

Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom

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There are some eunuchs who were born so from their mother's womb, and there are some eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by human hands, and there are some eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 19.12.

By any reckoning this is surely a surprising saying—so surprising, indeed, that it would seem unreasonable to attribute it to anyone but that master of the unexpected, Jesus himself. Just how surprising it is, and just how confident we may be that it goes back to Jesus, are questions which it will be the purpose of this lecture to explore. But at the outset we may note that surprise is the keynote not only of this saying but of the context in which it is set. Jesus has just given some stringent teaching on marriage and divorce. The disciples are amazed: in that case, they say, it would surely be better not to marry at all—virtually a *reductio ad absurdum* of Jesus' injunction, given the divine commandment to be fruitful and multiply, and the obligation generally perceived by Jewish males (though some religious groups seem to have disregarded it)¹ to marry and beget a family. Jesus replies that this is not something that can be accepted by all, but only by those 'to whom it is given'. Then, apparently by way of explanation, comes our saying about eunuchs. Explanations tend to be prosaic and laborious, depriving the imagination of its freedom to explore all possible avenues of interpretation. Such are the majority of those preserved in the gospels and attributed to Jesus, and for this reason they are often suspected of having been added by a later hand. But in this case an entirely new thought is introduced, that of sexual impotence. The explanation is as surprising as that which it purports to explain.

Yet the surprise which one might expect to have been engendered by this text is scarcely registered by the commentators. It has been completely eclipsed by the importance, as it seems, of

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answering a certain question of church discipline. From very early times the Christian church has placed great value on celibacy as a deliberate and chosen way of life, and it has been a matter of some importance to determine whether this personal and social (or, some would say,

¹ Some Essenes: Josephus, *BJ* II 120, 160; Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.14; Therapeutae: Philo, *Vit. Con. passim*.

antisocial) option was expressly endorsed by Jesus. Virtually the only text which can be called in aid for this purpose is the saying about eunuchs. But before this saying can be claimed as proof that Jesus authorized and approved the celibate life, its meaning has to be clarified. What it actually refers to is 'those who have made eunuchs of themselves'. If it is to yield the required dominical authorization of celibacy its meaning must be shown to be metaphorical. Self-castration must be a metaphor for voluntarily abjuring marriage, family life and sexual relationships. The question whether this is so occupies the bulk of all critical comment on this passage and exhausts the interest of all but a few of the commentators. How the saying would originally have been understood and received, and what form of response it may have originally been intended to evoke, are questions barely touched on. Marriage and the renunciation of marriage—this is what commentators assume to have constituted the single topic under discussion in this section of the gospel. Any other possible nuance or implication of this startling saying about eunuchs—and I hope to show just how startling it must have sounded—receives no attention in the text books.

We must however spend a little longer on the traditional exegesis, since it gives us valuable information about the two clauses which form the introduction to the one we are concerned with. Literally translated they run:

'There are some eunuchs who were born so from their mother's womb, and there are some eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by human hands'.

It is evident that the word 'eunuch' is being used in an extended sense. Strictly speaking, a eunuch is a man who has been either

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voluntarily or forcibly castrated: one cannot be 'born' a eunuch. But there is a passage in the Mishnah (Yeb. 8:4-6) where the Hebrew word usually translated 'eunuch'—*saris*—describes two categories of sexually impotent persons: those born impotent and those subsequently rendered so. This usage goes back at least to the time of R. Aqiba and R. Eliezer, who are recorded as having had some disagreement on the matter. This fully explains Jesus' usage, and also assures us that we are on solidly Jewish ground. There is no hint at this stage that anything is being said about the alien institution of men being deliberately castrated to serve in foreign courts and households. The only phenomenon in question is the familiar one of some men being sexually impotent, and therefore denied certain rights and obligations in law, as a result of birth or of accident.² The exact extent of this disability at law is difficult to determine, beyond the exclusion from the sacred assembly laid down in Deuteronomy (23:1); but there is no doubt that in certain respects those who were sexually impotent were disadvantaged and enjoyed an inferior social status—as did, for example, infertile women (Niddah 5:9). This is something I shall return to. For the present, the point to notice is that, so far, all the words in the saying have been used in a precise descriptive sense. There is not the faintest aroma of metaphor.

It is indeed the very flatness of these two clauses which was doubtless intended to prepare us for the shock of the third. In themselves they convey no interesting information: everyone knew about the unfortunate condition they refer to. The only surprise is that this condition

² Deut. 23.1; Lev. 21.20.

should have been singled out for attention at all. But this, we must remember, was characteristic of Jesus' style of teaching: socially unacceptable or disadvantaged groups—tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, the poor—are frequently given unexpected prominence and are shown to be capable of acting in a way that deserves approval. But in this case the sexually impotent appear to serve a humbler purpose. The teacher is using the familiar three-fold form: he passes rapidly over one and two in

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order to focus all attention on number three. Just as, in the parable of the talents, there is nothing particularly interesting about the first two servants whose entrepreneurial skills win the approval of their master, the entire weight of the story falling on the third who buried his money in the ground, so the two classes of impotent men are not intended to intrigue us in themselves but rather to arouse our curiosity about what the third class can be. Indeed it is more than curiosity. At that time and place it could have been virtual incredulity. The teacher continues, 'and there are some eunuchs....' But what third category could there possibly be? The two categories found in the Mishnah are exhaustive: a man was either born impotent or rendered so by violence or accident; nothing else was thinkable. Yet it is precisely the unthinkable which completes the saying '...who have castrated themselves'. In a society in which deliberate castration of either man or beast was not only repulsive to all social instincts but actually illegal, to what phenomenon could Jesus possibly have been referring?

Certainly we need to take account of the art of the teacher. Jesus was prone to exaggeration, to figurative speech, to startling metaphor. Cutting off one's hand or one's foot would have seemed equally implausible advice: any form of deliberate mutilation was abhorrent in the culture and created legal disability. But, precisely for this reason, that saying caused no difficulty. It was immediately heard and read as a metaphor. And so, we are tempted to think, it must be here. The very implausibility of literal self-castration forces us to look for a metaphorical meaning. And such a meaning is of course to hand: Jesus is referring to those who voluntarily renounce marriage and sexual gratification 'for the sake of the kingdom'. And so, by and large, it has been taken throughout the history of the church.

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It is not always noticed that this line of interpretation has one immediate consequence, congenial to those who study Matthew's gospel to learn more of the community from which it came and the circumstances under which its members practised their discipleship, less welcome to those who persist in an instinctive belief that a saying of such apparent originality must go back to Jesus. In the case of the saying about cutting off a hand or a foot, there is no problem. Jesus simply said it is better to do so than be condemned to hell fire. But here there is specific reference to those who are already making a renunciation: 'there are some who have made themselves eunuchs'. To whom could Jesus have been referring? In his own lifetime his followers can hardly have included people who had voluntarily and definitively renounced marriage in order to become disciples. The only other persons we know of who made such a commitment were certain communities of Essenes and Therapeutae: it does not seem likely that Jesus would have regarded them as doing so 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'. But if there were no examples for Jesus to refer to, the case may have been very different by the time Matthew's gospel came to be written. By then, we may imagine that Paul's advice to avoid the entanglement of marriage in view of the imminence of the last

days,³ along with his powerful theological warning against recourse to the only alternative for sexual gratification⁴—that is, a prostitute—may have been heeded in many Christian communities; or even that the asceticism which tends to accompany any new and intense religious movement had already begun to take hold of Christians of marriageable age—as it certainly did in the following century. In which case it would have seemed obvious whom the saying referred to: members of the congregation who had (metaphorically) made eunuchs of themselves. The saying, then, was written for them, it grew out of the experience of the community, their abstinence could be seen to be ‘for the sake of the kingdom’. So perhaps, after all, it was premature to think the words so surprising that they must have been spoken by Jesus. Taken metaphorically, and transposed from

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Jesus’ culture where marriage was *de rigueur* into enthusiastically ascetic Christian communities where celibacy was already established, the eunuch-saying becomes perfectly comprehensible, even ordinary. Of course some people were renouncing marriage for the sake of the kingdom; and of course Jesus would be assumed to have said something encouraging them to do so. We must do away with our quaint prejudice that the saying has anything to do with Jesus and all our problems are solved.

But have we moved too rapidly from the literal sense to the metaphorical? It is well known that Origen, in early life, took Jesus’s words literally and castrated himself, though later on he came to see this as an error. He tells us⁵ that he was encouraged to take this drastic course by two of the sentences of Sextus and a passage of Philo. The two maxims of Sextus⁶ are concerned with the cardinal Stoic virtue of *sophrosyne*, self-control. If any part of the body is threatening your self-control it is better to discard it. People in fact mutilate themselves for all sorts of reasons; how much more, then, should they be ready to do so for the sake of self-control. Similarly Philo⁷ takes the instance of a man under torture who bites off his own tongue rather than betray precious information; and he goes on, ‘it is better to be castrated’, (made a eunuch—the same word as in our gospel saying) ‘than to lust madly after illicit unions’ From these passages, and from Origen’s response to them, one thing is perfectly clear. The possibility of voluntary castration has nothing to do with renouncing marriage and family. It is a means of controlling sexual passion and neutralising its consequences. It is a measure, radical but effective, which may be taken for the sake of gaining the prize of self-control. The step once taken, it is likely, of course, to involve life-long celibacy; but that is neither the immediate purpose nor the dominant idea. We cannot assume that self-castration was an obvious metaphor for celibacy. It was rather an extreme remedy against sexual temptation, a decisive blow in the struggle for self-control, a virtue prized as much among Hellenized Jews as among

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pagans: the *Testament of Joseph*, a Jewish writing of much the same period, is a treatise devoted entirely to it.

³ I Cor. 7.29ff.

⁴ I Cor. 6.13ff.

⁵ *In Matth.* 15.3 (GCS 10.354).

⁶ *Sextus, Sent.* 13 and 273.

⁷ Philo, *Quod det.* 176.

How seriously did these moralists expect to be taken? It may be instructive to spend a moment to notice Philo's line of argument. Like the author of the Letter of James, he dwells at some length on the evil that can be done by yielding to any of the senses or their organs. 'Need I then go on to remind you of the multitude of those who have been ruined by the stream that there is no stopping, flowing from an unbridled tongue, or by the deadly stimulus to sexual sins which accompanies ungoverned lust?' And so, he goes on to say, 'those who are not utterly uneducated would choose to be blinded rather than see unfitting things, to have their tongues cut out rather than utter things that should not be spoken'. If that sounds impossible, consider the case—which I have already quoted—of a man biting off his tongue under torture. But there is no evidence that those who attended to these philosophical commonplaces often resorted to such extreme measures or would have been commended for doing so. Origen himself came to see that his youthful impulse to asceticism had led him to a mistaken literalism in interpreting both these words and the words of Jesus. For it was not self-mutilation that the philosophers were interested in. It was the training of the will. We can complete Philo's exhortation accordingly. It is better to be castrated than to lust madly after illicit unions; but better still to achieve such mastery of the passions that no such drastic act is required.

We return, therefore, to our eunuch saying in the gospel no longer prepared to take it for granted that it must have been both intended and understood as a metaphor for celibacy. It may be that if we are to recover the original meaning we shall have to be more sensitive to the impact which this startling reference to self-castration would have made on those who first heard it.

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We have first to consider the associations evoked by the word eunuch itself. Even if the first two clauses of Jesus' saying correspond to an accepted legal categorization of sexually impotent persons, and can therefore be fully explained in terms of a condition which, whether by birth or accident, could befall any Jewish male, nevertheless it can hardly have been used without bringing to mind an institution which, though foreign to the Jewish culture, was nevertheless by no means unfamiliar. The first mention of eunuchs in Greek literature is in Herodotus;⁸ and the classic discussion of them is in Xenophon,⁹ who records the widespread assumption that they were capable of particular trustworthiness and devotion to their masters, to whom they were indebted for protection against the contempt and insults they received from other men. They became, inevitably, a stock figure in comedy: Terence's play, *The Eunuch*, concerns the exploit of a young adventurer who gains access to a young lady by passing himself off as her eunuch keeper: the eunuch himself plays only a minor part, though there is opportunity for another character to indulge in vulgar speculation over whether a eunuch, as well as being impotent, was also without sexual drive of any kind.¹⁰ The same speculation occurs in burlesque form in Lucian's dialogue of the same name, where one of the philosophers contending for a prize is reported to have described his eunuch competitor as 'neither man nor woman, but something composite, hybrid and monstrous, alien to human

⁸ 8.105

⁹ *Cyrop.* 7.5.60ff.

¹⁰ *Eun.* 665f.

nature'¹¹—an idea immediately laughed out of court by those telling the story. Taken along with frequent anecdotal evidence that eunuchs appeared soft, effeminate, self-indulgent and sycophantic, these references show that we are dealing with something other than the private and usually unobservable condition of those who happen to be sexually impotent. Eunuchs of this kind were a recognizable class of people, normally of foreign extraction, with a distinctive appearance and certain proverbial traits of character.

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Were such people known in the environment of Jesus? It is tempting to give the simple answer that, castration being explicitly forbidden in the Jewish law and castrated persons being denied full rights in the community, any form of contact with foreign victims of this alien and repulsive practice would have been shunned by any sensitive Jew. But the reality was certainly less simple. Eunuchs appear in foreign courts in the Hebrew Scriptures,¹² and the word, far from exciting automatic revulsion, was sometimes used to describe any senior court official, whether or not he was physically a eunuch.¹³ Herod the Great employed eunuchs in his court,¹⁴ and Josephus himself, when in Rome, employed a eunuch as tutor for his children.¹⁵ Alien and repugnant the institution certainly was; but we cannot assume that Jesus recoiled from the sight and sound of individual eunuchs or would have been surprised to meet one in the street. There is no suggestion in the narrative in Acts that the eunuch of the Candace from Ethiopia was a particularly unusual visitor to Jerusalem or that he would have met any overt form of social discrimination. On the contrary, he had evidently become sufficiently accepted in the congregation of a synagogue to become interested in, and in due course to acquire, a scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

There is therefore little reason to think that when Jesus talked of 'eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by human hands' he did so without reference to a class of people, some successful and prosperous, others less so, but all exposed to a certain degree of prejudice and social contempt, who made their appearance in the Scriptures and who could be encountered from time to time at least in Jerusalem and doubtless also in Galilee. But this only goes to sharpen the problem of the third limb of Jesus' three-fold saying, to which we must now turn our attention. It would have been convenient to assume that the first two categories included only those who might be found in any Jewish community—the impotent by birth or accident. The climax that the saying is working up to might then have been an unexpected reference to a

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foreign eunuch, in much the same way as, in one of his most famous parables, Jesus moves unexpectedly from the respectable priest and Levite to the foreign and by no means highly regarded Samaritan. But this solution must now be renounced. The previous clause—those who have been made eunuchs by human hands—can hardly have been understood to exclude this category; indeed the foreign eunuch was the most conspicuous example of the group to which it referred. Yet Jesus goes on to identify a third category of eunuchs, indeed it is clearly

¹¹ *Eun.* 6.

¹² Esther 1.10; Daniel 1.3 etc.

¹³ 2 Kings 25.19.

¹⁴ Josephus *BJ* 1.488.

¹⁵ *Vita* 429.

to draw attention to these that the first two categories have been enumerated. To what can lie possibly be referring?

I observed a few minutes ago that we are not dealing here with an exhortation. In the case of the saying about cutting off a hand or a foot no examples are given, it is simply a challenge to behave in this way if our circumstances or disposition require it. But the eunuch saying is quite different. Jesus is not exhorting us to become (in some sense) eunuchs in this way, in that way, or even another way. He is drawing attention to the fact that some people actually are eunuchs, and directing attention to one particular class—those who have made eunuchs of themselves. Who are these people? In the face of the difficulty of this question, we may remind ourselves that there is always an escape route to hand. We can always fall back on the explanation, hallowed by centuries of pious and by no means disinterested exegesis, that Jesus had suddenly slipped from the literal to the metaphorical mode. He did not mean eunuchs at all, but those who had voluntarily opted for celibacy. And if we ask where Jesus could have seen such people, we can take a leaf from the book of the scholarship most fashionable today and simply assume that the saying has nothing to do with Jesus and grew spontaneously out of an early Christian community where ascetic practices of this kind were already well established. I have already suggested reasons for doubting whether either of these lines of escape is secure. But in any case I believe that before resorting to them we should at least make an attempt

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to make sense of the saying as it stands. If some reference can be found for it, and if it retains some of the pungency and ability to surprise which we registered at the first reading, then we may feel we have grounds, after all, for ascribing it to the genius of Jesus. Who then are those people who have made eunuchs of themselves? An ingenious suggestion, made nearly forty years ago and subsequently taken up by a number of scholars,¹⁶ is that they are none other than Jesus and his disciples themselves. It can be reasonably assumed that it would have been insulting and contemptuous to call someone a eunuch. The popular characterization of these people as fat and beardless in physique, yellow and wrinkled in complexion, effeminate and touchy of character, made the word eunuch eminently suitable for invective. May this not have been exactly the language which was being maliciously used about Jesus and his followers by his enemies? This new movement evidently discouraged marriage and its leader was unmarried. What better way to discredit them than to suggest they were a group of eunuchs trying to make a virtue out of their shameful disability? To which Jesus could well have replied that of course they were not eunuchs but that there was a kind of eunuch-condition—the deliberate renunciation of family ties, domestic comforts and sexual relationships—which could be undertaken for the sake of the kingdom. The saying, in other words, was originally polemical, a sharp answer to an embarrassing criticism. It was Matthew who brought it into its present context, reading it as a metaphor for celibacy and placing it where it would seem to offer the disciples some explanation of Jesus' exacting teaching on marriage and divorce.

The suggestion is attractive; but once again it falls to take into account the difficulties which are involved in any purely metaphorical interpretation. Not only have we no previous

¹⁶ J. Blinzler, *Z.N.W.* 48 (1957); cf. Stephen Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (C.U.P. 1994) pp. 191-204.

instances of self-castration as a metaphor for the renunciation of marriage; the metaphorical uses we do have are to do with the control of

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the sexual impulse, not the decision whether to marry and found a family. Moreover, if the genesis of the saying was in slanderous language directed at Jesus and his followers, it would have to have been the sort of language that would stick. Eunuchs naturally gravitated towards one another and kept their own company. Could the description plausibly be applied to Jesus, who was regularly seen consorting with women, some of whom were prostitutes, with the poor and sickly, and (in his inner group) with men who had until recently been active in skilled and physically demanding trades? This explanation, in any case, assumes what it sets out to demonstrate, namely, that after two uses of the word eunuch in its literal (Jewish) sense Jesus could have suddenly changed gear and meant something quite different by it, and that this new metaphorical sense of eunuch would have been readily understood. I have argued that neither of these assumptions is self-evident, and that we ought not to accept either of them unless forced to do so by our failure to find any other condition that Jesus could have been referring to.

‘There are those who make eunuchs of themselves for the sake of ...’ To any student of the ancient world these words should have a clear point of reference. There were indeed men who castrated themselves for the sake of a religious vocation. The cult of Cybele, the Great Earth Goddess, was wide-spread throughout Asia Minor. It had become popular in Rome under Augustus and had inspired Catullus with such awesome alarm that he wrote one of his greatest poems about it. One of its most notable features was its self-castrated priests, men whose desire to serve the goddess caused them to sacrifice their own masculinity. These *Galloi*, as they were called, were a well-known feature of city life in many parts of the empire, easily recognizable by their long flowing hair.¹⁷ Were these the eunuchs to whom Jesus was alluding in his unexpected third category?

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I said earlier on that any third category of eunuchs, within the Jewish culture, must have seemed unthinkable; what I should have said is that, until recently, it seemed unthinkable to New Testament scholars. We have all been brought up to think of Jesus having lived in a world totally insulated from the institutions and influences of paganism. A reference to a pagan cult is the very last thing we should expect to find in one of his sayings. His entire religious and cultural conditioning would surely have made such an illusion inconceivable. Yet the last decades have seen a steady erosion of the assumed barrier between the two cultures, not only intellectually, but in terms of institutions and social activities. The burial ground at Beth She‘arim in Galilee has revealed that Jewish people in the time of Christ were ready to carve a Greek inscription on an ossuary expressing sentiments that would pass on any pagan gravestone.¹⁸ The pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, confidently described by Joachim Jeremias,¹⁹ soon after its excavation, as a porticoed Jewish public amenity (despite the total absence of any trace of monumental columns) is now more accurately identified in the

¹⁷ Diodorus Siculus 36.6.

¹⁸ P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kok Pharos 1991) 118ff.

¹⁹ *Die Wiederentdeckung von Bethesda* (Göttingen 1949).

guidebooks²⁰ as an Asclepeion to which the local inhabitants may well have gone for healing by the power of a pagan god and which Jesus may well have visited on the occasion recorded in John's gospel. Any reconstruction of Jerusalem in the first half of the first century of our era has to allow for monuments—baths, theatres, palaestras—which functioned under the aegis of pagan religion; we cannot assume that Jewish passers by averted their eyes from them with such determination that they were unaware of what they stood for. It was, after all, only from the Temple itself that they were determined to banish the imperial standards with their idolatrous emblems.

But of course it may still be said that, even if this is true, it surely applies only to the most pervasive cults and institutions of paganism. Certainly the Roman occupying forces may have brought their customary gods and religious practices with them; certainly we should not be too surprised to find a healing shrine of

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Aesculapius in Jerusalem along with countless other centres of population throughout the empire. But the cult of Cybele with her attendant castrated priests—this is surely another matter. Prevalent it certainly was in parts of Asia Minor, and recently introduced into Rome, but it surely remained an exotic and localised phenomenon, hardly likely to have come to the attention of untravelled natives of Galilee or Jerusalem. To which, surprisingly, archaeology once again gives the lie. Not only have Hellenistic coins bearing the image of Cybele been found in Sebaste, where Alexander the Great had settled colonists from Macedonia, but just over 30 years ago a diadem that appears to have been worn by a priest of her cult was found in the region of Neapolis in Samaria and is stylistically to be dated well before the foundation of that city in 72/3 C.E.²¹ Jesus, and presumably countless other Galileans on their way to Jerusalem, is known to have visited Samaria. There is little reason to think he was entirely ignorant of the cults which flourished there. He may even have passed in the street one of its long-haired eunuch priests. When, therefore, he introduced his third category of eunuchs with the words, 'there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of....' it is difficult to resist the conclusion that what he had in mind, and what his hearers would have had brought to their minds, was the pagan institution of *Galloi*, or eunuch priests of Cybele. And if this seems an outlandish allusion for a Galilean preacher to have made, it may seem less so when we remember that Josephus, writing in Rome about the Mosaic legislation concerning 'eunuchs', found it perfectly natural to do so under the general heading of *Galloi*.²²

Let us suppose, then, as I believe we must, that these words, as Jesus spoke them, evoked just one image in his hearers' minds, that of the voluntarily castrated priests of a pagan goddess. We can now catch the extraordinary and climactic impact of the final clause, 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'. This is the last and most daunting fence to be cleared by the interpreter, and of course we may shy away from it by using approved critical

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²⁰ J. Murphy O'Connor. *The Holy Land* (O.U.P. 1986) p.39; cf. A. Duprez, *Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs* (Paris: Gabalda 1970).

²¹ R. Jonas, P.E.Q. 94 (1962) pp. 118-128.

²² *Ant.* 4.290.

methods. We may assume that the reference to ‘the kingdom’ must have been introduced by the evangelist or by the church community within which he was writing, who had already begun to appropriate the expression ‘castrate oneself’ as a metaphor for voluntary celibacy and who recorded the saying of Jesus in a form which seemed to authorize this as a course that could be undertaken ‘for the sake of the kingdom’. In which case the original phrase will have been something like, ‘for the sake of a goddess’ or (to put it in a more classically Jewish form) ‘for the sake of an idol’. Jesus, that is to say, will have been giving a literal description of what was actually the case with regard to three categories of eunuch. His followers, some of whom were disposed by their zeal for the kingdom to renounce marriage, assumed a metaphorical meaning in the third which seemed to secure Jesus’ approval for their practice, and made this explicit by introducing ‘the kingdom of heaven’ in place of the original reference to a pagan cult.

This may be correct; and there is no way of demonstrating that it is false. But it is a counsel of despair. If accepted, it removes for ever the possibility of recovering Jesus’ intention. For the third limb of his saying then becomes exactly like the other two: together the three clauses would simply enumerate the three known categories of the sexually impotent—those born so, those rendered so by violence or accident, and those who have deliberately become so out of enthusiasm for a pagan cult. Admittedly it would remain surprising that Jesus had embarked on this topic at all, and still more so that he had extended the two categories envisaged by Jewish lawyers by adding a third taken from another culture altogether. But on its own this enumeration would be purely descriptive. Further words would be needed to draw a moral or infer a challenge, and these will have been lost beyond recall when the saying was smoothly edited to provide a dominical authorization for celibacy.

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Rather than abandon at this point the quest for Jesus’ meaning on the grounds that his original words have been obliterated by the twin pressures of enthusiastic asceticism and editorial accommodation, I believe we must make a final attempt to make sense of the saying as it stands. We are now confronted by words which express what, by the standard of the most basic Jewish sensibilities, must have been unthinkable, namely that a practice that was both illegal and idolatrous could be ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’. Unthinkable, possibly; shocking and paradoxical, certainly. And this gives us a clue. Shock and paradox are among the most distinctive elements in Jesus’ repertory of teaching methods. We may take as an illustration a passage which, from the point of view of form and structure, offers a close parallel to the one we are concerned with. After the episode of the Rich Enquirer (Mark 10.17ff.), Jesus says to his disciples, ‘how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God’. This causes amazement. Jesus repeats it, and then reinforces the point by turning the screw tighter. It is not merely hard: ‘it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God’. More amazement; and no wonder. The entire biblical tradition of measuring a man’s blessings by his material prosperity, albeit with some qualifications related to moral character;²³ the entire sapiential tradition, still alive in Jesus’ day, according to which a generous and prudent disbursement to the poor out of adequate and well maintained personal resources was the surest means of

²³ Prov.28.6.

securing the divine favour;²⁴ the nascent but already sturdy rabbinic tradition that almsgiving as a stated proportion of both capital and income headed the list of the acts of kindness required of the righteous²⁵—all this seemed to be called into question by a paradox so uncompromising that it could evoke only protest: ‘Then’—i.e. if this entire structure of religious stewardship and sharing of material resources is to be discounted—‘who can be saved?’ What is left of our religion that will assure us of salvation if only the poor can practise it—the poor who are proverbially ‘without understanding’ and lack the material resources

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to carry out what are generally regarded as the works of piety necessary for inheriting a share in the world to come? To which Jesus replies that even if this seems impossible in human terms, with God all things are possible. It is truly astonishing to observe the way in which western interpreters have seized on this relatively banal and routinely biblical pronouncement as a pretext for turning on its head Jesus’ paradoxical exclusion of the rich from the kingdom. Of course, we are assured, Jesus did not mean that there is no hope for you and me who so obstinately hold on to our quite modest stake in the material world. The God for whom everything is possible is also a gracious God who forgives us our preoccupation with financial reward and security and opens the gate of the kingdom to us. It has taken the very different circumstances and priorities of liberation theologians to introduce into standard commentaries even the possibility that Jesus may have meant what he said.²⁶ God’s omnipotence may of course make it possible for there to be an occasional exception; but the new way into the kingdom disclosed by Jesus is quite incompatible with the formulas of a measured and prudential piety appropriate to the well-to-do. That God can do the impossible is no justification for taking the sting out of the paradox: ‘it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle’

Now let us revisit the saying on eunuchs. In form, the dialogue that leads up to it is strikingly similar. Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce has seemed to his disciples so radically opposed to the permissions afforded both by the law and by traditional moral teaching that they protest: ‘in that case it is not advisable to marry at all’. To which Jesus replies with a startling saying, charged with paradox, that certainly does not loosen the screw but if anything turns it tighter. And how is this achieved? I have already mentioned one of the distinctive traits of Jesus’ style of teaching, that of using a totally unexpected, sometimes morally or socially unacceptable, example of conduct in order to shock or challenge his hearers into a review of their own assumptions and priorities.

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A Samaritan may teach us something about our duty to our neighbour, an unprincipled judge about our relationship in prayer with a just god, a devious steward or agent about how to respond to an urgent priority. Could this be the case even of a man who castrates himself for the sake of a pagan cult? If a person will give up even his manhood for such a cause, what should you not be prepared to do yourselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven?

²⁴ Tobit 4.8, 10.

²⁵ Strack-Billerbeck 4 p.551.

²⁶ Cf. F. Belo, *A materialist reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Orbis Books 1981) p. 318.

The message, the style, the technique are characteristic of Jesus. But is this a sense which our saying can bear? After all, it is more than paradox: it places side by side two incompatible entities, a pagan cult-practice and the kingdom of the one God. I do not wish to minimize the difficulty of the problem, but I believe there is help in one further trait that can be discerned in the teaching of Jesus. You might call it his ability to lead you up the path and then, by a sudden tap on the shoulder, to show you that you are missing the point. Take the teaching on anger in Matthew 5. 'I tell you that whoever is angry with his brother is liable to judgement'. The context is a discussion of one of the Ten Commandments, 'Thou shalt not kill'. This gave rise, by its nature, to a great deal of legal discussion. It clearly did not apply to killing on military service, or carrying out a judicial sentence. But what about killing in self-defence, or to protect one's livestock from armed robbery? There were many grey areas; and one's first impression is that Jesus was entering this legal debate. 'Whoever is angry with his brother is liable to...'—that is exactly how legal judgements are formulated. It looks as if Jesus is proposing a scale of penalties for something which is not in fact, though perhaps it should be, a criminal offence. But then, 'whoever says "you fool" shall be liable to the fire of Gehenna'. We are stopped short in our tracks. No claim against such a mild insult would ever be justiciable; no human court could impose the penalty of hell-fire. Jesus has led us up the path. He was not talking about law at all. He was simply drawing attention to the fact that, on occasion, a fit of anger can cause as much damage as, or even result in, an act of

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homicide or murder. And he made the point by a paradox: he presented a moral case in the form of an imaginary and, as one soon sees, impossible legal procedure. The paradox at the end of the saying startles us by making us realize that Jesus was not talking about legal matters at all, but about a much more serious and important question of moral behaviour.

And so, I suggest, with our saying. The first two clauses, like the beginning of the saying on anger, are couched in the language of the jurists: there are two different classes of the sexually impotent, whose condition may therefore have different consequences at law. Such an introduction might have led naturally into a discussion, of these different consequences or a proposal to make further distinctions—say between impotence by reason of accident and castration while enslaved to a foreigner. But Jesus, surprisingly, introduces the case of the eunuch priests, who could have no relevance to a discussion of Jewish law. So—was Jesus leading us up the path? Was this his interest at all? Then comes the decisive tap on the shoulder. Voluntary self-castration for the sake of the kingdom! Not, presumably, a variation on prostitutes and tax collectors having priority in the kingdom of heaven, even pagan priests taking precedence over pious Israelites: the flavour of idolatry would have been too strong for even Jesus to have contemplated that. But a clear sign that Jesus has led us up a particular path and has reached the point of showing us that his real concern is with something quite different. There are even people, he says, who by reason of their misguided pagan enthusiasm for ascetic worship go so far as to castrate themselves. How about that as a model for what you should be prepared to do for the sake of the true God and his kingdom! If that is the argument—and it would be entirely characteristic of Jesus—then the challenge is to see that, if there is a metaphor implicit in the idea of 'making a eunuch of oneself', it is not a restricted metaphor for celibacy, as traditional exegesis would have it, nor a metaphorical invitation to sexual continence in the manner of philosophical

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exhortation (as we find in Philo), but an open metaphor for any form of radical renunciation. The demands of the kingdom override any attachment whatever—to sensual gratification, to family ties, even to the obligation to marry and found a family in obedience to the commandment. To be ‘eunuch priests’ for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is to have a will for total dedication and the renunciation of all lesser ideals, objectives and obligations comparable in its intensity and commitment to that of a man who, in the words of Catullus, emasculated his body *Veneris nimio odio*,²⁷ in an excess of revulsion against the goddess of love.

Before we can rest with this conclusion we need to set it in the context of early church theory and practice. For the earliest period, there is no evidence that celibacy and the renunciation of domestic ties was regarded as a particularly blessed state or one contributing to the work of the kingdom. When Paul commends the celibate option he does so for quite other reasons, mainly to do with the imminence of the end; the other apostles, he tells us, retained their family ties and we hear of no converts specially commended for their renunciation of such things. But every religion attracts its ascetics. It was not long before celibacy made its appearance as an option among forms of Christian discipleship, and in due course even self-castration for the sake of becoming a true priest began to be seriously considered by some: we would hardly have an express prohibition of it in the Apostolic Constitutions of the fourth century²⁸ had it not been actively canvassed by some within the church. All of these options found their justification in a particular application of Jesus’ eunuch metaphor and so laid the foundation for what was to become the standard interpretation of this passage. I have been arguing that this is not likely to have been its original meaning. Indeed there is a sense in which the literal interpretation opted for by Origen and others, according to which Jesus was actually recommending voluntary castration for some of his followers, comes closer to the thrust of the saying. Celibacy, after all, is a relatively easy option for some:

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either a personality which makes a life-long partner hard to find, or a sexual orientation which abjures the search in the first place, have often deluded people into thinking that they had renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom. What Jesus was challenging us to consider was of an altogether more radical nature. The kingdom might demand an act of renunciation as absolute and life-changing as deliberate self-castration. To take this literally was only to fail to see the wider and more searching implications involved in the metaphor; at least it recognized the seriousness of the demand. Moreover, when Origen came to see that he had been mistaken, this was not because there was an obvious application to celibacy which he had failed to recognize, but because he had come to acknowledge that his youthful zeal had led him to apply to the body what Jesus, like the philosophers whose sayings had also influenced him, intended for the will. It was the will which, if it were to overcome the passions and temptations to which it is prone, must concur in some decisive act of renunciation. For this, voluntary castration was a powerful image brilliantly exploited by Jesus, though used also, if less forcefully, in the passage in Philo which Origen confesses he also misunderstood.

²⁷ Catullus 63.17.

²⁸ 8.47, cf. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 24.4.

I said at the outset that this saying of Jesus is, by any reckoning, surprising. The principal element of surprise, I have suggested, is to be identified in its allusion to an alien and idolatrous institution which is then taken as an example of the act of will that may be demanded for entry into the kingdom of heaven. But we have perhaps passed too rapidly over another feature of the saying which must also have caused some surprise. The first two clauses, specifying the two categories of the sexually impotent that were of interest to lawyers, served, as we have seen, a literary or dramatic purpose. In the threefold structure of the saying, the first two instances created an expectation about the third which enabled Jesus to achieve maximum effect with his totally unforeseen reference to *Galloi* or eunuch-priests. But this could have been done in other ways. It remains surprising that the class of people

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selected to enhance the force of the teaching should have been those who were disadvantaged at law, deprived of some of the most cherished ambitions for family and posterity and singled out for social contempt and isolation, all by reason of a physical condition for which they bore no possible blame. Such people did not normally attract the interest of moral teachers in any positive sense. But Jesus not only drew attention to their existence, he used an extreme form of their condition, self-inflicted for purposes utterly abhorrent in his culture, as an example of an act of will of supreme value. But perhaps, once we have got to know Jesus, this is not surprising at all. No other teacher that we know of addressed his teaching to the poor and not the well-to-do, consorted with the disreputable in preference to the morally correct, challenged the virtuous by comparison with the capacity for generosity and heroic self-sacrifice latent in those generally regarded as sinners. A sixth century prophet, whose writings are collected under the name of Isaiah, had foretold a time when even the eunuch would be accepted into the holy community and honoured as much as the head of a family (56.3-5). The same vision lingered in the tradition of moral reflection represented by the Wisdom of Solomon (3.14). In Jesus and his new community all this was now being realized. With the dawning of the kingdom eunuchs, not only by birth or accident but as the result of deliberate acts, were to exchange the contempt and revulsion in which they were held for the dignity of full membership of the people of God. No, perhaps we should not be surprised. Or rather, perhaps it is ourselves we should be surprised at who still, after twenty centuries of Christian history, are capable of showing contempt and revulsion, or, more insidiously, some form of almost unconscious discrimination, against those who, for no fault of their own, are of a particular race, colour, gender or sexual orientation. But there, given not only the constraint of time but also the desire of the founder of this series that the topic should not be such as to arouse controversy, it would be wise to bring this lecture to an end.

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