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WAS POTIPHAR A EUNUCH? (Genesis 37.36; 39.1)

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Introduction

In most modern English translations, as in KJV, Potiphar is called an "officer" (KJV, GNB, RSV, NCV, NASB; NRSV Gen 37.36) or an "official" (NIV, NJB, REB, CEV, NRSV Gen 39.1); *Tanakh*, the translation of the Jewish Publication Society, calls him a "courtier", and NEB, a "eunuch". There is similar disagreement among modern French translations, though more of them opt for "eunuch".

This variety of renderings of the same Hebrew term is found in several Old Testament texts, referring to different people. Were they "eunuchs" or not? Dictionaries typically distinguish between a literal sense: "a castrated man, especially one formerly employed at an oriental harem or court", and a figurative sense: "a person lacking effectiveness" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 8th ed., 1990).

Did all the men so described in certain Bible translations come within one or other of these two categories? In any case, none of them fits the second, figurative definition. For a number of them the context confirms that they were castrated, even if not necessarily keepers of a harem, but questions may be raised about others, in particular, Potiphar, the chief of Pharaoh's royal guard, who is known to have been married (see Gen 39.7-20). It seems worthwhile to reopen the question in the hope of throwing fresh light on it.

Historically, in the Ancient Near East, castration seems to have originated as a punishment sometimes inflicted on prisoners. But the practice may have extended to other people, to whom a ruler intended to entrust important tasks, whether domestic (supervision of the harem) or political (senior civil servants). Eunuchs were considered more reliable than others, since they had no descendants to favour.

Lexicography

The Hebrew word generally translated "eunuch" is *saris*, which occurs 45 times in the OT[1]. In 31 cases, the Septuagint renders it *eunoukhos*, a word which occurs four times in the NT, together with two occurrences of the verb *eunoukhizō*, "to make a eunuch"[2]. The Old Syriac version, with two exceptions, uses in both OT and NT a word *mehaymen*, derived from a root expressing the idea of faithfulness. As for the Vulgate, there are only four cases in which it does not use the Latin word *eunuchus*. It is clear that these last two versions have been influenced by the Septuagint's usual choice. In contrast, it is interesting to note that the Targum uses the Aramaic word *sarisa* (from the same root as *saris*) only 13 times; in other OT

1 Gen 37.36; 39.1; 40.2, 7; 1 Sam 8.15; 1 Kgs 22.9; 2 Kgs 8.6; 9.32; 18.17; 20.18; 23.11; 24.12, 15; 25.19; Is 39.7; 56.3, 4; Jer 29.2; 34.19; 38.7; 39.3, 13; 41.16; 52.25; Esth 1.10, 12, 15; 2.3, 14, 15, 21; 4.4, 5; 6.2, 14; 7.9; Dan 1.3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18; 1 Chr 28.1; 2 Chr 18.8.

2 *eunoukhos*: Mt 19.12 (3 x); Acts 8.27; *eunoukhizō*: Mt 19.12 (2 x).

passages, it uses 12 times words from the root *rab*, "great, important"; seven times *gawwa'a*, referring to an "insider", a member of the household[1]; twice *shilton*, "director", and twice *gebar*, "man", including once *gebar rab*, "important man". In nine cases, the Hebrew word has no Aramaic equivalent.

If we look at the biblical texts themselves, we note that in only three cases, Is 56.3-4 and Mt 19.12, is it explicitly stated that the men in question were for some reason unable to procreate.

According to Is 56, even eunuchs (Aramaic *sarisa*) would be admitted into the cultic community of Israel. The door is thus opened to men whom the Law excluded (Deut 23.2)[2]. Jesus, in speaking of marriage (Mt 19.12), includes within the general term "eunuchs" both men unable to procreate because of physical deformity or castration, and also men who, though not so handicapped, voluntarily abstained from sexual intercourse.

Two verses, 2 Kgs 20.18 || Is 39.7, probably refer to voluntary castration: Isaiah tells Hezekiah, king of Judah, that his sons will be taken away captive to Babylon and made eunuchs in the service of the king of Babylon. This would then be a case of castration of prisoners of war, as a punishment, and certainly also to put an end to a royal dynasty.

In three other verses, the word appears as a title, equivalent to a proper name: *rab-saris* in 2 Kgs 18.17 and Jer 39.3, 13; in most cases, the ancient versions simply transcribe the title (*rabsaris*, *rabsares*, *raphis*, etc.).

There remain 39 verses in which the terms *saris* (OT) or *eunoukhos* (NT) occur. In none of these cases is physical castration excluded, not even in the case of Potiphar; there are historical examples of married eunuchs. In the story of Esther, it is even rather probable that the *saris* mentioned in 1.10, 12; 2.3, 14, 15; 4.4, 5, being attached to the service of the royal harem, had been castrated, though this cannot be stated with certainty. But in none of the other 32 cases does physical castration constitute an indispensable feature of the *saris*'s personality. What the contexts of all these occurrences show clearly is that these people held relatively high offices in a royal court, just like the *saris* of Queen Esther and those of the kings of Assyria (2 Kgs 18) and Babylon (Jer 39). What is stressed is thus their social status rather than their physical condition.

Etymology and comparative philology

It is here that new light may be thrown on the question. It is always a delicate matter to appeal to etymology or comparative philology: the contribution of these two disciplines in the area of semantics is problematical. Nevertheless they can sometimes provide useful information.

Specialists have studied the etymology of the Hebrew word *saris*; some formerly linked it with various Semitic roots, meaning for example "cut", "crush", "be impotent", or "castrate". But it seems likely that the development went in the opposite direction; that is, that the verbal roots were derived from the noun *saris*. Recent research suggests that *saris* is the Hebrew transcription of the Akkadian *sha reshi*, "he who is at the head". The starting point would thus be the idea of the importance of someone highly placed in the court hierarchy. Since some of these

1 In 2 Kgs 9.32; 23.11, one Aramaic manuscript has the variant *gawaza'a*, "castrated".

2 According to Lev 21.20, men suffering from a physical defect, including those who were impotent, were excluded only from the priesthood.

important officials, in certain cultures, were castrated because of their occupations (such as guarding the harem), it is not surprising that, by a quite normal process of semantic change, the Akkadian expression came to denote a castrated man. But this derivation did not eliminate the basic meaning: the *sha reshi*, like the Hebrew *saris*, was almost always an important person, whether or not he was castrated.

A somewhat similar process may be traced in Greek: *eunoukhos* is etymologically a compound of *eunē* and *ekhō*, "the supervisor/protector of the bed", that is, "the keeper of the harem". Here too, the meaning changed from the person's function to what may have been his physical state. The latter meaning came to predominate in the word *eunuchus*, which Latin borrowed from Greek, and thus in the English word "eunuch".

As for comparative philology, which must also be used very carefully, let us look again in more detail at the ancient versions in Aramaic and Syriac, two languages related to Hebrew which have been mentioned above.

It is remarkable that the translators of the Targum used the Aramaic word *sarisa* (the equivalent of the Hebrew *saris*) in only three contexts:

—Is 56.3-4, which refers to real castration;

—2 Kgs 18.17 and Jer 39.3, 13, where the title *rab saris* is considered a kind of proper name;

—in eight passages of Esther, concerning the royal harem.

It seems therefore that in Aramaic, the word *sarisa* acquired the specific sense of "eunuch", and the translators used it only in appropriate contexts; elsewhere, they had recourse to other terms which did not emphasize this physical feature.

In the Syriac version, the OT of which was probably made from the Septuagint, and the NT clearly from the Greek, there is almost complete uniformity: the translators never used the root *srs*, which nevertheless exists in Syriac with the specific sense of castration. They use 49 times the word *mehaymen*, with the basic meaning "faithfulness"; once *rahata*, "runner, courier" (Esth 6.14), and once the transcription *rabsisaq* (2 Kgs 18.17). Like their Targumist colleagues, the Syriac translators thus deliberately avoided the easy solution of systematically using the Syriac word from the same root as the original *saris*.

Additional information

There are two other OT texts which may throw some light on this question; they are Lev 21.20 and Deut 23.2, mentioned in passing above. These passages are concerned with men having defective sexual organs:

—Lev 21.20: Among those barred from the priesthood are men with "crushed testicles". The Targum translates this literally; the Septuagint and the Syriac translate "having only one testicle", and the Vulgate "suffering from a hernia".

—Deut 23.2-4 lists those who are not admitted in the assembly of the Lord's people; they include any man "who is injured by crushing [of the testicles]" or "whose penis has been cut off". The Targum renders this as "someone who has [his penis] cut off or the parts mutilated"; the Septuagint by "a castrated man or a [man whose penis has been] cut off"; the Syriac by "he who commits adultery", and the Vulgate by "a eunuch with crushed or amputated testicles, or whose penis has been cut off."

Thus, in these two cases in which the Hebrew specifically refers to a castrated man, neither Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic nor Syriac employs the usual vocabulary of *saris* and its equivalents. Only Latin, in one of the two cases, uses the word *eunuchus*, but in a kind of doublet summarizing the Latin descriptive expression, which is fuller than the Hebrew original.

History

A brief return to history will complete the picture. Until the middle of this century, Egyptologists strongly doubted the practice of castration in the Nile Valley. Erman and Grapow's dictionary mentions only two occurrences of an Egyptian word translated *Verschnittener?* ("castrated?")[1]. F. Jonckheere, in an article of 1954[2], proves that the silence is less total than had been previously thought. He recognizes, however, that the eunuch as keeper of the seraglio never appears in the Pharaonic data; on the contrary, some keepers of the harem were married.

It would thus appear that the reference by the author of the story of Joseph to the *saris* Potiphar is more a matter of Hebrew semantics (to denote an important person, irrespective of his physical condition) rather than of Egyptian history.

Proposals

No absolutely certain conclusions can be drawn from this brief lexicographical and historical study. Nevertheless, a range of evidence leads us to think that the common language translations are right not to translate the Hebrew word *saris* or the Greek word *eunoukhos* in strict concordance as "eunuch", or its equivalents in other modern languages[3] In most cases, the correct translation can be easily seen from the context:

—"eunuch" in 2 Kgs 20.18 || Is 39.7; Is 56.3-4; in Esther (except perhaps 2.21 || 6.2; 6.14; 7.9); Mt 19.12.

—"official" or "adviser" in Genesis; 1 Sam 8.15; 1 Kgs 22.9 || 2 Chr 18.8; 2 Kgs 8.6; 18.17; 23.11; 24.12, 15; 25.19 || Jer 52.25; Jer 29.2; 34.19; 38.7; 39.3, 13; Dan 1; 1 Chr 28.1.

In the seven remaining texts, some hesitation may remain. In 2 Kgs 9.32, the *saris* who throw Jezebel out of the window are in any case important figures at court, but it is not improbable that they were eunuchs. In Jer 41.16, "eunuchs" is suggested by the mention in v 10 of "the king's daughters", and especially by their position at the end of the list in v 16, which does not suggest an important category of people. In Esth 2.21 || 6.2; 6.14; 7.9, the *saris* have nothing to do directly with the harem, so they may well not have been eunuchs; yet for reasons of literary coherence it seems preferable to translate the ten occurrences of *saris* in this book in the same way. Finally, in Acts 8.27, there may be an allusion to Is 56.3-5, in the sense of the fulfilment of a promise; moreover, the mention of two other titles of the Ethiopian ("an important official in charge of the treasury") leads some

1 A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 6 vols, Leipzig 1926-1950. The question mark emphasizes the uncertainty of this translation.

2 "L'eunuque dans l'Egypte pharaonique", *Revue de l'histoire des sciences* 7 (1954) 139-155, quoted by J. Vergot, *Joseph en Egypte* (Orientalia et Biblica Lovaniensia 3), Louvain 1959, 40-42.

3 See R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: its Life and Institutions*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1961, 121: "*saris* is usually translated 'eunuch', and it is certain that this word has this meaning in other texts, such as Is 56.3-5... But it is more than doubtful that this meaning can be proved in the texts previously cited [1 Sam 8.15; 1 Kgs 22.9 = 1 Chr 18.8; 2 Kgs 8.6; Jer 29.2 etc], where the *saris* are merely officials or courtiers."

commentators to think that here, *eunoukhos* does denote a castrated man. Yet this interpretation is not certain, and competent commentators question whether it refers to a "eunuch" in the strict sense.[1]

Conclusion

Was Potiphar a eunuch? We cannot say for certain whether he was or not, for we have no absolute proof. The pieces of evidence we have cited, however, and their respective weight, lead us tentatively to suggest that he was not. In any case, the translator should not lay all the emphasis on the purely formal and physiological aspect by translating *saris* as "eunuch". On the contrary, it is preferable to respect the sociological dimension of the word by choosing a functional title which underlines the importance of Potiphar's role.

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MORE ON REVELATION 1.13 AND 14.14[2]

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In an earlier article, I argued that "one like **a** son of man" was a preferable translation of *homoion huion anthrōpou* in Rev 1.13 and 14.14, rather than the NRSV'S "one like **the** son of man."[3] The present article offers additional evidence which confirms and strengthens my original argument.

In the first study, I noted that Lietzmann correctly understood that Dan 7.13, Rev 1.13 and 14.14 differ from the synoptics in two ways. First, both books employ comparisons; and, secondly, neither uses the definite article. Following Lietzmann, I concluded that *homoion huion anthrōpou* was not a messianic title in Daniel or Revelation, but a description by means of comparison. I supported my thesis by identifying similar "descriptive comparisons" in *1 Enoch* 46.1 (one "whose face had the appearance of a human being"[4]) and *4 Ezra/2 Esdras* 13.1 ("something like a figure of a man"[5]). The *Similitudes of Enoch*, *4 Ezra* and Revelation are all dated by scholarly consensus in the second half of the first Christian century[6]. Additionally, all three independently give messianic interpretations of Dan 7.13. Finally, both Dan 8.17 and *1 Enoch* 60.10 use the generic expression "son of man" as a means of direct address to the seer of the visions (cf Ezek 1.26-28; 2.1; 17.2).

Against my thesis, one might argue that the *Similitudes of Enoch* consistently employ "that Son of man" as a messianic title, and also refer in a titular sense to the seer Enoch as "the Son of Man" (71.14). However, all the Enochic "that Son of Man" passages refer back to the descriptive comparison in 46.1. *1 Enoch* 46.3

1 See E. Hänchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 7th ed., Göttingen 1977, 300: "one does not necessarily have to think of castration"; similarly John B. Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary), Nashville, Tennessee 1992, 223: "Whether he was an actual physical eunuch is not certain."

2 This study is dedicated to Ms Ruth E. Young, Main Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

3 T.B. Slater, "*homoion huion anthrōpou* in Rev 1.13 and 14.14", TBT 44 (1993) 349-350.

4 M.A. Knibb's translation in *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, ed. H.F.D. Sparks (Oxford: Clarendon 1984). *1 Enoch* is a composite of many different Enochic traditions. Chs 37-71 are also known as the *Similitudes of Enoch*; this paper will refer to those chapters in this manner.

5 B.M. Metzger's translation in J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols, Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1983.

6 See, e.g., J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, New York: Crossroad 1989, 155-186.