

King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1–8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices

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I. ISAIAH 56:1–8 AS A RESPONSE TO PENTATEUCHAL LAW?

Isaiah 56:1–8 is a divine oracle that addresses the concerns of foreigners and eunuchs. With respect to the former group, YHWH promises that he will bring them to his sacred mountain and accept their offerings and sacrifices if they meet his obligations (vv. 6-7). To the despairing eunuch, on the other hand, YHWH promises a “monument and a name” (יָד וְשֵׁם) that are superior to sons or daughters (vv. 3-5):

Let not¹ the eunuch say, “I am just a dried-up tree!” (4) For thus spoke Yhwh:
“Concerning the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me,

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¹ For the “do not say” formulae, see Alexander Rofé, “The Wisdom Formula ‘Do Not Say . . .’ and the Angel in Qohelet 5.5,” in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and H. G. M. Williamson; JSOTSup 373; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 364–76.

and who cling to my covenant, (5) I will give to them within my house and my walls a monument and a name [יד ושם], one that is better than sons or daughters. I will give him an everlasting name [שם עולם] that will not be cut off.”²

Often commentators identify the passage as a form of “prophetic Torah” that responds to and revises pentateuchal law.³ The new ruling is thought to lift the ban on eunuchs’ membership in the assembly in texts such as Lev 21:16–23 and especially Deut 23:2.⁴ Thus, Joachim Schaper asserts:

The Isaianic ruling flies in the face of the Deuteronomic one. As Herbert Donner has demonstrated, we have in Isa 56:1–8 the only biblical example of an abrogation in the strict sense of the word, “abrogation” being a technical term coined in Roman law that indicates the public, authoritative abolition of a law or custom.⁵

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own. For יד ושם as a “monument” or “stele,” see, in addition to the arguments presented here, D. W. Van Winkle, “The Meaning of *yād wāšēm* in Isaiah LVI 5,” *VT* 47 (1997): 378–85, *pace* the arguments to the contrary set forth by G. Robinson (“The Meaning of *jd* in Isa 56,5,” *ZAW* 88 [1976]: 282–84) and Sara Japhet (“*yd wšm* [Isa. 56:5]—A Different Proposal,” *MAARAV* 8 [1992]: 69–80).

³ For questions of dating, see the literature cited in Jacob Stromberg, *Isaiah after Exile: The Author of Third Isaiah as Reader and Redactor of the Book* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

⁴ See the discussion in Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998), 146–48, 150–51.

⁵ See, e.g., Joachim Schaper, “Rereading the Law: Inner-Biblical Exegesis of Divine Oracles in Ezekiel 44 and Isaiah 56,” in *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament: Beiträge des Symposiums “Das Alte Testament und die Kultur der Moderne” anlässlich des 100. Geburtstags Gerhard von Rads (1901–1971), Heidelberg, 18.–21. Oktober 2001* (ed. Bernard M. Levinson and Eckart Otto; Altes Testament und Moderne 13; Münster: Lit, 2004), 133. The essay he cites by Donner is “Jesaja LVI 1–7: Ein Abrogationsfall innerhalb des Kanons—Implikationen und Konsequenzen,” in *Congress Volume: Salamanca 1983* (ed. John A. Emerton; VTSup 36; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 81–95. For other supporters of this view, see Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 312; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 257; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Das Evangelium der unbekanntenen Propheten: Jesaja 40–66* (Kleine Biblische Bibliothek; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 177; Christoph Bultmann, *Der Fremde im antiken Juda: Eine Untersuchung zum sozialen Typenbegriff ‘ger’ und seinem Bedeutungswandel in der alttestamentlichen Gesetzgebung* (FRLANT 153; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 211; Steven S. Tuell, “The Priesthood of the ‘Foreigner’: Evidence of Competing Polities in Ezekiel 44:1–14 and Isaiah 56:1–8,” in *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride Jr.* (ed. John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 193; Bernard Gosse, “Sabbath, Identity and Universalism Go Together after the Return from Exile,” *JSOT* 29 (2005): 364–65; Raymond de Hoop, “The Interpretation of Isaiah 56:1–9: Comfort or Criticism?” *JBL* 127 (2008): 681; Saul M. Olyan, *Rites and Ranks: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); idem, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11–12, 84–85.

This popular approach to our text poses many problems. To begin with, the term סריס does not even occur in Deut 23:2.⁶ This is a significant lacuna, especially in light of the fact that genital mutilation could occur for religious reasons, accidentally/congenitally, or as a punitive measure.⁷ Hence, mutilated genitalia are not *eo ipso* a sign of a person's status as a eunuch. What is more, the eunuchs in Isa 56:3–5 are not concerned with entrance into the community or even participation in the cult, which is at the heart of Deut 23:2.⁸ The eunuchs themselves do not enter the temple; rather, the deity grants them a monument there. What troubles this group is instead the perennial problem posed by their impotence. Their cry, “I am but a dried-up tree” (v. 3b), uses an arboreal metaphor to express their inability to sire children and produce a namesake (cf. Jer 11:19; see also Ps 1:3; Jer 17:7–8).⁹

Zion's glorious future is the theme of this chapter (Isa 56:1, 7–8).¹⁰ In response to the anxiety of certain eunuchs that they would not be able to participate (through progeny) in this coming era, the oracle announces that those who keep YHWH's Sabbaths, choose what pleases the deity, and remain faithful to the divine covenant will receive an “everlasting name” that “will not be cut off” (the double entendre is obvious). The issue addressed in our text is, hence, not whether a person with mutilated genitalia may enter “the assembly of YHWH,” as in Deut 23:2. Although later

⁶ Leviticus 21:16–24 applies to Aaronides specifically, and hence we focus here on Deut 23:2.

⁷ See Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.32; Middle Assyrian Laws A §15 and A §20 in Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (2nd ed.; SBLWAW 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 158, 160.

⁸ See J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters XL–LXVI* (Cambridge: University Press, 1917), 165; D. W. Van Winkle, “Isaiah LVI 1–8,” in *SBL Seminar Papers, 1997* (SBLSP 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 238, 250; and Christopher R. Seitz, “Isaiah 40–66,” *NIB*, 484; Sommer, *Prophet Reads Scripture*, 279 n. 46.

⁹ In ancient Near Eastern literature, the tree is used widely as an image of procreancy and survival. The image is used also when survival or procreancy are under threat. In a fourteenth-century treaty between Shattiwaza of Mittanni and Suppiluliuma I of Hatti, Shattiwaza states, “If I, Prince Shattiwaza . . . do not observe the words of this treaty and of the oath, let me, Shattiwaza, together with my other wife, and us Hurrians, together with our wives, together with our sons, and together with our land—as a fir tree when it is felled has no more shoots, like this fir tree let me . . . like the fir tree have no progeny.” Quoted according to Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (ed. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr.; SBLWAW 7; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 49. For Egypt, Eberhard Otto quotes a text that links an uprooted tree, name making, and the desire for children; see his “Die Endsituation der ägyptischen Kultur,” *Welt als Geschichte* 11–12 (1951–52): 208. In the Bible, agricultural growth is often used to speak of offspring: see, e.g., פרה in Gen 1:22, 28; 26:22; Exod 23:30; Jer 3:16; and פרי in Gen 30:2; Deut 7:13; 28:4; 30:9; Ps 21:11; Lam 2:20. Similarly, words associated with the root זרע (cf. Akk. *zārû*; Ug. *drʿ*) also describe offspring (e.g., Gen 3:15; Num 5:28; 1 Sam 1:11; 2:20; Nah 1:14). See H. D. Preuss, “זרע,” *TDOT* 4:143–62.

¹⁰ בִּי קְרוּבָה יִשׁוּעָתִי לְבוּא. See Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40–66: Introduction and Commentary* (in Hebrew; 2 vols.; Mikra Leyisra'el; Tel Aviv: Am Oved; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008), 2:404–12, as well as Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity and Deutero-Isaiah* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1970), 167–68; Skinner, *Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 165.

readers may have interpreted Deut 23:2 in light of Isa 56:3–5, the authors of the latter likely did not have the former in view.¹¹

YHWH's promise to the eunuchs falls within the realm of *Totenpflege* ("care for the dead"). This claim is supported by the striking similarities between our text and 2 Sam 18:18, a notice about Absalom's establishment of his own funerary stele:

Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken the pillar, which is in the Valley of the King, and set it up for himself; for he said, "I have no son to keep my name alive" [הזכיר שמי]. He had named the pillar after himself, and it has been called "Absalom's Monument" [יד אבשלום] to this day.

Like the eunuchs of Isa 56:3–5, Absalom lacks progeny. As a result, he has to set up his own monument to ensure that his name would be commemorated (הזכיר שמי)—a task that would normally have fallen to the son. (Isaiah 56 mentions daughters as well!) Absalom's monument is also referred to as a יד (2 Sam 18:18; cf. 1 Sam 15:12; Ezek 21:24).

The deity promises to provide the eunuchs with a monument and a name in the temple (בביתי, "in my house"). Throughout ancient Western Asia and the Mediterranean world, temples were places where one would conventionally deposit some form of material representation that served as a memorial of an individual or of a group.¹² Due to the deity's presence there, these sacred edifices represented the

¹¹ Many Second Temple texts seem to draw on or respond to Deuteronomy 23 (see Neh 13:1–3; Lam 1:10; Ezek 44:7, 9; 47:13–23, and the references to separation in Ezra 6:21; 9:1; 10:11; Neh 9:2; and 10:29; see discussion in Olyan, *Rites and Ranks*, 72, 107–8, 164 n. 117). Nevertheless, one must appreciate Isaiah 56 on its own terms, especially as it appears to be responding to different concerns. Thus, the eunuch in Isa 56:3 does not cry out, "I have been prohibited from entering the temple," as if his plight related to a legal prohibition. Rather, as argued above, he laments his physical condition of being "a dried-up tree," which relates to his incapacity to produce progeny and through them to participate with all other Israelites in the future salvation and deliverance of the nation (56:1; see also 55:1–13, esp. v. 13). Alternatively, one might argue that Isa 56:1–8 seeks to invalidate any attempt to *reapply* the regulations set forth in Deut 23:2–9 to community norms of a later period.

¹² That biblical authors were acquainted with the practice is demonstrated by such texts as Num 17:16–22 (Eng. 1–7). For evidence related to statues in temples, see Karen Radner, *Die Macht des Namens: Altorientalische Strategien zur Selbsterhaltung* (Santag 8; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 114–29. In Baal's intercession for Danel, he includes among the so-called "Duties of the Son" the obligation to "set up the stele for his father/ancestor in the sanctuary, the monument (?) of his kinsman" (*nšb. skn. ilibh. b qdš ztr. ʿmh. [KTU² 1.17i:26–28a]*). As Nick Wyatt indicates, *ztr* is likely a loose synonym of *skn*. *ztr* may be related to Hitt. *šittari* (sun emblem?). See the bibliography in Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilmilku and His Colleagues* (2nd rev. ed.; Biblical Seminar 53; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 256 n. 28. Stelae are found at other Levantine temples, but it is not always clear if their function is funerary. See, e.g., the five Iron Age upright stones found in a cultic setting at Wadi Arabah, the obelisks at the Middle Bronze Balaat Gebal temple at Byblos, or the stelae from the Canaanite temple at Hazor. For discussion, see

epicenter of social space, and it is there that the monument of the eunuchs will be erected. In this way, the eunuchs will have a part in the future age, when “my salvation will come and my deliverance will be revealed” (56:1b).¹³

But does this mean that YHWH is depicted in Isa 56:3–5 as a son or substitute *paterfamilias*? Is family religion the background of YHWH’s beneficent actions toward the eunuchs? Some have argued as much. Izaak de Hulster, for instance, writes, “The Lord may give such a memorial to fulfill the duty of a son. Giving/establishing a memorial can be interpreted as the duty of a son/child to keep the memory of his ancestors alive.”¹⁴ While the father–son relationship is certainly one possible background for the oracle to the eunuchs, the pattern of devotion and reward, which clearly marks the oracle, is more at home in the king–servant relationship than in the father–son relationship. When YHWH provides the eunuchs with a $\square\text{ש} \text{ד}$ in his temple, he does so not because he is bound by family tradition to do so, but rather because he wishes to reward his faithful eunuchs. The monument is also said to be *better* than progeny. It functions as a child would, insofar as it outlives the eunuch and keeps his name alive. But it is superior to a child insofar as the deity himself guarantees its permanence.¹⁵

II. DEVOTION AND REWARD: EUNUCHISM IN IMPERIAL COURTS

Near Eastern kings frequently honored eunuchs and other faithful royal servants by endowing and adorning their funerary cults. These rewards typically took three forms: (1) the servant is given a commemorative funerary monument; (2) the king commits to undertake responsibilities related to the funerary cult, and/or (3) the servant is endowed with a special burial location. All three of these elements are to be found in Isa 56:3–5. In what follows, we compare this text to analogies from North Syria, Egypt, Assyria, and Greece. We do not pretend to be exhaustive. Moreover, we do not claim to have discovered the immediate prototypes of Isa 56:3–5. Rather, the passage from Isaiah seems to incorporate a well-known and widespread practice from the surrounding culture and to adapt it for a specific crisis.

To begin, we consider eunuchism in general terms, paying special attention to Assyrian and Persian materials. This background information is rarely considered in interpretations of Isa 56:3–5 and accounts for much of its misunderstanding. Evidence for the use of eunuchs in this period and the earlier Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 900–612 B.C.E.) is abundant. A number of premodern empires (see, e.g., Hittite,

Izaak de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 155–63.

¹³ Pace Sara Japhet, “*yd wšm* (Isa. 56:5),” 75.

¹⁴ De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 164.

¹⁵ Many thanks to Peter Machinist for this insight.

Neo-Assyrian, Persian, Roman, Byzantine Ottoman, Indian, and imperial Chinese) employed eunuchs in their bureaucracies and militaries.¹⁶ On occasion, this class of servants even occupied high offices. In many cases, eunuchs also played critical roles in the advancement of aristocratic families, much like priests in Christian families of medieval Europe. Parents would select a son for castration and admission into eunuchship so that he could pursue a career at the royal court and thereby secure for the family a channel of influence to the highest seats of power.¹⁷

But outside influence on the throne was inherently at odds with the primary incentive for employing eunuchs. In his comparative study of eunuchism, Orlando Patterson observes that “genealogical isolation”—not concerns for the harem, as often assumed—became one of the key reasons why imperial governments utilized eunuchs.¹⁸ This class of servants was (in theory, at least) not self-perpetuating; there was no son to continue the legacy of his father.¹⁹ Hence, for a ruler who was concerned to consolidate his power and transmit it solely along his own dynastic line, the eunuch was perceived to pose much less of a threat.

Eunuchs in the Neo-Assyrian Empire

A wealth of visual and textual sources exists from the Neo-Assyrian period relating to this class of servants. As one might expect, this material has given rise

¹⁶ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, castrati also came to play a significant role in choirs and opera. See Piotr Scholz, *Eunuchs and Castrati: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 271–90.

¹⁷ Kathryn M. Ringrose, “Eunuchs,” in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Margaret Schaus; New York: Routledge, 2006), 265.

¹⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 319–20. See also Hayim Tadmor, “The Role of the Chief Eunuch and the Place of Eunuchs in the Assyrian Empire,” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; 2 vols.; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 2:607. The concerns to prohibit males from approaching royal women may have been the original reason for employing eunuchs; see, e.g., the harem texts collected by E. F. Weidner, “Hof- und Harems-Erlasse assyrischer Könige aus dem 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.,” *AJO* 17 (1954–56): 257–93. Yet one should not confuse the origins of eunuchism with the factors that sustained its continued use. For this view, see already Lewis A. Coser, “The Political Functions of Eunuchism,” *American Sociological Review* 29 (1964): 880.

¹⁹ However, we know of at least one instance of an Assyrian eunuch adopting a daughter. See Gershon Galil, *The Lower Stratum Families in the Neo-Assyrian Period* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 303. In a private communication to Jacob Wright (Sept. 4, 2009), Cornelia Wunsch describes a Neo-Babylonian text she is editing in which an individual who appears to be a eunuch is concerned with the transfer of his private property to an adopted son. For exceptions among Chinese eunuchs, see Jennifer W. Jay, “Another Side of Chinese Eunuch History: Castration, Marriage, Adoption, and Burial,” *Canadian Journal of History* (1993): 459–78.

to a vigorous and sometimes contentious debate, much of which relates to the ability to identify eunuchs, either philologically²⁰ or art historically.²¹ Scholars are fortunate to have this wealth of data, since later imperial administrations adopted much of what was first developed by the Neo-Assyrian state. Compared to the many satrapal rebellions of the Achaemenid period, the Neo-Assyrian empire was extraordinarily stable during its more than three centuries of rule.²² Intradynastic disputes, not military or provincial rebellions, were the primary causes for the few cases of large-scale conflict. What contributed to this administrative stability was the way in which Neo-Assyrian rulers controlled access to the organs of the empire. These kings recognized the need not only to hold in check the power of an emerging “aristocracy” but also to control the most critical centers of power (troops, treasuries, temple personnel, the highest officials, etc.).²³

²⁰ See, e.g., A. Leo Oppenheim, “A Note on ša rēši,” *JANESCU* 5 (1973): 325–34; Albert K. Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power: Their Role in the Assyrian Bureaucracy,” in *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament: Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993* (ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz; AOAT 240; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1995), 96; Karlheinz Deller, “The Assyrian Eunuchs and Their Predecessors,” in *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East: Papers of the Second Colloquium on the Ancient Near East, The City and Its Life, Held at the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo), March 22–24, 1996* (ed. Kazuko Watanabe; Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1999), 305–6; Tadmor, “Role of the Chief Eunuch,” 607; Stephanie Dalley’s review of Raija Mattila, *The King’s Magnates: A Study of the Highest Officials of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (SAAS 11; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2000), *BO* 58 (2001): 197–206; L. R. Siddall, “A Re-examination of the Title ša rēši in the Neo-Assyrian Period,” in *Gilgameš and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference Held at Mandelbaum House, the University of Sydney, 21–23 July, 2004* (ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks; ANE Studies Supplement 21; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 225–40; Dominik Bonatz, “Bartlos in Assyrien: Ein kultur-anthropologisches Phänomen aus Sicht der Bilder,” in *Fundstellen: Gesammelte Schriften zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altvorderasiens. Ad honorem Hartmut Kühne* (ed. Dominik Bonatz et al.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2008), 131–53.

²¹ Art historians often assume, uncritically, that the beardless officials depicted in Neo-Assyrian art are eunuchs. For a discussion of the issue, see, e.g., Siddall, “A Re-examination of the Title ša rēši,” 225–40.

²² See the incisive comments of Andreas Fuchs, “War das neuassyrische Reich ein Militärstaat,” in *Krieg, Gesellschaft, Institutionen: Beiträge zu einer vergleichenden Kriegsgeschichte* (ed. Burkhard Meissner, Oliver Schmitt, and Michael Sommer; Berlin: Akademie, 2005), 19–34.

²³ Neo-Assyrian kings regularly rotated governors in order to prevent them from becoming too politically established in one place. In a forthcoming publication, Karen Radner notes that, beginning with Sennacherib, kings tended to shift power away from provincial governors and to confer it on the king’s family members and closest advisors (personal communication). See also Radner, “The Delegation of Power: Neo-Assyrian Bureau Seals,” in *L’archive des Fortifications de Persépolis: État des questions et perspectives de recherches* (ed. Pierre Briant, Wouter Henkelman, and Matthew W. Stolper; Persika 12; Paris: De Boccard, 2008), 510; Raija Mattila, “The Chief Singer and Other Late Eponyms,” in *Of God(s), Trees, Kings, and Scholars: Neo-Assyrian and Related Studies in Honour of Simo Parpola* (ed. Mikko Luukko, Saana Svärd, and Raija Mattila; StudOr 106; Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2009), 159–66.

Eunuchism is one of the clearest expressions of this tendency toward centralization. Beginning in the ninth century B.C.E., eunuchs (LÚ.SAG = *ša reši*, + other morphological variations) exclusively held numerous top positions in the empire.²⁴ Assyria's monarchs seem to have recognized that the accumulation of power in the hands of individuals was unavoidable—and perhaps even necessary in certain cases. By employing eunuchs, however, one could prevent the more serious threat posed by what one might call the *transgenerational accumulation of power*. Such power was generated and sustained when an official bequeathed to his descendants the authority and prestige he had amassed for himself during his lifetime, establishing thereby a dynasty that could potentially compete with the throne. But since a eunuch (usually) did not establish a family of his own,²⁵ any power he accumulated during his lifetime returned to the throne upon his death.

Such genealogical isolation permitted eunuchs to rise to the highest ranks of government and the military, as witnessed not only in the numerous seals of eunuchs discovered in the archaeological record but also in their pervasive presence on official palace reliefs.²⁶ In 798 B.C.E., during the reign of Adad-nerari III, one chief eunuch (Mutakkil-Marduk) even served as an eponym alongside other important officials, a unique event up to this point in Neo-Assyrian history.²⁷ Crisis situations provided opportunities for eunuchs to wield considerable power as the king's agents. For instance, the chief eunuch (*rab ša reši*) was able to exercise a great deal of influence late in the reign of Šalmanesar III (826–820 B.C.E.), due to a succession dispute between his two sons.²⁸ At times, powerful (and insubordinate) eunuchs also set up stelae in order to perpetuate their names. For example, between the death of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 B.C.E.) and the accession of Šalmanesar V (727–722 B.C.E.), Bêl-Harrân-bêl-ušur founded a town that he named after himself and even set up a stele in its temple (see fig. 1 on the following page).²⁹

²⁴ Since the middle of the eighth century B.C.E., the term becomes practically synonymous with “provincial governor.” For the role of eunuchs in the Neo-Assyrian period, see Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power,” 85–98; Deller, “Assyrian Eunuchs,” 303–11; Oppenheim, “A Note on *ša reši*,” 325–34. However, debate continues over the definition of *ša reši*; see, e.g., Dalley, review of Mattila, *King's Magnates*, 197–206; Siddall, “Re-examination of the Title *ša reši*,” 225–40; Bonatz, “Bartlos in Assyrien,” 131–53.

²⁵ Adoption may have been practiced by eunuchs.

²⁶ Seals are the most basic form of one's name (see, e.g., Gen 38:18, 25). See also Kazuko Watanabe, “Seals of Neo-Assyrian Officials,” in idem, *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East*, 313–66.

²⁷ See Tadmor, “Role of the Chief Eunuch,” 608.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 607. For a recent study of eunuchs as rulers (and rebels), see Claus Ambos, “Eunuchen als Thronprätendenten und Herrscher im alten Orient,” in Luukko et al., *Of God(s), Trees, Kings, and Scholars*, 1–8.

²⁹ He was also named eponym (for 741 B.C.E.). See Ursula Magen, *Assyrische Königsdarstellungen—Aspekte der Herrschaft: Eine Typologie* (Baghdader Forschungen 9; Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1986); and Radner, “Bêl-Harrân-bêlu-ušur,” in *The Prosopography of the*



Figure 1. Stele of the eunuch Bêl-Harrân-bêl-ušur. See Jutta Börker-Klähn, *Alt Vorderasiatische Bildstelen und Vergleichbare Felsreliefs* (Baghdader Forschungen 4; Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1982), no. 232; and Eckhard Unger, *Die Stele des Bel-Harran-Beli-Ussur* (Istanbul: Ahmen Ihsan, 1917), pl. 1.

Related to the eunuchs' devotion to the king is their inseparable attachment to their royal masters. In fact, they are often called “the king's eunuchs.”³⁰ Iconographically, the close spatial proximity between eunuchs and the king represents their unmediated access to the crown: in palace reliefs, eunuchs consistently stand nearest to the king (see fig. 2 on the following page). These images reflect their function as a concrete extension of the royal arm, as the king's right-hand men and trusted courtiers.

Neo-Assyrian Empire (ed. Simo Parpola et al.; Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1999), 1/II:301a–b(2).

³⁰ For *ša rēš šarri* (“eunuch of the king” or “royal eunuch”), see, e.g., Andreas Fuchs and Simo Parpola, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part III: Letters from Babylonia and the Eastern Provinces* (SAA 15; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2001), 54:r17; *The Political Correspondence of Esarhaddon* (ed. Mikko Luuko and Greta Van Buylaere; SAA 16; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2002), 100:17; *The Babylonian Correspondence of Esarhaddon, and Letters to Assurbanipal and Sin-Šarru-Iskun from Northern and Central Babylonia* (ed. Frances Reynolds; SAA 18; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2003), 103:18, 22; 125:11.



Figure 2. Two eunuchs surround the king, one of whom is flanked by a winged genius. From Room G of the North West Palace of Aššurnasirpal II. BM 124564. © Trustees of the British Museum.

To enter into this intimate relationship with the emperor, eunuchs were required to sever ties to their biological families. Disaffiliation was necessary, for, as noted above, family ties represented potential venues of outside influence on the throne. Moreover, without a family of their own, eunuchs were more likely to ingratiate themselves with the king, a tendency encouraged by most imperial courts. In turn, the name one made for oneself by means of a successful career could substitute in some ways for the lack of a family and a genealogical namesake. The separation of eunuchs from their families and the commencement of their new status was further marked by a name change.³¹ Karlheinz Deller writes: “By assuming their eunuch name they depose the filiation, i.e. identification by their fathers’ names.”³² The change in name indicated not only a change in the person’s identity but also a change in the person’s relationship to the *Namensgeber*. The eunuch’s new name frequently expressed his role as guardian of the king’s power; the most common type is DN-*šarru-ušur* (“DN, protect the king”).³³

³¹ See Deller, “Assyrian Eunuchs,” 306.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Daniel, for example, receives the name *Bēlṭēšaʿšsar* (Dan 1:7; 2:26; 4:5–6, 15–16; 5:12; 10:1), which probably means something like, “protect his life” or “protect the life of the king.” The

Eunuchs in the Achaemenid Empire

Most of our information about eunuchs in the Persian period is dependent on classical and biblical sources.³⁴ Unlike the Assyrian evidence, none of these sources was officially generated by the empire itself, though some were created by servants of the empire (e.g., Ctesias may have served as a physician for the Achaemenid court). Concerning Greek and Latin sources, references to eunuchs can be found in the works of Xenophon, Herodotus, Ctesias, Quintus Curtius, Plutarch, and Diodorus, *inter alios*.³⁵ Two types of eunuchs are typically depicted. One type of eunuch, which appears in later texts, typically plays a votary role for a goddess and is associated with her sanctuary. This eunuch also roams the countryside, earning money through begging or divining.³⁶ The second type, with which we are concerned, is associated with kings—usually the Achaemenid rulers themselves. This figure often shares a special relationship with his master. The Greek term εὐνοῦχος, which means “the one in charge of the bed,” is the typical designation for this class of eunuch.

On the biblical side of things, the books of Esther and Daniel are the most obvious sources of potential information about how eunuchs (Hebrew סריס) were perceived in the Persian period (see Esth 1:10, 15; 4:4, 4; 6:14; 7:9; Dan 1:3, 7–9, 10–11, 18).³⁷ The Nehemiah Memoir is another potential source of information.

folk etymology in 4:5 is likely incorrect. (Our thanks to Carol Newsom for bringing this example to our attention.) For other names given upon entry into royal service, see Gen 41:45; Jer 38:7–13; 39:16.

³⁴ The beardless men on the Persepolis stairway reliefs may also be eunuchs, but this is a contested claim. See Erich Friedrich Schmidt, *Persepolis* (3 vols.; OIP 68–70; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 1:225.

³⁵ For a helpful introduction to eunuchs in the Persian period, see Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 268–77; and Muhammad Dandamayev, “Eunuchs: The Achaemenid Period,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, n.p., online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/eunuchs> (accessed December 30, 2011); Heleen W. A. M. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, “Decadence in the Empire or Decadence in the Sources? From Source to Synthesis: Ctesias,” *Achaemenid History* 1 (1987): 33–45. In the Byzantine empire, eunuchs also aroused suspicion among the “non-eunuch male elite,” who often virulently despised them for their influence on the king; see S. F. Tougher, “Images of Effeminate Men: The Case of Byzantine Eunuchs,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (ed. D. M. Hadley; Women and Men in History; London: Longman, 1999), 90–92. The physical changes eunuchs experienced after their emasculation only augmented the negative image given to them; see Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 320. Despite the popular negative caricatures in literature, eunuchs often exhibited remarkable loyalty and even camaraderie among themselves; see Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power,” 96.

³⁶ For this helpful distinction, see Cristiano Grottanelli, “Faithful Bodies: Ancient Greek Sources on Oriental Eunuchs,” in *Self, Soul, and Body in Religious Experience* (ed. Albert I. Baumgarten, Jan Assmann, and Guy G. Stroumsa; SHR 78; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 405.

³⁷ Like LÚ.SAG (*ša rēši*), the meaning of Hebrew סריס, which is derived from the Akkadian term, is contested. For a more in-depth discussion of סריס and its meaning, see Hayim Tadmor,

Although Nehemiah is never explicitly called a סריס, several clues suggest that he may have been a eunuch.³⁸ For example, Nehemiah mentions his brothers, fathers, and servants, but never his wife or progeny.³⁹

Considered as a whole, sources from this period typically cast royal eunuchs in one of two roles: they are either (1) faithful royal servants or (2) perfidious and/or sexually perverse opportunists. These are, of course, stereotypes, and the facts on the ground no doubt reflect a more complex situation. A quotation from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* illustrates the first view:

[Cyrus] knew that men with children, or wives, or favorites in whom they delight, must needs love them most, while eunuchs, who are deprived of all such dear ones, would surely make most account of him who could enrich them, or help them if they were injured, or crown them with honor. And in the conferring of such benefits he was disposed to think he could outbid the world. . . . There was every reason to suppose that the eunuch would be the most faithful of all servants. . . . Indeed, no men have shown more faithfulness than eunuchs when ruin has fallen on their lords. (*Cyr.* 7.5.60–65)

As Christopher Nadon insightfully notes, the eunuchs' condition "serves to restrict the scope of their interests or focus it entirely upon themselves."⁴⁰ That is, in order to tie the eunuchs' self-interest in with his own well-being and security Cyrus makes himself their greatest benefactor and protector.⁴¹ When compared with other Greek sources, Xenophon's presentation of eunuchs is remarkably sanguine. In fact, it may have been fashioned as a point-by-point refutation of the negative reputation of eunuchs in Greece.⁴² Similarly positive evaluations of eunuchs are also expressed in Herodotus's *Histories* (see, e.g., 8.105) and Plutarch's *Artaxerxes* (see, e.g., 12.1, 4; 17.1; 29.1; etc.).⁴³

"Was the Biblical *sāris* a Eunuch?" in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 317–26.

³⁸ For alternative views, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 211; and H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco: Word Books, 1985), 174–75. For supporting views, see A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire: Achaemenid Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 314; J. M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 136; F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 157.

³⁹ Numerous pleas punctuate his Memoir calling on the deity to remember his name and his deeds (Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31); one may compare these prayers with the divine promise in our passage to grant a name and monument not only within "my house" but also within "my walls" (Isa 56:5).

⁴⁰ Christopher Nadon, *Xenophon's Prince: Republic and Empire in the Cyropaedia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 113.

⁴¹ See also Grottanelli, "Faithful Bodies," 406–7.

⁴² Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 270.

⁴³ For these citations and others, see *ibid.*, 272.

The rosier depictions of eunuchism, however, are the exception. By and large, negative views of eunuchs predominate in literature related to the Persian period. In Ctesias's *History of Persia*, for instance, eunuchs frequently betray those around them (see, e.g., *Pers.* 13, 29, 45, 47, 49, 53).⁴⁴ Esther 2:21–23, which depicts two eunuchs conspiring to kill the Great King, perpetuates this view of eunuchs. Quintus Curtius, writing in Latin, refers to “herds” (*spandonum*) of eunuchs who attend to the concubines and also prostitute themselves (*Hist.* 6.6.8). At one point, he describes with disgust a beautiful eunuch who had been loved by both Darius III and Alexander (6.5.23).

III. HONORARY BURIAL IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Eunuchs belonged to a special class of royal servants that was created for the express purpose of serving the king. They were crown dependents whose fortune was intimately linked to how well they performed the king's will. Exceptionally devoted servants could even receive rewards for their services. One way for kings to reward their servants was by endowing various aspects of their funerary cult: an honorific burial site, funerary monuments, and/or a royal commitment to maintain various aspects of the cult. In what follows, we present a sampling of this evidence, arguing that similar practices inform the oracle to the eunuchs in Isa 56:3–5. Our evidence comes from the kingdom of Samʿal in North Syria and from Egypt, Assyria, and Greece.

The Inscription of Barrakab for Panamuwa II (KAI 215)

On a dolerite statue found at Tahtali Pinari, Barrakab commemorates the great deeds of his father, Panamuwa II, who died in battle while fighting for his overlord, Tiglath-pileser III (733–732 B.C.E.). The inscription, written in Samʿalian Aramaic, is twenty-three lines, with lines 11–18 treating Panamuwa's relationship to Tiglath-pileser.⁴⁵

According to Barrakab, Panamuwa lived a life of exceptional obedience to the

⁴⁴ For a discussion, see Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 268. Bagapates is one exception to this rule. He faithfully watches over the tomb of Darius for seven years (see *Pers.* books 12–13, §23).

⁴⁵ According to the revised outline of the inscription proposed by Douglas J. Green (“I Undertook Great Works”: *The Ideology of Domestic Achievements in West Semitic Royal Inscriptions* [FAT 2/41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010], 200), the relevant section falls into part 3, “Panamuwa II and the Assyrian king.” Green revises the outline of Josef Tropper (*Die Inschriften von Zincirli: Neue Edition und vergleichende Grammatik des phönizischen, samalischen und aramäischen Textkorpus* [Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas 6; Münster: Ugarit, 1993], 99).

Assyrian king. His devotion to Tiglath-pileser is poetically expressed by the phrase, 𐎶𐎠𐎵.𐎠𐎫𐎢𐎥.𐎠𐎢𐎶𐎠𐎵. (‘‘he took hold of the hem of his lord’’; line 11). He ran beside Tiglath-pileser’s chariot in the emperor’s conquests of the four quarters of the earth (lines 12–14). And while on campaign, he showed the ultimate act of loyalty by dying in the service of his lord (line 16). In a show of appreciation and honor for his loyal vassal, Tiglath-pileser and his entire army mourned the death of Panamuwa (lines 16–17). The Assyrian king performed a funerary rite for him (lines 17–18), erected an ‘‘image’’ (*mšky*) on his behalf (line 18), and also took his remains to Assyria for burial (line 18). Within the structure of the inscription, Panamuwa’s honored burial represents the climax of the rewards conferred upon him by the Assyrian king.

Egyptian Honorary Burial

Evidence for honorary burials is abundant from ancient Egypt.⁴⁶ Most Egyptians were responsible for the construction of their own graves or tombs, a task that many began early in life.⁴⁷ During the Old and Middle Kingdoms, mummification was typically reserved for the royal family and high-ranking persons.⁴⁸ Mummification and the extravagance of one’s tomb, therefore, were an indication of social status.⁴⁹ Yet John Taylor notes: ‘‘At this period [Old and Middle Kingdoms], mummification could be awarded by the king as a favour in recognition of good service or an exemplary act of piety by a subordinate.’’⁵⁰

One of the most moving examples of honorific burial in Egypt comes from the autobiography of Sabni, who lived during the reign of Pepy II (ca. 2278–2184 B.C.E.). This ‘‘autobiography’’ describes Sabni’s trip to Nubia to obtain the body of his father, who apparently had died there while on an expedition. Upon hearing about Sabni’s recovery of his father from Nubia, the king of Egypt was so taken that he gave Sabni’s father an honorary burial place in the necropolis where, according

⁴⁶ For a detailed rendering of Egyptian understandings of death and the afterlife, see Jan Assmann, *Tod und Jenseits im Alten Ägypten* (Munich: Beck, 2001).

⁴⁷ John H. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 170.

⁴⁸ All dates related to the history of Egypt are taken from Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ B. G. Trigger et al. note that the patterns of leadership and status were marked by tomb size, and that ‘‘the hierarchic scaling of tomb size symbolized and reinforced the existing patterns of leadership’’ (*Ancient Egypt: A Social History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 86); see also Wolfgang Helck, ‘‘Soziale Stellung und Grablage: Bemerkungen zur Thebanischen Nekropole,’’ *JESHO* 5 (1962): 225–43; Sigrid Hodel-Hoernes, *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt: Scenes from Private Tombs in New Kingdom Thebes* (trans. David Warburton; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 4.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife*, 76.

to Sabni's account, "never was one of his rank (so) buried [before]."⁵¹ The faithfulness of the son to the Egyptian ideal of being buried in one's homeland seems to have evoked this generous response on the part of Pepy II.⁵²

The *Tale of Sinuhe*, a literary masterpiece from the Middle Kingdom concludes with the claim that Senwosret I provided Sinuhe with a pyramid, funerary equipment, and priests:

A pyramid of stone was built for me, in the midst of the pyramids. The masons who construct the pyramid measured out its foundations; the draughtsman drew in it; the overseer of sculptors carved in it; the overseer of the works which are in the burial grounds busied himself with it. All the equipment to be put in a tomb shaft—its share of these things was made. I was given funerary priests; a funerary demesne was made for me, with fields in it and a garden in its proper place, as is done for a Chief Friend. My image was overlaid with gold, and its kilt with electrum. It is his Majesty who caused this to be done. There is no other lowly man for whom the like was done. I was in the favours of the king's giving, until the day of landing came.⁵³

Sinuhe's burial inside the boundaries of Egypt provides a fitting end to his wanderings among the Asiatics.

But honored burials were not limited to the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Thus, Nebamūn, a courageous and loyal standard-bearer who served a number of kings in the Eighteenth Dynasty, reports in his tomb inscriptions from TT (Theban Tomb) 90 that the king not only took steps "to ensure that he should enjoy an honoured old age in an elegant two-storied house with an inner courtyard shaded by a palm tree," but also gave him the gift of *amakh/amakhou* (lit. "venerable" or "revered"), an honor of burial at the king's expense.⁵⁴

As with ὙΝΩΗ's gift of a funerary stele for the eunuchs in Isa 56:3–5, the Egyptian kings honored faithful servants by provisioning them with commemorative statuary, private tombs, funerary implements, and sometimes even personnel

⁵¹ For a translation of the autobiography of Sabni, see J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (5 vols.; 1906–7; repr., London: Histories and Mysteries of Man, 1998), vol. 1, §§362–74.

⁵² Concerning the Egyptians' greatest horror of dying outside of their homeland, see Assmann, *Tod und Jenseits*, 235.

⁵³ R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42–43.

⁵⁴ For the inscriptions, see Norman de Garis Davies and Nina de Garis Davies, *The Tombs of Two Officials of Tuthmosis the Fourth (nos. 75 and 90)* (Theban Tomb Series, 3rd Memoir; London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1923), pls. 24–29. See also the comments in Pierre Montet, *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great* (1958; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 224.

for the funerary cult. These burials functioned ideologically to exalt or establish the social status of the buried person.⁵⁵

The Stelenreihen of Assur

The erection of stelae bearing the names not only of the royal family (including women) but also of important officials is richly attested in the so-called *Stelenreihen* that Walter Andrae discovered at Aššur.⁵⁶ About 140 stelae were found in an area around one hundred meters long running from east to west, with the oldest dating from the fourteenth century B.C.E. and the latest from the seventh century B.C.E. Some one hundred of the exemplars from the southern area commemorate and honor the names of high state officials (*limmu*). The function of the officials is difficult to discern, since most of the stelae do not bear images and the inscriptions are minimal in length. Moreover, they are not accompanied by graves, which makes their association with burial rites difficult to determine. The majority of the inscriptions begin with *šalam PN* (“image of PN”). The inscribed name and the stelae aggrandize and memorialize the associated person, features present also in the memorials promised to the eunuchs in Isaiah 56.⁵⁷ Peter Miglus suggests that they “may represent the grand *favissa*, a collection of objects placed originally in a temple.”⁵⁸ If so, their placement in the temple would provide an interesting parallel with Isaiah 56, which also indicates that honorific stelae were placed in temples (Isa 56:5). Regardless of their specific social function and symbolic value, the inscribed names make it clear that their general purpose was to represent the individuals whose names they bear and to honor them by preserving their name on a monument.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Martin Fitzenreiter has undertaken an in-depth study of the graves of officials from the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1550–1352 B.C.E.), paying particular attention to the way in which tomb decor reflects their high social status (“Totenverehrung und soziale Repräsentation im thebanischen Beamtengrab der 18. Dynastie,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 22 [1995]: 95–130, esp. 106). Especially relevant are the scenes indicating the close relationship between the official and the king.

⁵⁶ See Andrae, *Die Stelenreihen in Assur* (WVDOG 24; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913). For a discussion of the history of scholarship, see Peter Miglus, “Another Look at the ‘Stelenreihe’ in Assur,” *ZA* 74 (1984): 133–40.

⁵⁷ Isaiah 56 promises faithful eunuchs both a “hand” (i.e., a “monument”) and a “name.”

⁵⁸ See Miglus, “Another Look,” 138.

⁵⁹ See also Jeanny Vorys Canby, “The ‘Stelenreihen’ at Assur, Tell Halaf, and Maššēbôt,” *Iraq* 38 (1976): 126; Alan Millard, *The Eponyms of the Assyrian Empire: 910–612 BC* (SAAS 2; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1994), 11–12.

Neo-Assyrian Land Grants to Eunuchs

Other cases of Neo-Assyrian honorary burial derive from the reign of Ashurbanipal. This evidence is unique in that it also concerns eunuchs who receive honorific burials from the king as a reward for faithful service.⁶⁰ In fact, the Neo-Assyrian tablets are what first led Jacob Wright to begin thinking about Isaiah 56. Four of these tablets preserve the name or title of the grantee (nos. 25, 26, 29, 30). With the exception of a few minor variants, these grants are identical and were probably copied from the same master tablet.⁶¹ Since these grants are largely identical, we will discuss only one exemplar, no. 26, which was given by Ashurbanipal to Nabû-šarru-ušur, a “chief eunuch” (LÚ.GAL—SAG).⁶²

Like other grants from this period, the one given to Nabû-šarru-ušur exempts him from all taxes and duties on his land and personnel.⁶³ In the grant, Nabû-šarru-ušur is lauded as one deserving of kindness and favor, for he “from the [‘succ]ession’ to the exercise of kingship [was d]evoted to the king [his lord], who served before [me in faithfulness], and walk[ed in safety, who grew with a good repute within my palace, and kept guard over my kingship]” (SAA 12, no. 26, lines 11–20). Because of Nabû-šarru-ušur’s exceptional loyalty, Ashurbanipal exempted his fields and his personnel from taxation and duties (line 30-r.8). Ashurbanipal then promises that when Nabû-šarru-ušur “goes to his fate” (*il-la-ku[a-na]šim-ti*; line 20), they will bury him where he wishes. As L. Kataja and R. Whiting, the editors of SAA 12, indicate, the burial presumably occurs in the palace.⁶⁴ The king then takes a number of steps to protect the grave of Nabû-šarru-ušur, so that he will not be disturbed (lines 26–27). For example, the king speaks several curses to the one who might disturb Nabû-šarru-ušur: (lines r.27–31). Finally, the king decrees that neither king nor prince shall change the wording of the tablet (lines r.32–39).

As a reward for his faithfulness to the king, Nabû-šarru-ušur is given an honorific royal burial. Radner goes so far as to suggest that the king is taking on the

⁶⁰ See L. Kataja and R. Whiting, *Grants, Decrees and Gifts of the Neo-Assyrian Period* (SAA 12; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1995), nos. 25–26, 29–34. For the list of relevant texts, see Radner, *Macht des Namens*, 77 n. 358.

⁶¹ Kataja and Whiting, *Grants, Decrees and Gifts*, XXVI. See also J. N. Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants and Decrees* (Studia Pohl: Series Maior 1; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 34.

⁶² This is text no. 10 in Postgate’s study, *Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants and Decrees*.

⁶³ Kataja and Whiting write, “In the Assurbanipal grants on the other hand it is clear that the property is already owned by the grantee and that what is being granted by the king is exemption from all taxes and dues on the land and its personnel” (*Grants, Decrees and Gifts*, XXVI).

⁶⁴ Kataja and Whiting note, “These grants contain another boon that has no precedent, and that is the right of the grantee to be buried wherever he pleases, presumably in the palace, surely a signal honor” (*Grants, Decrees and Gifts*, XXVI).

kispum responsibilities that would normally fall upon the shoulders of a son.⁶⁵ It is tempting to speculate about the possible connections between Isa 56:3–5 and the land grants to Ashurbanipal’s eunuchs, especially since both seem to be specifically fashioned to address the childless status of the eunuchs; however, the chronological distance makes a genetic connection unlikely.

Xenophon

Xenophon the Athenian (ca. 430–354 B.C.E.) provides the last bit of comparative evidence.⁶⁶ The story begins with Cyrus learning about the death of an old friend, Abradatas (see *Cyr.* 7.3.2–5). Having heard that his friend’s widow, Panthea, was in deep grief, Cyrus rushed to the burial site to console her and honor his friend (7.3.6–13). Yet Panthea would not be comforted. Once Cyrus left, she killed herself and died next to her husband’s body (7.3.14). When three of the eunuchs realized what had happened to their mistress, they also killed themselves (7.3.15). A brief interpolation into the narrative notes that “the monument of the eunuchs is still standing; and they say that the names of the husband and wife are inscribed in Assyrian letters upon the slab above; and below, it is said, are three slabs with the inscription the “mace-bearers [i.e., the eunuchs].” The account goes on to say that Cyrus “took care that they [the eunuchs] should find all due honours, and the monument reared over them was, as they say, exceeding great” (7.3.16). Like Isa 56:3–5, Xenophon’s account describes royal honorific funerary monuments that are given in response to incredible acts of devotion.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 56:1–8

Our findings destabilize the problematic interpretation of Isa 56:3–5 as simply a legal abrogation of Deut 23:2–9. The prophet’s address to the eunuchs has little if anything to do with overturning the Deuteronomic text. As noted above, eunuchs were often the victims of negative stereotyping in the Persian period, and Isa 56:3–5 may have been intended to combat negative stereotypes against eunuchs.

With respect to both the *Sitz im Leben* and *Sitz im Buch* of our text, eunuchs probably represent a small but significant demographic during the Second Temple period.⁶⁷ Concerning the *Sitz im Leben*, as noted above, the Achaemenid court

⁶⁵ Radner, *Macht des Namens*, 77.

⁶⁶ For a helpful discussion of this text, and the much later *De Dea Syria*, attributed to Lucian, in light of Isa 56:3–5 and 2 Sam 18:18, see Grottanelli, “Faithful Bodies,” 414.

⁶⁷ During the First Temple period, eunuchs are attested in the courts of both Israelian and Judahite kings, where their employment may have been influenced by Neo-Assyrian practices. The following references use the term סריס (1 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 22:9; 2 Kgs 8:6; 9:32; 23:11; 24:12, 15; 25:19; Jer 29:2; 34:19; 38:7). Some evidence exists, however, indicating that סריס did not refer

employed many eunuchs, harvesting them from among the boys of all their subject peoples.⁶⁸ Biblical literature also attests to the use of (young) men from Judah as eunuchs in Babylonian courts (see 2 Kgs 20:18; 24:12, 15; Isa 39:7).⁶⁹

Based on our survey of sources, this population was often stigmatized and represented as being morally and sexually distorted. For unknown reasons, Xenophon seems to confront this stereotype directly, by offering an alternative representation of the eunuchs as immensely loyal. Some scholars have even argued that Xenophon's positive depictions of eunuchs may have been an intentional response to the largely negative view of eunuchs found elsewhere. Pierre Briant, for instance, writes, "[Xenophon's] Cyrus was always anxious for his security and chose to entrust it to eunuchs. He explains this with the aid of arguments that seem to be designed to refute point by point the disastrous image these people had in Greece."⁷⁰ Is it possible that Trito-Isaiah, like Xenophon, was trying to combat negative stereotypes of eunuchs in the Persian period? The book of Esther, which also depicts eunuchs in treacherous roles, seems to participate in this negative assumption about eunuchs (see Esth 2:21–23). By addressing the eunuchs' lament, Trito-Isaiah elevates their status, demonstrating not only to the eunuchs but also to his fellow Jews that יהוה has a deep concern for the eunuchs and their plight.

The eunuch's *cri de cœur* may express a larger perspective: "I am just a dried-up tree" would certainly have resonated with the community's anxiety about its own future.⁷¹ Its arboreal imagery spans a thematic bridge back to the remnant motif in the Isaiah Memoir.

exclusively to eunuchs (see, e.g., Gen 37:36, where Potiphar is described as a סריס). For a discussion of סריס, see Tadmor, "Was the Biblical *sārīs* a Eunuch?" 317–26.

⁶⁸ E.g., Herodotus (*Hist.* 3.2) claims that five hundred Babylonian boys were sent yearly to the Persian court to serve there as eunuchs. One may compare this to the levy of non-Muslim boys for soldiers through the *devşirme* system in the Ottoman empire (from the fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century). See Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire: 1700–1922* (New Approaches to European History 17; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98–100.

⁶⁹ The Judahite boys in Daniel 1, for example, are probably eunuchs. Their caretaker and teacher, who is identified by two titles (שר הסריסים and רב סריסיו), may be the chief eunuch, which suggests that the boys were being trained in a similar vocation. Both titles probably apply to the same person (see John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 140). For the Neo-Assyrian equivalent of these titles, see Grayson, "Eunuchs in Power," 96; and Deller, "Assyrian Eunuchs," 304–6. Rabbinic sources (e.g., *b. Sanh.* 93b) and Christian sources (e.g., the tenth-century Christian writer Symeon Metaphrastes; see Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 92–98) portray Daniel and the other youths as eunuchs.

⁷⁰ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 270.

⁷¹ The collective dimensions of Isa 56:3–5 are perhaps most poignantly reflected in the use of the hendiadys *Yad Vashem* for the name of Israel's official memorial in Jerusalem to the victims of the Holocaust.

I asked, "How long, my Lord?" And he replied: "Till towns lie waste without inhabitants, and houses without people, and the ground lies waste and desolate. For YHWH will banish the population. And deserted sites are many in the midst of the land. But while a tenth part yet remains in it, it shall repent. It shall be ravaged like the terebinth and the oak, of which a stump is left when they are felled. Its stump shall be a holy seed." (Isa 6:11–13)⁷²

The remnant community described in Isaiah 6, like the eunuch, is a mutilated tree, whose growth has been stunted by a violent act of truncation. Arboreal and botanical imagery pervades Isaiah and often metaphorically represents Israel, its leaders, and its future (e.g., Isa 5:1–7; 11:1–12; 27:2–6; 41:17–20; 65:22).⁷³ These and other Isaianic references evoke the *collective* significance of the individual eunuch and his fate in Isaiah 56 and prompt the reader to associate the fate of the eunuch more closely with the fate of the community.⁷⁴

Finally, we have seen that eunuchs, as bodily extensions of the king, often represent imperial rule.⁷⁵ Similar to Judean eunuchs in the service of a foreign king, the community as a whole was often torn between loyalties to the empire, on the

⁷² By referring to the Isaiah Memoir, we are not suggesting that 6:11–13 belongs to an older document that can be traced to the historical figure of Isaiah. Our intention is rather to show how the authors of Isaiah introduced the book's major *literary* trajectories in this pivotal early section of the book (vv. 11–13 seem to constitute, at least in part, redactional additions to the chapter). On the connection between Isaiah 56 and the Isaiah Memoir, see Marvin A. Sweeney, "Prophetic Exegesis in Isaiah 65–66," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* (ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans; 2 vols.; VTSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:467–68. For the place of our text within the book of Isaiah as a whole, see Odil Hannes Steck, *Studien zu Tritoesaja* (BZAW 203; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 224–48 et passim, as well as Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 405–11.

⁷³ As for the connections to Isaiah 11, both texts deal with YHWH's holy mountain (11:9; 56:7), the gathering of the dispersed (11:10, 12, 16; 56:7–8), and, if one expands 56:1–8 to include v. 9, the feeding of animals (see Isa 11:7; 56:9). See de Hoop, "Interpretation of Isaiah 56:1–9," 676–77; and W. A. M. Beuken, "Isa. 56:9–57:13—An Example of the Isaianic Legacy of Tritoesaja," in *Tradition and Re-interpretation in Jewish and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honour of Jürgen C. H. Lebram* [ed. Jan Willem van Henten et al.; SPB 36; Leiden: Brill, 1986], 50–51).

⁷⁴ In addition, the eunuch bears resemblance to the figures of Abraham and Sarah in Isa 51:2. Although these ancestors of Israel were originally just "one," YHWH blessed and multiplied them. For the juxtaposition of the barren woman and the faithful eunuch, see Wis 3:13–15 and de Hoop, "Interpretation of Isaiah 56:1–9," 693. All these texts relate to Israel's desire to multiply and flourish as a people. As such, they may be brought to bear on Isaiah 56—in connection not only with the eunuchs but also with the second group, the בני הנכר ("foreigners"). For by "joining themselves" to YHWH (Isa 56:3, 6), who "gathers to the outcasts of Israel more than those who have already been gathered" (v. 8), these newcomers directly contribute to Israel's revivification and growth as a verdant tree.

⁷⁵ The relationship between eunuchs and imperial authority is comparable to the figure of the "court Jew," whose biblical predecessors are found in the Joseph story, the Esther scroll, Daniel, 1 Esdras, and Ezra-Nehemiah.

one hand, and the demands of YHWH , on the other. Consequently, the oracle in Isaiah 56 makes the divine promise available to all Judahites, though its fulfillment is contingent on strict Sabbath observance, holding fast to the covenant, and doing “what pleases” the deity. Therefore, if our text seeks to overrule or transform anything, it is not pentateuchal law but imperial ideology. YHWH ’s promise to his faithful eunuchs turns a major symbol of royal power on its head by transferring absolute devotion to the empire, which eunuchs both symbolize and physically embody, to fidelity to YHWH . Similarly, Isaiah 56 replaces the imperial palace with the temple and city of Jerusalem, as the locus of the מִשְׁכָּן . By establishing a monument for his eunuchs, the deity supersedes the role of the foreign king.⁷⁶ This shift corresponds to the way the book of Isaiah, and especially the chapters conventionally assigned to Deutero/Trito-Isaiah, remap imperial space so that Zion and its temple represent the seat of (divine) power to which the nations of the earth bring their service (see esp. Isa 2:1–4; 60).⁷⁷

⁷⁶ The combination of the city walls and the temple in our passage is part of the expansion of the sanctuary’s holiness to the city as a whole (see, e.g., Neh 3:1; 11:1–2; 12:27–43; Isa 48:2; 52:1; Dan 9:24).

⁷⁷ Many other biblical texts present Zion as YHWH ’s imperial capital (e.g., Psalms 46; 48; 76; Isa 61:1–9; Jer 3:14, 16–18; Hag 2:6–9; Zech 2:14–17; 8:20–23; 14:16–21). On Isaiah 60 and its conceptual proximity to Persian imperial art, see Brent Strawn, “A World under Control: Isaiah 60 and the Apadana Reliefs from Persepolis,” in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. Jon L. Berquist; SemeiaSt 50; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 85–116.