March 1995

Frank W. Nelte

ISAIAH 39:7

THE SCRIPTURE CONCERNED

> And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be EUNUCHS in the palace of the king of Babylon. (Isaiah 39:7 AV)

THE MEANING PEOPLE DRAW FROM THIS TRANSLATION

People sometimes assume that this means that the descendants of king Hezekiah, who were taken to Babylon, were made physical eunuchs in the palace of the Babylonian kings.

But that is not necessarily the case at all.

THE "MISTRANSLATION"

This is not really a mistranslation at all. The problem here is that the Hebrew word translated as "eunuch" ALSO had the meaning of a high government official, a minister of state, most of whom would very likely have been married.

The Hebrew word for "eunuch" is "saris". Now while this word was indeed derived from an unused root word meaning "to castrate", it also became at an early time a title for high-ranking government officials. The word "saris" is used 42 times in the Old Testament, and it is translated 17 times as "eunuch", 13 times as "chamberlain", and 12 times as "officer".

The very first time this word "saris" is used in the Old Testament is in Genesis 37:36.

> And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, AN OFFICER (Hebrew "saris") of Pharaoh's, *and* captain of the guard. (Genesis 37:36 AV)

Potiphar was a military officer, and certainly not a eunuch. It was Potiphar's WIFE who falsely accused Joseph (see Genesis 39:7). So here we have a biblical example of someone described by the word "saris" (which means "eunuch") who was clearly married!

Other men were also designated with the title "saris". Consider Genesis 40:2.

> And Pharaoh was wroth against two *of* HIS OFFICERS (Hebrew "saris"), against the chief of the butlers, and against the chief of the bakers. (Genesis 40:2 AV)

The royal households involved an enormous staff of many hundreds of servants. These "officers" here were respectively over ALL the butlers and over ALL the bakers in the royal household. They were high-ranking because they personally had access to the king. But they were not necessarily physical "eunuchs".

When the people of Israel came to Samuel and wanted a king, Samuel included the following statement in the warning he gave the people:

> And he (the king) will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to HIS OFFICERS (Hebrew "saris"), and to his servants" (1 Samuel 8:15 AV)

Samuel was not talking about the king giving things to "his eunuchs", but to his officers, to the higher officials in his employ.

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took the Jewish people captive, the general of the Babylonian army took certain people into captivity. They included the following:

> He took also out of the city an EUNUCH (Hebrew "saris"), WHICH HAD THE CHARGE OF THE MEN OF WAR; and seven men of them that were near the king's person, which were found in the city; and the principal scribe of the host, who mustered the people of the land; and threescore men of the people of the land, that were found in the midst of the city. (Jeremiah 52:25 AV)

The man in charge of the military was not a physical "eunuch", but "an officer". The designation "saris" was his title; it was not a designation of his physical condition. Here the translators were incorrect in translating the Hebrew word as "eunuch"; they should have translated it as "officer".

Likewise, in the New Testament the word "eunuch" was still a title for high government officials, as can be seen in Acts 8:27.

> And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, AN EUNUCH OF GREAT AUTHORITY under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, (Acts 8:27 AV)

Again, the word "eunuch" here is simply a title that showed the man's status as having "great authority" in a certain government.

So unless the persons designated with the word "saris" had the responsibility of looking after the royal women, it is highly unlikely that they were physically "eunuchs". It was a title that carried a certain amount of prestige in biblical times.

THE SOURCE OF THIS WRONG TRANSLATION

It is not a mistranslation. The confusion arises because the word referred to both, normal men who had attained some status in the king's employ, and who were in all likelihood married (as was Potiphar), and also to men who had been castrated (usually while still young boys) for the purpose of taking care of the royal women.

THE CORRECT TRANSLATION

> And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be officials in the palace of the king of Babylon. (Isaiah 39:7)

THE MEANING OF THIS CORRECT TRANSLATION

The kings of Babylon had the descendants of Jewish royalty employed as officials in their courts and palaces. In other words, this verse is a prediction of servitude to the Babylonians. But it is not a pronouncement that the royal descendants would all be castrated to become physical eunuchs.

IN SUMMARY

Of the 42 times that the Hebrew word "saris" is used in the Old Testament, most of the time it does NOT refer to men who were physically eunuchs. Most of the time this word is used to express a man's title, a position of some prestige.

Frank W. Nelte