

The Meaning of Eunuch

My contention that strategies developed by queer theorists offer new ways of reading the ambiguities in the identity of the Ethiopian eunuch productively rests on the premise that it is legitimate to read him as a male who had been castrated and who thus occupied an ambiguous place within ancient constructions of masculinity. There are scholars of biblical, classical, and ancient Near Eastern studies, however, who argue that, while the words for *eunuch* in Greek, Hebrew, and Akkadian could refer to a *castrated male*, each could also function as a title for a noncastrated *high official*. Is it legitimate, then, to read the Ethiopian eunuch as a castrated male? One of the claims of postmodern biblical criticism is that a text's meaning does not reside in the author's intentions, in the world behind the text, or in the text itself, but rather a text's meaning is produced in the interactions among all of these *and* real flesh-and-blood readers.¹ In the context of postmodern biblical criticism, it might be enough to argue that it is legitimate to understand the Ethiopian eunuch as a castrated male because it is *possible* for me, a real flesh-and-blood reader, to do so. However, in order to obtain a hearing for my thesis among readers who are skeptical about postmodern biblical criticism, I will first engage standard philological analyses of the Greek, Hebrew, and Akkadian words. Then I will examine how the usage of the Hebrew word is interpreted in the Hebrew Bible and how the word has been translated in the Septuagint and in a variety of English versions of the Bible. Finally, I will present a social-rhetorical argument for reading the Ethiopian eunuch as a castrated male.

1. See, for example, The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 20–67; Mary Ann Tolbert, “Afterwords: The Politics and Poetics of Location,” in *Reading from This Place*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1:305–17.

GREEK ΕΥΝΟΥΧΟΣ

The current edition of the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* presents three meanings for εὐνούχος, which reflect a particular interpretation of the threefold reference to eunuchs in Matt. 19:12: “a castrated male person, *eunuch* . . . a human male who, without a physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children, *impotent male* . . . a human male who abstains [from] marriage, without being impotent, *a celibate*.”² The first three definitions of εὐνούχος in the lexicon of Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida reflect a similar interpretation of Matt. 19:12: “a castrated male person—‘eunuch’ . . . a human male who without being castrated is by nature incapable of sexual intercourse—‘impotent male’ . . . a male person who abstains from marriage without being necessarily impotent—‘celibate.’”³ Louw and Nida, however, add a fourth definition: “an official of an Oriental court who was entrusted with

2. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 409. Most scholars argue that the third category of “eunuchs” in Matt. 19:12 figuratively signifies those who choose to lead a celibate life; see, for example, T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black, eds., *Encyclopaedia Biblica: A Critical Dictionary of the Literary, Political, and Religious History, the Archaeology, Geography, and Natural History of the Bible*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 2:1427; Walter A. Elwell et al., eds., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 2:729; Samuel Fallows, Andrew C. Zenos, and Herbert L. Willett, eds., *The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia and Scriptural Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1909), 1:626; Siegfried H. Horn, *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 327; John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965), 253; Johannes Schneider, “Eunouchos, Eunouchizō,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 2:767–68; R. J. A. Sheriffs, “Eunuch,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas et al. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1982), 356; F. Scott Spencer, “Eunuch,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 435; John E. Steinmueller and Kathryn Sullivan, *Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia: New Testament* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1950), 216. Other scholars note both this figurative interpretation and the possibility of a literal interpretation in terms of self-castration; see, for example, D. G. Burke, “Eunuch,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:202; G. Petzke, “Eunouchizō,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 2:81. Still other scholars argue that this literal interpretation makes the most sense in the text’s original context; see, for example, Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 150–54; Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 258–60.

3. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:107–8.

various important responsibilities and who was also a eunuch—“court official, eunuch.”⁴ They go on to argue that in some instances when the word is used with this fourth meaning, the focus is on the person’s physical condition, while in other instances the focus is on the person’s official responsibilities and position.

Some scholars propose that, etymologically, εὐνοῦχος is a combination of the noun εὐνή, meaning “bed,” and the verb ἔχω, meaning “have, hold, keep,”⁵ and some add that the origin of the word is to be found in the bed-keepers, or chamberlains, employed in harems.⁶ Madeleine Miller and J. Lane Miller, for example, assert that eunuchs were “emasculated males employed in Oriental harems as bedroom attendants, but also given positions as trusted officials and commanders.”⁷ On the one hand, there are scholars who argue that although the word properly referred to a chamberlain, “at the time the word was coined, the office doubtless presupposed the mutilation, so its term of reference was exclusively ‘castrato.’”⁸ On the other hand, there are scholars who contend that the word retained two meanings and could refer either to a castrated *eunuch* or to a noncastrated *court official*.⁹ Thus, the results of a standard philological analysis of the Greek word εὐνοῦχος are inconclusive. Several scholars, however, have pointed out that the usage of this word in the Septuagint (and by extension in the New Testament) is dependent on the usage of the Hebrew word סָרִיס, ¹⁰ and therefore I continue by analyzing this word.

4. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:482.

5. See, for example, B. Kedar-Kopfstein, “Sāris,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10:346; Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 724; Sheriffs, “Eunuch,” 356.

6. See, for example, John D. Davis *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, rev. Henry Snyder Gehman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1944), 173; Fallows, Zenos, and Willett, *Bible Encyclopedia*, 1:626; Horn, *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, 327.

7. Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 8th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 176.

8. J. D. Hawkins, “Eunuchs among the Hittites,” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting, 2 vols. (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 1:218. Cf. Davis, *Westminster Dictionary*, 173–74; Fallows, Zenos, and Willett, *Bible Encyclopedia*, 1:626; Horn, *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, 327.

9. See, for example, Burke, “Eunuch,” 201; Elwell et al., *Baker Encyclopedia*, 2:729; Kedar-Kopfstein, “Sāris,” 346; Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, Helps for Translators (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), 181; Schneider, “Eunouchos, Eunouchizō,” 766; Steinmueller and Sullivan, *Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia*, 215–16.

10. See, for example, Burke, “Eunuch,” 201; Schneider, “Eunouchos, Eunouchizō,” 766.

HEBREW סָרִיס

One standard Hebrew lexicon defines סָרִיס simply as “eunuch,”¹¹ and another presents two definitions: “1. eunuch . . . 2. (eunuch who is a) court official.”¹² T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black argue that Hebrew possessed two identical words סָרִיס, one of which meant “eunuch” and the other of which meant “captain” or “high officer,”¹³ while others, such as Gordon H. Johnston, contend instead that the meaning of this one Hebrew word changed over time: “court official, royal steward (preexilic); and eunuch = royal steward, harem guard (exilic and postexilic).”¹⁴ B. Kedar-Kopfstein, however, claims that “neither two separate etymologies nor a semantic change in one or the other direction can be persuasively demonstrated,”¹⁵ and he and others conclude that this one Hebrew word simply had two meanings and could refer either to a castrated “eunuch” or to a noncastrated “courtier,” “(political) official,” or “(military) officer.”¹⁶ Hayim Tadmor, on the other hand, argues:

I believe it is very likely that the term *sārīs* stands for “eunuch,” not only in texts from the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid milieus, but also in texts describing the Israelite and Judean royal courts. There is no conclusive evidence that might militate against this view, and a point of semantics may be added to support it. It is very hard

11. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 710.

12. William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 260.

13. Cheyne and Black, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 2:1427.

14. Gordon H. Johnston, “Sārīs,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:290. Cf. Nili Sacher Fox, *In the Service of the King: Officialdom in Ancient Israel and Judah*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000), 196; K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1966), 165; Gene McAfee, “Eunuch” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 205.

15. Kedar-Kopfstein, “Sārīs,” 345.

16. In addition to Kedar-Kopfstein, see, for example, Burke, “Eunuch,” 201; Elwell et al., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2:729; Louis H. Gray, “Eunuch,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings with John A. Selbie, 13 vols. (1908–26; reprint, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 5:579; Karen Randolph Joines, “Eunuch,” in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1990), 271; Robert North, “Palestine, Administration of (Judean Officials),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:87; Schneider, “Eunouchos, Eunouchizō,” 766; Sheriffs, “Eunuch,” 56.

to imagine how *sārīs* could have borne two simultaneous meanings in Biblical Hebrew: that of royal courtier (not castrated) and that of a (court) eunuch. No development from general to specific may be discerned in the biblical evidence. Moreover, Biblical Hebrew already possessed indigenous terminology for royal courtiers/officers. . . . There would have been no reason to borrow it had a Hebrew equivalent to “eunuchs” existed in the language and in practice.¹⁷

Thus, the results of a standard philological analysis of the Hebrew word קָרִים are also inconclusive. Scholars, however, have pointed out that the usage of this word in the Hebrew Bible is dependent on the usage of the Akkadian word *ša rēši*, and therefore I continue by analyzing this word.

AKKADIAN *ŠA RĒŠĪ*

The usage of the Akkadian word *ša rēši* is ultimately the crux of a standard philological analysis of the use of the words for *eunuch* in biblical texts. The literal meaning of this Akkadian word is “(one) of the head,” “one who is head,” or “one who is at the head.”¹⁸ The derived meanings proposed by scholars include “courtier,”¹⁹ “(court or high) officer,”²⁰ “(he who is) chief,”²¹ “captain (at the head),”²² “(royal) attendant,”²³ and “[the king’s] personal servant.”²⁴

Some scholars claim that the usage of *ša rēši* changed over time from a general to a specialized meaning. For example, Johnston argues:

17. Hayim Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *Sārīs* a Eunuch?” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 322–23. Cf. A. Kirk Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power: Their Role in the Assyrian Bureaucracy,” in *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament: Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993*, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 240 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 93; Hawkins, “Eunuchs among the Hittites,” 218.

18. See, e.g., Burke, “Eunuch,” 201; Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power,” 90; Hawkins, “Eunuchs among the Hittites,” 218; Kedar-Kopfstein, “*Sārīs*,” 345; McAfee, “Eunuch,” 205; Sheriffs, “Eunuch,” 356.

19. Burke, “Eunuch,” 201; Joines, “Eunuch,” 271.

20. Cheyne and Black, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 2:1427; Joines, “Eunuch,” 271; Sheriffs, “Eunuch,” 356.

21. Fox, *In the Service of the King*, 196; Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power,” 90; Kedar-Kopfstein, “*Sārīs*,” 345; North, “Palestine, Administration of (Judean Officials),” 87.

22. Cheyne and Black, 2:1427; Schneider, “Eunouchos, Eunouchizō,” 766.

23. Hawkins, “Eunuchs among the Hittites,” 218; Kedar-Kopfstein, “*Sārīs*,” 345; McAfee, 205.

24. Kedar-Kopfstein, “*Sārīs*,” 345.

Throughout the early and late periods it designated a court official, while in the later period the technical meaning of eunuch arose with the development of the practice of utilizing castrated men within the royal court. . . . Thus the meaning eunuch arose with the practice of utilizing castrated men in key positions in Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.²⁵

Kedar-Kopfstein agrees, but he emphasizes that the general meaning was still occasionally used even after the development of the specialized meaning.²⁶ A. Leo Oppenheim also agrees, but he adds that even in texts from the Neo-Assyrian period, the word should be read as referring to a castrated male “only where and when the royal mores required the institution of a harem or similar arrangements.”²⁷ My review of Oppenheim’s analysis of the Neo-Assyrian evidence suggests to me that his conclusions are based on unproven ideological assumptions about castrated males and their place in ancient societies. For example, in discussing the use of *ša rēši* in Neo-Assyrian texts to refer to figures attached to the king, the crown prince, the royal mother, the queen, and even a city prefect, Oppenheim simply asserts, “This line shows that every official of importance had to have his retinue of attendants and it is unwarranted to assume that all these *ša rēši* were eunuchs.”²⁸ Why is it unwarranted? Similarly, in discussing a text from the Sargonid period describing a dangerous ritual in which a *ša rēši* stood in for the king, Oppenheim simply asserts, “It is inconceivable that a eunuch would have been selected to act for the king of Assyria.”²⁹ While this may be inconceivable to Oppenheim, as I will explain further in chapter 4, it was actually likely that a eunuch would be selected to stand in for a king precisely *because* he was a castrated male.³⁰

While A. Kirk Grayson agrees with Oppenheim and others that the specialized meaning “(castrated) eunuch” might have developed later, he argues that there is overwhelming textual evidence to support the interpretation of *ša rēši* as “eunuch” in the case of Assyria.³¹ He also contends that while textual

25. Johnston, “Sārīs,” 289. Cf. Burke, “Eunuch,” 201; Fox, *In the Service of the King*, 196; Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, 165.

26. Kedar-Kopfstein, “Sārīs,” 346.

27. A. Leo Oppenheim, “A Note on *Ša Rēši*,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973): 331.

28. Oppenheim, “A Note on *Ša Rēši*,” 332.

29. Oppenheim, “A Note on *Ša Rēši*,” 332.

30. See p. 102 below.

evidence does not conclusively prove or disprove this usage in the case of Babylon, the application of the word to persons in a wide range of positions from high court officials to servants in private households suggests that the term refers not to their official status but rather to their condition, thus lending support to the reading “eunuch.”³² Tadmor, on the other hand, directly challenges Oppenheim’s work, especially his suggestion that in Neo-Assyrian reliefs depicting both bearded and beardless officials, the beardless ones are young (noncastrated) males rather than castrated adult males.³³ In fact, Tadmor ventures “to suggest that the rather emotional scholarly reaction of claiming that *šūt rēši* [an Akkadian synonym for *ša rēši*] is never a eunuch, should be viewed as ensuing from a *Weltanschauung* that wished to see Assyria as the prototype of the Indo-European, military society which never accepted castration and even emphatically rejected it.”³⁴ Tadmor himself proposes that “we take the *ša rēši* as ‘eunuch’ throughout all the texts, and thus make Assyria join the series of empires in the ancient and modern Orient that employed eunuchs in their courts.”³⁵

EUNUCHS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The word עֲרֵיסִים occurs forty-five times in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible (see table 1.1). In the Septuagint, thirty-eight of these occurrences are translated as εὐνοῦχος or ἀρχιευνοῦχος. Of the remaining seven occurrences, two are translated as σπάδων, a noun derived from the verb σπάω, the meanings of which include “to pluck off or out,” “to tear, rend,” “to snatch, tear, or drag away,” and “to draw tight, pull,” which was probably used to refer to a particular method of castration.³⁶ One occurrence is translated as δυνάστης, which usually means “lord, master, ruler”;³⁷ two are translated as part of the proper names (or titles) Παφίς (עֲרֵיסִים־בַּבְּלִיָּה in Hebrew) and Ναβουσαρις

31. Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power,” 91–93.

32. Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power,” 90–91.

33. Hayim Tadmor, “The Role of the Chief Eunuch and the Place of Eunuchs in the Assyrian Empire,” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting, 2 vols. (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 2:606.

34. Tadmor, “Role of the Chief Eunuch,” 604.

35. Tadmor, “Role of the Chief Eunuch,” 606.

36. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1625. I will discuss the different methods of castration in antiquity and the different words for referring to those castrated by each particular method in chapter 4; see p. 97 below.

37. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 453.

(רַב־סָרִיס in Hebrew); and two occurrences are omitted altogether in the Septuagint.

Scholars have proposed a variety of principles for interpreting the meaning of the word סָרִיס in each of its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. D. G. Burke asserts that it is only in later biblical writings that the word clearly has the specialized meaning of “emasculated male,” while in earlier writings it most often has the general meaning of “courtier.”³⁸ Johnston argues that because castrated males were prohibited from the assembly of Israel in Deut. 23:1, the word means “eunuch” only when it refers to foreigners or to Judahites castrated in exile, while in all other cases it designates “a high-ranking official in the political or military spheres.”³⁹ Similarly, Kedar-Kopfstein holds that the word is usually to be translated “courtier,” although it may mean “eunuch” when it is used to refer to non-Israelite/non-Judahite courtiers and harem supervisors.⁴⁰ The case of Potiphar (Gen. 37:36; 39:1), who is called סָרִיס in the Masoretic Text and both σπάδων and εὐνοῦχος in the Septuagint, is particularly interesting. I contend that the use of two different words for “eunuch,” as well as the relationship between σπάδων and a particular method of castration, suggest at the very least that the Septuagint translators read the Hebrew word as a reference to a castrated male. Johnston and K. A. Kitchen argue, however, that Potiphar could not have been castrated, both because he was married and because there is no evidence for the use of eunuchs in Egypt.⁴¹ Kedar-Kopfstein and John L. McKenzie agree with the latter point, but they also suggest that the use of the word in this story may reflect a later time of composition, when royal attendants *were* castrated, rather than earlier circumstances in Egypt.⁴²

38. Burke, “Eunuch,” 201.

39. Johnston, “Sāris,” 290–94. Cf. Joines, “Eunuch,” 271; Schneider, “Eunouchos, Eunouchizō,” 766; Steinmueller and Sullivan, *Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia*, 216.

40. Kedar-Kopfstein, “Sāris,” 347–49.

41. Johnston, “Sāris,” 290–91; Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, 165–66.

42. Kedar-Kopfstein, “Sāris,” 349; McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 253.

Table 1.1: Eunuchs in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint

Passage	Masoretic Text	Septuagint	Passage	Masoretic Text	Septuagint
Gen. 37:36	סְרִיס	σπάδοντι	Esther 4:4	וְסִרְיָהּ	εὐνοῦχοι
Gen. 39:1	סְרִיס	εὐνοῦχος	Esther 4:5	מִסְרִיסֵי	εὐνοῦχον
Gen. 40:2	סְרִיסוֹ	εὐνούχοις	Esther 6:2	סְרִיסֵי	εὐνούχων
Gen. 40:7	אֶת־סְרִיסֵי	εὐνούχους	Esther 6:14	וְסִרְיָי	εὐνοῦχοι
1 Sam. 8:15	לְסְרִיסָיו	εὐνούχοις	Esther 7:9	מִן־הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχων
1 Kgs. 22:9	אֶל־סְרִיסִים	εὐνοῦχον	Isa. 39:7	סְרִיסִים	σπάδοντας
2 Kgs. 8:6	סְרִיס	εὐνοῦχον	Isa. 56:3	הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνοῦχος
2 Kgs. 9:32	סְרִיסִים	εὐנוῦχοι	Isa. 56:4	לְסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχοις
2 Kgs. 18:17	וְאֶת־רַב־סְרִיסִים	Ραφίς	Jer. 29:2 (36:2 LXX)	וְהַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχων
2 Kgs. 20:18	סְרִיסִים	εὐνοῦχοι	Jer. 34:19 (41:19 LXX)	הַסְרִיסִים	δυνάστας
2 Kgs. 23:11	הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχου	Jer. 38:7 (45:7 LXX)	סְרִיס	—
2 Kgs. 24:12	וְסִרְיָיו	εὐνοῦχοι	Jer. 39:3 (46:3 LXX)	רַב־סְרִיסִים	Ναβουσαρις

2 Kgs. 24:15	וְאֶת־סְרִיסָיו	εὐνούχους	Jer. 39:13 (46:13 LXX)	רַב־סְרִיסִים	————
2 Kgs. 25:19	סְרִיסִים	εὐνοῦχον	Jer 41:16 (48:16 LXX)	וְסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχους
1 Chron. 28:1	עַמ־הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχους	Jer. 52:25	סְרִיסִים	εὐνοῦχον
2 Chron. 18:8	אֶל־סְרִיסִים	εὐνοῦχον	Dan. 1:3	רַב סְרִיסָיו	ἀρχιευνούχῳ
Esther 1:10	הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχους	Dan. 1:7	שָׂר הַסְרִיסִים	ἀρχιευνούχος
Esther 1:12	הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχων	Dan. 1:8	מִשָּׂר הַסְרִיסִים	ἀρχιευνοῦχον
Esther 1:15	הַסְרִיסִים	εὐνούχων	Dan. 1:9	שָׂר הַסְרִיסִים	ἀρχιευνούχου
Esther 2:3	סְרִיסִים	εὐνούχῳ	Dan. 1:10	שָׂר הַסְרִיסִים	ἀρχιευνούχος
Esther 2:14	סְרִיסִים	εὐנוῦχος	Dan. 1:11	שָׂר הַסְרִיסִים	ἀρχιευνούχῳ
Esth 2:15	סְרִיסִים	εὐנוῦχος	Dan. 1:18	שָׂר הַסְרִיסִים	ἀρχιευνούχου
Esther 2:21	שְׁנֵי־סְרִיסָיו	εὐνοῦχοι			

The principles these scholars have articulated are generally reflected in contemporary English versions of the Hebrew Bible (see table 1.2). The New International Version, the New Revised Standard Version, and the New American Bible generally use the term *eunuch* only in reference to foreigners and exiled Judahites who are threatened with castration, although there are a

few places in which they offer differing translations for the same character, including “eunuch,” “official,” “courtier,” “attendant,” and “servant.”⁴³ In these three biblical versions, Potiphar is called “official,” “officer,” and “courtier,” and even the foreign figure in Daniel is referred to as “palace master, chief official,” or “chief chamberlain,” perhaps in order to avoid the suggestion that Daniel and his companions were themselves being groomed to become eunuchs. The New King James Version follows the scholars’ principles more consistently, even calling the foreigner in Daniel “master/chief of eunuchs,” although Potiphar is still called “officer.”⁴⁴ Finally, the Contemporary English Version avoids the translation “eunuch” altogether, instead employing terms such as “(palace/royal/ chief) official,” “officer,” “palace worker,” “(personal) servant,” and even “men who are unable to become fathers.”⁴⁵

Table 1.2: Eunuchs in English Translations of the Hebrew Bible

Passage	New International Version (1978)	New King James Version (1982)	New Revised Standard Version (1989)	New American Bible (1991)	Contemporary English Version (1995)
Gen. 37:36	official	officer	official	courtier	official
Gen. 39:1	official	officer	officer	courtier	official
Gen. 40:2	officials	officers	officers	courtiers	-----
Gen. 40:7	officials	officers	officers	courtiers	-----
1 Sam. 8:15	officials	officers	officers	eunuchs	officers
1 Kgs. 22:9	official	officer	officer	official	-----
2 Kgs. 8:6	official	officer	official	official	official

43. The Holy Bible, New International Version (International Bible Society, 1978); New Revised Standard Version Bible (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989); New American Bible (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., 1991).

44. New King James Version (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982).

45. Contemporary English Version (American Bible Society, 1995). This translation omits altogether eleven of the occurrences of the word in the Hebrew Bible.

2 Kgs. 9:32	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	palace workers
2 Kgs. 18:17	chief officer	Rabsaris	Rabsaris	lord chamberlain	military officer
2 Kgs. 20:18	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servants	————
2 Kgs. 23:11	official	officer	eunuch	eunuch	official
2 Kgs. 24:12	officials	officers	officers	functionaries	officials
2 Kgs. 24:15	officials	officers	officials	functionaries	officials
2 Kgs. 25:19	officer	officer	officer	courtier	officer
1 Chron. 28:1	palace officials	officials	palace officials	courtiers	palace officials
2 Chron. 18:8	official	officer	officer	official	————
Esther 1:10	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	personal servants
Esther 1:12	attendants	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servants
Esther 1:15	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servants
Esther 2:3	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	servant
Esther 2:14	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	man
Esther 2:15	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	personal servant
Esther 2:21	officers	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	men
Esther 4:4	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servants
Esther 4:5	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servant

Esther 6:2	officers	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	-----
Esther 6:14	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servants
Esther 7:9	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	personal servants
Isa. 39:7	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	servants	-----
Isa. 56:3	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	eunuch	men who are unable to become fathers
Isa. 56:4	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	eunuchs	-----
Jer. 29:2	court officials	eunuchs	court officials	courtiers	-----
Jer. 34:19	court officials	eunuchs	eunuchs	courtiers	royal officials
Jer. 38:7	official	eunuch	eunuch	courtier	official
Jer. 39:3	chief officer	Rabsaris	Rabsaris	chief officer	-----
Jer. 39:13	chief officer	Rabsaris	Rabsaris	chief officer	-----
Jer. 41:16	court officials	eunuchs	eunuchs	guardians	royal officials
Jer. 52:25	officer	officer	officer	courtier	officer
Dan. 1:3	chief of court officials	master of eunuchs	palace master	chief chamberlain	highest palace official
Dan. 1:7	chief official	chief of eunuchs	palace master	chief chamberlain	chief official

Dan. 1:8	chief official	chief of eunuchs	palace master	chief chamberlain	chief official
Dan. 1:9	official	chief of eunuchs	palace master	chief chamberlain	official
Dan. 1:10	official	chief of eunuchs	palace master	————	man
Dan. 1:11	chief official	chief of eunuchs	palace master	chief chamberlain	official
Dan. 1:18	chief official	chief of eunuchs	palace master	chief chamberlain	chief palace official

I think that these decisions regarding the translation of סָרִיס and εὐνοῦχος are ultimately based not on philological principles but rather on unproven ideological assumptions. First, in the case of Potiphar, some translators assume that a eunuch could not have married in antiquity, but they do not offer any evidence to support this assumption. On the other hand, there are scholars who argue that eunuchs could indeed marry in antiquity,⁴⁶ and Siegfried Horn even suggests, “If [Potiphar] were a eunuch the situation would easily account for his wife’s approaches to Joseph.”⁴⁷ Second, the assumption that rulers in ancient Israel and Judah would not have employed eunuchs because of the prohibition of castration in Deut. 23:1 is particularly questionable in light of the fact that the Hebrew Bible portrays these same rulers as violating multiple commandments, including even the commandments prohibiting idolatry and the worship of other gods.⁴⁸ If one rejects such unproven assumptions, one might concur with Tadmor’s conclusion that “*sārīs* could be rendered ‘eunuch’ in every occurrence in the Hebrew Bible, including the reference to Potiphar,”⁴⁹ as well as Janet

46. See, for example, Davis, *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, 174; Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *Sārīs* a Eunuch?” 321; John Taylor and Norman Henry Snaith, “Eunuch,” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings, rev. ed. by Frederick C. Grant, and H. H. Rowley (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 276.

47. Horn, *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, 327. Cf. James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 75–76.

48. Cf. Janet Everhart, “Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 2002 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 155.

49. Tadmor, “Role of the Chief Eunuch,” 605. Cf. Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *Sārīs* a Eunuch?” 317–25.

Everhart's conclusion that "[t]ranslating all instances of biblical *sārīs* with the English term 'eunuch' is faithful to the historical evidence and allows the eunuch's unique status to emerge."⁵⁰

A SOCIAL-RHETORICAL ARGUMENT

The results of standard philological analyses are inconclusive, although in every instance there are scholars who argue that the Greek, Hebrew, or Akkadian word should always be translated as "(castrated) eunuch." I think there is another way to address this issue. Rather than posing a broad question in philological terms, I pose a narrow question in social-rhetorical terms: What was the word εὐνοῦχος most likely to evoke among Greek-speaking audiences in the Greco-Roman cultural context in which the book of Acts was produced? I contend that there is enough evidence to conclude that such audiences would have heard this word as a reference to a castrated male.

I first consider the perspective of audience members who not only understood the Greek language but who also had some knowledge of Greek literature. In the fifth century b.c.e., Herodotus used the word εὐνοῦχος at several points in his *Histories*. I think two particular occurrences are determinative for the rest. In one instance, Herodotus claimed that victorious Persian generals chose the most beautiful boys from among the defeated Ionians and castrated them, thus making them eunuchs rather than "entire men" (or "men with testicles").⁵¹ In another instance, he told the story of Hermotimus, a eunuch of the Persian ruler Xerxes, who took his revenge on the man who had made him a eunuch by castrating that man and his sons.⁵² Although Herodotus did not explicitly mention castration in the seven other instances in which he used the word εὐνοῦχος to describe an individual, he did locate all these individuals in the Persian court. Hence, in light of these two determinative occurrences, it is reasonable to conclude that he very likely understood all of them to be castrated males.⁵³

In the fourth century b.c.e., Xenophon wrote at length about the explicitly castrated eunuchs of the Persian ruler Cyrus.⁵⁴ In the same century, Aristotle used the word εὐνοῦχος several times in his *Generation of Animals*. In one

50. Everhart, "Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible," 143. I will discuss the "unique status" of eunuchs in antiquity in chapter 4.

51. Herodotus *Histories* 6.32: ὦν γὰρ δὴ [Περσέων οἱ στρατηγοὶ] ἐπεκράτησαν τῶν πολιῶν, παῖδας τε τοῖς εὐειδεστάτους ἐκλεγόμενοι ἔξεταμνον καὶ ἐποίηον ἀντὶ εἶναι ἐνόρχιας εὐνούχους.

52. Herodotus *Histories* 8.104–6.

53. Herodotus *Histories* 1.117; 3.4, 77, 130; 7.187.

54. Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 7.5.58–65.

instance, Aristotle alluded to castration in his observation that the mutilation of just one part of their bodies changes the appearance of eunuchs so that it approximates the appearance of females.⁵⁵ In another instance, he observed that a eunuch does not go bald—a physical result of castration—and he concluded that this is the case because the eunuch is in the process of transitioning into the female state.⁵⁶ There is one other instance in this work in which Aristotle claimed that men who are sterile from birth remain as eunuchs.⁵⁷ Finally, in a passage in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argued that one should not use the term *impotence* in the same sense of a boy, a man, and a eunuch, thereby presenting these as three different categories of persons.⁵⁸

In the first century, Dio Chrysostom used the word εὐνοῦχος several times in his *Discourses* to refer explicitly to castrated individuals. In one instance, he first discussed castrated Persian eunuchs⁵⁹ and then went on to report that Nero had castrated his young beloved and had subsequently given a woman's name to this eunuch.⁶⁰ In another instance, he described a man who could not drive fear from his soul as both weaker than a woman and “weaker than eunuchs” (ἥττώμενος δὲ εὐνούχων), implying some sort of similarity (and hierarchy) between women and eunuchs.⁶¹ In yet another he described a particular man's voice as “shriller than that of eunuchs” (ὀξύτερον φθεγγόμενος εὐνούχων), whose shrill voices were a physical result of castration.⁶² There is one final instance in which, although he did not mention castration, Dio Chrysostom—like Herodotus and Xenophon before him—associated “eunuchs” with Persian rulers.⁶³ Similarly, although neither Chariton nor Plutarch ever referred explicitly to castration, there are many instances in which they associated eunuchs with Persian rulers.⁶⁴ Finally, Strabo used the word εὐνοῦχος

55. Aristotle *Generation of Animals* 766a: ὁρᾶν δ' ἕξεσθιν ἐπὶ τῶν εὐνούχων, οἱ ἐνὸς μορίου πηρωθέντος τοσοῦτον ἐξαλλάττουσι τῆς ἀρχαίας μορφῆς καὶ μικρὸν ἑλλείπουσι τοῦ θήλεος τὴν ἰδέαν.

56. Aristotle *Generation of Animals* 784a: καὶ εὐνούχος οὐ γίνεται φαλακρὸς διὰ τὸ εἰς τὸ θήλυ μεταβάλλειν.

57. Aristotle *Generation of Animals* 746b: ἄγονοι . . . εὐνουχίας διατελεῖν ὄντας.

58. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1019b: οὐ γὰρ ὁμοίως ἂν φαίεν ἀδύνατον εἶναι γεννᾶν παῖδα καὶ ἄνδρα καὶ εὐνούχον.

59. Dio Chrysostom *Discourses* 21.4–6.

60. Dio Chrysostom *Discourses* 21.6–9: οὐ μόνον ἐξέτεμε τὸν ἐρώμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ μετωνόμασε γυναικεῖον. . . . Καὶ τί ἦν τὸ ὄνομα τῆ γυναικί, ὃ τῷ εὐνούχῳ ἔθετο.

61. Dio Chrysostom *Discourses* 3.34–35.

62. Dio Chrysostom *Discourses* 62.6.

63. Dio Chrysostom *Discourses* 6.38.

64. Chariton *Callirhoe* 5.2–3; 5.9; 6.2–7; 6.9; 8.5; Plutarch *Artaxerxes* 11.4; 12.1; 12.3; 15.1–5; 16.1; 17.1–6.

to refer to two individuals. The first was Philetærus of Tiejium, who was made a eunuch in childhood when he (and his testicles) were accidentally pressed (θλιβῆναι) by a crowd.⁶⁵ The second was Hermeias, whom he described as a domestic slave of a certain banker (τραπεζίτου τινὸς οἰκέτης): as I will discuss further in chapter 4, Hermeias's status as both a eunuch and a slave strongly suggests that he too was castrated.⁶⁶

In the second century, Lucian used the word εὐνοῦχος with specific reference to castration. In *The Eunuch*, Lucian described a eunuch as a visibly identifiable bad omen who is “neither man nor woman” (οὔτε ἄνδρα οὔτε γυναῖκα), but rather something “hybrid and monstrous” (μικτὸν καὶ τερατῶδες), and he went on to depict eunuchs in terms of physical characteristics that resulted from castration, such as an effeminate voice.⁶⁷ In *The Mistaken Critic*, Lucian again referred to visibly identifiable bad omens, including a “cut priest” (βάκιλον), a “eunuch” (εὐνοῦχον), and a “monkey” (πίθηκον).⁶⁸ Finally, in a fictional work associated with Lucian, Pseudo-Lucian's *Lucius or The Ass*, after the character Lucius has been transformed into a donkey, a farmer recommends that his owner “castrate him” (αὐτὸν ἔκτεμε), and Lucius thinks to himself that he would rather die than “become a eunuch” (γενοίμην εὐνοῦχος).⁶⁹

The Greek texts I have been examining are primarily works of elite literature, and their consistent use of the word εὐνοῦχος over the course of several centuries leads me to conclude that for educated, elite Greek-speaking audiences, this word would have evoked a castrated male. It should also be noted, however, that Lucian's references to bad omens quite likely reflected popular opinion; furthermore, the fictional works of Chariton, Lucian, and Pseudo-Lucian may have been accessible to a wider range of audiences. Therefore, it is very likely that the word εὐνοῦχος would have evoked a castrated male also for non-elite Greek-speaking audiences. In fact, I have not been able to find one example in Greek texts from the fifth century b.c.e. through the second century c.e. in which the word εὐνοῦχος was used to refer to a person who was *clearly not* castrated.

I next consider the perspective of an audience familiar with Jewish literature in Greek. The word εὐνοῦχος occurs four times in texts that were included in the Septuagint but not in the Masoretic Text. In Sirach, a work

65. Strabo *Geography* 13.4.1.

66. Strabo *Geography* 13.1.57. See pp. 98–99 and 113–115 below.

67. Lucian *Eunuch* 6–10.

68. Lucian *Mistaken Critic* 17.

69. Pseudo-Lucian *Lucius or The Ass* 33.

that was translated from Hebrew into Greek in the second century b.c.e., the author compares the person who does right under compulsion to the desire of a eunuch to deflower a young woman (Sir. 20:4),⁷⁰ and he compares the one punished by God, who sees with his eyes and groans, to a eunuch who embraces a virgin and groans (Sir. 30:19–20).⁷¹ In both cases, the comparison assumes that the eunuch is physically unable to deflower a virgin. In the Wisdom of Solomon, a work likely composed in Alexandria in the first century b.c.e., after pronouncing a blessing on barren women, the author adds a blessing upon the eunuch who has not committed lawless actions (Wis. 3:14).⁷² That the eunuch is to be understood as castrated is strongly implied not only by the juxtaposition with barren women but also by this passage’s allusion to Isa. 56:3–5, in which the eunuch is promised a name better than children, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.⁷³ Finally, in Judith, a novel likely written in the second century b.c.e., the general Holofernes orders Bagoas, the eunuch in charge of his affairs, to persuade Judith to join him for a meal (Jdt. 12:11).⁷⁴ Although the text does not mention castration, there are two reasons for suggesting that Bagoas was a castrated eunuch. First, his role as an intermediary between a man and a woman reflects an important aspect of the role of castrated court eunuchs, which I will discuss further in chapter 4.⁷⁵ Second, in a book in which names are symbolic, it may be significant that according to Quintus Curtius Rufus, a Roman historian in the first century, Bagoas was the name of a famous eunuch (whom he refers to as *spado*, *castrati hominis*, and *castratus*) who served both the Persian ruler Darius III and Alexander the Great.⁷⁶

In the first century, Philo of Alexandria (20 b.c.e.–40 c.e.) not only used the word εὐνοῦχος in his writings, but he also interpreted occurrences of this word in the Septuagint. In two different works, Philo asked how Potiphar (Gen. 37:36; 39:1) could be both married and a eunuch. In *Allegorical Interpretation*, he

70. Sirach 20:4: ἐπιθυμία εὐνοῦχου ἀποπαρθενῶσαι νεάνιδα, οὕτως ὁ ποιῶν ἐν βίᾳ κρίματα.

71. Sirach 30:19–20: οὕτως ὁ ἐκδιωκόμενος ὑπὸ κυρίου. βλέπων ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ στενάζων ὡσπερ εὐνοῦχος περιλαμβάνων παρθένον καὶ στενάζων.

72. Wisdom 3:14: καὶ εὐνοῦχος ὁ μὴ ἐργασάμενος ἐν χειρὶ ἀνόμονα μηδὲ ἐνθυμηθεὶς κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου πονηρά, δοθήσεται γὰρ αὐτῷ τῆς πίστεως χάρις ἐκλεκτῆ καὶ κληρὸς ἐν ναῶ κυρίου θυμηρέτερος.

73. Isaiah 56:3–5: “Do not let the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people,’ and do not let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths and who choose that which pleases me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

74. Judith 12:11: καὶ εἶπεν Βαγῶα τῷ εὐνοῦχῳ, ὃς ἦν ἐφρευτικός ἐπὶ πάντων τῶν αὐτοῦ . . .

75. See p. 102 below.

76. Quintus Curtius Rufus *History of Alexander* 6.3.12; 6.5.22–23; 10.1.22–42.

concluded that this was an allegory for the Mind that is incapable of begetting wisdom and thus deserves to be called “eunuch.”⁷⁷ In *On Joseph*, he called this a paradox and interpreted it as an allegory for those who woo desire as a man woos a woman, without regard for reason.⁷⁸ In two other works, Philo asked why Pharaoh’s chief butler (Gen. 40:2, 7) was called “eunuch.” In *On Dreams*, he argued that the allegorical meaning was that his soul’s organs of generation had been castrated, making him a thing neither male nor female, incapable of producing children and prohibited by Moses from entering the assembly of Israel (Deut. 23:1).⁷⁹ In *On Drunkenness*, he contended that the offices of chief butler and chief baker were entrusted to eunuchs, who are neither men nor women, because it is the nature of a castrated soul, impotent and barren and thus unable either to produce the masculine seeds of virtue or to receive them, to delight in costly food and drinks.⁸⁰ He again noted the prohibition in Deut. 23:1, which he interpreted allegorically as directed against those unable to beget wisdom because faith has been castrated.⁸¹ Finally, in *That the Worse Is Wont to*

77. Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.236: ὁ γὰρ εὐνοῦχος καὶ ἀρχιμάγειρος ὄντως νοῦς μὴ ταῖς ἀπλαῖς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ταῖς περιτταῖς χρώμενος ἡδοναῖς εὐνοῦχος κέκληται καὶ ἄγονος σοφίας, ὧν εὐνοῦχος οὐκ ἄλλου τινὸς ἢ τοῦ σκεδατοῦ τῶν καλῶν Φαραῶ. . . .

78. Philo *On Joseph* 60.

79. Philo *On Dreams* 2.184: διὰ τοῦτο ἐγὼ μὲν ὁ Φαραῶ κατὰ τὰς ἀνέσις ἐπιτεινομένου τὸν σκληραύχενα καὶ πάντων ἀκράτορα λογισμὸν εὐνοῦχος εἶμι, τὰ γεννητικὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκτετμημένους, μετανάστης μὲν τῆς ἀνδρῶνιτιδος, φυγὰς δὲ καὶ γυναικῶνιτιδος, οὐτ’ ἄρρεν οὔτε θῆλυ, οὔτε προσῆθαι οὔθ’ ὑποδέξασθαι σπορὰν δυνάμενος, ἀμφίβολος, οὐδέτερος, ἀνθρωπέως παράκομμα νομίσματος, ἄμοιρος ἀθανασίας, ἢ τέκνων ἢ ἐγγόνων διαδοχαῖς εἰς αἰεὶ ζωπιρεῖται, συλλόγου καὶ ἐκκλησίας ἱερᾶς ἀπεσχοιτισμένος. θαλαδίαν γὰρ καὶ ἀποκεκομμένον ἀντικρυς διείρηται μὴ εἰσέναι. Cf. Philo *On the Change of Names* 173, in which Philo argued that Potiphar is called σπάδων (Gen. 37:36) because his soul’s organs of generation had been castrated (τὰ γεννητικὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκτετμημένους); Philo *On Joseph* 58, in which Philo held that although to all appearances Potiphar possessed the organs of generation, he was deprived of the power to use them, just as the multitude seems to practice virtue but is unable to produce wisdom (τῷ δοκεῖν ἔχων τὰ γεννητικὰ, τὰς δ’ εἰς τὸ γεννᾶν δυνάμεις ἀφρημένος . . . τίς οὖν ἢ πρὸς ὄχλον εὐνοῦχων ὁμοίότης; ὅτι ἄγονος ἐστὶ σοφίας δοκῶν ἐπιτηδεύειν ἀρετήν); and Philo *On the Special Laws* 1.324–30.

80. Philo *On Drunkenness* 211: τίνος δὴ χάριν οὐτ’ ἀνὴρ οὔτε γυνὴ τῶν λεχθέντων οὐδὲν ἀπλῶς ἐπιτέτραπται; ἢ ὅτι σπεῖρην μὲν ἄνδρες γονὰς ὑποδέχονται δὲ γυναῖκες ἐκ φύσεως πεπαιδευνται, ὧν τὴν εἰς ταῦτο σύνοδον αἰτίαν γενέσεως καὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς διαμονῆς εἶναι συμβέβηκεν, ἀγόνου καὶ ἐστερωμένης, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐξευνουχισμένης ψυχῆς σιτίσις πολυτελέσι καὶ ποτοῖς καὶ ὄψων περιέργοις παραστήσει χαίρειν μῆτε τὰ ἀρετῆς ἄρρενα ὡς ἀληθῶς σπέρματα καταβάλλεσθαι δυναμένης μῆτε τὰ καταβληθέντα παραδέξασθαι καὶ ἀναθρέψασθαι, ἀλλ’ οἷα λυπρὰν ἄρουραν καὶ λιθώδη πρὸς διαφθορὰν μόνον πεφυκέναι τῶν αἰεὶ ζῆν ὀφειλόντων;

81. Philo *On Drunkenness* 213: τί γὰρ τῷ σοφίας ἀγόνῳ λόγῳ ἀκροάσεως ἱερῶν ὄφελος ἐκτετμημένῳ πίστιν καὶ παρακαταθήκην βιωφελειστάτων δογμάτων φυλάξει μὴ δυναμένῳ.

Attack the Better, Philo argued that it would be better for a man “to be made a eunuch” than to lust after unlawful sexual unions.⁸²

Philo’s allegorical readings all depend on the assumption that, in the Septuagint, the word εὐνοῦχος refers to a castrated male. Philo’s works provide evidence of how the word εὐνοῦχος was used in elite Jewish discourses in Greek, which leads me to conclude that for elite Greek-speaking Jewish audiences, this word would have evoked a castrated male. The texts from the Septuagint, on the other hand, would have been accessible to a wider audience, including non-elite and even nonliterate persons. I conclude, therefore, that it is very likely that, for non-elite Greek-speaking Jewish audiences also, the word εὐνοῦχος would have evoked a castrated male. In fact, I have not been able to find one example in Jewish texts in Greek from the second century b.c.e. through the first century c.e. in which εὐνοῦχος was used to refer to a person who was *clearly not* castrated.

CONCLUSION

By supplementing a philological analysis with a social-rhetorical analysis, I have demonstrated that the evidence does not support the repeated assertion of some scholars that in antiquity the word εὐνοῦχος could be used to refer to a noncastrated court official. In fact, I think it is time to consider removing this supposed meaning of εὐνοῦχος from the Greek lexica. Therefore, it is not only possible for contemporary interpreters to read the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8:26-40 as a castrated male, but the evidence suggests that this is exactly how Greek-speaking Jewish and gentile audiences, elite and non-elite, would have understood the word εὐνοῦχος in the Greco-Roman cultural context in which Acts was produced. This is important, because as I will demonstrate in chapter 4, it is precisely the Ethiopian eunuch’s status as a castrated male that produces ambiguities in relation to multiple ancient identity categories, including gender, sexuality, class, and race. In order to interpret Acts 8:26-40, one must find a way to analyze the potential rhetorical impact of the ambiguities in the eunuch’s identity on both ancient and contemporary audiences. In the next chapter, therefore, I will introduce queer theory, and I will argue that queer theorists have in fact developed effective strategies for dealing with issues of identity, difference, and ambiguity productively.

82. Philo *That the Worse Is Wont to Attack the Better* 175–76: ἐξευνοουχισθῆναι γε μὴν ἄμεινον ἢ πρὸς συνουσίας ἐκνόμους λυτῶν. Cf. Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.236.