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Word Wise Wednesday – V1, EP1

Understanding the Term "Eunuch" and Its Biblical Applications

The term "eunuch" has historical significance in both the Old and New Testaments, but its meaning and application vary across different contexts. Eunuchs were often physically castrated men who served in royal courts, though the term also came to symbolize more than just a physical condition. The word for eunuch in Hebrew is **סַרִּיס** (*saris*), and in Greek, it is **εὐνοῦχος** (*eunouchos*). This blog post will explore the definition of eunuch, the four main uses of the term in scripture, and the possible identification of prominent biblical figures like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as eunuchs.

Definition and General Understanding of Eunuchs

A eunuch is commonly understood as a man who has been physically castrated, especially in ancient societies where such men were employed in sensitive roles within royal courts. Eunuchs were often trusted to serve in harems or oversee royal treasuries, since their inability to reproduce was seen as a safeguard against threats to the royal family (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In biblical contexts, however, the term eunuch can extend beyond mere physical castration to include those who abstain from marriage or sexual relations for religious purposes, as we will see in the New Testament (Matthew 19:12).

Four Uses of the Term

The term "eunuch" has four primary applications in Scripture: those born as eunuchs, literal eunuchs, royal officials, and symbolic or spiritual eunuchs.

1. **Born Eunuchs:** Refers to those who, due to natural causes or birth defects, are unable to engage in sexual relations. This could include people that had been involved in accidents that resulted in physical damage to their genitals or otherwise were unable to produce children (less likely usage).
2. **Literal Eunuchs:** In the Old Testament, the term **סַרִּיס** (*saris*) is often used to describe men who were physically castrated and served in royal courts. For instance, in **2 Kings 20:18** and **Isaiah 39:7**, the prophet Isaiah warns King Hezekiah that some of his descendants will be taken away and made eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. These eunuchs were physically altered to serve in positions of trust within royal households. Another example appears in **Esther 1:10-12**, where eunuchs serve the Persian king by delivering royal commands.
3. **Royal Officials:** The term **סַרִּיס** can also refer to high-ranking officials who may not have been physically castrated but held significant authority in royal courts. For example,



October 23, 2024

Genesis 37:36 describes Potiphar, who purchased Joseph, as a "saris" of Pharaoh. Although Potiphar had a wife, which suggests he was not castrated, the term still applies to him as a royal official. This could also explain why Potiphars wife was so interested in Joseph (we know Joseph was not made into a eunuch as he later fathered sons). Similarly, **Jeremiah 38:7** mentions Ebed-Melech, a eunuch in King Zedekiah's court, as a key figure who aids the prophet Jeremiah.

4. **Symbolic and Spiritual Eunuchs:** In the New Testament, **εὐνοῦχος** takes on a more symbolic meaning. In **Matthew 19:12**, Jesus speaks of three types of eunuchs: those born as eunuchs, those made eunuchs by others, and those who choose to live as eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven. This latter category refers to individuals who voluntarily abstain from marriage and sexual relations for spiritual reasons, symbolizing total dedication to God.

How did Society View Eunuchs in Scriptural Times?

The societal view of eunuchs in both the Old Testament and New Testament times was complex, reflecting a mix of marginalization, functional importance, and evolving religious perspectives. Eunuchs held specific roles in society, and their status could vary depending on the context, culture, and time period.

In both the Old and New Testaments, eunuchs were often marginalized in religious life due to their "blemish" or physical condition, particularly in early Israelite law. To be fair, most abnormal physical conditions resulted in this behavior in society with a number of references in scripture indicating an abnormality was a result of a sin of the individual or father/mother. However, eunuchs also held important roles in royal courts, where their castration ensured loyalty and trustworthiness, and they were often given significant administrative responsibilities.

The New Testament ushers in a more inclusive view of eunuchs, with the Ethiopian eunuch being fully accepted into the Christian faith and Jesus emphasizing the spiritual value of those who choose celibacy. Through these changes, the gospel message demonstrated that societal barriers—whether related to physical condition, social status, or nationality—could be transcended by God's grace and salvation.

Eunuchs Also Play a Significant Role in Scripture:

In the Bible, several eunuchs played significant roles, often serving in positions of trust and authority. While their physical condition as eunuchs may have marginalized them in society, many are portrayed as having a notable relationship with God. Some were influential in the fulfillment of God's plans, and their stories reflect themes of inclusion, devotion, and God's providence. Let's take a closer look at some of the most prominent eunuchs in the Bible:

1. The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-39)



October 23, 2024

The Ethiopian eunuch is one of the most famous eunuchs in the New Testament. He was a high-ranking official in charge of the treasury of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, and he is described as a God-fearing man who had gone to Jerusalem to worship. On his way back, he was reading from the book of Isaiah when Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, approached him. Philip explained the gospel to the eunuch, and he was baptized on the spot, symbolizing his full inclusion in the Christian faith (Acts 8:38).

The Ethiopian eunuch's story emphasizes that God's salvation is available to all people, regardless of status or physical condition. His immersion represents God's openness to eunuchs, who were often seen as marginalized figures, and his eagerness to understand the Scriptures demonstrates his sincere devotion to God.

2. Ebed-Melech (Jeremiah 38:7-13)

Ebed-Melech was a eunuch serving in the court of King Zedekiah of Judah. When the prophet Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern and left to die, Ebed-Melech courageously intervened, pleading with the king to rescue Jeremiah. With the king's permission, Ebed-Melech personally took a team of men to lift Jeremiah out of the cistern and save his life. For his faithfulness and courage, God promised Ebed-Melech that he would be spared from the coming disaster upon Jerusalem (Jeremiah 39:16-18).

Ebed-Melech's relationship with God is marked by his courageous stand for justice and his willingness to act on behalf of God's prophet. These actions illustrate that God honors those who act righteously, regardless of their social or physical status.

3. Ashpenaz (Daniel 1:3-21)

Ashpenaz was the chief eunuch in King Nebuchadnezzar's court, responsible for overseeing the education and training of young men from Israel, including Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego). While Ashpenaz's personal relationship with God is not elaborated upon, his role was crucial in bringing these faithful Jewish men into positions of influence within the Babylonian empire. He allowed Daniel and his companions to follow their dietary convictions, showing respect for their devotion to God and perhaps his own fear of the one true God.

4. The Eunuchs Who Served Queen Jezebel (2 Kings 9:32-33)

In a less positive example, eunuchs in the service of Queen Jezebel are involved in her demise. In 2 Kings 9, as Jehu approached Jezebel's palace, he called to her eunuchs and asked, "Who is on my side?" The eunuchs responded by throwing Jezebel out of a window, leading to her death. While their personal faith is not detailed, their actions facilitated the fulfillment of God's judgment against Jezebel, who had led Israel into idolatry and rebellion.



October 23, 2024

5. Daniel and His Companions (Potential Eunuchs)

While it is not explicitly stated in the Bible, some scholars speculate that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego may have been made eunuchs when they were taken into the Babylonian court (Daniel 1:3-7). The text refers to them being under the care of Ashpenaz, the chief eunuch, and it was common practice for foreign officials to be made eunuchs in service to the king. However, this is not definitively confirmed in the Scriptures. Whether they were physically eunuchs or not, Daniel and his companions were deeply committed to God, even in a foreign land.

Conclusion

The term "eunuch" in Scripture carries layered meanings, ranging from those born with or who have acquired deformities in life, literal castrated men to royal officials and even those who choose celibacy for spiritual reasons. Eunuchs, in their various forms, played significant roles in both the Old and New Testaments, symbolizing dedication, trust, and even spiritual devotion.

References

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