Examples of discrimination include Deut 23:1, being excluded from the assembly, and Lev 21:20, discrimination based on physical disability/ deformity.

¹⁰⁶ N'Shea, "Royal Eunuchs", 218.

¹⁰⁷ Lynn E. Roller, "The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest," *Gender and History* 9.3 (1997): 542-559, 543.

¹⁰⁸ Wright and Chan, "King and Eunuch", 104.

Nevertheless, there is clearly a reason as to why this group of individuals are not instinctively associated with men or entirely spoken about in a positive manner. There are two reasons as to why I think this is; The first being their infertility and lack of ability to have children, which leads to the inability to continue their family name.¹⁰⁹ By not having a name to pass on throughout generations or a wife to call theirs, their social position is automatically temporary as it could not be passed on to children. Even if this was useful in the palace as the royals did not have to worry about eunuchs affecting the royal bloodline, perhaps the average individual took issue with infertility as they could not perform the role they were born to do.

Secondly, their gender ambiguity was a threat to the androcentric society that the Hebrew Bible views as normative and correct. Men being understood to look and act a certain way was 'essential for the preservation'¹¹⁰ of the male-dominated laws and community. Their ability to have masculine jobs (such as military officers), and to enter female dominated spaces without supervision;¹¹¹ Created a complex individual who was able to 'transcend conventional social boundaries'¹¹². The Hebrew Bible separates male and female roles and creates the impression that men would not have or wanted to perform female roles. Perhaps the inability to choose and forcibly being restricted, something that would have rarely happened for men, created a societal prejudice and dislike towards eunuchs as they disrupted the social fabric. Eunuchs caused men to reconsider what makes them different from women, and perhaps this disruption and realisation of lack of difference unwittingly caused by eunuchs allowed men to form prejudices against them.

Eunuchs inadvertently maintaining female and male roles could have been used by ancient leaders as a threat; Castration leading to redefinition of one's place in the social, familial, gendered, and religious hierarchies. In this sense, castration goes beyond mere servitude, and redefining personhood as much as social role. In addition, castration leading to infertility, threatening the possibility of descendants, bloodline, or memory. Additionally, the threat of exile from religious community as well as isolation from the society, may have made eunuchs a powerful deterrent to convince people to obey cultural, religious, and political traditions.

¹⁰⁹ Continuing on your family name was of paramount importance as it demonstrated various aspects of an individual's life such as establishing their connection with Yhwh (Gen 32:28, Jacob being renamed Israel), establishing family ties and relationships, and signifying a change in status and authority (2 Kgs 23:34, Eliakim changing to Jehoiakim when he took the throne).

¹¹⁰ Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality," 560.

¹¹¹ Solevag, "No Nuts?," 86.

¹¹² Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 165.

3 – Society

In ancient Israelite society, I would argue it was not entirely alienating or discouraging to be a eunuch, and that some were seen to be a valued member of society as advocated in Isa 56. They ‘operated alongside their fertile male counterparts’;¹¹³ Often carrying out important roles, such as advisors to elite and royal families, and employed ordinary roles such as ‘cooks, bakers, musicians, and scribes’¹¹⁴. Men who were classed as eunuchs by abstaining from sexual intercourse would have been ordinary people with no distinguishing physical features about them;¹¹⁵ So it is very likely that these eunuchs would have had average but necessary roles within their communities. From the biblical texts that mention castrated men as eunuchs, such as Deut 23:1, perhaps it was the biblical authors that attempted to exclude and alienate eunuchs from everyday life, and not their community.

3.1 – Employment

Although it was perceived socially disabling to have no genitals, eunuchs held a variety of different roles, from slaves and servants to royal advisors. It is important to note that eunuchs could not be three of the central biblical roles for a man; (biological) Father, king, or priest. It is often unclear if סריס signifies a military official or a castrated man who also was involved in the military. The lack of clarity means we have to look to the wider literary context a eunuch is mentioned in, for example in Esther 1-7, 12 eunuchs are referenced by name, but as these men were involved in the protection of the palace and royal family, it is likely that these men were castrated men as opposed to soldiers as they could be in close contact with the female members of the royal family without fear of impregnating them.

Important roles were often given to men ‘without question or reflection’,¹¹⁶ and the power dynamic between men and women was highlighted by this. Eunuchs became a unique exception to this power dynamic, they were not solely ‘below’ men and ‘above’ women, but flowed between the boundaries of male and female roles. A key example is by having a close relationship with high-class women; Higher-class women would have rarely interacted with poor, lower-class men or men whose status was not clear.¹¹⁷ By associating with higher class circles, eunuchs established their class and importance within society independently as the average person would not have had that ability. By holding ‘elevated positions’¹¹⁸ of authority with upper-class women, such as royals, they were able to speak freely with royal men and women without fear of punishment or consequence. Due to the difficult nature of pinpointing each eunuch’s social situation, it is difficult to suggest a certain social status; They could be in high office or a common slave – automatically associated with a status change due to their unclear gender. By not being restricted by their male gender, they could move freely between the worlds of men and women:¹¹⁹ Men rarely had access to royal

¹¹³ Melville, “Eunuchs,” 2561.

¹¹⁴ Lemos, “Like the Eunuch,” 49.

¹¹⁵ Ringrose, “Eunuchs,” 496.

¹¹⁶ Todd Compton, “‘Kingdom of Priests’: Priesthood, Temple, and Women in the Old Testament and in the Restoration,” *Dialogue* 36.3 (2003): 41-59, 49-50.

¹¹⁷ Lemos, “Like the Eunuch,” 58.

¹¹⁸ Lemos, “Like the Eunuch,” 49.

¹¹⁹ Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play*, 108.

women due to the threat of contaminated bloodline, an aspect I will explore later on in this chapter.

3.2 – Dependent on their masters

Eunuchs in the royal household quickly became an extension of space that their master could not enter.¹²⁰ Service to an upper-class woman, as well as being seen as beneath women, was extremely socially limiting and portrayed the eunuch to have a lack of masculine traits. By existing in a place outside of family and gender, eunuchs became vulnerable and desirable to their royal masters; They were seen as loyal as they depended solely on their masters, and useful as they educated the elite's children.¹²¹ Eunuchs were portrayed to be less of a threat than the average man as their masters were aware that any power and influence they held would die with them; Name and identity were linked closely to power and history, and by severing ties to their family, eunuchs were unable to carry on their family name, having limited influence on their masters' personal lives.¹²²

Additionally, eunuchs who were born with no viable genitals could not have children, royal masters did not worry about them affecting the royal bloodline, they were trusted around women and in female spaces as there would have been no concerns of a potential royal being the eunuchs. Eunuchs had 'successors rather than sons'¹²³ who could inherit their influence and potential status, but not be a biological relation. The eunuchs in 2 Kgs 9 are a central example of eunuchs being trusted around women, as they are alone with Jezebel – being alone with women is rarely written in the Hebrew Bible, except in cases of family relations such as wives and daughters. Falling short of male expectation is a further reason as to why eunuchs depended on their masters.¹²⁴ Eunuchs were seen as 'effeminate, self-indulgent and sycophantic'¹²⁵ and so by ensuring they had a master, they had job security, a place to live, and a source of income.

The eunuchs in 2 Kgs 9 are a prime example of being dependent on their masters; when told by Jehu to 'throw her down' (2 Kgs 9:33) they throw Jezebel out of the tower, to her painful death. The eunuchs of this story were aware that Jezebel's time as a ruler was close to an end and Jehu was to take over, knowing that they needed a master to survive and to carry on residing in the palace, they quickly follow Jehu, showing him obedience and loyalty. As Everhart states, eunuchs plotting to overthrow the monarchy is not an uncommon situation, in Neo-Assyria, Byzantium, and China there is convincing evidence to show that eunuchs planned to transfer power and influence from one individual in the court to another.¹²⁶ Aristocratic masters looked for these traits, loyalty and obedience, in people who served

¹²⁰ Solevag, "No Nuts?," 86.

¹²¹ Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality," 557.

¹²² Wright and Chan, "King and Eunuch," 108.

¹²³ Everhart, "Jezebel," 693.

¹²⁴ Solevag, "No Nuts?," 88.

¹²⁵ Harvey, "Eunuchs," 7.

¹²⁶ Everhart, "Jezebel," 696.

him and not others;¹²⁷ The eunuchs who caused Jezebel's painful death would have been perceived as useful and accommodating to Jehu.

Biblical male characters were sometimes outwardly violent, persuasive and determined to maintain their honour;¹²⁸ Anything less was emasculating and socially prohibiting. However, this did not affect their ability within a work setting, eunuchs were employed and sought after by royal families for a multitude of reasons. It is noteworthy to mention that although eunuchs were employed because of their ability to move between male and female worlds, the gender and sexual ambiguity of eunuchs is never mentioned within the biblical texts, portraying an idea that although eunuchs were written often to be a less than admirable group, the royal courts saw no issues with eunuchs as leaders and participants of the group.¹²⁹ This further shows us that it could have been the biblical writers displaying their feeling towards eunuchs, and that biblical texts are not an accurate representation of how eunuchs were treated or thought of in ancient Israel.

3.3 – Outcasts

Mentions of eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible often seem to imply they were minority groups or outcasts and although potentially limited in number, eunuchs as a phenomenon were evidently widely known. Fertility was a fundamental characteristic of men and women and eunuchs, not being able to have children meant that they could not fulfil this normative communal responsibility, which places them outside usual societal groups. As fertility was thought to be God-given, infertility was not as disadvantageous to a man who was able to shoulder important roles in ancient Israelite society.¹³⁰

The gendered implications of anger also highlight the eunuch's contradiction within society and could be a reason as to why they were written to be outcast as a group.¹³¹ It was socially acceptable for men to be angry, societal norms allowed men to be aggressive, have high testosterone levels, however when a woman displayed aggression, this was seen as an attempt at masculinity and quickly rejected as a social norm. Women were seen to be irrational, had a 'lack of control...emotionally unstable'¹³² and any characteristics that labelled a man in a positive light, were quick to call a woman uncooperative and masculine. When a man defended his honour and people, he was seen as strong and powerful, such as David killing Goliath in 1 Sam 17:48-50, a woman was seen as cruel and a temptress, for example, Jezebel in 2 Kgs. Men who did not display any aggressive or violent behaviours were labelled with qualities of 'effeminacy or unmanliness' and eunuchs became a part of that group.¹³³

¹²⁷ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 39.

¹²⁸ Creanga, "Variations on the Theme," 87.

¹²⁹ Nissinen, "Relative Masculinities," 233.

¹³⁰ Sarah Melcher, "Disability and the Hebrew Bible: A Survey and Appraisal," *Currents in Biblical Research* 18.1 (2019): 7-31, 19.

¹³¹ Conway, *Behold*, 26.

¹³² Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 52.

¹³³ Eric Stewart, "Masculinity in the New Testament and Early Christianity," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46.2 (2016): 91-102, 94.

What is apparent from the biblical texts is there was an aspect of eunuchs that made the biblical writers want to segregate them from society or within texts. I would argue that their gender ambiguity caused this; Perhaps the authors feared a third, unknown gender as they believed that Yhwh created two sexes, man and woman, and the eunuchs not fitting in either of these sexes would have upset and anger' the religious society. Eunuchs existed outside of the 'boundaries of normativity'¹³⁴ and it is feasible that they feared what they could not understand, by alienating and secluding eunuchs from certain roles within everyday life, they were able to ensure they were not part of their religious community and consequently not associated with.

This brings us to the question of why some eunuchs were labelled as outcasts, but some had important responsibilities and jobs in the government/royal household. What distinguished a socially acceptable eunuch from a rejected eunuch? We cannot claim to know if a eunuch was treated in the same manner as other royal servants/ slaves, it is a possibility that they were rejected and treated differently. In addition to this, the lack of genitals potentially could have been seen as a linked to a high spirituality, eunuchs were believed to cross between 'the material and spiritual worlds',¹³⁵ the ability to be closer to Yhwh is likely to be a reason as to why some eunuchs were welcomed into society.

Much like a priest, they could have been holy men who were seen to be the physical link between Yhwh and earth. Their higher spirituality is not only the link that connects them to Yhwh, but the link that connects them to social acceptance. Although this possibility exists, there is no evidence of this in the Hebrew Bible, and if eunuchs could not enter the temple then it is likely that it was not a common idea for eunuchs to be seen as a link between the spiritual and material world until a much later time period. Priests were seen to be "differently gendered from other males"¹³⁶ as their clothing empowered their priesthood and masculinity due to their heightened duty to God, yet this also controlled them.¹³⁷ Perhaps being an assembly official and physically displaying as one could have allowed them to be socially accepted into society. Clothing controls the human interactions of public and private life so it is possible that being a priest encouraged social acceptance due to their link to Yhwh and outward appearance not being unordinary.¹³⁸

3.4 – Disability Studies

Comments and attitudes on mental and physical disabilities are mentioned frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible, but one that connects with the study of eunuchs is Deut 23:1. Deut 23:1 states that 'no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord', a subtle but direct comment towards סריס המה and אדם סריס eunuchs. Though the blemish 'crushed testicles' seems out of place among the list of those 'unable to be admitted to the assembly of the Lord', this did not hinder them from

¹³⁴ Arvas, "Early Modern," 117.

¹³⁵ Ringrose, "Eunuchs," 501. It must be noted that this quote focusses on eunuchs from a later time period.

¹³⁶ Heather A. McKay, "Gendering the Body: Clothes Maketh the (Wo)man," in *Theology and the body: Gender, Text, and Ideology*, Ed. Robert Hannaford and J'annine Jobling, (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1999): 84-104, 103.

¹³⁷ McKay, "Gendering the Body," 103.

¹³⁸ McKay, "Gendering the Body," 104.

participating in the assembly service.¹³⁹ Among the list of those unable to enter the 'assembly of the Lord', including 'those born of an illicit union' (23:2) and 'Ammonite or Moabite' (23:3), are many social groups and ethnicities who would be unable to participate, showing that this quote is not directly aimed at disabled individuals and was not an attempt to dispel disabled individuals from participating in social and religious activities in ancient Israelite society. People with physical disabilities were 'as welcome as anyone'¹⁴⁰ to bring sacrifices and offerings to the assembly. This verse also inadvertently includes eunuchs as castrated men within this grouping as although *saris* is not mentioned explicitly, it is an obvious reference.

A further verse that highlights the integration of disabled people in ancient Israelite society and shows no disdain for their presence among the community is Jer 33:7-9; Within these verses Yhwh tells his people he will save the 'remnants of Israel' (33:8) from the farthest parts of the earth (33:8) which includes 'the blind and the lame' (33:9). This text shows to the reader that disabled individuals were worthy of saving and considered Yhwh's people. It shows disabled individuals as not only part of Yhwh's plan, but as part of a 'utopian scenario'¹⁴¹ where disabled individuals will be saved and remain in Yhwh's kingdom. The idea of 'utopian scenarios' in which disabled individuals are saved from destruction is repeated in Isaiah 56 and any ideas of castrated men being 'illegitimate and unwarranted'¹⁴² in cultic practises are rejected and any preconceived stigmas of disabled individuals, who are castrated men/ eunuchs in this text, are repudiated.¹⁴³

These three biblical extracts highlight the integration and recognises the stigma around disabled individuals within ancient Israelite society and if we are to include castrated men within this group of people, it could be argued that eunuchs were stigmatised in society due to their genital disability because their genital disability gave the appearance of a fluid gender, as opposed to the disability itself.

¹³⁹ Thomas Hentrich, "Masculinity and Disability in the Bible," Pages 73-91 in *The Abled Body, Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, Ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, Jeremy Schipper, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007): 84.

¹⁴⁰ Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, "Misconceptions about Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible," in *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 10, 2007: 78.

¹⁴¹ Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 85.

¹⁴² Olyan, *Disabilities*, 85.

¹⁴³ Olyan, *Disabilities*, 85.

Chapter 4 – Sex and Physical Appearance

This section will discuss the physical aspect of being a eunuch. In particular, their appearance (or lack of it in the Hebrew Bible) and how they were portrayed to their living community, I will also reflect on how a eunuch's castrated genitals would have affected them in regards to sexual relations, having children, and how the procedure of castration differs from other genital procedures, such as circumcision. Physical appearance was as important in the ancient world as it is today; How one constructed and presented the body had a significant impact on how they identified with and were identified by their community.

4.1 – Appearance

A eunuch's appearance may well have differed depending on when they were castrated. If they were castrated later in life then to onlookers, they may have looked like any average man. If they were castrated before puberty, however, the eunuch would likely have little to no facial or body hair, be tall and slender in stature, and have a high-pitched voice due to the lack of testosterone.¹⁴⁴ The contrast of having an emasculated, beardless male with his masters having rich and full beards would have further emasculated eunuchs, having a beard was synonymous with masculinity and fertility.¹⁴⁵ The eunuch's inability to produce facial hair automatically placed them in a category below hegemonic and elite males.

As shown in later texts, eunuchs could also be accused of having female-orientated traits, such as being self-indulgent and drinking too much,¹⁴⁶ as well as lacking harmony and balance, which were associated with men.¹⁴⁷ If castrated after puberty, there would be very little physical indication of who was a eunuch as they could potentially have a beard, have a deep voice, and have body hair and so we cannot use a eunuchs appearance to dictate if they should be classed as male or female. I would argue that a mass majority of eunuchs identified as men, even if they did not have the sexual anatomy to match their gender.¹⁴⁸

4.2 – Infertility

If a man was infertile in the Bible his ability to participate in society was not hindered completely as men were able to carry out other important roles that contributed to the community, however an infertile woman was unable to assume the role she was born to be, a mother.¹⁴⁹ There was extreme pressure for a woman to have children, and even more so to have a son; By having a son mothers were able to secure her status within their household.¹⁵⁰ Sons were more profitable than daughters as men could work and bring

¹⁴⁴ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 59.

¹⁴⁵ O'Shea, "Royal Eunuchs", 218.

¹⁴⁶ Harvey, "Eunuchs," 7.

¹⁴⁷ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 52.

¹⁴⁸ The exception to this would be groups such as the Galli, who voluntarily castrated themselves and did not restrict themselves to one gender's expectations, limitations, or appearance.

¹⁴⁹ Melcher, "Disability," 19.

¹⁵⁰ Melcher, "Disability," 23.

financial support to their household. Where a child that was born a eunuch would fit into this, is an interesting question.

The inability to father children carried the assumption that the eunuch was unable to maintain any property of his own; By having no children he was unable to carry on his bloodline or name; They could have potentially had successors to carry the name but not bloodline. Eunuchs rarely had wives as no biblical woman took a husband who could not provide children. Although in the Hebrew Bible they did not have children if they were born castrated, by the Byzantine empire eunuchs were allowed to adopt children, however it is unsure if eunuchs were able to adopt prior to this as it is not explicitly stated in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵¹ Infertile men and eunuchs were unable to increase the population of their community which also had an effect on how masculine eunuchs were seen to be, by not performing their main role eunuchs were portrayed as ‘incapable of virtue’¹⁵² and not masculine. A father’s ‘role’ was to control his wife and children, showing others he had full authority and dominance over a group of people, even if they were very few in number, a eunuch could display few signs of dominance, a key trait for biblical masculinity, and therefore was emasculated.

The New Testament makes references to eunuchs and fertility in Matt 19:12 ‘there are eunuchs who have been so from birth... made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God’. This quote expresses a clear understanding of the various types of eunuchs. I would argue that statement aimed to help deflect blame from eunuchs regarding their lack of reproduction. By stating that eunuchs had no level of culpability in whether they could reproduce, the blame and shame were taken away as there is nothing to blame them for. This quote would also allow followers of Yhwh to understand that Yhwh did not make these individuals as a mistake or punishment, they were not to be seen as a threat to the societal norms but as men who could ‘beget no children’.¹⁵³

Matthew 19:12 could also be an attempt at persuading the reader to practise self-restraint on the topic of sex, castrated eunuchs were ‘sexually impotent’¹⁵⁴ and could rarely perform sexually and therefore were involuntarily celibate. Perhaps Matthew was speaking of men who become eunuchs through celibacy, as opposed to a physical mutilation and castration. Although men who were born eunuchs were not considered an example of celibacy,¹⁵⁵ man-made eunuchs, discussed in chapter 1, were men and women who decided to abstain from sexual intercourse. Matthew could have been encouraging people to ‘metaphorically’¹⁵⁶ become eunuchs, in the form of celibate men and women, in order to be ‘perfect’ Christians as ‘women should be virgins, and clergy should be celibate’¹⁵⁷. If Jesus

¹⁵¹ Moran, “Byzantine,” 107.

¹⁵² Asikainen, “Eunuchs,” 167.

¹⁵³ Bolle and Llewelyn, “Intersectionality,” 557.

¹⁵⁴ Harvey, “Eunuchs,” 6.

¹⁵⁵ Asikainen, “Eunuchs,” 169.

¹⁵⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *WBC: Matthew 14-28*, Vol. 33b, (Texas: World books publisher, 1995): 550.

¹⁵⁷ Gillian Walker M.S.W., “Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Constructing the Celibate Priest,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 5.2 (2004): 253-270, 249-50.

was preaching eunuchs as a physical third category of gender as well as examples of celibacy, this could mean that eunuchs were a larger, more inclusive group as opposed to being men with disfigured/no genitals.

Although סרִיס is translated to mean officer in Gen 39:1, it is possible that Potiphar was both an officer and eunuch, in terms of being an official with a high rank and a celibate marriage as opposed to being a castrated man. Potiphar and his wife may have had a celibate marriage which could explain his wife's extreme attraction to Joseph.¹⁵⁸

A further notion mentioned throughout biblical commentaries on Matt 19:12 is the idea of eunuch being a term to describe men who are unmarried and without children, due to their disinterest in a heterosexual relationship.¹⁵⁹ It is possible that the men who were 'not attracted to the other sex'¹⁶⁰ and as a result were seen to be celibate were classed as eunuchs due to their lack of family and future family lineage.

4.3 – Circumcision

The definition of circumcision is the 'surgical removal of a small part of the genital sex organ'¹⁶¹ and in ancient Israel circumcision was an act of 'socially accepted violence'¹⁶² towards infant males. Although not intended to severely harm or maim, the act of circumcision showed aggression towards a helpless baby who could not make their own choice about what happened to their genitals.¹⁶³ Circumcision is often linked or mentioned to eunuchs, but circumcision and castration are extremely different. The reason for this being the parent's choice; parents can choose to circumcise their child for religious reasoning however there are very few instances where a baby would be mutilated, ensuring the baby would have a better upbringing than the family could provide, however even in those situations the young child would often be sold instead of mutilated. There was no form of genital surgery performed on new born females.¹⁶⁴

Depending on the severity of the genital disability, eunuchs were often killed at birth, but it was not unheard of that some families would choose to castrate their own young sons in order to improve their 'market value' and quality of life.¹⁶⁵ Childhood castration was performed in the 'hope of creating an individual who was significantly different'¹⁶⁶ from the average man and by castrating their sons, they prepared them for traditional eunuch roles,

¹⁵⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 778.

¹⁵⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 724-5.

¹⁶⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook Matthew 13-28, Vol 2*, (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1990), 274.

¹⁶¹ Efrat Even-Tzur and Uri Hadar, "Castration, Circumcision, Binding: Fathers and Agents of Socially Accepted Violence," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 88.2 (2019): 349-376, 351.

¹⁶² Even-Tzur and Hadar, "Castration," 352.

¹⁶³ Even-Tzur and Hadar, "Castration," 352.

¹⁶⁴ There are a multitude of biblical quotes that discuss and justify circumcision. In Gen 17:10 Yhwh instructs Abraham to circumcise his offspring, Gen 34:17 the sons of Jacob command Hamar and Shechem to be circumcised otherwise they will take back their daughters, Lev 12:3 discusses the legislation of circumcision and instructs that baby boys will be circumcised eight days after his birth.

¹⁶⁵ Ringrose, "Eunuchs," 497.

¹⁶⁶ Ringrose, "Eunuchs," 497.

such as royal advisors or servants, giving them economic security, something their birth family might not have been able to give them. It is important to note that although not stated within the Hebrew Bible, it is a possibility that this took place. A family could ensure their child had economic security by selling them to a royal household/wealthy family, who would then grow up to be the elites' teacher, servant, or advisor.

4.4 – Sex and Celibacy

Sexual relations between a eunuch and a woman were treated the same as relations between a man and a woman, there were no laws against eunuchs and a woman being together. This could be for a variety of reasons, perhaps because there was no risk of pregnancy, they could not have engaged in sexual intercourse due to the castration, or perhaps because society did not discourage any relations between a woman and eunuch. There are, however, biblical texts that condemn male homosexual relations, potentially showing us that although biblical authors did not consider eunuchs a hyper-masculine group, eunuchs were still regarded as male.¹⁶⁷ Although procreation might not have been a possibility for all eunuchs, whether they were infertile or had no viable genitals, it was a possibility that if the eunuch's penis was intact, then they were able to perform sexually.¹⁶⁸

Celibacy is defined as abstaining from any and all sexual contact/ intercourse which was a rare choice for many communities and individuals in ancient Israel. Celibacy would increase in popularity as religious expectations of celibacy increased with the popularity of biblical texts. Celibacy is believed to be a spiritual link between the human world and the immortal, the Galli remained celibate after they had castrated themselves as they believed it would bring greater fertility to their community as they became the link between the two worlds.¹⁶⁹ For example, in Matt 19:12 Jesus encourages his followers to 'become eunuchs', meaning if they divorce they should practise celibacy, it would be extremely unlikely to mean for people to physically become eunuchs, instead of remarrying or engaging in sexual contact with others.¹⁷⁰

However, I would argue that eunuchs in the Hebrew Bible should not be 'considered an example of celibacy'¹⁷¹ as they had no choice in regards to being sexually inactive. If a man had become a eunuch through punishment and had his penis completely mutilated/ cut off then he could not engage in sexual intercourse, if the eunuch was born with a genital deformity which did not allow them to have sexual relations, then they were celibate through biology. Eunuchs had no ability to choose whether they were able to have sexual relations or not, it was unlikely that many would have made the choice to abstain.

¹⁶⁷ Lev 20:13 is a prime example of male homosexuality being condemned, specifically in terms of sexual relations.

¹⁶⁸ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 34.

¹⁶⁹ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 248.

¹⁷⁰ Walker, "Eunuchs", 249.

¹⁷¹ Asikainen, "Eunuchs", 169.

Chapter 5 – Gender

The ambiguous and fluid positions of eunuch within societal hierarchy, as well as their varying depictions in biblical texts, result in a group of people who fit into both and neither gender. By not conforming to either expected gender, eunuchs involuntarily reinforce the previous accepted gender ideals and expectations as ‘natural, normal, and universal binary opposites’.¹⁷² I would argue that instead of categorising eunuchs into a third gender, they should be categorised by how during their daily lives they adhere to dominant gender standards and the reflection of this upon the gender norms;¹⁷³ Looking into why a category of effeminate men may be more suitable rather than a third gender. This chapter will explore the place of eunuchs within the boundaries of gender. A third gender classification is often used in reference to eunuchs however I would argue that this is not appropriate as it was only in rare cases that eunuchs did not identify as their biological gender.¹⁷⁴ Although the idea of a third gender on the surface follows some biblical narrative and scholarship, and in some places is a suitable assumption/ organisation, perhaps it is their disabled status that creates them an ‘outside’ group to masculine and has little to do with their gender.

5.1

5.1.1 – Gender as a Social Construct

Gender is a cultural construct surrounded with limitations, assumptions, and anxieties, gender is presupposed to be ‘natural’ to men and women, however the construct is surrounded by prohibitions that reveal its man-made nature.¹⁷⁵ Biblical masculine privilege is highlighted when researching gender as a construct, showing how masculinity is unchanging whereas the boundaries and expectations of femininity were constantly changing to focus on and appease men. Throughout history, men have been the primary focus, with the occasional woman being mentioned, however only when her behaviours mimic that of men; There is no ‘history of masculinity’ or how it has adapted as the two are synonymous with each other.¹⁷⁶ In ancient Israel, men generally had authority and influence over women in their immediate spheres.

Eunuchs became an exception to the rule within the constructs of gender here; Eunuchs were not legally classed as men, but were able to maintain positions of power and impact with, as opposed to over women.

An example of eunuchs maintaining positions of power and authority, even if their masculinity was perceived to be less than an average biblical male, is Est 4. The eunuchs here worked to protect the female members of the royal court – although it would have been seen emasculating to work for a woman, they still had traditionally male traits within

¹⁷² Moral, “Qu(e)rying Sex”, 791.

¹⁷³ Moral, “Qu(e)rying Sex”, 799.

¹⁷⁴ The Galli are an example of an exception here, discussed in 5.4. Scholars who use the term ‘third gender’ in discussion of eunuchs are Moral, “Qu(e)rying Sex”, 2016, 791, and Ilan Peled, *Masculinities and the Third Gender: The Origins and Nature of Institutionalised Gender Otherness in the Ancient Near East*, (Muenster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016), 292.

¹⁷⁵ Marling, “Strong Women”, 160.

¹⁷⁶ Marling, “Strong Women”, 160.

their employment, e.g., protection and defence, in order to protect the women. By working alongside women in the royal court, eunuchs were seen to be 'loyal and trustworthy'¹⁷⁷ as there was little to no threat of a bloodline that could 'potentially compete'¹⁷⁸ with the royals. However, they had no control over these women, they could influence and advise their opinion on royal matters, but ultimately had no real power over them. As they did not fit into either gender category and did not fit the constructed rules around each gender, eunuchs became an 'emasculated rather than alternative form of masculinity'¹⁷⁹ – by distinguishing eunuchs from men, there was less competition for control, and it allowed men to further their masculinity by being 'above' eunuchs.

The unintentional gender crises caused by eunuchs is apparent when there was a crisis within society; Whether it was economic, religious, or warfare, the men wanted and sought after were 'real men';¹⁸⁰ i.e., Government officials, priests and holy men, and soldiers and generals. Jer 34:19 is particularly interesting when considering this, as eunuchs are mentioned between the 'officials of Judah and Jerusalem' and 'priests', in this circumstance they are classed in between groups of men, albeit these are not circumstances of emergency, but this text highlights that eunuchs were often categorised with men.

5.1.2 – Third Gender Category

One of the key reasons as to why eunuchs were often disliked and alienated as a group by biblical writers is because they circumstantially became synonymous with reminding men the 'tentative nature of sexual difference',¹⁸¹ reminding them of their privilege above women. It was important for men to physically display their masculinity by having people beneath them; By having men inferior to them 'need' them to highlight their own masculinity, created an ideology of dominance and control – two key biblical masculine traits. If, in the ancient world, gender was comprehended to be fundamentally male, and all other groups ranked as 'less' than a man, such as women, children, and eunuchs, then eunuchs represent the power that elite males possess and must guard to prevent a loss of. Eunuchs were a constant reminder that gender boundaries were man-made and not natural to society, they displayed masculine traits and abilities but without the societal outlook that they were automatically classed as masculine, eunuchs were proof that any gender ideas held about men being above women were false and artificially created by the men in charge, which is likely to be a reason as to why eunuchs were alienated and excluded from religious and cultural communities.

Eunuchs as an 'in-between' gender classification, as opposed to a third, different category, highlights to their community and readers of the biblical texts the specifics of men and women as separate and opposing genders – the eunuchs experiences are 'composed of a multitude of features and influences'¹⁸² of how people interacted with them, distancing

¹⁷⁷ Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality," 559.

¹⁷⁸ Wright and Chan, "King and Eunuch," 106.

¹⁷⁹ Silverman, "Anthropology," 424.

¹⁸⁰ Marling, "Strong Women," 160.

¹⁸¹ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 31.

¹⁸² Moral, "Qu(e)rying Sex," 796

themselves from being associated with either gender boundary. The Bible illustrates clear societal boundaries and distinct categories within binary pairs; male and female, Jew and Gentile, pure and impure, creating a difficult and vague place in which to categorise eunuchs.¹⁸³ It is a possibility that men refused to categorise eunuchs with men not for reasons of physiognomy as much as power. As it would have been an ‘insult’ that someone who was disfigured and ‘impure’ was in the same category as them. This links to the listing of eunuchs after officials in Jer 34, although they were categorised amongst men, the biblical author made a clear distinction between officials/ soldiers, a definitive masculine group, and eunuchs. It could be argued that from this, the biblical authors are not creating eunuchs to be a third gender, but a form of emasculated masculinity.

When considering the theme of eunuchs as a third gender, ancient Israelite society influenced which gender they were seen to be connotated with. Eunuchs existed in between clear-cut categories, caused by the authoritarian two-gender structure society they lived in.¹⁸⁴ They lived in between strict gender norms, allowing them to move fluidly and freely between the two worlds, however hegemonic masculinity ensured they could not fluctuate between average men and elite men. The movement between gendered worlds exemplifies the eunuchs’ existence outside adult masculinity and even the boundaries of gender.¹⁸⁵

Their sexual ambiguity and mutilated genitalia were major factors in locating eunuchs outside of normative masculinity; they represented the possibility/ threat of loss of masculinity.¹⁸⁶ Biblical representations of men and eunuchs were overtly different in their descriptions, men, women, and children are mentioned throughout the various instructions and laws concerning them, yet eunuchs are never mentioned – eunuchs had to either be men in order to be included, or non-existent as a third gender category is never mentioned. Sexual ambiguity was a threat to the religious order that society followed as humans have an innate need to categorise in order to understand.

Simultaneously flowing between the boundaries of men and women and not being restricted to one gender allowed the eunuch to have close relationships with both men and women. This had its advantages in elite spheres as eunuchs could obtain knowledge that the men would not know. It encouraged men to classify eunuchs as ‘female men’, as men who attended female-orientated areas, which were usually private spaces, were viewed as suspicious.¹⁸⁷

By establishing eunuchs as a distinctive form of the masculine gender, yet still connected to masculinity, society could justify their treatment of eunuchs, and their roles and responsibilities. Associating men with eunuchs would have drastic negative implications for men as the Bible emphasises the importance of being a father and carrying on their bloodlines, which eunuchs failed to do depending on the age of castration. Equally eunuchs could not be referred to as women, as they carried out male roles and did not have any

¹⁸³ Bolle and Llewelyn, “Intersectionality,” 560.

¹⁸⁴ Bolle and Llewelyn, “Intersectionality,” 560.

¹⁸⁵ Arvas, “Early Modern,” 119.

¹⁸⁶ Solevag, “No Nuts?,” 89.

¹⁸⁷ Haddox, “Favoured Sons,” 4.

biological similarities to a woman, such as being able to menstruate. Eunuchs as an effeminate form of masculinity, as opposed to a third gender allowed society to create new rules used to control and subordinate eunuchs, without having to apply them to either men or women.

5.2 – Gendered Attributes

Eunuchs as servants and slaves, in the form of teachers or domestic servants, were not particularly valued as individuals or as men as their subservience to another man led them to femininity and emasculation. The eunuchs listed in Est would not have been seen as masculine or manly due to their intimate service to Queen Vashti and Queen Esther. However, the King's eunuchs named in Est, such as Shaashgaz and Hegai, would have been seen as masculine and been associated with their male gender as they had overtly male roles – protection of the royal family and violence towards anyone who threatened them. It is possible that these eunuchs were remembered as they were synonymous with their male gender and the 'third gender' eunuchs, who served the Queens and women of the court, were not to be remembered as they were unimportant due to their fluid gender status.

Similarly to women, eunuchs were not described in what they could do but what they lacked. Men were able to control their emotions, and behave with 'control, balance and harmony',¹⁸⁸ women were seen as emotionally unstable. Eunuchs were not described with positive attributes identified with men, but towards their level of competency in service; Eunuchs were described as 'intelligent and capable of learning complex tasks and functions'¹⁸⁹ which improved their importance as servants and royal advisors but did not increase how masculine they were perceived to be. It could be argued that their lack of female and male physical attributes and behaviours unintentionally created a third gender group, with its own attributes, expectations and characteristics, however I would argue that they existed as men in-between the male and female gender.

5.3 – Queen Jezebel

One of the most prevalent stories of gender fluidity in the Hebrew Bible is Jezebel and the three eunuchs. Introduced in 1 Kgs, Jezebel was a Phoenician princess and wife of King Ahab;¹⁹⁰ Brutally murdered by three eunuchs who betray her in 2 Kgs 9. I would argue that the characters in this story are used to highlight the ambiguity of gender in ancient Israel, suggesting that straying from the gendered norms society dictated was not entirely taboo or unheard of. Throughout Jezebel's reign, she is seen as taking a male role lead, she is portrayed as a strong, yet unlikeable character who reflects the 'unconventional gender status'¹⁹¹ of female leaders and females who 'act like men'.¹⁹² Although it may be simple to

¹⁸⁸ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 52.

¹⁸⁹ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 39.

¹⁹⁰ Everhart, "Jezebel," 688.

¹⁹¹ Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play*, 131.

¹⁹² It must be noted that Jezebel is not alone in her portrayal of a masculine woman, throughout antiquity men were seen to 'become' men through their behaviours, actions, and attitudes; Sara Parks' *Gender in the Rhetoric of Jesus: Women in Q*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), discusses the topic surrounding societal gender structures and women well.

consider female masculinity as an imitation or female version of masculinity, female masculinity should be seen as its own topic.¹⁹³ The three eunuchs in this story equally reflect the gender fluidity in this narrative, as few characters within this story are their gendered stereotype; Such as Jehu who is a violent and determined man and Jezebel who ‘shows no fear’¹⁹⁴. They were the only males permitted to enter the royal harem and the personal spaces of the female royalty, showing their gender differences to the average male who would be forbidden to enter private female spaces.¹⁹⁵

The story of Jezebel, her ‘female masculinity’¹⁹⁶ and her eunuchs is used to show the danger of going against the gendered norms. Jezebel’s role as a royal leader upholds her male privilege, much to the dismay of the writers and characters within the story.¹⁹⁷ The entire narrative of 2 Kgs 9 actively shows the readers the dangers of going against the norms of society; Jezebel behaves like a man through her ability to control and be dominating over the people beneath her, such as her advisors, staff and servants, and the people of her city.

The eunuchs in this story are unique and thought-provoking as they represent an aspect of masculine few associate with, feminine masculinity. The actions in this narrative depict the eunuchs as being men in-between the male and female gender, yet there is little to distinguish them as a third gender. They are quick to overthrow Jezebel in order to maintain their position in the royal court, showing their betrayal to their leader, quick to follow the enemy, and selfish in protecting only themselves – portraying an ideal that eunuchs were power-hungry and not to be trusted. Going against their king was something biblical men were strongly warned against; not only did they cause severe harm to their societies, but they also negatively influenced themselves, they were no longer seen as strong powerful men, but deceitful and cunning – traits that were often synonymous with women.¹⁹⁸

Although they are not an example of a third gender here, I would argue that their combination of female and masculine traits illustrates them as the middle ground between the two genders, they do not fit into either yet are not excluded.

5.4 – Galli

¹⁹³ Hilary Lipka, “Queen Jezebel’s Masculinity,” Pages 125-151 in *Hebrew Masculinities Anew*, (Ed. Ovidiu Creanga, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2019): 126.

¹⁹⁴ Lipka, “Queen Jezebel’s,” 140.

¹⁹⁵ Izabela Eph’al-Jaruzelska, ‘Officialdom and Society in the *Book of Kings: The Social Relevancy of the State*’, in *The Book of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography, and Reception*, ed. Andre Lemaire and Baruch Halpern (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 467-500 (483).

¹⁹⁶ Deryn Guest, “Modeling the Transgender Gaze: Performance of Masculinities in 2 Kings 9-10,” Pages 45-80 in *Transgender, Intersex, and Biblical Interpretation*, (Ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Deryn Guest, Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 45-80, 69.

¹⁹⁷ Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play*, 96.

¹⁹⁸ Examples of men being threatened by disobedience to their rulers include Lev 26:14-46 where the ‘penalties for disobedience’ are listed in great detail, and Prov 11:21 where those who act wickedly ‘will not go unpunished’. Examples of women who were depicted as deceitful and untrustworthy include Athaliah who’s thirst for power, similarly to the eunuchs, led her to killing her grandchildren in order to secure her place in the royal court. Additionally, Eve is the original outline for selfish women, she led Adam astray by making him eat the apple in the Garden of Eden – creating the blueprint for women to be labelled selfish and cunning.

As explained in Matt 19:12, there were some eunuchs who chose to become eunuchs – they were born with viable genitals but chose to castrate themselves. It is important to look at this group of men and discuss their link with men who were born eunuchs. Followers of the Phrygian goddess of Cybele or Magna Mater, otherwise known as the *Galli*, were a group of priests who became eunuchs through voluntary self-castration.¹⁹⁹ A *Gallus* was a pagan priest, often distinguished from the average man by their distinctive, often typically feminine, appearance; They wore jewellery and headdresses, had long hair, and used perfume.²⁰⁰

Galli priests are linked to eunuchs in two ways; In appearance and what they mean to masculinity. They looked different from the average man, making them stand out and easy to target; Men who were born eunuchs differentiated from the average male by lacking ‘facial hair, body hair, and a deep voice’²⁰¹ and the Galli chose to wear feminine clothing and jewellery. However, it is important to note that although this links the two groups of eunuchs, it also divides them, as men who were born eunuchs had no choice in their appearance, the Galli did; Eunuchs were not able to decide whether to have facial hair or a higher-than-average pitched voice, whereas a Gallus was able to choose how to appear.

Galli priests and eunuchs are also linked by their perceived threat to masculinity – they both became examples of what happened when traditional male roles are abandoned. They could maintain male roles but would rarely be classed as a man due to their lack of testosterone not giving them typically male features. In a world where women were seen as the inferior sex and actively placed beneath men in employment, opinions, and laws, it is likely that men were confused as to why men would want to be a woman. By creating a third, fluid gender that had no fixed identity, Galli priests became a ‘usable paradigm of resistance to privilege and discursive hegemony’,²⁰² they were rebels against the masculine authority and privilege that they were born with.

¹⁹⁹ Asikainen, “Eunuchs,” 167.

²⁰⁰ Roller, “Ideology,” 550.

²⁰¹ Solevag, “No Nuts?,” 87.

²⁰² Fuchs, “Biblical Feminisms,” 223.

Chapter 6 – Masculinity

The link between eunuchs and masculinity is contradictory. A eunuch's place within masculinity is unclear as for every aspect that links a eunuch with masculinity, there is an aspect that separates them, or brings them more in line with femininity. The eunuch's representation of a third or no gender led eunuchs to be labelled 'out there'²⁰³ as they upset the phallogocentric society in which they lived. Having an individual who was born a male but had a feminine-like appearance could 'create anxiety about a loss of power';²⁰⁴ By ostracising the group that threatened the boundaries of power, hegemonic masculinity could be upheld.

6.1 – Hegemonic Masculinity

A hegemonic male in biblical narratives was a 'free, elite, adult male citizen'²⁰⁵ that had an overtly masculine appearance and displayed dominance and authority over other men and women, associated with power whether that was a king with power over his land and citizens, a military general with power over his soldiers, or a father with power over his family. Below these men were people characterised by 'unmen' anyone who was not yet an adult male or anyone who strayed from the social norms of masculinity, such as 'women, children, slaves, effeminate males, eunuchs, and 'barbarians''²⁰⁶. Deviation from these social norms had severe consequences for the men involved.²⁰⁷

I would argue that it was socially limiting to be a eunuch depending on the way in which the eunuch was categorised; if a man was born a eunuch, then he would be seen as 'less' of a man, however still categorised as male, but if a man became a eunuch through punishment, then it would have been extremely limiting and intimidating for that individual. Having lived as a man and then being 'unmanned' and having to renegotiate their identity would have been traumatic on multiple levels. Masculinity depended upon physical displays of character and a man being punished and tortured into becoming a eunuch would have been a shameful and visual display of emasculation.

Hegemonic masculinity was not a celibate role, having physical relations with many women was seen as dominating as the man could impregnate as many women as he liked, increasing the number of children who would continue his bloodline. By not being able to have sexual relations with women and have children, it is likely that eunuchs were seen as emasculated and 'unmanly' as they could not fulfil the duty they were born to do.

There was a common expectation that very few men will meet the standards for hegemonic masculinity, however every man should aspire to be as overtly masculine as possible. Deut 23:1 demonstrates the disdain for the eunuch's lack of acceptable male standards, as no men with disfigured genitals 'shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord'. This text could be used in an attempt to maintain the gendered norms of religion, only 'real' men and

²⁰³ Arvas, "Early Modern," 117.

²⁰⁴ Haddox, "Masculinity Studies," 180.

²⁰⁵ Asikainen, *Jesus*, 26.

²⁰⁶ Asikainen, *Jesus*, 26.

²⁰⁷ Chris Greenough, *The Bible and Sexual Violence Against Men*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2020): 35.

women with no physical disabilities would be permitted into the temples, if believers thought that Yhwh created only man and woman, then by excluding eunuchs they did not need to associate with the men who were no longer men.

The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is an example of this, his 'blackness, participation in Israelite cult, and his status as a eunuch'²⁰⁸ allow him to be labelled a 'man', however his status as a foreigner, his inability to produce offspring as a eunuch, and by being a member of a minority religious community permits his manliness to be questioned by religious leaders.²⁰⁹ This highlights that any characteristics that can label a male a man, can also be used to question a eunuchs masculinity; The Ethiopian eunuch here represents all eunuchs, he represents the tentative nature of gender and masculinity.

Nathan-Melech (נתן־מלך) in 2 Kgs 23 is a case in point for adding to one man's masculinity by diminishing his. His name translates to 'gift to the king' and has obscured his identity – he is only known by his given, enslaved status. His presence in the royal household adds to the king's masculinity as a whilst simultaneously diminishing Nathan-Melech's own masculinity and identity. Although the masculinity of the eunuchs was far less than the men they served, eunuchs 'often represent imperial rule',²¹⁰ and therefore heightened masculinity, as extensions of their master.²¹¹ Nathan-Melech would thus have had less status and a limited masculinity due to his servitude, yet his proximity to royalty and power meant he was not entirely without status.

6.2 – Violence

6.2.1 – Aggression and Biblical Men

The language surrounding war and violence is 'acutely masculinist'²¹², male violence shown towards women and other men is 'elemental to normative masculinity'.²¹³ The continuous male-on-male and male-on-female violence allows for relations of violent behaviour to form, and allows for the appearance of masculinity to be heightened. Sexual prowess is equally described with war imagery as a leading and dominant man is able to increase his masculinity by emasculating or dominating another individual, and a passive, penetrated (or castrated) man is one who is subject to violence.²¹⁴ Being unable to perform sexually as well as not being an aggressor caused the eunuch to be an effeminate and weak man in the eyes of ancient Israelite men and women.

²⁰⁸ Stewart, "Masculinity," 94.

²⁰⁹ Stewart, "Masculinity," 94.

²¹⁰ Nissinen, "Relative Masculinities," 234.

²¹¹ Nissinen, "Relative Masculinities," 234.

²¹² Harold C. Washington, "Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 5.4 (1997): 324-363, 330.

²¹³ Washington, "Violence," 331.

²¹⁴ Haddox, "Masculinity Studies," 180.

Although eunuchs are rarely connected with violence, eunuchs are a symbol of male violence.²¹⁵ They had experienced a form of violence that impacted various aspects of their livelihood, yet they still live on. The violence performed on them effected their body, gender, bloodline and family, and character.

Eunuchs were a standard that showed men were not born aggressive or with violent tendencies, it was a behaviour used to control and intimidate women and other men. Sexual violence against women is included here – eunuchs in the royal court had close contact with women and were able to enter their private spaces as there was no fear of sexual assault or violence. Sexual violence against/towards men were equally linked to biblical descriptions of war, ‘invasions as rape, and battering as sexual intercourse’,²¹⁶ demonstrating further how violence was associated with hegemonic masculinity, whether it was physical against enemies of Israel or sexual, the story of Samson and Delilah is an example of sexuality and gender linked with violent imagery.²¹⁷ The Bible focusses on male issues in stories aimed at men with mainly male characters, where violence and war were extremely common and encouraged throughout – men who did not fit this blueprint were isolated and placed into a separate group from men in order to regulate and control their norm as well as the cultural norm for women.²¹⁸

Biblical men were outwardly violent, persuasive and determined to maintain their honour;²¹⁹ Anything less was emasculated and socially prohibiting. The lack of aggression shown by men who were forced to be genitally mutilated could have been a ‘psychological reaction to forced castration’,²²⁰ it is possible that these men felt ‘humiliation and rejection’²²¹ caused by the social reaction and showed fewer signs of aggression in fear of ridicule or due to lowered testosterone levels.

6.2.2 – Violence as a Power Dynamic

Physical violence, in the form of genital mutilation or castration, is a display of control, aggression, and hegemonic masculinity. The display highlights the power dynamic between the ‘victim and aggressor’,²²² especially when the punishment has the intention of bringing shame to the victim.²²³ Shame affects the individual involved in two ways, personally and

²¹⁵ A reason as to why eunuchs are not written to be an aggressive/ violent group could be that the biblical authors had little to no interest in writing about them – it is a possibility that they could have been violent but this has been ignored/ omitted by the biblical authors.

²¹⁶ Creanga, “Variations on the Theme,” 91.

²¹⁷ Ela Lazarewicz-Wrzyzkowska, “Samson: Masculinity Lost (and Regained?),” Pages 171-188 in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, (Ed. Ovidiu Creanga, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2010), 171.

²¹⁸ Haddox, “Masculinity Studies”, 182.

²¹⁹ Creanga, “Variations on the Theme,” 87.

²²⁰ F.P. Retief, J.F.G. Cilliers, S.P.J.K. Riekart, “Eunuchs in the Bible,” *Acta Theologica* 26 (2010): 247-258, 248.

²²¹ Retief, Cilliers, Riekert, “Eunuchs,” 248.

²²² T.M. Lemos, “Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125.2 (2006): 225-241, 226.

²²³ Examples of men displaying their heightened control within a power dynamic include the Levite and his concubine in Judg 19, Amon’s deceit and rape of Tamar in 2 Sam 13, and the two elders who accused Susanna of adultery when she would not sleep with them in Dan 13. Examples of women being the aggressor within a power dynamic include Lot’s daughters raping their own father for survival in Gen 19, Delilah deceiving

within the community.²²⁴ A biblical man who had been humiliated by being involuntarily castrated could be associated with femininity as they had shown to society they were not capable at defending themselves and their masculinity. The power dynamic of control through violence is not restricted to victim and aggressor as men from opposing militaries, written throughout the Hebrew Bible is stories of men controlling women through physical violence, as well as women controlling men who were in a lower-class status to them. The power dynamic of violence is associated with being strong, in control, and dominating others through inflicting violence on the human body.²²⁵ To the common castrated man, they were rarely anything except the victim in situations of power, socially they were seen as weak as they could not defend themselves from mutilation, they were no longer seen as physically strong and masculine as they no longer had their genitals, which was the most important detail in separating men from women.

Dismemberment refers to an action where someone violently mutilates or permanently disables a body part, either their own or another person's, which results in an important bodily function being permanently paralysed or lame.²²⁶ Permanently disabling another individual lead to physical, economic, and social issues and restrictions. Bodily violation of a free man was 'forbidden'²²⁷ however there are certain situations where bodily violation of an enslaved man would be improbable. For example, it would be unlikely for a master to harm a slave to make them a eunuch if they were not one already, a master would not have any means to violate his slave as the slave was already emasculated and below his master, there would be little need to mutilate him. Punishment was 'reserved for the enemies of Israel and their God',²²⁸ and rarely performed on Israelites by their own people except in situations of betrayal or religious blasphemy. For the eunuchs who had been castrated as a means of punishment or violence, they and their families had been dishonoured.

A major physical display of the power dynamic between the assailant and sufferer is sexual violence. Sexual violence against men 'reflect(s) attitudes of misogyny and homophobia that serve to protect patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity'²²⁹ and therefore, protects the male-dominated power structures within the Hebrew Bible. Sexual violence against men was performed in order to emasculate and humiliate the victim; Being penetrated, compared to being the penetrative, was viewed as feminine and passive, associated with being subordinate to masculinity.²³⁰ Male-on-male rape was a display of who could and could not protect themselves, and consequently, who was not masculine or powerful enough to protect themselves and their family from harm. When a woman was raped and violated in the biblical traditions, the men in her life, usually her father or husband, depending on who

Samson leading to his brutal murder in Judg 13-16, and Potiphar's wife attempting to seduce Joseph, eventually accusing him of attempted rape in Gen 39.

²²⁴ Lemos, "Shame," 228.

²²⁵ Myrick C. Shinall Jr., "Dismemberment, Dualism, and Theology of the Body in the Gospel of Matthew," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 44.4 (2014): 185-194, 191.

²²⁶ Shinall Jr., "Dismemberment," 187.

²²⁷ Conway, *Behold*, 21.

²²⁸ Shinall Jr., "Dismemberment," 188.

²²⁹ Greenough, *The Bible*, 34.

²³⁰ Asikainen, "Eunuchs," 163.

was in charge of her, was also seen to be violated as the dominating men in her life held the rights to her and her body.²³¹

4 Maccabees 10:20 advances the idea that being a eunuch was not as socially deterring as potentially thought, and that the emphasis on eunuchs was the potentially violent manner that came to create them. The third and fourth brothers who were being tortured declare that 'gladly, for the sake of God, we let our bodily members be mutilated', showing that perhaps it was not having any genitals that was socially inhibiting, but how a man came to be a eunuch. It was the power dynamic of victim and offender, and the display of brutal violence on the man's genitals that characterised the man to be effeminate and unmanly, not the fact that he no longer had genitals. Violent displays acted upon by men towards other men created the social norm of being 'less of a man' but perhaps being born with no viable genitals, choosing to castrate yourself, or losing your genitals through accidental means was not socially isolating and stigmatising.

6.3 – Military Men

In ancient Israel, military and masculinity went hand-in-hand. It is a possibility that eunuchs who chose the military for employment could have established themselves within masculinity in ways that they could not before; For example, by becoming a military commander, employed by elites and royals for protection, eunuchs could demonstrate power over themselves and others, creating themselves as equal to men and dominant to women.

A man having a loss/lack of power, that was not based on their employment, such as a soldier, was seen to be highly feminine and created an individual with a submissive masculine personality. A hierarchy of power, such as master and slave owner, man and woman, adult and child, created a physical display of an 'active, penetrative role'²³² against a 'passive, penetrated'²³³ role. 'Penetrative' men were expected to have an 'uncultivated roughness'²³⁴ about them, a man was unable to be masculine and rough, if they were emasculated or feminised in any way, such as through castration or having a master. Biblical texts write of male stories that value violence, maintaining honour, and binary thinking, male values are not bolstered by stories of men showing feminine values such as obedience and submission. Proverbs 11:16 supports this, 'a gracious woman gets honour... the aggressive gets riches'. Eunuchs, with the translation of castrated men, becoming soldiers increased the probability of being seen as hypermasculine and being associated with biblical masculinity traits; Bravery, aggression, and valour.

There were instances where eunuchs became soldiers and were able to become military officials, some going from administrative importance to military commanders.²³⁵ Joining the army would have had several benefits for social advancement and increase how masculine

²³¹ Greenough, *The Bible*, 36/7.

²³² Asikainen, "Eunuchs," 163.

²³³ Asikainen, "Eunuchs," 163.

²³⁴ Asikainen, "Eunuchs," 167.

²³⁵ Julia Assante, "Men Looking at Men: The Homoerotics of Power in the State Arts of Assyria," *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity*, (Ed. Ilona Zsolnay, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 42-82, 72.

you were seen to be, it could also be a place where average men could become hypermasculine by working their way up the military ranks.²³⁶ Joining a place surrounded by hegemonic masculinity performed two actions for eunuchs; The first being it showed their community that they were masculine, as women could not be soldiers, and it showed the biblical authors and readers that eunuchs should be associated with men in regards to their gender; Joining the military became a place for eunuchs to massively influence their perceived masculinity.²³⁷

A further reason as to why joining the military was sought after was because the military offered 'a good name as an incentive'²³⁸ for soldiers to risk their lives. Soldiers were well aware that there was a high chance of death before they could have children to carry on the family name, and so the military offering a name connotated with hegemonic masculine traits, such as bravery, honour, and valour would have been extremely desirable. A military career may have offered a path to honour that a eunuch could not attain by other means. Joining the military offered the eunuch many beneficial elements; Employment, a name to continue their legacy, and helped in achieving a masculine status.

²³⁶ Assante, "Men Looking," 72.

²³⁷ Assante, "Men Looking," 72.

²³⁸ Jacob Wright, "Making a Name for Oneself: Martial Valour, Heroic Death, and Procreation in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36.2 (2011): 131-162, 142.

Chapter 7 – Religion

A eunuch's place within the religious community and temple life is difficult to pin down. Some passages state that a eunuch could not enter the temple or community, but in practise this would have been difficult to enforce. In addition, the variety of different religious practises in the ancient world mean that eunuchs may well have practised cultic worship differently than the Bible proclaims.

7.1 – Men and the Temple

Eunuchs were able to become active and important aspects of the religious community, and during the fifth century CE an act of perfect service by eunuchs was focussed on service to Yhwh, shown by the increasing number of eunuchs who became assembly officials, holy men, and patriarchs.²³⁹ There are a number of reasons for the increase in eunuchs within the church, one being that becoming a priest or holy man led to job security, protection, and the confirmation that Yhwh would look after his people. Further, the priest had to 'undergo a period of celibacy in order to perform'²⁴⁰ his duties as a holy man, perhaps the eunuch was linked closely with priesthood as they were fortuitously and inadvertently celibate depending on the age of castration. Another explanation is that a mutilated penis was no different 'from that of a holy man who starves his body in order to make it holy',²⁴¹ both bodies were mutilated and disfigured with no real difference between the two, excluding the age in which the eunuch was castrated. I would argue that although the priest had starved his body, his body was still that of a man's and had the physical aspects of his body that clarified his masculinity whereas the eunuch could not.

7.2 – Religious Exclusion

However, although there are few instances where eunuchs who had a physical genital disability are excluded from temple worship, e.g., Deut 23:1, Lev 21:19, eunuchs were not excluded from all religious activity. Eunuchs were not ostracised from their religious community and were still able to follow Yhwh, they just had different rules compared to an average Israelite man. For example, any man with 'crushed testicles' (Deut 23:1, Lev 21:19) would not be permitted to enter the assembly or offerings for Yhwh, but this does not mean that they were forbidden to serve and follow Yhwh. Much like a menstruating woman who was not permitted to enter the temple as she was 'unclean' (Lev 15:20), eunuchs were exempt from serving within the temple at certain times but were still allowed and encouraged to follow Yhwh, Isa 56 furthers this by encouraging eunuchs to follow Yhwh in order to be accepted by their community. Additionally, eunuchs were forbidden from associating with the temple during various aspects of temple life, however as Lev 21 lists, there were many groups that were banned from approaching the food offering; Such as blind people (21:18), those with broken hands or feet (21:19), and dwarves (21:20). This shows that eunuchs were not an isolated group in their inability to participate in religious

²³⁹ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 40.

²⁴⁰ David Tabb Stewart, "Sexual Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible," *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, (Eds. Candida R. Moss, Jeremy Schipper; New York: Palgrave, 2011): 67-87, 78.

²⁴¹ Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 50.

rituals, they were arranged with other groups of physically disabled people – who were still allowed and encouraged to serve Yhwh and follow their rules.

Whether they were born with mutilated genitals, or if they were castrated as punishment, eunuchs did not intend nor want to create a separate gender – they recognised that this would be perceived as an attempt at nonconformity and rebellion against the religious laws, leading to seclusion and withdrawal from the community. Religious acceptance was a crucial aspect of ancient Israelite life, it led to societal acceptance as well as protection and security, which explains why Isa 56:1-8 would have been such an important text for eunuchs, it promised a ‘monument and a name’ (Isa 56:5), but also approval and welcome. Stories of people straying against the religious laws and word of Yhwh in the Bible are quickly and brutally narrated.²⁴² Notably, none of the stories feature disobedient eunuchs.

While we might make assumptions about eunuchs being excluded from Yahwistic cultic practise, therefore, in practise only a few texts limit their presence in the temple – along with other disabled groups and other able-bodied people who could have been excluded for being impure. Eunuchs were evidently still welcome in the wider community.

²⁴² For example, Jer 22:5 Yhwh declares that the house of David will ‘become a desolation’ if they did not obey his word, in Jer 12:17 Yhwh declares he will ‘uproot the nation, uproot and destroy it’ if they do not listen to him, and Lot’s wife in Gen 19 is turned into a ‘pillar of salt’ (Gen 19:26) when looking back at the city when she is fleeing after being told not to ‘look back or stop’ (Gen 19:17).

Conclusion

As the introduction and early part of this dissertation showed, eunuchs have been rarely studied in regards to their relationship with religion, societal employment, and their comparison with officials/ military men. Following this research, it is clear that the relationship between gender identity and sexual anatomy for a eunuch was not seen by ancient Israelite society and I would argue that it was not entirely socially disabling to be categorised as a eunuch. Throughout history eunuchs have been associated and affiliated with royal courts, showing that although at times excluded, eunuchs were not a dangerous or entirely disagreeable group. There are three main reasons, I believe, as to why eunuchs faced a struggle within ancient Israelite society, but were not at a complete disadvantage.

The first explanation is control, and the lack of control the eunuch was able to display. The eunuch was unable to control various aspects of their lives, the most obvious being the lack of family relations; The eunuch was unable to control a wife or children as, if castrated before puberty, they would have been infertile. They also were unable to display control to people socially 'underneath' them; A father controls his son, a king controls his servants, and a military general controls his soldiers. The childless servant would have little to display to others he was able to dominate and authority over others – a high-class eunuch potentially could have been in charge of other eunuchs within the royal courts. However, they would ultimately have been seen as a slave to their master. Compared to the average ancient Israelite man and woman, eunuchs could not control a lot of aspects in their own life; Depending on castration age, they could not choose marriage and children, nor what groups they are associated with, or how they physically appear. The issue of choice surrounding eunuchs is a prominent and pertinent matter as they had led their lives being unable to display next to none.

The second reason as to why eunuchs were an omitted group from normative biblical history is due to the lack of masculinity they could present, and the consequences of this to misogyny. Misogyny protects men and validates the male social construct of men being in control/ power; men were able to belittle and control women. The eunuch's subordinate masculinity allowed the hegemonic, elite males in power to establish themselves as the ruling power – if they had no one to dominate, they could create an effeminate group in order to oppress and intimidate, establishing to others their power.²⁴³ Even if born and identified as male, their 'hybrid physical state'²⁴⁴ as a third group highlighted the strength of other men and permitted their social alienation in biblical writings. The necessity of categorising social groups keeps society in check and misogyny at the top.

The final reason as to why eunuchs were written to be an alienated group by biblical authors and could have struggled socially within ancient Israel is due to their insufficiency at creating relationships. Their relationship with biological families was strained as if they were sold as slaves, they would have severed ties, and consequently had no access to their

²⁴³ Peled, *Masculinities*, 292.

²⁴⁴ Peled, *Masculinities*, 285.

heritage/ any way of locating them.²⁴⁵ Relationships with women were predominantly employment based, it would have been seen as feminine to have relationships with multiple women and associating with women outside the 'necessity of procreation'.²⁴⁶ Additionally, eunuchs could form no physical or sexual relationships with women, depending on the severity of genital disfigurement, further creating the view that eunuchs were unable to 'take' a wife. This lack of relationships contributed in the eunuch's inability to establish themselves as an individual within society. They could have important roles with immense responsibility, yet no personal relationships which would have hindered how others viewed eunuchs as a group.

By isolating eunuchs from masculinity and highlighting their differences to the average Israelite man, they signified what 'common, hegemonic people are not';²⁴⁷ Their ambiguous gender did not damage or lessen their perceived manliness, yet it allowed other men to assert their masculinity.²⁴⁸ Gender division allowed for male superiority to rule and enforced the control of minority groups to submit to their orders – eunuchs, although born male, were used as a tool for elite men to utilise to assert their dominance.

There are three main reasons, I believe, as to why eunuchs faced a struggle within ancient Israelite society, but were not at a complete disadvantage; Their association with disabled communities could have created their exclusion and social rejection, and not their gender identity. Equally, they were also not at an entire disadvantage as they were associated with men and other groups worthy of saving. As explained in chapter 2; If they had been a group that was intended to be exiled from the community then they would not have been mentioned in various passages, showing a struggle that they were able to overcome. Following from this, research on eunuchs could lead to further information on their link to disabled groups in ancient Israel; And if this impacted their perceived masculinity. Research on eunuchs could equally follow the path into New Testament stories of eunuchs and how the difference in attitudes/ beliefs/ characteristics of eunuchs had adapted and changed, and why this change occurred.

²⁴⁵ Wright and Chan, "King and Eunuch," 108.

²⁴⁶ Haddox, "Favoured Sons," 4.

²⁴⁷ Peled, *Masculinities*, 279.

²⁴⁸ Peled, *Masculinities*, 284.

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