

IAN KINMAN

Thinking with Eunuchs

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*
666

Mohr Siebeck

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Ian Kinman

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Reading Matthew 19:12 in the First Century

Mohr Siebeck

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FOR KATHRYN
אֶשֶׁת־חַיִּל: *I found you*

Preface

As far back as the end of the second century, some early Christians began to read the eunuchs of Matthew 19:12 as a simple cypher for celibacy. Many contemporary readings have challenged this reading by noting that eunuchs would have been a problematic exemplar for celibacy, considering that the trope of the eunuch operative at the time of the writing of Matthew's Gospel was of a hyper-sexualized character, frequently used as a rhetorical *foil* for celibacy, not a model. Despite this, modern biblical exegesis of this passage remains dependent on one oddly uninterrogated presumption: that the eunuchs in question still should be seen a model for discipleship. According to this presumption, the exegetical task concerning the passage is therefore to discern the otherwise enigmatic aspect of discipleship that the eunuchs are modeling. It is the argument of this book that such an interpretive approach is misguided and anachronistic to the late first century: eunuchs were not seen by the author of Matthew's Gospel as a model, but an anti-type.

With a review of numerous examples of first- and second- century literature of the ancient Mediterranean world, and a detailed comparative exegesis of the Gospel of Matthew, I demonstrate how Matthew 19:12 presents eunuchs as an example of those who are not fruitful of the word of the kingdom, specifically in the context of Jesus's challenging teachings on divorce and marriage. Instead, to use the language of Isaiah 56:3, they are "withered." As such, eunuchs represent not an illustration of how one is to live in Matthew's ἐκκλησία, but a caution against those who have an incomplete acceptance of living out the challenging word of the kingdom of heaven.

This book is developed from my Fordham University dissertation, *The Eunuch as a Rhetorical Trope in Matthew 19 and its Afterlife in Early Christianity*, which was successfully defended in 2021. It was invaluabley directed by Dr. Benjamin Dunning of Harvard Divinity School, with outstanding support from Dr. Sarit Kattan Gribetz of Yale University's Department of Religious Studies and Dr. Larry Welborn of Fordham University's Department of Theology. Additional excellent support was provided by Dr. Karina Martin Hogan and Dr. Michael Peppard, both of Fordham University's Department of Theology.

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Abbreviations

AB	Analecta Bollandiana
AcT	Acta Theologica
AJA	American Journal of Archeology
AJP	American Journal of Philology
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
APB	Acta Patristica et Byzantina
AR	Archiv für Religionswissenschaft
ASB	Archives of Sexual Behavior
ASH	Ancient Society and History
AThR	Anglican Theological Review
BCH	Bulletin de correspondance hellénique
BDAG	A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature
BDB	A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
BFC	Bollettino Di Filologia Classica
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
BIBR	Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome
BICS	Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies
BJRL	Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
BMCR	Bryn Mawr Classical Review
BN	Biblische Notizen
BSac	Bibliotheca Sacra
BT	Bible Translator
BTB	Biblical Theological Bulletin
ByzF	Byzantinische Forschungen
CaCu	Canon & Culture
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CH	Church History
CJ	Classical Journal
ClAnt	Classical Antiquity
CP	Classical Philology
CTJ	Calvin Theological Journal
CTQ	Concordia Theological Quarterly
CW	Classical World
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CurBR	Currents in Biblical Research
CurTM	Currents in Theology and Mission

DSD	Dead Sea Discoveries
EgT	<i>eglise et théologie</i>
Eur.	Jud. European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe
GB	Grazer Beiträge
GR	Greece and Rome
HeyJ	Heythrop Journal
Historia	Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte
HR	History of Religions
HSCP	Harvard Studies in Classical Philology
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
IrJur	Irish Jurist
JAAR	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JAJ	Journal of Ancient Judaism
JAPLF	Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JBQ	Jewish Bible Quarterly
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JFSR	Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JHI	Journal of the History of Ideas
J Hist Biol	Journal of the History of Biology
JHS	Journal of Hellenic Studies
JHistSex	Journal of the History of Sexuality
JMEMS	Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies
JNCI	Journal of the National Cancer Institute
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JR	Journal of Religion
JRAS	The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JSHJ	Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period
JSM	Journal of Sexual Medicine
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSP	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha
JSQ	Jewish Studies Quarterly
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
Klio	Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte
L&T	Literature and Theology
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LS	Louvain Studies
LSJ	Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek/English Lexicon
LV	Lumen Vitae
MAAR	Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome
MDAI	Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts
MH	Museum Helveticum
MSJ	Master's Seminary Journal

NovT	Novum Testamentum
NTS	New Testament Studies
Numen	Numen: International Review for the History of Religion
OpAthRom	Opuscula: Annual of the Swedish Institutes at Athens and Rome
OrChrAn	Orientalia Christiania Periodica
PAAJR	Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research
PCPhS	Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society
PG	Patrologia Graeca
Phil	Philologus
PIBA	Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association
PL	Patrologia Latina
PRSt	Perspectives in Religious Studies
QUCC	Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica
R&T	Religion and Theology
RB	Revue Biblique
ResQ	Restoration Quarterly
RevQ	Revue de Qumran
RLAC	Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum
RHR	Revue de l'histoire des religions
RTL	Revue théologique de Louvain
SAC	Studi di Antichità Christiana
SC	Sources Chrésiennes
SEÅ	Svensk exegetisk årsbok
SNTSU	Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt
SO	Symbolae Osloenses
SPhilo	Studia Philonica
SPhiloA	Studia Philonica Annual
TAPA	Transactions of the American Philological Society
TAPS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
TJ	Trinity Journal
TS	Theological Studies
TynBul	Tyndale Bulletin
VC	Vigiliae Christianae
VCSup	Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae
VT	Vetus Testamentum
WW	Word and World
YES	Yearbook of English Studies
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZNW	Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche
ZTK	Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche

Introduction

Matthew's Enigmatic Eunuchs

A. The Challenge

While the counter-proposition [a concession of guilt] does not indeed apply here [concerning relative importance], it is still frequently found in other questions; for instance, someone kills a eunuch with the discovery of his wife as an adulterer (ὅτιον εὐνοῦχόν τις εὐρὼν ἐπὶ τῇ γυναικὶ ὥς μοιχὸν ἀπέκτεινε) and he flees the consequence of murder. After the question of who an adulterer is has been completed on account of the points settled beforehand, the killer will make a counterclaim that the eunuch was worthy of punishment. Necessarily the objection will follow, that he should have brought the man to trial and charged him; and once the objection has been found, there will also be a counter-proposition, that the murder was appropriate.¹

In the latter half of the second century CE, likely during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Hermogenes of Tarsus wrote a linguistic guidebook that included a simple rhetorical example concerning legal definitions and terms. In the example above quoted from that guidebook, a husband finds his wife in bed with a eunuch and kills the perceived adulterer, an act theoretically permissible under Roman law.² Yet the husband is charged under the law with murder. Why? Presumably the charge of homicide leads from the understanding that a eunuch is physically incapable of committing adultery, so the husband clearly should be punished for an unwarranted murder. According to the above illustration, this is at least how Hermogenes imagined that the courts would see it. Yet the function of the rhetorical example is to demonstrate that such a legal presumption is possibly incorrect and needs interrogation. After all, the husband did indeed see a eunuch committing adultery with his wife, so the courts are perhaps wrong in their interpretation. Hence, “there will also be a counter-proposition, that the murder was appropriate.”³

¹ Hermogenes, *Opera*, edited by Hugo Rabe (Leipzig: B.G. Teubneri, 1913), 60–61. Translation by the author, with guidance from: Hermogenes, *On Issues: Strategies of Argument in Later Greek Rhetoric*, tr. Malcolm Heath (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 44.

² According to Julius Paulus, *Opinions* 2.26.4–7, Roman law allowed a husband to murder an adulterer if the perpetrator was unambiguously caught in flagrante in the husband's own house, and if the perpetrator also was of a certain social status.

³ Maud Gleason refers to this passage in Hermogenes's handbook as an example of “effeminacy shielding a guilty individual from punishment.” Maud Gleason, *Making Men:*

In the last thirty years, scholars have given the eunuch in Greco-Roman and Jewish antiquity growing attention, as they have begun to recognize the eunuch as a trope and a figure that troubles modern preconceptions about gender and sexuality in antiquity.⁴ Their work demonstrates the insufficiency of con-

Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 135, n. 15.

⁴ Prominent texts in the field include Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), all of which reference the classic article by Wayne Meeks, "Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *HR* 13 (1974): 165–208. For additional studies on eunuchs in Greco-Roman antiquity see also Baudouin De Gaiffier, "Palatins et eunuques dans quelques documents hagiographiques," *AB* 75 (1957): 17–46; Keith Hopkins, "Eunuchs in Politics in the Later Roman Empire," *PCPhS* 189 (1963): 62–80; Peter Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980); Hannelore Gauster, "Zu Hermaphroditen-Darstellungen in der Antike," in *Frauen, Weiblichkeit, Schrift*, ed. Renate Berger (Berlin: Argument-Verlag, 1985), 79–98; Pierre-René Côté, "Les Eunuques Pour le Royaume," *EgT* 17 (1986): 321–334; P. Boulhol and I. Cochelin, "La réhabilitation de l'eunuque dans l'hagiographie antique (IVe–VIIe siècles)," *SAC* 48 (1992): 49–76; Walter Stevenson, "The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity," *JHistSex* 5 (1995): 495–511; Jacqueline Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium: Or, How, When, and Why to Slander a Eunuch* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kathryn M. Ringrose, "Eunuchs as Cultural Mediators," *ByzF* 23 (1996): 75–93; Liz James, ed. *Women, Men, and Eunuchs: Gender and Byzantium* (New York: Routledge, 1997); George Sidéris, "Eunuques et Pouvoir à Byzance IVe–VIIe Siècle" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Sorbonne University, 2001); Gary Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, tr. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); George Sidéris, "Eunuchs of Light: Power, Ceremonial and Positive Representations of Eunuchs in Byzantium (4th–12th centuries)," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (London: Duckworth, 2002), 161–176; Gillian Walker, "Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven," *Studies in Gender & Sexuality* 5 (2004): 233–258; J. David Hester, "Queers on Account of the Kingdom of Heaven: Rhetorical Constructions of the Eunuch," *Scriptura* 90 (2005): 809–823; Willi Braun, "Virgins, Eunuchs, Empire," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 21 (2010): 19–38; Sarra Lev, "They Treat Him as a Man and See Him as a Woman: The Tannaitic Understanding of the Congenital Eunuch," *JSQ* 17 (2010): 213–243; Susannah Cornwall, ed., *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text, and Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

One monograph, a revised dissertation on the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, has also exegeted the passage with a reliance on contemporary queer theory: see Sean Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). Another, unpublished, dissertation provides a broad survey of references to the eunuch in the ancient world and in early Christianity, with a focus on the passage of Matthew 19:12, seeking to demonstrate the inadequacy of reading the eunuch solely as a trope for celibacy. See Gary R. Brower, "Ambivalent Bodies: Making Christian Eunuchs" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke Uni-

tional renderings of the eunuch as a celibate figure incapable of sex or sexuality, as demonstrated by the rhetorical example above. Contesting that a eunuch is incapable of adultery was apparently so mundane as to merit inclusion as a definitional example in a rhetorical textbook.

Clearly the eunuch was an ambiguous figure. And writers in the ancient Mediterranean world struggled with their recognition of eunuchs' complexities, their physicalities, their social locations, and how they were portrayed in the literature of their time. Clement of Alexandria, writing at the very beginning of the third century CE, grappled with the eunuch's intersecting spectrums of gender, class, and religion when he challenged the followers of Basilides and their theology of strict celibacy. Clement stresses that marriage is not only permitted but is divinely ordained, though he allows that God has blessed some with permanent celibacy and refers to those who make that choice as eunuchs, appropriating the Basilideans' own language for such a way of life.⁵ Later in the same writing, however, he also has this to say about eunuchs:

A eunuch, therefore, is not the one who has been castrated (ὁ κατηναγκασμένος τὰ μόρια – literally 'fractured of his member'), and not even the one who calls himself unmarried, but the one who is unproductive of truth (ἄγονος ἀληθείας).⁶

Clement finds it rhetorically useful to appropriate the Basilidean trope of the eunuch as a celibate person, yet at the same time he must contend with a broader set of conflicting cultural presumptions undergirding such a multivalent figure. And he needs to address these challenges in the context of the legacy of an enigmatic scriptural passage that prompted both his writings as well as those of his opponents:

For there are eunuchs who were born that way from the mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs owing to the kingdom of heaven. Whoever is able to receive [this], let him receive it. (Matthew 19:12)

Modern biblical exegesis of Matthew 19:12 also must surmount the inertia of a legacy of presumptions, from the nineteenth century and much earlier, that

versity, 1996). A third, also unpublished, dissertation, focuses on later antiquity, though spends much time documenting sources from the first and second centuries, CE. See Lindsey Mercer, "Of Monks and Monsters: 'Voluntary Eunuchs' and the Project of Male Celibacy in the Fifth Century" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 2018)

⁵ "[W]e both on the one hand consider blessed those eunuchs who have been given this by God, and simultaneously on the other hand marvel at monogamy, the one divine marriage." Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 3.1.4.4.

⁶ *Miscellanies* 3.15.99.1. For more on Clement of Alexandria and his writings on eunuchs, see the epilogue, below.

the eunuch represents a simple cypher for 'celibacy'.⁷ As a result, most contemporary biblical scholarship still reads the eunuchs of Matthew 19:12 simi-

⁷ Biblical commentaries prior to World War II vary in the specifics of interpreting the passage, but all rely on the presumption that eunuchs are figures representing celibacy. See the following representative examples: "'He that can take it, let him take it' are not words without commendation for perpetual celibacy, nor are they full of reproach for the celibacy of the priesthood, nor are they without the implicit promise of the gift of perpetual celibacy for some at least; but they stir us up to struggle for this gift as the better and securer path to the kingdom. Since perpetual virginity is not enjoined by Jesus, but only recommended, we have here a clear distinction between evangelical counsel and precept." Anthony John Maas, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew: With an Explanatory and Critical Commentary* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1898), 202. "The disciples found difficulty in the pure and binding conditions of marriage laid down by Christ, and saw no escape save in abstaining from marriage like the Essenes of that day" A. Carr, *The Gospel According to St Matthew, with Maps, Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 228. "[...] who have made themselves, etc. – i. e., who have chosen celibacy as the more perfect state of life." Madame Cecilia, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew, with Introduction and Annotations* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1906), 314. "[...] If the cause or reason of divorce between man and wife be so, i. e., if it is to be limited to unchaste acts, it is better not to marry, because marriage with a woman of bad temper or malicious tongue, e.g., is in that case an intolerable burden which cannot be thrown off [...] so there are some who have made themselves spiritual eunuchs, i. e., have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom, i. e. because the calls of religious duty have made marriage inexpedient." Willoughby Charles Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 205–206. "Nevertheless, it may be that He thought it well to justify His own example and that of the Baptist. Marriage was instituted by God for the good of mankind, and is open to all. But no one is obliged to marry, and there are some who believe that they can live more spiritual lives by remaining single." Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (New York: MacMillan, 1915), 276. "[...] the Lord may be referring to the fact that some of the disciples had given up thoughts of marriage in order to follow Him. St. Peter probably left his wife during the period in which he followed Jesus (Luke 18:28 f.), though she accompanied him afterwards (1 Cor 9:5); tradition held the apostle John to be a celibate (Jerome), and for Jesus himself also self-dedication to His Father's business may possibly have involved a conscious act of abnegation." Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London: Robert Scott Roxburghe House Paternoster Row, 1915), 261. "[...] there are those who have cut off their own possibilities of marriage for the kingdom's sake. Such are men like St. Paul and not a few missionaries ever since, besides others, who have denied themselves the holiest and sweetest of human relationships for the love of God or man. But the demand for this voluntary mutilation of life is addressed only to a few [...] Eunuch literally means 'lord of the bedchamber' such, being slaves set over the harem, were emasculated and are still so treated in Muhammadan lands. The most powerful of physical impulses, that which is worshipped by the Hindu more than any other divinity, is to be under the moral control of Christ's disciples for the purposes of His kingdom." H. U. Stanton, *Weitbrecht, The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919), 484–485. "Thus while Jesus intimates that celibacy is allowable he does not urge it upon his followers, and he considers it expedi-

larly, and the passage itself as a call for celibacy as a model of discipleship. Many, therefore, see celibacy as an ideal that replaces or surpasses marriage, a reading that has long dominated much of modern biblical scholarship and religious teachings.⁸ I will argue, however, that a major problem with that reading is how it essentially contradicts Jesus's teaching in 19:3–9 that marriage is a primary intention for God's creation.⁹ Others, then, see celibacy as a state that

ent, only in unusual cases." Charles Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1929), 154. "But there can be no doubt that Matthew represents the movement towards Catholicism in the early church [...]" F. W. Green, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew in the Revised Version with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 2.

⁸ "[T]he clause 'for the kingdom of heaven' indicates not the absolute necessity of celibacy in order to enter the kingdom, but the greater safety and ease of entering on account of the celibacy [...]" Maas, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 202. The eunuchs are those "who have made themselves, etc., – i. e., who have chosen celibacy as the more perfect state of life." Cecilia, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 314. See also Joseph Rickaby, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London: Burns & Oates, 1910), 153–154; McNeile, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 217; Herman Cladder, *In the Fullness of Time: The Gospel of St. Matthew Explained*, tr. Godfrey J. Schulte (Saint Louis: B. Herder, 1925), 255 (who notes that "The noblest fruit of Christian married life is not to give children to parents, to the family and human society, but to bring forth children of God."); Marie Joseph LaGrange, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1927), 371–372 (who argues that the final class of eunuchs are a direct reference to John the Baptist and Jesus himself); Theodore H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), 159–160; Green, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 217; Chanoine Max Overney, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu: Traduction sur le Texte Grec avec Commentaires et Notes Finales* (Fribourg en Suisse: Éditions de L'Imprimerie St-Paul, 1944), 171–172; R. P. P. Benoit, *L'Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1950), 114; David M. Stanley, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1960), 64; Paul Gaechter, *Das Matthäus Evangelium* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1962), 617–618; Karl Staab, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1963), 106; Alexander Jones, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: A Text and Commentary for Students* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), 217; Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple: A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19.13–12 [sic] and 1. Cor. 11.3–16* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1965), 148–152; Heinrich Baltensweiler, *Die Ehe im Neuen Testament* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1967), 106–108; Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 429; Wolfgang Trilling, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 112; Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982), 105; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 470; Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2000), 203; W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 3.21; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 724; and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 274–276.

⁹ "[Marriage] is an essential part of the Creator's plan, and attempts to thwart it, either by indulging in promiscuous sexual intercourse, or by asceticism and enforced celibacy, or

can coexist with marriage – similar to how Clement might see it – without necessarily relegating marriage to a second class of discipleship.¹⁰ More re-

by unnatural vice, or by attempts to break up marriages where the unity that God has in mind is being realized, are all contrary to the divine will.” Randolph V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 180.

¹⁰ It has long been recognized that seeing this passage as indicating that celibacy is preferable to marriage leads to a “four legs good, two legs better” tiered level of discipleship, a conclusion not supported by the rest of the Gospel. “What a fatal blow would have been given to the world’s happiness and the world’s morality, had He assented to their rash conclusion!... These [the three different types of eunuchs] were not better than others, but only different. It was the duty of some to marry and serve God in the wedded state; it might be the duty of others not to marry, and so to serve God in the celibate state.” Frederic William Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1874), 471–472. “Marriage was instituted by God for the good of mankind, and is open to all. But no one is obliged to marry, and there are some who believe that they can live more spiritual lives by remaining single.” Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary*, 260–261. See also Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus: Seine Sprache, seine Zeit, seine Selbständigkeit* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948), 573; G. E. P. Cox, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: SCM, 1952), 123; Cyril C. Martindale, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, with an Introduction and Commentary* (Westminster: Newman, 1957), 142; Floyd Vivian Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 207; A. W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 145; J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (London: Penguin, 1963), 311; Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 261; Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 175; Quentin Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 346; Gerd Theissen, “Wanderradikalismus: Literatursoziologische Aspekte der Überlieferung von Worten Jesu im Urchristentum,” *ZTK* 70 (1973), 250 (who argues that the passage legitimizes ascetic lifestyles of “wandering charismatics”); Pierre Bonnard, *L’Évangile selon St. Matthieu* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1982), 284 (who argues that if some members of the community can be eunuchs by force or by choice, then the disciples can certainly deal with the divorce teaching); Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 381–383; William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 207; Francis J. Moloney, “Matthew 19:3–12 and Celibacy: A Redactional and Form Critical Study,” *JSNT* 2 (1979): 42–49; Heth, William, and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 45–72; William Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage: Recovering the Biblical View* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 153 (who wryly summarizes his argument as “the rules-of using-the-‘plumbing’ view”: the teaching on divorce does not apply “to those who are by birth, force, or choice not using the ‘plumbing’”); Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 42–43; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 154–156; Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 274–276; Dale C. Allison, Jr., “Divorce, Celibacy and Joseph (Matthew 1:18–25 and 19:1–12),” *JSNT* 49 (1993): 5; Douglas R. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 223; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 550; Daniel Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville:

cently, there has been a shift to see celibacy not as an alternative to marriage, but as an illustration that unfortunately divorced disciples should not remarry.¹¹

This notion of the eunuch as a cypher for celibacy carries with it a set of assumptions requiring critical interrogation. Such assumptions include the following: that the eunuch is a self-evident and clearly defined category that was relevant in the ancient world; that the definitional parameters of such a category are sufficiently recoverable to enable an informed reading of the text; that our modern understanding of the eunuch has some purchase on the ancient world in ways that avoid anachronism; and that ancient references to the eunuch might still have some significant relevance today. A brief survey of modern commentaries on Matthew showcases the operation of the assumptions, insofar as the commentaries offer divergent appraisals of the eunuch's status – sometimes exalted, other times demeaned – in ways that depend uncritically on whatever definition is being assumed.¹² This exegetical lacuna, I contend,

Abingdon, 1997), 147; Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 380–382; Yordan Kalev Zhekov, *Defining the New Testament Logia on Divorce and Remarriage in a Pluralistic Context* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 134–136; Wilhelmus Johannes Cornelis Weren, *Studies in Matthew's Gospel: Literary Design, Intertextuality, and Social Setting* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 159–160; and R. Jarrett Van Tine, “Castration for the Kingdom and Avoiding the *aitia* of Adultery (Matthew 19:10–12),” *JBL* 137 (2018): 399–418.

¹¹ See an early argument for this theory in Jacques Dupont, *Mariage et Divorce dans L'Évangile: Matthieu 19, 3–12 et Parallèles* (Bruges: Abbaye de Saint-André, 1959), 191–220. See also Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs,” 335–358; Gundry, *Matthew*, 381–383; Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties*, 195–199; Warren Carter, *Households and Discipleship. A Study of Matthew 19–20* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the New Testament, 1994), 69–72; and Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 500.

¹² Cf. “To us the use of ‘eunuch’ language seems unhelpfully extreme when talking about those who could marry but choose not to do so, and the fivefold repetition of the word (the noun ‘eunuch’ three times and the verb ‘to make a eunuch’ twice) within this one verse makes it the more uncomfortable. But the word would have been no less offensive in first-century Jewish culture, in which eunuchs were the object of pity, if not of horror. The choice of this striking metaphor perhaps reflects a culture where marriage and the procreation of children were so much taken for granted as the norm that strong language is needed to question that assumption. The ‘abnormality’ in that culture of a man’s not being married meant that there was little room in popular thinking for a middle way between marriage and being a eunuch. Jesus’ saying is framed against that black and white background.” France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 724. Yet: “The eunuch was for many centuries a well-recognized (and for obvious reasons well-trusted) figure in Near and Far Eastern society.” W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 227. Both statements can be historically supported – and demonstrate the complexity of the role of a eunuch in ancient society – but in neither case do the authors acknowledge such complexity.

demonstrates the need for further analysis of the social, historical, and linguistic complexities at play in the passage.¹³

As others have argued – and I will also argue below – eunuchs are also a problematic exemplar for celibacy.¹⁴ In antiquity, eunuchs do not procreate, but they are not celibate: quite the opposite, as will be demonstrated, for the character of the eunuch is a highly sexualized creature that is even deployed rhetorically as a *foil* to illustrate celibacy as a virtue. Therefore, I argue, one should push past seeing the figure of the eunuch in Matthew 19:12 as signifying only a single notion of celibacy and functioning only in the context of the preceding pericope on marriage and divorce.¹⁵ One risks neglecting potentially

¹³ Despite these complexities, many commentators offer readings in which a single presumed signification of the eunuch functions as the foundation for discerning the ‘meaning’ of the passage: “[...] it is possible that the saying in this verse has been attracted to its present context as being loosely associated with a discussion on marriage. In reality, only two classes of men are being described here – those physically incapable of marriage, either from birth or from being rendered so by others, and those who while at one time physically capable of marriage have renounced that state either by self-mutilation or voluntary celibacy.” Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 227. Also: “In addition to the two sorts of eunuchs just introduced here there is a third type, one accounted for only by religion. Members of this class are not literal castrates nor impotent by nature. They are indeed unmarried, but not because they cannot take a wife but rather because they will not – because the duty placed on them by the kingdom of heaven is such that it is best discharged outside the confines of marriage.” Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 3:23. Also: “The third member of the ‘eunuch saying’ supplies the proper motivation for celibacy – dedication to the kingdom of heaven.” Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 274. “If to ‘make oneself a eunuch’ is not to be understood literally [...] it should probably be understood along the lines of some modern versions, ‘to renounce marriage’ (NIV, REB), ‘do not marry’ (GNB). The first two categories were incapable of marriage; this third group represents those who have voluntarily chosen celibacy.” France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 725. In all cases, these are from the concluding paragraphs commenting on the passage.

¹⁴ See Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality* (London: A. Deutsch, 1990), 22–30 for an aggressive argument against eunuchs being a signifier of celibacy. Hester also notes, “[i]t seems odd, therefore, that the ‘simple and straightforward’ exegesis of the eunuch logion of Matthew today would view the eunuch as a symbol of sexual chastity and celibacy. Clearly eunuchs were widely perceived as neither chaste nor celibate, but highly sexual and sexed beings.” James D. Hester, “Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities,” *JSNT* 28 (2005): 24. See Susanna Asikainen, “‘Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven’: Matthew and Subordinated Masculinities,” in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 170, note 12 for a list of contemporary scholars who still see eunuchs as “obviously” representing celibacy.

¹⁵ This relationship is actually fraught, as most witnesses of Matthew 19:11 say “not everyone can accept this saying [τὸν λόγον τοῦτον].” At issue is the question of which saying is in fact ‘this saying’: is it verses 4–9, especially verse 9; is it verse 10, the disciples’ response; or is it what follows, verse 12 and the eunuchs saying? If the demonstrative pronoun refers back to verses 4–9, then ‘this saying’ may be invoking the understanding of marriage

broadest and more robust readings of the passage by treating the eunuch singularly as one who never marries, despite evidence to the contrary;¹⁶ who is always and entirely celibate, despite the eunuch's attested function in harems to please royal women and those in elite households; and who is incapable of having children, despite the eunuch's ability to adopt under Roman law.¹⁷ And, I further argue, one benefits by interrogating the broader context of the passage, not just looking to the previous pericope on marriage and divorce, but also to the following pericope on the blessing of children, as well as the larger context of Matthew's conceptions of fertility and procreation operative throughout the Gospel.

Such observations have led to arguments that eunuchs must signify, either in the mind of the Matthean assembly or in the contemporary mind, some positive aspect of discipleship other than a form of celibacy. In these readings, eunuchs often represent liminal states, a challenge to simple gender binaries, and / or a related challenge to patriarchal ideologies.¹⁸ These interpretations

in the Matthean community. If the pronoun refers back specifically to what the disciples have said immediately prior to verse 10, then Jesus is making a direct comment on their response, perhaps agreeing with them. If it is referring to verse 12, then the logical connection between the eunuchs saying and the previous divorce pericope becomes more tenuous. For more, see chapter six below.

¹⁶ Potiphar, whose wife attempts to seduce Joseph, in Genesis 39 is a סרִיס, which in most modern translations is translated as 'court official' in this passage; yet in most other Hebrew Bible passages, the word clearly means 'eunuch'.

¹⁷ *The Rules of Ulpian* 3:8:5–6 specifically mentions eunuchs' legal ability to adopt children: "Males, as well as females, can be adopted by the authority of the Prætor or Governor of a province; and this applies to those who are under and above the age of puberty. Women, however, cannot be arrogated by the act of the Roman people, and formerly minors also could not be arrogated, but they can be now by a Constitution of the Divine Antoninus, when proper cause has been shown. Those who are incapable of procreation, as for instance, eunuchs, may adopt in either way. The same rule applies to unmarried persons." Here we should be cautious of any overly simple understanding of what it meant to have children in the ancient world. See Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 50–85.

¹⁸ See Carmen Bernabé, "Of Eunuchs and Predators: Matthew 19:1–12 in a Cultural Context," *BTB* 33 (2003): 128–134 (who argues that eunuchs represent an idealized husband for the household of heaven); Anthony E. Harvey, "Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom," *HeyJ* 48 (2007): 1–17 (who argues that the metaphorical imagery of the eunuchs because of the kingdom references the *galloi*, as representative of a broad sense of renunciation, an opinion he repeats in a later article in 2015); Hester, "Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus," 13–40 (who argues that the passage references ritual castration as a way to destabilize the gender binary); Rick Talbott, "Imagining the Matthean Eunuch Community: Kyriarchy on the Chopping Block," *JFSR* 22 (2006): 21–43 (who argues that eunuchs are metaphor for gender – based on the idea that they are transgressively neither male nor female – and therefore imply an equality for women in Matthew's community); Stephen R. Llewelyn, Gareth J. Wearne, and Bianca L.

see such challenges as descriptive of an underlying ideology to be found in the historical Matthean assembly, thereby offering an ancient authority for a liberating model of contemporary Christian discipleship. Yet such readings lead to several complications and problems as well.

A reading of Matthew 19:12 that buttresses an ideology challenging norms of gender, sexuality, and desire, faces a major anachronistic difficulty in that such a reading finds minimal support in any other part of an otherwise patriarchal Gospel that appropriates and reinforces such norms.¹⁹ Matthew's rhetoric relies on conceptual binaries: earthly kingdoms and divine kingdoms, earthly families and divine families, both of which reinforce operative norms of the ancient structures of kingdom and family. All models of discipleship are illustrated by simple, and frequently ironic, binary pairs: wise and intelligent men who do not understand are paired with children (11:25); those who fail to give up possessions are paired with those who do (19:16–30); and as will be shown, those who understand are fruitful, while those who do not are withered and sterile. Matthew also frequently illuminates the challenge of insufficiently achieving such a new and elevated state that is flipped from the norm, for instance in how one accepts the word of the kingdom. Matthew illustrates this all in parables, such as the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, and the Parable of the Ten *Parthenoi*. Yet these do not reflect liminal states of being. Instead, they reflect an insufficient and ultimately failed progress towards a full crossing of a binary from a hegemonic norm to the telos of the kingdom.

Sanderson, "Guarding Entry to the Kingdom: The Place of Eunuchs in Mt. 19.12," *JSHJ* 10 (2012): 228–246 (who argue that eunuchs are celibate, but should be read as liminal gatekeepers, as in Esther); Jennifer Sylvan Alexander, "Self-Made Eunuchs as Model Disciples: Matthew 19:12 in Narrative and Historical Context," in *The Theologically Formed Heart: Essays in Honor of David J. Gouwens* ed. Warner M. Bailey, Lee C. Barrett III, and James O. Duke (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 89–114 (who argues that 19:12 is a general call to renunciation of family, property, and status, potentially reflective of their liminal state (page 101) and ambiguous gender (page 103)); and Asikainen, "'Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven,'" 178–181 (who argues that 19:12 is about cutting out adultery at all costs).

¹⁹ For a broader critique of these types of readings in the Gospels, see John Hall Elliott, "The Jesus Movement was Not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented," *BibInt* 11 (2003): 173–210. For specific work on this passage in this context, see Asikainen, "'Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven,'" 174–177 for a review of such readings. She notes on page 175 that many of these readings that see eunuchs as a challenge to normative masculinity still require seeing them as celibate. And on page 177 she appropriately notes that "19.3–9 is not a defense of women's rights. Matthew 19.9 actually assigns the blame to the wife." Alexander notes that "A near-exclusive focus on preceding verses (Matt 19:3–11) prevents many biblical scholars from making key connections between self-castrated eunuchs and Matthew's larger narrative, particularly subsequent verses in chapter 19 that exhibit decidedly androcentric, patriarchal and hierarchal features." Alexander, "Self-Made Eunuchs as Model Disciples," 90.

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