

Status Assigned to Eunuchs in the Books of the Old Testament and in the New Testament of the Holy Bible- A Study on the Positive Transition of their Treatment

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Abstract—*The word eunuch or the sight of a eunuch generally evokes jeer in many societies. History validates that men were made eunuchs to accomplish the mission of guarding the royal harems. They held high positions in the Royal Palaces and often acted as the king's 'eye', 'ear' and 'tongue'. The eunuchs though in high positions lived with a social stigma of being "neither this" 'nor that'. Eunuchs were spoken about many times in The Holy Bible both in the Old and the New Testaments. The present paper deals with the transition of treatment towards the eunuchs as depicted in the Holy Bible. From forbidding the eunuchs to enter the Holy place (the Book of Deuteronomy- the Old Testament) to baptising the Ethiopian Eunuch (the Book of Acts- the New Testament), the Bible exhibits a sensitive and positive transition in the way the eunuchs were treated. The Ethiopian Eunuch just like any other man or woman of those times wanted to more about God and salvation, he is baptised by Philip through a revelation from God. This proves the transition and the fact that the New Testament teaches us to treat the eunuchs just as we treat any other human being. The important lesson taught through this is to be unprejudiced towards the eunuchs.*

“INTRODUCTION”

If the meaning of the word castrated is not taken in just biological terms but in terms of psychological and mental, then the Eunuchs are castrated almost every day in some of the present societies. India's third gender, be it congenital or man-made both have their own stories of woe to tell. Their stride, talk and movements are perceived with contempt. Women shy away from them as if they are allergens, men pass lewd comments and cat calls and children's minds are conditioned against the eunuchs. The 'keepers of bed'- the eunuchs in history were persons assigned with a lofty mission of protection and safety. History vouches that eunuchs held very high positions in the kingdoms, courts and harems. ¹The monarchs and the kings trusted them so much that they were made in charges of the royal harems. The kings perceived things through the eyes of the eunuchs; they complied with

what the eunuchs spoke and listened to what the eunuchs heard. Thereby, eunuchs became the king's 'eye', 'ear' and 'tongue'. Many courtiers and high officials were so jealous of the position of the eunuchs that they connived to annihilate them. Their mental and physical strength, their loyalty towards their masters and their determination to safeguard them were unmatched. The Ramayana speaks about the loyalty eunuchs displayed towards the prince in exile Lord Rama. The prince is so impressed by them that he gives a boon, the one that has become the major source of their income.

2. “The Paper”

The present paper deals with the transition of treatment towards the eunuchs as depicted in the Holy Bible. To facilitate the study, verses/ incidents from three books of the Bible namely: Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Acts of the King James Version are taken for textual study.

3. “Bible as a Piece of Literature”

3.1. Bible the Treasure-trove of Literary Genres

Apart from being the Holy book to the Christians and proclaimed by them to be the divine interpretation of the Holy Spirit, the Bible presents itself to be a rich source of Literature. It is a beautiful piece of Literature with a collection of sixty six books written by many authors over a period of fifteen hundred years. It is a treasure-trove of diverse genres and subgenres like Descriptions, Narratives, Parables, Poetry, Short stories, Imagery, etc. The lofty literary content makes it one of the best books in English Literature.

3.2. The Books under Study

Deuteronomy is the fifth book in the Holy Bible written by Moses. ²According to Chuck Swindoll, the book Deuteronomy which means 'second law' restates God's commands

originally given to the Israelites around forty years earlier in Exodus and Leviticus. The book of Isaiah majorly written by prophet Isaiah speaks about the judgment on the disobedient and also the salvation. Deuteronomy and Isaiah are from the Old Testament whereas; Acts is traced in the New Testament.³To quote Swindoll, “Acts is the biblical book that chronicles the history of the church immediately after Jesus’ ascension and provides us with a valuable account of how the church grew and spread out from Jerusalem into the rest of the Roman Empire”.

4. “Eunuchs in the Bible- The Positive Transition in their Treatment”

4.1. The Forbidden one

All books discussed above mention about eunuchs in diverse perspectives, a careful study of the books reveals a transition in the treatment towards them. ⁴Deuteronomy 23:1 says ‘... *or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD.*’ This is a direct reference to the eunuchs: congenital or consensual. They were forbidden from entering the sanctum sanctorum due to their ‘physical defect’. This shows how much emphasis was laid on the physical aspects. Deuteronomy is primarily a book of dogmas; it speaks about the rules laid out to the Israelites on their journey to the ‘promised land’. Many statutes were formulated to regulate their movements, to bring discipline and to gather them under one doctrine. In this milieu, the eunuchs were considered to be the forbidden lot who were not entitled to enter the sanctum sanctorum. This decree at those times meant that castration is a deformity and everything deformed or maim is not qualified to worship in the temple of God. What one needs to study here is the pulse of the Bible regards to perfection: of mind, soul and body. Whether this ‘prejudice’ towards eunuchs is justified or not is to be discussed at theological forums, the present study is confined to illustrate incidents that justify the topic of the paper.

4.2. The Accepted One

The paper traces the next important reference to eunuchs, in the book of Isaiah, which is emphatically a proof to show a transition from a prohibitory order to a sympathetic acceptance. ⁵Isaiah 56: 3-5 says:

Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree.

For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant;

Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

The verses create three important impressions; firstly the Lord is sympathetic towards the eunuchs. The words *‘neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree’* explain that the Lord knew the social woes of the eunuchs. If sexual fertility is compared to a fruit-bearing tree then the eunuch is thought of as a dry tree, this could be the reason why the eunuch thought himself to be dry tree. Secondly, the Lord not only equals the sons and the daughters to the eunuchs but also promises them a better treatment. Verse five *‘Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters’* affirms this thought. Reading between the lines, there is a change in the way eunuchs were perceived. Thirdly, *‘I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off’* explains the empathy shown towards the eunuchs who were cut off by the society earlier. *‘... unto the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths...’* is not just a conditional clause but also a phrase that speaks clearly about the equal treatment that the Lord wants to exhibit towards the sons, the daughters and the eunuchs. The above verses explicitly show a shift in treatment towards eunuchs.

4.3. The Baptised One

Salvation is the hope that Christians look forward to be experienced after their tryst with the life on this earth. The Bible reiterates that it is the hope bought to them by their Saviour by redeeming their sins with his life on the cross. Salvation is that fruit assured to Christians who keep the required statutes and it is for this that they strive. Baptism a prerequisite of salvation is discussed in many verses in the Book of Acts in the Holy Bible. The book talks about how the early followers of Jesus Christ pooled in their efforts to spread their faith. Acts 8: 26-39 narrates the incident of Ethiopian eunuch’s baptism by Philip the evangelist chosen to take care of the Christian community in Jerusalem. Due to space constraint, only few verses from the segment are taken

Verses 27-29

And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,

Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet.

Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.

Verses 36-39

³⁶ *And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?*

³⁷ *And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*

³⁸ *And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.*

³⁹ *And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.*

This segment sees a eunuch, as eager as anybody else to get baptized; it also speaks about the eunuch's thirst for salvation. A person of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, in- charge of all her treasure is humble to take teaching from Philip. The entire incident is universally accepted by Christians as God's role in evangelism, if this is believed then it is no exaggeration that God chose a eunuch (one forbidden to enter the Holy place) as one of the catalysts to build His church. It can also be inferred that the Lord saw no difference between the eunuchs and the men he chose to be His disciples. This treatment gives us a subtle yet direct hint that the Lord saw beyond the physical self of people. He saw people's attitude and thirst for Him. This incident qualifies to be the final phase of the 'transition in treatment mentioned earlier.

5. CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the paper, I would like to reinstate that the aspects discussed above are a result of an academic study, from being **forbidden to enter the temple** to **getting baptised**, one can see a total changeover in the way eunuchs were treated. On a social note it also gives us an indication to have an empathetic outlook towards eunuchs. Their physical condition should not be a deterrent to treat them as normal beings.⁷In its ruling, the Supreme Court said the Indian

constitution provides equal opportunity "irrespective of caste, religion or gender". The paper ends on a note '*to gather the eunuchs into the fold.*'

References

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- [5] Isaiah, "Isaiah" chapter 56, verses 3-5, King James Version.
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