

**Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus:
Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities**

by

J. David Hester
Interfakultäres Zentrum für Ethik in den Wissenschaften, Tübingen
Centre for Hermeneutics and Rhetorics, California
Send correspondence to: 224 S. Castle St., Baltimore, MD 21231
david@ars-rhetorica.net

Abstract

The eunuch of Matthew 19:12 has long been viewed as a symbol of chastity and celibacy. However, a study of ancient perspectives on eunuchs reveals a highly sexed and morally dubious “third type of human” embodying the worst fears of masculine vulnerability and sexual transgression. Many early Christians interpreted Jesus’ instruction literally, imitating their counterparts in other religious traditions who employed castration as an expression of religious devotion. This created difficulties for certain church leaders concerned with appealing to (aristocratic) male converts, and the effort to transform the eunuch into a symbol of masculine askesis was never an easy one.

In this article I problematize the “celibate” eunuch, exploring implications that a symbol of sexual transgression would have for current discussion regarding the proscription of homosexuality in the Church: Fundamental to understanding Matthew 19:12 is the explicit rejection of the heterosexist binary paradigm for understanding the role and importance of sex, sexuality and sexed identity in the “kingdom of heaven”.

Introduction

The modern reception of the logion in Matthew 19:12 is so secured in the interpretive tradition that it seems odd to consider this verse at all. Indeed, very little new has been

done on this verse among biblical interpreters¹ in the last 50 years, and what has been done continues to view this verse as an instruction favoring celibacy. However, two significant developments with respect to the ongoing interpretive reception of this verse have made it necessary to revisit alternative possibilities.

The first of these developments is the dawning awareness in modern Christian communities of new forms of sexuality and sexed identity. One need only consider the struggles within Presbyterian and Episcopalian traditions concerning the place and role of homosexuals and transgenders within their communities to understand how far we have come since the Stonewall riots and Christine Jorgenson. What were once considered severely deviate psychoses have now entered mainstream Christianity. These groups are demanding to be received with dignity and respect, as part of God's own creation. How one understands and views human sexuality and sexed identity will predetermine one's response to these demands.

Second is the recent research into ancient forms of sexuality and sexed identities spurred on by recent work in Queer theory and history.² Literature about ancient masculinities, eunichism, medicine and moral philosophy have brought a new light to old and overlooked data. What has developed is a new appreciation of how cultures of the Mediterranean viewed sexual practices and their meaning for placing individuals in society. In light of this, significant new perspectives can be brought to the literature from the ancient world regarding the perceptions about and roles played by eunuchs as sex-gendered identities.

¹ On the other hand, see the recent work in culture criticism of G. Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

² I will not tax the reader with the numerous and growing citations in these areas of exploration, but simply point to some representative works, e.g., J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary Ed. (New York/London: Routledge, 1999). E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). D. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York/London: Routledge, 1989). M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 3 vols. (Los Angeles/London: Vintage, rpt. 1990 - 1992).

In what follows, I will problematize the “celibate” eunuch by reference to ancient historical gender systems that undermine the traditional masculinist and heterosexual reading of this verse. Both ancient religious practices and early Christian reception of this saying understood the call for eunichism to be a literal act of religious devotion with profound social-gender consequences. These consequences reverberate throughout the “single-sex” continuum of the ancient world, taking aim precisely at anxieties regarding the vulnerability of the privileged status of the male in ancient society. The eunuch was a figure perceived to be neither celibate nor morally chaste, but was a monstrous gender formation whose ability to navigate within and take on properties of both male/masculine and female/feminine worlds (physically, sexually, socially, culturally, even politically) was the source of his/her ambivalent social status. It was only several centuries later, under the guidance of aristocratic bishops, that the eunuch was transformed into a symbol of masculine *askesis* and superiority, thus becoming a means by which to reinforce the very heterosexual structure it transgressed.

The implications of this study for modern exegesis of this text, but more importantly for modern discussions of the role and place of transgressive (i.e., non-heterosexual conforming) identities in the church are profound. Modern interpreters perpetuating the celibate reading of this text do so without recourse to significant socio-historical gender-norm data of the ancient Mediterranean world. More importantly, however, such modern interpreters undermine the power and radicality of this saying with respect to the dominical critique of our cherished assumptions regarding human sexuality and the importance of normative heterosexism as a religious (not to mention social, moral and phenotypic) ideal.

Modern Interpretive Receptions

As mentioned above, modern interpreters of the logion in Matthew 19:12 overwhelmingly, indeed unanimously view the eunuch within a particular constellation of

assumptions regarding sexuality. They arrive at this conclusion despite each starting from differing interpretive contexts for their exegetical efforts.

On the one hand, many commentators have suggested that within the context of the *Sitz-im-Leben Jesu* this logion was a response to a supposed taunt or jeer by others commenting upon the non-married status of Jesus and his disciples.³ These others (whether specifically mentioned as Pharisees, or simply vaguely described as his “contemporaries”) referred to their non-marital state by reference to a derisive figure, the eunuch. Part of a series of *ad hominem* attacks (Mark 2:18 - not fasting; Mark 2:23 - violating Sabbath; Mark 7:5 - violation of purity rituals with respect to meals; Matt 11:19 - “glutton and drunkard”; John 8:48 - Samaritan and demon possessed), the taunt of “eunuch” was meant to accuse him and his disciples of not conforming to the social expectation, indeed the social *demand* to be married and produce children. Jesus answers these taunts by making reference to those eunuchs who were incapable of marriage and by contrasting this incapacity with a voluntary commitment to renounce marriage “on account of the kingdom of heaven”. What was meant as a jeer and insult has been transformed into something to be admired.

Alternatively, others read this saying (explicitly or implicitly) within the *Sitz-im-Leben Evangelium* and interpret this saying as an *a fortiori* extension of the saying on divorce. In this setting, the teaching becomes an instruction for commitment to singleness and celibacy that may or may not be appropriate for some believers. Here the alternative interpretations move from viewing the eunuch logion 1) as a call for the renunciation of

³ J. Blinzler, “*Eisin eunouchoi*: Zur Auslegung von Mt 19.12,” ZNW 48 (1957), 254-270. U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, vol. 3: Mt 18-25 (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1985), 103-112. F. Moloney, “Matthew 19,3-12 and Celibacy. A Redactional and Form Critical Study,” JSNT 2 (1979), 42-60. P. Gaechter, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1963), 617-618. L. Perdue, “The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus,” Forum 2/3f (1986), 3-35. D. Trautman, *The Eunuch Logion of Matthew 19,12: Historical and Exegetical Dimensions as Related to Celibacy* (DST dissertation; Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1966).

marriage after divorce (consecrated virginity),⁴ or 2) as a call for the recognition that celibacy is itself an alternative to marriage brought about by the committed response to the call of the “kingdom of heaven”,⁵ or 3) as a symbol for the critique and outright rejection of marriage and family-kinship systems.⁶ The logion is not so much a response to critics as it is a call to strive for a higher moral sexual practice.⁷

What is at work behind all these interpretations, regardless of the emphasis, is an unquestioned view of the eunuch as a figure meant to embody a state wherein sexual practices are rejected. The physiological incapacity for procreation is equated with the physiological incapacity for sex. Based upon this, those called to become “eunuchs on

⁴ J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959). Q. Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 19:12),” *CBQ* 30 (July 1968), 335-358. See also M. Donovan, *The Vicarious Power of the Church over the Marriage Bond* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1972), particularly 16-48. W. Heth, *Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying' (19:12) and Its Relationship to Paul's Teaching on Singleness in 1 Corinthians 7* (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1987). M. Davies, *Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 131-133. Moloney, “Matthew 19,3-12,” also accepts this reading in the context of the *Sitz-im-Leben Evangelium*, arguing that it was directed specifically to new Gentile converts who were divorcing their unbelieving spouses.

⁵ E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, trans. by D. Green (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1975), 383-384. L. Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 484-486. A. Sand, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet Verlag, 1986), 391-392. D. Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 266-268. J. Kodell, “The Celibacy Logion in Matthew 19:12,” *BTB* 8 (1978), 19-23. F. Möller, *Matthäus: Kommentar*, vol. 2 (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1994), 275-276. D. Hill, *Gospel of Matthew*, New Century Bible, ed. by R. Clements and M. Black (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 279-282. A. Willoughby, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 203-206. R. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 279-283.

⁶ L.W. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 150, 176. A. Dewey, “The Unkindest Cut of All?” *Forum* 8/1-2 (1992), 113-122. Countryman relies on B. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 133, when he makes the claim that eunuchs are “intrinsically” *individuals* in the ancient world of dyadic personalities, i.e., without relationship to family. Dewey rejects the Matthean redactional setting, but sees in the isolated logion a critique nonetheless of familial systems.

⁷ See also R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 735-740, who views this saying as a call for sexual-mastery and self-control within marriage.

account of the kingdom of heaven” are to reject sex and procreativity. It is on the basis of incapacity that the teaching of Jesus makes its impact: though some have no choice, others do and choose (or are chosen) not to.

It is, however, one thing to be physiologically incapable of *procreation* and another to be physiologically incapable of *performing sex acts*. The only basis upon which one is equated with the other is through an ideological presumption regarding the purpose and function of sexed morphology and sexual activity within a framework that defines sex solely on the basis of procreativity. The modern interpretation of this verse depends upon us seeing the eunuch from the perspective of a heterosexual imperative that defines the individual not only in terms of certain relations s/he has to others (only men and women have sex), but also in terms of specific sexual performances with others (only the penetrative act of a penis in a vagina is understood as sex). From this perspective, since a eunuch cannot penetrate a female in order to produce children, a eunuch cannot have sex.

This interpretation is certainly reasonable (within its presumptive contours) and clearly has deep historical roots in the reception of this saying⁸ (as well as in the history of the development of Christian sexual ethics from the late 2nd century onwards). But that this interpretation is predicated upon a deep *ideological* assumption about sex and sexuality can be shown by reference to one single fact: eunuchs were not celibate. Indeed, they were not even viewed as chaste. In fact, eunuchs were universally characterized by the frequency, ease of and adeptness with which they performed sex acts with both men and women.

⁸ Cf., e.g., Justin Martyr, *Apology* i.15, where he gives one of the earliest interpretations of this text as forbidding Christians from marrying after divorce.

Eunuchs and Sexuality in the Ancient World

We will set aside the issue of the role of eunuchs in the monarchic bureaucracies of Persia, Assyria, the Hellenistic monarchies, the Roman Imperium and Byzantium. The sheer historical breadth and durability of the institution of courtly eunuchs is testimony not only to their usefulness to monarchs throughout the world, but also indicates the importance of their role as intermediaries (between court and public, between imperial household and aristocracy, between public male realm and private female realm, between political institutions and their allied religious institutions) which they were perceived as particularly capable to fulfill.⁹

Nevertheless, even if powerful and widely feared and respected as political figures, it was precisely because of their sex-gender status that they were despised¹⁰ and viewed as morally dubious, even profligate. Within the phallogentric gender economy of the ancient world, to be a man was to embody virtue. In particular, to be a penetrative male was to exercise the dominance required of masculinity and to embody the moral strength necessary to uphold honor. Although moral philosophers¹¹ and even medical theorists¹²

⁹ The standard literature on this subject includes P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, Stuttgarter Beiträge zur Geschichte und Politik 14 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980); H. Scholten, *Der Eunuch in Kaisernähe. Zur politischen und sozialen Bedeutung des praepositus sacri cubiculi im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter langLang, 1995); P. Scholz, *Der entmannte Eros: eine Kulturgeschichte* (Düsseldorf: Atemis & Winkler, 1997); P. Browe, *Zur Geschichte der Entmannung: Eine Religions- und Rechtsgeschichtliche Studie* (Breslaw: Müller and Seiffert, 1936); M. Riquet, *La Castration* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1948); and S. Tougher, ed., *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (London: Duckworth Publishing, 2001). Additionally, P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) and M. Keufler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) are excellent resources for the history of eunichism and castration in Late Antiquity.

¹⁰ Cf. Herodotus, *Histories* viii.105-106, for a report on the eunuch Hermotimus in Xerxes' court. The ambivalence of the position of the eunuch in the courtly bureaucracy is made radically apparent in this story: On the one hand, Hermotimus' ascension was due to his castration, which allowed him entry into the court and thereby the opportunity to acquire power and prestige. On the other hand, his castration was a source of great consternation, so much so that when the slave trader who had castrated him, Panionius, came before him, Hermotimus exacted his revenge by castrating him and forcing him to castrate his four sons.

¹¹ Cf. Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, 31 and 17, where *sophrosyne* and the *vita philosophica* are linked in the mastery over sexuality, and sex is only for procreative purposes.

began to set limits and change fundamental practices of masculinity by demanding of men a certain restraint on excessive performances of dominance (extending from excesses of violence to excessive sex), the possession of a penis and testicles was the *sine qua non* of morality and virtue. Those who did not possess them “naturally” suffered from moral weakness and were incapable of “virtuous” behavior.¹³ Just as naturally, those who were penetrated, even if male, were viewed as morally weak and socially inferior. Eunuchs, suffering from both characteristics, were all the more problematic due to the fact that they had lost the masculinity they once had.

Indeed, it was this notion of having lost their sex-gender position through castration that most repulsed “natural” males. Eunuchs were, in general, a threat to the dominant phallocentrism of patriarchy, insofar as they embodied the very loss with which men were constantly threatened. This threat played itself out within a gender ecology that understood men and women as essentially extreme developments of a single sex.¹⁴ Medical treatises stretching from Classical Athens to Byzantium understood sex morphology solely in terms

¹² Galen, *On Semen* i.16.19-31. Oribasius, *Collectio Medica* xxii.2.20-22.

¹³ This is not to suggest that women were not held to be virtuous, but that they were required to behave in such a way as to support male honor, and that the writings of ancient aristocratic males showed a general suspicion and inability of women to uphold certain standards of behavior that males were otherwise “naturally” capable of performing.

With respect to eunuchs, during the period under question I have found very few example in which a eunuch was praised. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* xvi.7-4-9, gives Eutherius praise, but does so clearly indicating that Eutherius was a unique figure in history. Lucian of Samosata, *The Eunuch*, has Lycinus repeat Bagoas’ defense of himself wherein he referred to Aristotle’s respect for the eunuch of Hermias, the tyrant of Atarneus, as well as a “certain Academic eunuch hailing from among the Pelasgians.” Polybius, *History*, xxii.22.1 praises Aristonikos. Eusebius’ (*Church History* viii.1.3-4, viii.6.5) praise of the eunuchs under Diocletian, but this praise has more to do with their willingness to embrace martyrdom.

¹⁴ Cf. T. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Medical theory stretching from Aristotle to Galen suggests that eunuchs represented the transformation of a male to a female, and that despite the fact that Galen critiques Aristotle on his understanding of this matter. Cf. Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 4.1.766a-20-35, where he states that castration causes one to “change from the male to the female condition.” Cf. Galen, *On Semen*, i.15.29-43 and i.16.15-18 where he speaks of the testicles of both men and women and how the removal of them causes them to lose their respective masculinity/femininity.

of the phallus: men's phalluses were external, due to a variety of factors (including levels of heat and moisture, the interaction of male and female sperm, and position of the fetus within the uterus); women's phalluses were internal. Both men and women had testicles; both men and women had sperm.¹⁵ The only thing that separated men from women, in this medical theory, was the difference in levels of dryness and heat.¹⁶

Men were constantly threatened with the potential of becoming weak through a variety of activities: whether by bathing too much, or by eating the wrong foods, or by engaging in too much sex, by wearing the wrong clothing, even by taking too much enjoyment in unmanly tasks.¹⁷ Men were concerned about their loss of maleness, and the medical treatises of the time reflect the ways in which physicians sought to ensure their patrons' manliness. In this slippery-slope of cultural and medical context of sexed identity, it was imperative that males invent certain practices (social, sexual, legal, martial, political) that could help them clearly define their masculinity.

In this setting, eunuchs were the nightmare embodiment of men's worst fears. Eunuchs had lost their masculinity. Unlike men, they were passive, performers of sexual pleasure, submissive, and were mounted ('bottom'). These features and aspects were usually attributed to females and slaves (of both sexes), and like them, eunuchs were branded *infamia* - not legally recognized. Unlike women, however, they could clearly not give birth or suckle. Eunuchs were a monstrous identity formation¹⁸, a source of sex-gender confusion. They were a "tertium genus hominum".¹⁹

¹⁵ Cf. Galen, *On Semen* i.7 and ii.5.41-51.

¹⁶ Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters and Places* xxi.

¹⁷ Cf. A. Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 5-23.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., Lucian of Samosata, *The Eunuch*, where Lycinus states, "...a eunuch was neither man nor woman but something composite, hybrid, and monstrous, alien to human nature." Cf. also Claudian, *In Eutropium* "...one whom the male sex has discarded and the female will not adopt." (i.468)

¹⁹ *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander* xxiii.7.

The confusion they wrought can be seen even in the number of terms used to refer to them. The ancient world recognized at least two broad categories of eunuchs: those born so, and those made so. The latter were described in a variety of ways. The Greek had approximately seven terms used in semantic relation to “eunuch”²⁰, and the Romans had even more,²¹ all of which were based on various technologies of castration. This variety of terms was compounded by the varying results of different kinds of castration, as well as the effect of castration upon prepubescent vs. post-pubescent males. With respect to prepubescent castration, certain physiological characteristics were widely known and stereotyped, including feminine and beardless faces, physical weakness, height, with womanish vocal characteristics. With respect to post-pubescent castration, however, many secondary sex-characteristics associated with males would be maintained, making it extremely difficult for anyone in the ancient world to know for certain whether the man in front of him was a eunuch or not.²²

The confusion that eunichism created made the eunuch a particular lightning rod for male anxiety and an object of tremendous suspicion, particularly with respect to their morality. Generally, they were viewed as soft (*mollis*, *eviratus*, *malakos*), effeminate (*semivir*, *semimas*, *effeminatus*, *androgynos*), sexually passive (*kinaidos*), unkind, immodest

²⁰ These are *eunuchos* (“eunuch”), *spádon* (“torn”, removed), *ektomías* (“cut out”), *tomías* (“gelded”, used dominantly with respect to animals), *apókops* (“cut off”), *thlibías* (“pressed”), *thalsías* (“crushed”), and *íthris* (“eunuch”), none of which are loan words, translations, or transliterations. The Greek corpus also uses different verbs for “castrate”/“make eunuch”, including *apokopto* (“to cut off”), *temno* (“to cut”), *apotemno* (“to cut off”), *ektemno* (“to cut out”), *eunouchizo* (“to castrate, to make a eunuch”), *apospao* (“to tear from”), *keiro* (“to crop, cut off”), *therizo* (“to mow down, cut off”), among others. Cf. P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, p. 23, n. 25 for citations.

²¹ The Latin corpus uses at least 20 different verbs for “castrate”; cf. P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, p. 23, n. 25.

²² Cf. Lucian of Samosata, *The Eunuch*, wherein the identity of one of two candidates for position of philosopher is under question as to whether he is truly a eunuch. Cf. also Cassius Dio, *Roman History* lxxvi.14.4-5, concerning Plautianus, who castrated 100 Roman nobles in order to serve his daughter, Plautilla, where Cassius admits, “...none of us knew about it...And so we looked on the very same people as both eunuchs and males, as both fathers and impotents, as both *castrati* and beard-wearers.”

(impudicitia), “changeable”, “light-skinned”²³, weak, impotent, deceitful,²⁴ cowardly, and incapable of virtue.²⁵ Popular novels depicted them as power-seeking, unscrupulous, greedy, untrustworthy and undependable.²⁶ A chreia attributed to Diogenes had him commenting upon an inscription over the door of a house of an “evil eunuch” that said, “Let nothing evil enter” by responding, “How can the owner then enter?”²⁷ Dream interpretation,²⁸ popular sayings,²⁹ fables,³⁰ even popular superstitions³¹: all viewed the eunuch as an object of scorn, bad luck, and deception.³² The eunuch, by definition, was not (could not) be a morally upright and virtuous figure, but was always suspicious.

This suspicion “naturally” extended to the sphere of sexual practices, where the eunuch’s status as “transgressor” was particularly noted. It was their role in sexuality that gave them their contested and contemptible identity. They were both passive receivers of

²³ A term alluding to the fact that they were raised among women in the *gynaecaeum*, and not among men. See also Galen, *Opera Omnia* 13.506, where he discusses the differences of skin types and their etiologies.

²⁴ Cf., e.g., Adamantius, *Physiognomy* ii.3.

²⁵ These perspectives continued for centuries, as the literature cited by Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, 174-176 demonstrates.

²⁶ Cf. Chariton, *Callirhoe*, LCL 481: Artaxates; Iamblichus, *The Babylonian Story*, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, B. Reardon, ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989): Damas and Sakas; and Heliodorus, *The Ethiopian Story*, W. Lamb, trans. (London: Everyman, 1997): Euphrates, and many anonymous eunuchs.

²⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Diogenese* vi. The term “evil eunuch” is equivalent to “wicked witch” – one does not need to mention “evil”, but does so out of a habituated labeling context.

²⁸ Cf. Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* ii.69.

²⁹ Cf. Diogenianus iii.88 – “The eunuch has a prostitute” (in reference to someone who cannot follow through with something). Diogenianus i.81 – “Every porcupine is rough” (in reference to the immoral character of eunuchs). Zenobius ii.62 – “You are a holy eunuch” (in reference to being a lightweight). Sirach 20:4 – “Like a eunuch lusting to violate a girl is the person who does right under compulsion”.

³⁰ Babrius 54 (=Perry 310) and 141 (=Perry 164). Cf. L. Giggs, *Aesop’s Fables: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³¹ Lucian of Samosata, *The Eunuch*; Claudian, *In Eutropium* i.125

³² Cf. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, 42-44.

male sexual activity, and active performers of giving pleasure.³³ They were adept at anal sex and *fellatio*,³⁴ and upon this basis were castigated. Despite being objects of status and desire³⁵ among aristocrats and rulers,³⁶ no “true” male desired to be or act like them. Indeed, those men who showed an inclination to continue desiring the sexual practices brought upon them during their early years as boys were despised for acting like eunuchs.³⁷ The fact that eunuchs were seen as objects of sexual desire did not shield them from vituperation directed precisely at the sexual practices that made them adept lovers.³⁸

These accusations were not limited to the adeptness with respect to their male lovers alone. The reputation of eunuch sexual promiscuity extended to include giving sexual pleasure to their mistresses as well.³⁹ These forms of pleasure certainly included oral⁴⁰ and digital stimulation, but also included (in cases of certain kinds of castration practiced on

³³ Cf. Petronius, *Satyricon*, for a bawdy example of a eunuch’s attempted sexual exploits.

³⁴ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* frequently speaks of fellators as those who have unclean mouths. Cf. i.79, iv.59.

³⁵ See Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, 59-66, for an excellent summary of the presence of eunuchs as objects of sexual desire.

³⁶ See Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, 121-129, for a thorough exploration of the presence of eunuchs, as both lovers and bureaucrats, in the first two centuries of the Roman Imperium. The evidence points to the presence of eunuchs in the service of the Imperial families of Drusus, Claudius, Nero, Titus, Domitian, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Elagabalus, Severus Alexander, Gordian III.

³⁷ Cf. *Historia Augusta*, *Commodus* i.7 accuses Commodus of being “both orally polluted and anally defiled.” Graffiti in Pompeii (cf. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* iv.1825-7) accuses several individuals of being fellators and eunuchs, making it clear that the one was associated with the other, and just as clear that the individuals mentioned were probably neither. *Historia Augusta*, *Elagabalus* v.2 spoke of that emperor, who was associated with the *galli* (though may not have been castrated), by reference to a simple question: “Who could endure an emperor who was the recipient of lust in every orifice of his body?” The general term “effeminate” was used to refer to those males who favored the passive role in sex, a term and a role that were widely associated with eunuchs for centuries.

³⁸ Claudian, *In Eutropium*, book I, “details” the sexual exploits of Eutropius as the reason for his/her political success.

³⁹ This reputation extends to the *galli* as well; cf. Lucian of Samosata, *The Syrian Goddess* 22.

⁴⁰ Cf. Martial, *Epigram* iii.81.

post-pubescent males) the suspicion of penetration.⁴¹ Martial,⁴² Juvenal,⁴³ and Theophrastus⁴⁴ report that eunuchs were favored by women, indeed even as marriage partners, as a means by which they might achieve sexual satisfaction without fear of giving birth.⁴⁵ Claudian hints at certain sexual intimacies that went on between eunuch and mistress.⁴⁶ Jerome⁴⁷ and Tertullian⁴⁸ doubted castration bridled any passion in them.⁴⁹ Their suspicions are justifiable, insofar as accusations of adultery are reported, most notably in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.⁵⁰

Additionally, the intimacy with which eunuchs were able to share in the world of women made them vulnerable to other sexually inflammatory charges. Indeed, their role as

⁴¹ Note Terence, *The Eunuch* 642ff, where Dorus, a eunuch who has exchanged clothing with Chaerea, is initially accused by Phaedria of raping Pamphilia. Pythias, however, responds with confusion, "Why, faith, I had heard that they [eunuchs] were extremely fond of women, but were incapable; unfortunately what has happened never came into my mind; otherwise I should have shut him up somewhere, and not have intrusted the girl to him."

⁴² Martial, *Epigram* iv.67, "Why does your Caelia have only eunuchs, Pannychus? Because she wants to whore it up, but not give birth." See also iii.81; vi.2, 21, 39, 67; x.91; xi.81.

⁴³ Juvenal, *Satyricon* vi.366-367, suggests that women wait for the onset of puberty before sending their servants to be castrated by barbers, so that they can be sexually useful without worry about pregnancy. Cf. also i.22.

⁴⁴ Hieronymus, *Adversus Iovinianum* i.47.

⁴⁵ Tertullian, *Ad Uxorem* ii.8.4, "...mutilated for licentious purposes."

⁴⁶ Claudian, *In Eutropium* i.105-109.

⁴⁷ Hieronymus, *Letters* cvii.11; cviii.20.

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *Adv. Marcionem* i.29.

⁴⁹ Basil of Ancyra in the fourth century *On Virginity* states, "It is said that those who, having attained virility and the age when the genital member is capable of copulation, have cut off only their testicles, burn with greater and less restrained desire for sexual union, and that not only do they feel this ardour, but that they think they can defile any women they meet without risk." Quote in Rouselle, *Porneia*, 123.

⁵⁰ Flavius Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* i.33, 36.

intermediaries⁵¹ not only allowed women to enter into public spaces accompanied by eunuchs,⁵² but even gave wives access to lovers behind their husbands' backs by means of communicating through their eunuch servants.⁵³ All in all, the eunuch was seen as the embodiment, and even the means of facilitating sexual transgression.

It seems odd, therefore, that the "simple and straightforward" exegesis of the eunuch logion of Matthew today would view the eunuch as a symbol of sexual chastity and celibacy. Clearly, eunuchs were widely perceived as neither chaste nor celibate, but highly sexual and sexed beings.

Matthew 19 and Its Redactional Setting

We have so far confined our remarks to general reflections upon the social status of and moral perspectives that were brought to bear upon eunuchs in the ancient Mediterranean world. What we have not yet done is to take seriously the distinction between those who were eunuchs by no choice of their own, and those who made themselves eunuchs. This distinction was recognized broadly in the ancient world, as reflected in the logion itself. The question that confronts us is: How would the call of Jesus to become a eunuch on account of the kingdom of heaven play itself out practically? With respect to what institutions, social groupings, interpersonal relations and practices would such a call be heard?

⁵¹ For an excellent introductory exploration into the function of eunuchs as intermediaries, including reflections on the connection between eunuchs and angels, see K. Ringrose, "Eunuchs as Cultural Mediators," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 23 (1996), 75-93. Cf. also Scholz, *Der entmannte Eros*, 162-172, and Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, 130-176.

⁵² Hieronymus, *Letters* xxii.16 ("crowds of eunuchs", "armies of eunuchs", "troops of eunuchs" surrounded aristocratic women when they went in public), liv.13, lxvi.13, cviii.7.

⁵³ Claudian, *In Eutropium* i.85-89.

The Matthean context offers us one of many such possible receptions and interpretations. The saying is set within the larger context of Matthew 19, a series of instructions that serve to alter certain misconceptions on the part of the disciples, indeed to intensify the ethics of discipleship. The immediately surrounding context in which the logion appears relates to issues of marriage and family-kinship systems. A controversy story begins with a question posed by the Pharisees (19:3) about divorce and leads to a discussion about the nature of marriage (19:4-6). On the basis of a reading of Gen 2 that supersedes the Mosaic legislation on divorce (19:7), Jesus intensifies the rules of divorce by forbidding remarriage (19:8-9). In response, the disciples react by suggesting it would be better never to marry (19:10). Jesus admits that the consequences of this instruction are an intensification of the demands of discipleship (19:11). He then offers the *mashal* regarding the eunuch, who thereby becomes the example of continence after divorce, or perhaps even an example of going one step further and rejecting marriage altogether. Thereafter, a pronouncement story wherein children are being hindered by the disciples from approaching Jesus leads him to comment upon the role of children in relation to the kingdom. (19:13-15)

Regardless of how one chooses to read 19:12, what is clear is that Matthew has set this saying within the rubric of marriage and family-kinship systems. As such, certain specific resonances take shape, encouraging a certain reading that constrains the figure of the eunuch within a limited interpretive sphere. Here, the eunuch is a figure of sexual renunciation, a figure that stands in contrast to procreativity and marriage.⁵⁴ To make

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that this was the reason offered by Xenophon for Cyprus deciding to employ eunuchs in his civil government: "A man, he believed, can never be loyal or trustworthy who is likely to love another more than the one who requires his guardianship. He knew that men with children, or wives, or favorites in whom they delight, must needs love them most: while eunuchs, who are deprived of all such dear ones, would surely make most account of him who could enrich them..." Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* vii.5. Unfortunately, although this *topoi* is widely attested to in the literature, other historical sources indicate that, at certain period under certain monarchs in a variety of nations, could indeed marry and adopt children, with families often castrating their sons so that they might enter the palace ranks and thereby improve the family's economic and political circumstances. Cf. A. Grayson, "Eunuchs in Power: Their Role in the Assyrian

oneself a eunuch “on account of the kingdom of heaven” was to make a certain choice that related to marriage, family and kin. It is not clear whether this interpretation was widely accepted by the time Matthew inserted it into this context, or whether this was an inventional strategy unique to him. No other gospel author chose to include the saying, so we have no way of tempering or contrasting Matthew’s reception and its subsequent impact upon interpretation by referring to other canonical receptions of this text.

This does not, however, suggest that the logion was a creation of Matthew. It is precisely because the figure of the eunuch was a scandalous one in the context of the Jewish milieu of Matthew that it is difficult to conceive of the author having any particular need to create it. It is to this milieu that we must now turn, in order to appreciate the force of this saying and the difficulty with which later Christian interpreters sought to constrain its reception.

While the history of the presence of eunuchs in the ancient courts of Israel and Judah have yet to be decisively written, and while later interpretive and translation practices have further complicated research into the subject, we can identify at least two classifications of eunuchs from the biblical record. The first group includes the *saris/sarisim*, or civil functionaries.⁵⁵ These were servants connected with the queen’s quarters and were in the service of the queen. They appear beginning possibly with the reign of Jehu and Jezebel⁵⁶

Bureaucracy,” in *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament*, edited by M. Dietrich et al. (Freudenstadt: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 85-98; F. König, *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos* (AfO Beiheft 18; Gratz, 1972) 21, par. 53 and p. 88; R. Guillard, “Les eunuchs dans l’Empire Byzantin,” *Études Byzantines* 1 (1943), 201.

⁵⁵ Cf. E. Yamauchi, “Was Nehemiah the Cupbearer a Eunuch?” *ZAW* 92/1 (1980), 132-142: 135-136 and n. 22.

⁵⁶ H. Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *saris* a Eunuch?” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, edited by Z. Zevit, S. Gitin, M. Sokoloff, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 317-325.

(2 Kgs 9) and their presence extends clear up to the fall of Judah⁵⁷ (Jer 29:2, 41:16//2 Kgs 24:15), if not further.⁵⁸ Another group of *sarisim* are not directly affiliated with the queen, but are clearly court officers. The latter group is more difficult to identify as “eunuchs”, but the evidence suggests that the generic use of the term did not exclude the possibility of the office being held by eunuchs. Indeed, in the late prophetic literature represented by Isaiah 56 the same term quite clearly refers to a *castrati*, the wordplay in v. 3-4 premised upon the term *sem* (successor), which stands in parallel with *yikkaret* (perish), the latter term clearly used in Deuteronomy 23:1 to define castration. Furthermore, the additional references in Esther (1:10, 12, 15; 2:3, 14-15, 21; 4:4-5; 6:2, 14; 7:9) continue to use *sarim* in reference to courtly eunuchs, much in keeping with the historical literature from other sources.⁵⁹

The second group, though highly controversial in the scholarly literature,⁶⁰ has parallels among similarly situated groups in the ancient near east.⁶¹ The religious function of the *qedeshim/qedeshoth* during the period of the divided kingdom was of great concern to the Deuteronomic historian, and the parallels to the religious function of the *assinnu*, *kurgarrû* and *kulu’u* of the Empires stretching in time from Sumer to Assyria were drawn for clearly polemical purposes. The *qedeshim/qedeshoth* were associated on the one hand with

⁵⁷ Cf. Jeremiah 29:2, 34:19, 38:7, 41:16, 52:25. Note esp. 41:16, where they are listed as a gender category distinct from men, women and children.

⁵⁸ Yamauchi, “Was Nehemiah the Cupbearer a Eunuch?,” gives a tentative answer “no”.

⁵⁹ Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *saris* a Eunuch?,” 321-322.

⁶⁰ E.g., R. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 100-110. Compare P. Bird, “The End of the Male Cult Prostitute: a Literary-Historical and Sociological Analysis of Hebrew *qedesh-qedeshim*” in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 66, edited by J. Emerton (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1997).

⁶¹ Cf. M. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, translated by Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 28-36. Note the castigation already expressed Mesopotamian society regarding the *assinnu/kurgarrû* by referring to them as *ur.sal* (dog/man-woman).

harlotry for female (*zona*) and dogs (*keleb*)⁶² for male office holders, and both were declared abhorrent (Deut 23:17-18). The presence of eunichized priests in Judah, their function within the Temple precincts in association with the worship of Asherah, and their importance to the religious history of Israel drive the rhetorical assaults made by the YHWHists upon them throughout the Deuteronomic history. Both the Levitical exclusion of the eunuch from the priesthood (21:20), together with Deuteronomic exclusion of the eunuch from the assembly (23:1), clearly react to their presence within the context of religious expression.

The motivation for this negative stance is not explainable only by reference to political struggles. Rather, what is driving force the prohibition of castration is a revulsion at the loss of male privilege and the threat of gender confusion that eunuchs represented in the ancient world. It is on this basis that Leviticus concentrates exclusively upon the act of “lying with a man as with a woman” as a form of abomination (Lev 18:22, 20:13): the act represents a loss of male prestige, even masculinity itself. It is not the act per se that is the issue, it is the consequences of that act: the “unnatural” transgression of male gender privilege by turning him into a woman.

It is precisely this connection between eunichism, loss of male prestige and identity, and Levitical prohibitions against castration and male homosexual activity that is made by Jewish commentators of the first century. Philo comments upon Deuteronomy 23:1, he makes precisely the connection between eunichism and effeminacy that he makes in his comments on Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Eunuchs are precluded from entering the congregation because,

⁶² D. Thomas, “*Kelebh* ‘Dog’: Its Origin and Some Usages of It in the Old Testament,” in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 1, *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, edited by P. Schmitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

...they belie their sex and are affected with effemination, [they] debase the currency of nature and violate it by assuming the passions and the outward form of licentious women. For [the Law] expels those whose generative organs are fractured or mutilated, who husband the flower of their youthful bloom, lest it should quickly wither, and restamp the masculine cast into a feminine form. (*Special Laws*, i.324-325)

When he comments upon pederasty, the description of and the condemnation he makes about the passive partner slowly slides down the sex-gender scale to its inevitable result: eunicism. Arising from sexual passivity in a pederastic relationship, the disease of effeminacy works itself out first through adornment and the pursuit of womanly, youthful beauty, eventually leading to the desire for castration.

These persons are rightly judged worthy of death by those who obey the law which ordains that the man-woman who debases the sterling coin of nature should perish unavenged...And the lover of such may be assured that he is subject to the same penalty. He pursues an unnatural pleasure and does his best to render cities desolate and uninhabited by destroying the means of procreation...The reasons is, I think, to be found in the prizes awarded in many nations to licentiousness and effeminacy.

That he is also clearly talking about eunuchs as priestly functionaries, is quite clear:

Certainly you may see these hybrids of man and woman continually strutting about through the thick of the market, heading the processions at the feasts, appointed to serve as unholy ministers of holy things, leading the mysteries and initiations and celebrating the rites of Demeter. Those of them who by way of heightening still further their youthful beauty have desired to be completely changed into women and gone on to mutilate their genital organs... (both quotes *Special Laws* iii.37-42)

These concern parallel exactly the problems conservative Roman Christian males had with eunuchs of later Imperial era.⁶³ It is also the issue that informs Paul's condemnation in

⁶³ Cf. in this regard Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 166-170, where he rightly explores the issue of masculinity as the *topos* to which most later Christian moralists turned.

Rom 1:26-32, where we see common *topoi* employed against eunuchs by his Roman contemporaries.⁶⁴

Isaiah 56 notwithstanding, Jewish moral tradition condemned eunichism as an act offensive to nature, by which was clearly meant the loss of male supremacy and identity brought about by castration.⁶⁵ Given this context, the radicality of this saying comes to the fore. Not only does this argue against Matthean authorship, but the power of the criterion of difficulty forces one to the conclusion that the logion is clearly original to Jesus.⁶⁶ Just as clearly, Matthean redaction can be understood as an attempt to domesticate the interpretive reception of this statement by attempting to render it functional for and within the Matthean call to radical discipleship.⁶⁷

The question such conclusions pose, is whether and to what degree this saying could be understood in a context other than the Matthean tradition which has so dominated its interpretive tradition, particularly among modern scholars? If the saying is neither original to Matthew nor to its Matthean redactional setting, then to what, exactly, could it refer?

⁶⁴ In Phil 3:2 Paul also tells believers to beware of “dogs” and “the mutilation”, the latter perhaps being a play on *peritome*, but in near relation with the former, may refer to eunuchs. Cf. Keufler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 257.

In this regard, see also the interesting article by S. Elliott, “Choose Your Mother, Choose Your Master: Galatians 4:21-5:1 in the Shadow of the Anatolian Mother of the Gods,” *JBL* 118/4 (1999), 661-683, wherein she suggests that the *Sitz-im-Leben* for the argument against circumcision given by Paul to the Galatians must take into account the religious context of the Cybele-Attis cults whose roots in this region of Anatolia go back for centuries.

⁶⁵ Cf., e.g., Philo, *Special Laws* i.324-325; iii.37-42; *On the Contemplative Life*, 57-63 (“disease of effeminacy”); and Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* iv.292 (iv.8.40). Cf., however, Josephus’ report of the presence of eunuchs in the court of Herod (*Jewish Antiquities* xvi.8.1), and his own possession of a eunuch as a tutor to his son (*Vita* 429).

⁶⁶ The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*, edited by R. Funk and R. Hoover (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993), 220-221, rated this saying a “Pink”.

⁶⁷ Dewey, “Unkindest Cut of All,” 113-117.

What must have been understood when the early Christians heard the call to become a “eunuch on account of the kingdom of heaven”?

The answer to this question is not nearly as difficult as one would imagine, because evidence is ready to hand in the writings of the church fathers of the second to fifth centuries. If Jesus’ logion sets “natural” and involuntary eunichism over against eunichism “on account of the kingdom”, the most “natural” reception of this text in the context of Mediterranean religious practices was that it was a reference to ritual castration.⁶⁸

Christian Ritual Castration and Gender Identity Politics

As controversial as this interpretation may seem to modern interpreters and scholars of first-century Judaism, it was quite widespread among congregations of early Christianity in both the West and East. Indeed, contrary to what we have come to believe, Christian ritual castration was in fact performed for centuries.⁶⁹ Practitioners were not limited to what we would now term “heterodox” or “gnostic” movements, but were also found within orthodoxy itself. Indeed, given the fluid and contested boundaries of the various Christian movements up to the 4th century, it should come as no surprise to learn that Christian ritual castration, though certainly understood as a special calling, found adherents in both orthodox and heterodox movements. The great ascetic movements that blossomed in the 3rd century which practiced ritual castration laid the foundation for later monasticism and its advocacy of celibacy.

⁶⁸ Admittedly, another “obvious” reference would be to the role that eunuchs played in monarchic bureaucracies, the implication then being that Jesus was setting up a kingdom over against Herod’s; cf. D. Good, “Eunuchs in the Matthean Community,” presentation given at “*Neither Woman nor Man*”: *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* conference held at Cardiff University, 1999.

⁶⁹ Note the extremely interesting statement by Tertullian, *De Monogamia* 3, where he says, speaking about Jesus, “...He stands before you, if you are willing to copy him, as a voluntary *spado* (eunuch) in the flesh.” The term *spado* used throughout this treatise had traditionally be translated “virgin”. It is, however, a term typically used for “castrated”.

It was precisely due to its general presence that such great rhetorical lengths were eventually required to overcome the “natural” interpretation of this saying. Those who wished to condemn the practice it could not dismiss it, since it was the authenticity of the saying that secured its place: no one doubted Matthew’s authority, and no one doubted that Jesus called for his followers to become eunuchs. Instead, forced to confront it, those who would reject its call to castration had to contend with an extremely powerful, naturalized and self-evident reading that Jesus was calling his followers to perform ritual castration as a sign of religious devotion and commitment.

The reason for this is clear in the history of religions of the eastern Mediterranean. Among the most familiar and most ancient forms of worship, tracing its roots to the earliest expressions of the divine by humankind, was the syncretistic religion of Cybele-Attis/Magna Mater. By the time of Jesus’ ministry, this religion had already been introduced into Rome 200 years earlier, but in its various forms could trace itself back to 8th century BCE Phrygia and beyond. During the period we are considering, its popularity is attested to not only by the confusing breadth and variety of religious myths of origins, which drew together the figures of Isis-Osiris, (Syrian) Astarte-Tammuz, (Babylonian) Ishtar-Dumuzi, as well as figures from both the Roman and Greek Pantheon, including Dionysus or Bacchus. Its influence throughout the Mediterranean can also be noted considering the numerous historical sources throughout the period that make reference to it: Pausanias,⁷⁰ Arnobius,⁷¹ Ovid,⁷² Catallus,⁷³ Apuleius,⁷⁴ Philo,⁷⁵ Livius,⁷⁶ Lucian of Samosata,⁷⁷ and Augustine,⁷⁸ just

⁷⁰ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* vii.17.10.

⁷¹ Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* v.5.

⁷² Ovid, *Fasti* iv.179, 212.

⁷³ Catallus, *Carmina* lxiii.

⁷⁴ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, vii.25-30.

to name a few. Perhaps its most famous adherent (or infamous, if one accepts the judgment of the *Historia Augusta*⁷⁹) is the Syrian-born emperor Elagabalus (ruled 218-222 CE), whose efforts at religious reform called for the unification of all religious practices across the Empire under the worship of the Mother of the Gods (*Mater Deum*). Later, the emperor Julian (355-363) attempted something similar, and it was not until the 5th century that worship of the *Mater Deum* eventually disappeared.

Priestly devotees of these syncretistic movements were known as *galli*,⁸⁰ and were widely recognized by the female garb they wore. Many of them were *castrati*, often emasculating themselves with their own hands. Explanations of the reasons for and the symbolic significance of ritual castration by the *galli* were varying and are difficult to sort out.⁸¹ Regardless of the variations among myths, religious rites were well known: in

⁷⁵ Philo, *Special Laws* i.324-325, iii.37-42.

⁷⁶ Livius, *Roman History* xxix.14,10.

⁷⁷ Lucian of Samosata, *Concerning the Syrian Goddess*.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, esp. books ii, vi, vii.

⁷⁹ *Historia Augusta*, *Elagabalus* xviii.14-xxxiii.7; compare, however, Herodian, *Basileia Historia* v.5.5.

⁸⁰ The etymology of this term is disputed; cf. Keufler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 248.

⁸¹ Certain myths (reported, e.g., by Catullus, *Carmina* lxiii) suggest that Attis castrated himself as a result of an "amorous rage, his mind gone." This act he subsequently regrets, at which point, Cybele overhearing him, sends her lions to drive her into madness back into the forests of Dindymus, where she served the Goddess for the rest of her life. Similarly, Lucretius reports that the *galli* are emasculate:

...since thus
They wish to show that men who violate
The majesty of the Mother and have proved
Ingrate to parents are to be adjudged
Unfit to give unto the shores of light
A living progeny. (*On the Nature of Things* ii)

Other myths suggest that it was the Goddess herself who castrated her consort when he was found to be unfaithful. Due to this act, he bled to death, whereupon the Goddess out of love for him returned him to life, but as a eunuch. Still other myths spoke of an enemy of the consort who killed him, cut him to pieces and

Springtime devotees to Cybele/Magna Mater would engage in ecstatic dancing. Certain novice members who were ready to signal their complete devotion would then take the ritual curved stone knife and castrate themselves, flinging their now amputated testicles at the door of house, whose female members were then expected to give them clothing, which they would then don.⁸² This would be followed by a time of lamentation eventually giving way to celebration.

Advocates against Christian ritual castration had an uphill battle ahead of them. Against them stood not only a teaching whose authority and authenticity were considered unassailable, but also a widely practiced and ancient act of religious devotion. Throughout Christian and European history there have been those who took and taught this statement literally: Valentinus (whose sect was centuries later declared heretical; mid-second century), Julius Cassianus (also declared heretical; also mid-second century),⁸³ Basilides (also declared heretical; early-second century),⁸⁴ Leontios of Antiochia (Bishop of Jerusalem; late-fourth century), Melito “the Eunuch” (ca. late-second century), Hilarion (mid-fourth century), Marcarius “the Egyptian (late 4th century) and Origen (also declared heretical; early-third century) are among the most famous of thousands that chose ritual castration. Several early Christian encratite and ascetic movements (centered mainly in Egypt) are known to have members among whom were numbered eunuchs.⁸⁵

dispersed his body throughout the cosmos. The Goddess then proceeded to find them and put them back together again, but she could not locate his penis.

⁸² Cf. Lucian of Samosata, *Concerning the Syrian Goddess* 50-51.

⁸³ Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* iii.13-14.

⁸⁴ Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* iii.1.1.

⁸⁵ Cf., e.g., Epiphanius (of Salamis), *Adversus Haereses* lviii mentions the followers of Valens; one should also note possibility of castration practiced by Montanists and Marcionites.

The earliest report of the desire for castration among Christians comes from the second century writings of Justin.⁸⁶ The cloisters of Egypt and Syria were centers of castration, and Coptic monasteries continued to perform castration well into the Islamic period.⁸⁷ Indeed, the criminalization of eunuchs in the church at the Council of Nicea is testimony to the degree to which castration was practiced.⁸⁸ While it is difficult to ascertain the role in which politics and the fear of the eunuch-dominated Roman bureaucracy played in this decision of the aristocratic bishops, it is nevertheless the case that eunuchs continued to maintain their influence over the court,⁸⁹ playing an important role in the history of both the state and church⁹⁰ (the most well known being the controversy over Arianism),⁹¹ maintaining a presence in both hierarchies for centuries.

⁸⁶ Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.29, "And that you may understand that promiscuous intercourse is not among our mysteries, one of our number recently presented to Felix, the Prefect in Alexandria, a petition, asking that permission might be given to a doctor to make him a eunuch; for the doctor said that they were forbidden to do this without the permission of the Prefect. And when Felix would by no means agree to subscribe [to the persuasion] the youth remained single, and was satisfied with the testimony of his own conscience and that of his fellow believers." The earliest report of eunuchs in Christianity is found in the Acts 8 of the Ethiopian eunuch. Interestingly, this pericope interested later interpreters only with respect to the question of the nature of the eunuch's conversion, and not with the status of the eunuch or the meaning of the state of castration.

⁸⁷ P. Scholz, *Der entmannte Eros*, 154-155.

⁸⁸ Note the several loopholes: Council of Nicea 325, canon 1: "If anyone in sickness has undergone surgery at the hands of physicians or has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy. But if anyone in good health has castrated himself, if he is enrolled among the clergy he should be suspended, and in future no such man should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this refers to those who are responsible for the condition and presume to castrate themselves, so too if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians or by their masters, but have been found worthy, the canon admits such men to the clergy." [Emphases mine.]

⁸⁹ Note that this was the case, despite several laws passed in the centuries beginning with Domitian (81-96), reiterated by Nerva (96-98), Hadrian (117-138), and Constantine (306-337) that made it illegal to make someone a eunuch in the Empire (and in the case of Hadrian's law, even if the individual were volunteering). Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassenen*, 45-51, has an excellent discussion of the issue. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* lxxvii.2.3, attributed the first law, issued by Domitian, to a political desire to insult Titus, who was said to be fond of eunuchs.

⁹⁰ For an excellent introductory survey of the role of eunuchs in Byzantium, see K. Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, edited by G. Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 85-109. See n. 48, p. 516, for a nice start regarding eunuchs in the Eastern church hierarchy.

Those who wished to fight against this fixture in the social, political and ecclesiastical landscape had to rhetorically invent an allegorical reading of the eunuch in Matthew 19:12, who then became a symbol for spiritual *askesis*. To do this, they drew from Middle Platonic and Stoic moral sources and contemporary medical theories that advocated abstinence as a means of preserving and assuring masculinity.⁹² The rigors of asceticism were the means by which men showed restraint and control. Sexuality was a threat to men, insofar as sperm was comprised of the male essence that accumulated as foam during times of the excitement of the blood. All medical theorists from the 2nd century on agreed that too much sex would lead to the loss of the male vital essence.⁹³ Control of sexual impulses, not castration (which would relieve men of the seat of their power, both social and medical), was the key to manliness. Castration was too extreme for most men. Early Christian authors, by turning to an allegorical reading of the text, could offer their male converts the comfort of a less threatening, but nevertheless rigorous practice of masculinity. Hence was born, as Matthew Keufler has so aptly puts it, the “manly eunuch”.

This effort can be seen in the writings of certain figures from Alexandria whose allegorical approach can be traced back to Philo.⁹⁴ Clement⁹⁵ and Origen,⁹⁶ taking their cue from Philo, view castration as unholy. Clement accepts Philo’s reading of Deuteronomy

⁹¹ It is worth noting how easily the bishops who quarreled with advocates of Arianism employed the *topoi* of perversity and immorality against the eunuch representatives of the court. Cf. Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 35-38, Gregory Nazianzos, *Discourses* 43, 47; Ambrosias, *Hexaemeron* v.68.

⁹² Rouselle, *Porneia*, explores these issues, as does Keufler, *The Manly Eunuch*. Cf. D. Hunter, “The Language of Desire: Clement of Alexandria’s Transformation of Ascetic Discourse,” *Semeia* 57/1 (1992), 95-111.

⁹³ Cf. also Oribasius, *Collectio Medica* xxii.2.20-22; Soranus, *On the Diseases of Women* i.30-31; Galen, *On Semen* i.16.19-31.

⁹⁴ Cf. Philo, *Special Laws* i.325 concerning Deuteronomy 23.

⁹⁵ Clement, *Protreptikon* ii.16; *Stromata* iii.1.1, iii.13.91-93.

⁹⁶ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, xv.1.

23, wherein the eunuch becomes a symbol of one “cut off from wisdom.” Ironically, even Origen’s commentary on Matthew 19:12 also rejects a literal reading of the text. He denounced castration as the morally weaker choice: a “true” eunuch is not one who eliminates the *ability* to have sex, but one who eliminates the *desire* for sex.⁹⁷ As Jerome, following upon Clement,⁹⁸ puts it, “Necessity makes another man a eunuch, my will makes me one.”⁹⁹

The influence of these early Alexandrian interpreters grew over time and made its impact felt even upon the East, where Gregory Nazianzos,¹⁰⁰ Epiphanius,¹⁰¹ Eusebius,¹⁰² Athanasius¹⁰³ and John Chrysostom¹⁰⁴ (among others) all accepted the figurative and allegorical reading of 19:12. Based upon a notion of a more rigorous spiritual *askesis*, aware of Levitical and Deuteronomic legislation against castration, and taking full advantage of their elite education, these authors advocated a reading that ran contrary to the more popular, more “self-evident” one being practiced apparently quite widely.

From this point of view, they could offer, albeit with great difficulty, and sometimes with great ambiguity and ambivalence,¹⁰⁵ an alternative to ritual castration. Feeling

⁹⁷ Cf. Eusebius, *Commentarius in Isaiam*, 1.22 and 1.37; Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, 1.27; Ringrose, “Living in the Shadows,” n. 49, p. 517.

⁹⁸ Clement, *Paedagogus* iii.58.3.

⁹⁹ Hieronymus, *Letters* xxii.19.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory Nazianzos, *Discourses* 32-37.

¹⁰¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion*.

¹⁰² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* vi.8.1, speaking on Origen.

¹⁰³ Athanasius, *Homily on the Song of Songs* in *P.G.*, vol. 27, col. 1332.

¹⁰⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily XXXV on Chapter XIV of Genesis* in *P.G.*, vol. 58, col. 599.

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian has a difficult time denying the symbolic usefulness of castration. Cf. Keufler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 260-273. Jerome praised Origen for his choice of castration (*Letters* lxxxiv.8).

compelled to recognize the validity of the impulse that led to Christian castration, they refused to accept the act of castration itself. The emasculated form of the eunuch that populated the religious landscape around them became a scapegoat for the difficulty they had when confronting the practice of religious castration in their midst. On the one hand, they set out to declare all Christian practitioners of castration and their followers heretical, a move particularly inspired by Epiphanius.

On the other hand, they vituperatively set out to attack ritual castration among the *galli*. The invective directed against the *galli* is particularly harsh. Augustine speaks of “shameful rites” and “obscenities” that were “gross and immodest” (*City of God* ii.5) and “more unseemly than all scenic abomination.” (*City of God* vi.7) There is little doubt about what was troubling Augustine:

But in whatever way their sacred rites may be interpreted, and whatever reference they may have to the nature of things, it is not according to nature, but contrary to nature, that men should be effeminate. (*City of God* vi.7)

Especially troubling to Augustine is the gender-blending that these priests represented.

These effeminate [the *galli*] no later than yesterday, were going through the streets and places of Carthage with anointed hair, whitened faces, relaxed bodies, and feminine gait, exacting from the people the means of maintaining their ignominious lives. (*City of God* vii.26)

It was as much the outward appearance and feminine behavior of these priests as it was their physical emasculation that was distressing, both combining to reinforce the sense of gender transgression.

Gender Transgression and the Kingdom of Heaven

A “eunuch on account of the kingdom of heaven” certainly was a contentious figure throughout Christian history. Clearly, earlier interpreters struggling for control over the

interpretation of this text understood it as a struggle over fundamental issues of sex-gender identity. What is fascinating is how little this history seems to have made its impact upon biblical interpretation today. With the disappearance of the eunuch from European and Western society came the disappearance of the eunuch in the Bible itself.

Given the inimical gender-identity context we have explored, the radicality of the call of Jesus to make oneself a “eunuch on account of the kingdom of heaven” can be clearly seen. If we grant the conservative reading of the Bible in favor of the clear delineation of male and female identities, sanctified at the time of creation, reinforced through Mosaic legislation, and promulgated by his Jewish contemporaries: What is Jesus doing advocating a figure that fundamentally transgresses precisely this sex-gender norm? Regardless of whether the eunuch is understood either as 1) an outcast from the community of believers as suggested by the Deuteronomic author, 2) a transgressor of cultic purity premised upon male privilege and clear delineation of male/female roles as suggested by first-century Jewish moralists, 3) a monstrous liminal sex-gender intermediary suffering from the disease of effeminacy with all its sexual and moral depravity as suggested by early Christian apologists, or even 4) a metaphorical figure of *askesis* that renounces human sexuality and family kinship obligations as suggested by Matthew and later Christian apologists, this logion of Jesus questions the privileged position of a heterosexist binary paradigm of identity. No matter how you view it, the figure of the eunuch as both a physical body and a social identity radically undermines the foundational assumptions used to reinforce the conservative heterosexist reading of the Bible, precisely because *this* body and *this* social identity threatens the sacred boundaries between male and female. The kingdom of heaven resides in between, even outside this dichotomy in the ultimate ancient figure of sex-gender transgression.

The implications of this reading are quite radical, because the logion is suggesting that sex-gender transgression is a biblically sanctioned identity practice. Any Christian sexual

ethic that seeks to ground itself by appeal to a scripturally based warrant for a heterosexist imperative must confront the specific *rejection* of this imperative in this logion. At its heart, the eunuch is a figure that stands outside of the binary sex paradigm. The figure of the eunuch serves as a symbol for the effect of the kingdom of heaven on the body of the believer, and as a figure that is neither male nor female, undermines our cherished assumptions about the relationship between our sexuality and the kingdom of heaven.

Current debates about the role of homosexuals and transgenders in the community of Christian believers have focused upon the question of sexual ethics and the implications that biblical teaching about certain sexual practices may have for their place in the church. The question is, can certain identities defined by certain practices be allowed to participate fully in the life of the church, if these practices are themselves biblically rejected? Interestingly, those who believe that the Bible condemns homosexual activity as sinful have based their reasoning upon physiological grounds: same-sex activity violates the “anatomical, procreative, and interpersonal complementarity of male and female.”¹⁰⁶ This view embraces a hermeneutic that is grounded upon a creation theology viewing male and female as divinely sanctified sexed morphologies whose complementarity is demonstrated by the procreative fittedness of anatomical design. Levitical prohibitions of same-sex practices are to be viewed in this context of sex morphology, deviation from which is also clearly condemned by both Levitical and Deuteronomic exclusion of eunuchs. It is the presumed classification of human beings into two and only two sexes that provides the fundamental ground upon which homosexual activity can be condemned as “unnatural”: “The only sexual categories that are significant according to a holistic reading of the Bible are those of male and female.”¹⁰⁷ In the best case, homosexuals are to be welcomed into

¹⁰⁶ R. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ K. Greene-McCreight, “The Logic of the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Homosexuality, Science and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, edited by David Balch (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 256.

the community, but to be healed of their practices and sexual object choice. Heterosexist creation theology of the binary paradigm serves as the model according to which sexual activity and identity is to follow, and deviation therefrom needs to be addressed and made to conform.

Where does the eunuch fit in such a sexed ideology? Outside of it altogether. The eunuch is a figure that not only violates the heterosexual binary dualism, but cannot participate in it at all. Even as a figure of celibacy, it renounces the forms and practices at the heart of binary paradigm. Indeed, in the saying of Matthew 19:12 there is absolutely no suggestion that to be a eunuch is to be someone who is in any way in need of “fixing”, “healing”, or “reintegration” into society. Jesus heals the blind, the paralyzed, the possessed, the fevered, the leprous, the hemorrhaging, even the dead, in every case restoring them to full societal membership. In the case of the eunuch, however, there is no implication whatsoever of “illness” or social “deformity” in need of restoration. Instead, the eunuch is held up as the model to follow. Such a model suggests, even in the larger Matthean context of marriage and divorce, that the rhetorical direction is away from reinforcement of the binary sex paradigm and its function to establish and naturalize heterosexual marriage and procreativity. Unlike Isaiah 56 where the eunuch is promised a return to society and a reward set in terms of that society’s sex-gender ideology (“more than sons and daughters”), it is the transgressive body of the eunuch that symbolizes the kingdom. Canonical appeals¹⁰⁸ to creation theology or Torah legislation in an effort to naturalize the heterosexist imperative ignore or dismiss this figure at their own peril.

Interestingly, this notion of the rejection of the binary sex paradigm finds resonances even within the canon itself, as the triple tradition report of Jesus’ controversy with the Sadducees (Mk 12:18-27//Mt 22:23-33//Lk 20:27-39) and the pre-Pauline baptismal

¹⁰⁸ Cf. C. Seitz, “Sexuality and Scripture’s Plain Sense: The Christian Community and the Law of God,” in *Homosexuality, Science and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*.

formula of Galatians 3:28 both suggest. Here we see an argumentative genre and tradition in the canon whose implicit premises share an ideal that eradicates the essential difference between male and female. The concern with *when* the overturning of these sex-gender differences is an interesting one, replete as it is with important social consequences that many have already explored. However, what is clear is that the difference established by the binary sex ideology is seen to be a *false* one. Symbolic appeal to church as the bride of Christ (II Cor 11:2), male as the head of female (I Cor 11:2-16), ethical appeal to marriage and divorce rules in the Pauline and deuterio-Pauline tradition (Mt 19:3-19 and parallels; I Cor 7:1-16, 25-40; I Tim 3:3-7; Tit 2:4-5), catechetical appeal to the limited roles available to women in the church (I Cor 14:33-36; I Tim 2:11-15, 5:3-16; II Tim 2:3-5): *these* serve as important canonical and authoritative texts reinforcing the clear sex-gender distinction between male and female worlds. They do so, however, upon the basis of a paradigmatic model of humankind that the figure of the eunuch stands in rejection of, and at the expense of early and authoritative traditions that explore the implication of such a rejection. While the Matthean redactional additions of 19:11 and 19:12d may allow interpreters to dismiss this instruction as an optional choice for the individual believer,¹⁰⁹ the figure of the eunuch continues to stand within a larger rhetorical tradition that aspires to reject any naturalization of the male/female binary as the definitive embodiment of Christian identity. Any appeal made by those who wish to naturalize the heterosexist imperative by reference

¹⁰⁹ Usually interpreted by reference to Paul's instruction on sexual restraint in 1 Cor 7:1-7. Those who wish to mitigate the instruction in Matt 19:12 point to v. 11 and 12d, suggesting that the saying is not binding on all believers, but only for some who can "accept this teaching". There are several difficulties with this interpretation: a) It requires "this teaching" mentioned in v. 11 to refer to the following verse, thereby isolating Jesus' saying from the disciple's response, effectively causing Jesus not to respond to their concerns at all; b) it would require the force of the entire instruction on divorce to be read as non-binding, since 12d would be referring back to 11, which refers back to v. 3-9. Additionally, c) to suggest a "non-binding" quality of this instruction undermines the entire trajectory of ethical intensification required of the believer that Matthew has been arguing for; and more importantly, d) to read it in connection with 1 Cor 7 continues to presume a connection between sexual restraint and eunucism that is precisely under question in this essay.

to Christian *tradition* must confront both the fact of the dominical *rejection* of this norm and the early Christian practices that embraced this rejection.

The eunuch has been a highly contentious and inflammatory symbol. The eunuch has served as a lightning rod for sexual anxieties. Rather than a figure that later came to reinforce conservative masculinities and their centers of privilege and power, the eunuch was a figure that undermine and threatened male privilege. Rather than conforming to and affirming the legitimacy of the heterosexist imperative, it served to radically call this ideology into question. A figure that has not gone away, indeed canonically cannot go away, the eunuch confronts us and demands that we face up to and reassess the assumptions we have about the sanctity of heterosexist ideology.