

## The Emasculate Connection

By Robert Diamante

In Matthew 19:2-9 Jesus rises to the Pharisees' challenge regarding the question of divorce by overtly challenging Mosaic law, which condoned conditional divorce:

*“And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.”*

Jesus, adding the clause “except for unchastity,”<sup>1</sup> placed emphasis on a stricter model of marriage in defiance of both Judaic patriarchal privilege and the Roman law that made divorce easy for both men and women (see Mark 10:12).<sup>2</sup> Reevaluation of social norms, such as this example, is recurrent in Matthew's gospel.

Following that passage in Matthew 19:10, the disciples react to Jesus' words against divorce by sarcastically observing, “if such is the case of a man with his wife, then it is not expedient to marry,” an observation that might be expressed similarly today. Meier's interpretation of the disciples' collective response concurs: it is “hardly [a] serious exclamation”<sup>3</sup>; however, Meier does assess Jesus' reply as very serious:

*But he said to them, “Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs<sup>4</sup> who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made*

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Aland and Kurt Aland, ed., *Greek-English New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998; 8th revised edition), Matthew 19: 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1993), 219-220.

<sup>3</sup> John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 138.

<sup>4</sup> ευνουχος (eunochos) castrated man. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (ed.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament vol. 2* (Michigan, Erdmans, 1981) p. 80. There is no doubt that the gospel author meant eunuch.

*themselves eunuchs for the for the kingdom of heaven. He that is able to receive this, let him receive it.*"<sup>5</sup>

Delivered with incisive wit and a poignant irony, this aphorism<sup>6</sup> is curiously open ended. Within Matthew's messianic epic it lies between the passage on divorce and the passage calling for the inclusion of children. There are no parallels to Matthew 19:10-12 anywhere in the other gospels, and the subject of eunuchry appears only once in the New Testament beyond Matthew.<sup>7</sup> It is among the consensus of the Jesus Seminar that Matthew 19:10-12 was something Jesus was likely to have said.<sup>8</sup> Whether attributable to Jesus or not, the aphorism fits Matthew's needs all too well.

The most obvious interpretation of the eunuch aphorism comes from theologian Michael Green, who asserts that "there is such a thing as a call to celibacy, and it is a very beautiful thing when embraced."<sup>9</sup> It illustrates the line of reasoning advocating continence as a method of attaining spiritual purity. From an editorial perspective, Matthew's decision not to redact the quote must have been influenced by something close to Green's assertion, however contemporaneous with Matthew's culture at the time of his gospel writing. Matthew must have had in mind the practitioners of a pagan cult active in the Greco-Roman world during Jesus' lifetime, a cult whose geographical location would have made contact with Matthew inevitable<sup>10</sup> and whose practices included self-castration. Furthermore, Matthew's decision to include the "eunuch"

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<sup>5</sup> Aland, Matthew 19:10-12. Any variants cited do little to alter the meaning or impression of the quote. It is furthermore remarkable that translations from several Bibles likewise offer little variation. This does well to strengthen the veracity of the aphorism as an actual Jesus saying. See note 8.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur J. Dewey, "The Unkindest Cut of All?" *Forum* 8, (March-June, 1992): 121.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 8:27-40. Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch on the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. This minister of the Ethiopian queen is reading from the book of Isaiah, and Philip pauses to guide the Ethiopian through the text. As the chariot passes water the Ethiopian eunuch asks to be baptized, which Philip performs without question. It is clear from the recounting of this tale that eunuchs, while ostracized in Judaic and Hellenistic world, received no such adverse status in the developing Christian church.

<sup>8</sup> Funk, Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, 220. The Seminar agreed upon assigning the eunuch aphorism pink status.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Green, *Matthew for Today: Expository Study of Matthew* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988). p 182.

<sup>10</sup> Meier.

passage was meant to demonstrate Jesus' view of "symbolic castration for the kingdom of heaven" as an option for those able to rise to it—an ascetic model. In its time, the passage might also have served as a method for indoctrinating into the fomenting proto-Christian theology those who followed the disparate mythologies that were spreading throughout the developing empire<sup>11</sup>. Ultimately, it is clear the "eunuch" passage was meant to illustrate noble intentions behind an uncommon practice.

It has been asserted that the "eunuch" passage was Jesus' attempt to justify his own (alleged) singledom, and the singledom of John the Baptist.<sup>12</sup> It is debatable that Matthew—or any of the gospel writers—desired to model Jesus as an ascetic in the strictly corporeal sense. Neither does the eunuch passage call for self-mutilation, as hyperbolically illustrated by Origen, who would pick up Matthew's passage like a sword and cut off his own testicles; an enthusiastic, if not over-the-top, interpretation. It is doubtful that Jesus or Matthew were advocating for voluntary castration.

Matthew took a radical approach when redacting his gospel sources by turning the life of Jesus into an epic. He needed to produce a mythology that could match the contemporary Near Eastern and Greco-Roman myths, whose social and historical foundations anteceded Christianity by centuries. How persuasive would the Jesus story have been to a culture swathed in fantastical lore and staunch tradition? In Matthew, Jesus appears time and again to be calling for a dynamic overhaul of the contemporary social mores of his day.<sup>13</sup> Matthew needed to support the radical assertions put forth by making Jesus appear not only venerable and benevolent, but god-like, all the while

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<sup>11</sup> In addition, the eunuch passage functions to foreshadow the resurrection. Matthew artfully blended contemporaneous mythologies with his specific editorial intention: to include a marginalized group of outsiders into the fray of developing Christianity and to consolidate the disparate soteriological concepts of his day under the heading of Christianity. This paper can only tackle one concept at a time. The author am furthermore extending his research to support this theory.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* ( London: Elliot Stock, 1909), 261.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur J. Dewey, "The Unkindest Cut of All?" *Forum*, Vol. 8 (March/June 1992): p 117.

maintaining the humanity at the core of his teaching. So why eunuchs? Why equate a marginal culture with marriage and spiritual transcendence, even if only through metaphor? A closer examination of the religious and social constructs of the time in which the quote was written is needed to understand the “eunuch” passage more fully.

First, eunuchry was not uncommon in the ancient world, although it was frowned upon. Men were sometimes intentionally emasculated and made into slaves, an uncontested effective form of subjugation. But whether forcibly made a eunuch, born a hermaphrodite, or self-made, eunuchs by their very physical being were social pariahs in Judaic culture and throughout the Greco-Roman world. Men unable to perform or produce as normal men were ridiculed. Perhaps it is through Matthew’s “pen” that Jesus asks his audience to show compassion for these cast-outs. It is Jesus who asserts that what eunuchs may lack in procreative potential is made up for in their desire to become transcendent “for the kingdom of God.” Some men may choose a path upon which holiness and godliness are facilitated by the renunciation of worldliness and corporeal satisfaction. It demonstrates that symbolic eunuchry is a step toward salvation, on one hand, and on the other it becomes an incidental rally to tolerate a fringe group whose social merits and spiritual potentials had up to that time been marginalized--the first historical example of diversity training!<sup>14</sup>

*“Self-castration of male priests was practiced in the fertility cults of Asia Minor (Artemis, Atargatis, Cybele, etc.), and the purpose of this custom was ritual purity and dedication of the priest’s entire life to the revered deity (Nock). These priests were despised and scorned outside the cult.”<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> At the same time Jesus seems to be foreshadowing his own death. Matthew is concurrently alluding to the resurrection, strengthening the soteriological foundation upon which Christianity has survived for centuries. I deal with that in another paper.

<sup>15</sup> Balz and Schneider, p 81. These cults and other ascetic philosophies (i.e., Hellenism, Stoicism) are often referenced when citing reasons for the development of asceticism in early Christianity. For a good overview refer to William E. Phipps’ book *The Sexuality of Jesus*. Perhaps it would do the Catholic church well to stand accused of practicing paganism in order to lift the burden of abstinence from its list of sufferable repressions.

It should be reemphasized that castration was hardly fashionable in the ancient world and was even seen as abhorrent. The Jews thought of it as a defilement of the natural order, and eunuchs enjoyed no rights under Judaic law. Procreation was penultimate, a cultural imperative during a time when infant mortality was high. A man with no procreative potential was of little use, and a man who would voluntarily abstain from sex, waste his seed, or go so far as to castrate himself, would be scorned harshly. Throughout the Hellenistic world, the practice of castration was met with considerable resistance<sup>16</sup> and any form of male effeminacy was viewed unfavorably.

Matthew wrote his gospel sometime shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.<sup>17</sup> Meier places Matthew in Antioch, Syria, a “great point in meeting between Jew and Gentile,”<sup>18</sup> where many cultures came together. Antioch was a cultural hub, an urban melting pot. Meier goes on to postulate that the concentrated themes in the Matthean gospel indicate that Matthew was addressing a broad “community in crisis.”<sup>19</sup> Crisis in reaction to what? Like any developing urban area where rapid growth, development and expansion take place, crisis might best be understood as the lack of cultural homogeneity and the disparate allocation of resources. Not to mention the crisis of identity from the displaced Jews who fled to Syria. How could any developing Christian message best be broadcast under such circumstances, in order to reach the right audience?

In his groundbreaking book, *The Sexuality of Jesus*, William E. Phipps makes a brief reference to the ancient Near Eastern Phrygian cultic worship of Cybele and Attis.

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<sup>16</sup> Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> In the Old Testament Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after making an appeal to the King. If one is to believe that Nehemiah, cupbearer, was indeed a eunuch, then perhaps Matthew is employing the eunuch passage as a way of ascertaining commonality between the mystical castigates and Biblical hagiography. It would have done well to help his case. The siege on Jerusalem which ended about 70 CE invoked the memory of Nehemiah who took it upon himself to revisit the city and help rebuild the wall. This would illustrate the inherent inclusiveness of Jesus’s teaching to that marginalized castrates of the Cybellic cults.

<sup>18</sup> Meier, p. 15

<sup>19</sup> Meier, p. 28.

Phipps contextualizes ideas about asceticism and resurrection mythology by referencing specific mystery religious practices.<sup>20</sup> But he does little to deploy the Cybele/Attis mythology to support Matthew's editorial intention in 19:10-12. It would be a big leap to correlate characteristics of the Phrygian cult to any developing Christian practice or emphasize its influence on Christianity. But it is never-the-less important to understand how the seedling Christian missions were impacted by (as much as they had an effect upon) the communities in which they were developing.

The cults of Cybele and Attis have been dated as far back as the thirteenth century BCE. It was sometime between the second and fourth centuries CE when the spring equinox-based ritual, which was associated with Attis, became officially recognized by the Roman Empire.<sup>21</sup> Given the broad expanse of time in which these cults were active, it is not unreasonable to assert their cultural significance. Cybele was especially worshipped at Pessinus in Galatia.<sup>22</sup>

Cybele's son Attis was born of Agdistis, a manifestation of Cybele, when he/she was castrated through the clever trickery of Bacchus. Bacchus tied Agdistis' testicles around a tree when he/she became inebriated then passed out. The hermaphrodite's blood spilled into the river, and Attis sprung forth. Famed for his beauty, Agdistis became enamored of her progeny. But Midas, King of Pessinus, fended off their unholy union by bequeathing his daughter to the young god. On the wedding day, Agdistis caused Attis to go mad, and he castrated himself, subsequently bleeding to death. Agdistis, in her grief, entreated Zeus to make Attis' remains inviolable. It is through this

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<sup>20</sup> William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), .

<sup>21</sup> The Encyclopedia Britannica (15th ed.) cites the second century CE as the Roman Empire's inaugural date of Attis' induction as a solar deity, while Gasparro points to sometime after the first century CE, (*Soteriology*, 84.) Still other sources point to the fourth century CE. In any case, all sources agree that the origin is Phrygian, that Midas, King of Pessinus was the father of Attis' intended wife. Phrygia is now part of Turkey, and is remarkably close to Antioch, Syria. If Meier is correct in his assumption that Matthew's ministry was based north of Palestine, then it is probable he would have had contact with such castration cults as those of Cybele/Attis, as earlier exemplified.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* (New York: New American Library, 1962), 388.

myth (albeit in many variations) that the fertility cults in Asia Minor (and throughout the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman world) evolved.

Without question Matthew knew of and had contact with the cults of Attis. Cybelic priests were often given to self-inflicted emasculation. From the perspective of Jesus as social libertarian, Matthew 19: 10-12 might be seen as an attempt to emancipate yet another group from the margins of restrictive, divisive, patriarchal culture while attempting to persuade them into the Christian mission. One has only to think of the orgiastic scene between the Cybelic eunuchs and the portly farmer in Lucian's *Golden Ass* to surmise how such cults were perceived.<sup>23</sup> It is a thin post-modern interpretation. More likely, Matthew's inclusion of the "eunuch" text was meant to create an ideological symmetry between the intense devotion of Cybelic priests and the devotion of Jesus' disciples within the growing Christian community. Jesus turned a cynical and sarcastic comment made by the disciples into a teaching moment. And Matthew emboldened the Christian message by creating an empathic link between Jesus and Attis, by equating "castration" (more succinctly asceticism) to a higher purpose. By merging the identity of Jesus and Attis for the benefit of attracting these cultic worshipers, Matthew was using his tools as an evangelist to employ cultural tropes to undergird his own religious goals. It dovetails with contemporaneous neo-Platonic thinking and provides the ascetic principles upon which Catholic monasticism will be later founded.

A person cannot help but wonder what sort of agency a devotee might hope for by committing such an act as self-castration. Favor with the god or goddess? Freedom from the perceived constraints of earthly pleasure? It is a forced asceticism that is as much psychological as it is physical. In Matthew 19: 10-12, Jesus acknowledges various scenarios that make oneself a eunuch. He does so in a very open-ended way giving the

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<sup>23</sup> Lucian "The Golden Ass."

choice ultimately to his followers. However, he is not advocating for a physical emasculation, but rather one that comes from deep within the soul: the emasculation of that part of us which chooses earthly desire over spiritual servitude.

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