

EUNUCHS AND THE OLDER TESTAMENT

Transgender Study

Session 3

Deuteronomy 23:1

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Sovereign.

Deuteronomy places a great deal of emphasis on preserving the purity of Israel and making clear the distinction between Israel and its neighbors. Neighboring peoples did have traditions in which priests serving other deities were castrated and where those charged with protecting and serving royal women were castrated as a means to ensure the “safety” of these women from sexual intercourse. In addition, castration was a punishment used in some nearby societies.

The Hebrew Scriptures also emphasize the need for procreation, both as a part of God’s dictates in Genesis and through the various laws. The nation was small and often embattled, and the need to grow the population was strong. Castration would remove a male from the ability to assist with procreation and was thus discouraged in every way possible. Children were necessary for furthering the family, assisting in tasks necessary for continuing life for the community, caring for elderly parents, and as a way for life to continue. The Hebrew culture had no strong sense of the afterlife, and continuing the family line was one way to live on after death.

Concerns also existed about both offerings and priests being free from blemishes or physical deformities. In the culture of the time, only those who were considered whole should approach God, excluding those who were injured or deformed.¹

Questions for Discussion:

1. Given the context in which this Scripture passage was written, does it “translate” into modern-day post-operative transsexuals?
2. What relationship does it have to genital surgery for intersexed infants? If you have not discussed the controversy surrounding genital alteration for intersexed infants, take this opportunity to do so.

Isaiah 56:1-5

Thus says God: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. Do not let the foreigner joined to God say, “The Sovereign will surely separate me from this people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says God: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please 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.

In this passage, the prophet emphasizes that justice and faithfulness are the primary things that God wants from humanity. In earlier sections of the Scriptures, as we have seen, both eunuchs and foreigners are very specifically cut out of the covenant that God has with Israel and are forbidden to participate in the community’s worship of God. This passage reveals a new commandment from God that directly contradicts earlier law. Part of the justice that God now demands requires that the people practice an acceptance and inclusion of others in their midst, including foreigners and eunuchs. Not only are such people to be included, but the prophet goes on to declare that God will give them a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name. This declaration marks a radical change from the views of Deuteronomy.²

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the priorities that are identified in this passage?
2. Read Isaiah 54 and chapter 56 in their entirety. What are the promises for the outcast?
3. What does it mean to be given a “name”?
4. This passage seems to contradict Deuteronomy 23:1. How do you resolve the contradiction?

¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 67-68.

² *Ibid.*, 69.