

EUNUCHS

IN ANTIQUITY AND BEYOND



Frontispiece. Coin of Eumenes I showing the head of his uncle Philetairos, the first Attalid dynast of Pergamum and reportedly a eunuch (3rd century BC).
Photo: British Museum.

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EUNUCHS AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION: Philo's exegesis of the Joseph narrative

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Introduction

The reflections on eunuchism and castration contained in the voluminous writings of Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 BC–AD 45), especially in his several exegetical treatments of the Joseph narrative in Genesis, provide a critical key for examining Philo's conception of the categories of male and female.¹ The foremost practitioner of biblical interpretation among the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria and our primary source for Jewish philosophical thought in the Hellenistic period, Philo sought to integrate the assumptions of scriptural revelation and the traditions and techniques of philosophical dialectic. The novel forms of cultural accommodation pioneered by Philo point the way to pagan and Christian philosophical thought of late antiquity, in which the innovations forged in the Hellenized Near East would come to seem commonplace. Like these later thinkers, such as Plotinus and Origen, Philo was vexed by the complexity of situating the human body within his philosophical programme.² It was with the aim of clarifying the place and function of the human body and the biblical commandments to which it is subject that Philo explores the figure of the eunuch.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between Philo's use of gender categories and his attitudes toward eunuchism, castration, and circumcision by exploring his allegorical exegesis of the Joseph narrative.³ I argue that his various, and sometimes contradictory, treatments of castration have important implications for Philo's conception of the commandment of male circumcision.⁴ The centrality of circumcision for the creation of visible Jewish difference in antiquity is unquestionable.⁵ The act and sign of circumcision did not, however, function in a social and cultural vacuum. Circumcision was not simply an anomalous Jewish peculiarity, but, to the Greek and Roman elites of the early empire, Jewish circumcision belonged to a larger category we might best term

'genital mutilation'. Circumcision was, at least in part, viewed by the surrounding culture through attitudes shaped by the emergent social reality of castration and the increasing prominence of eunuchs in political and social life.

As a Jewish man living in a Hellenistic world among both non-circumcised gentiles and circumcised Jews, Philo experienced circumcision as a source of tension. Alien to his surrounding culture but so important to his own, circumcision served as a locus of hesitation about his own tradition and his own conceptions of gendered sexuality. Philo's ambivalent reading of the complex figure of Joseph and the eunuchs he encounters in Egypt illuminates in important ways his explicit defense of the practice of circumcision.

Gender transformation and the spiritual life

For Philo, the figure of the eunuch serves as a fertile cultural signifier. Philo betrays an awareness that castration both reaffirms and endangers his rhetoric of male supremacy. The ambiguous figure of the eunuch represents the instability inherent in Philo's 'anthropology', in which corporeality and sense-perception are fused to intellect and soul within the compound human being. This conception of human existence is mapped out in Philo's writings in terms of a stark, though permeable, gender hierarchy. The malleable male body of the eunuch thus provides Philo with a dynamic image with which to explore the process of human growth and transformation so crucial to his philosophical programme.⁶

For progress is indeed nothing less than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, and more akin to mind and thought.⁷

Gender instability is crucial for Philo's conception of spiritual progress that he understands as the ability to control and ultimately to transcend human embodiment through pure intellection.⁸ In Philo's blueprint for human nature, all people, male as well as female, are bisected into the complementary facets of mind and body, components that are in turn conceptualized in gendered terms. All bodies, both those of men and those of women, are gendered female in their imperfection.

This language of progress through gender transformation is echoed in Philo's discussions of female virginity.⁹ For Philo, virginity is radically opposed to the embodied existence of physically mature women for whom the stages of menses, defloration and parturition signify their proper social function and location.¹⁰ The readoption by Philo's female biblical

characters of their former virgin state after menopause simultaneously removes them from the community of women and gives them access to the male deity as recipients of his divine seed.

The union of human beings that is made for the procreation of children turns virgins into women. But when God begins to consort with the soul, He makes what before was a woman into a virgin again, for he takes away the degenerate and emasculate passions which made it womanish and plants instead the native growth of unpolluted virtues. Thus God will not talk with Sarah till she has ceased from all that is after the manner of women (Gen. 18.11), and is ranked once more a pure virgin.¹¹

The purity represented by the female virgin seemingly represents a rejection of corporeal desire and experience, but in fact encodes Philo's gendered language of spiritual procreation in which God is imagined as the potent male who actively sows his seed in the receptive, feminized human soul.¹² Here Philo's language contains a tension between a rejection of sexuality and the reinscription of gender categories on a cosmic level. Like the two halves of a medieval diptych, male and female merge as complementary images into an integral whole, whose components, when differentiated, serve as the paradigms not only for human sexual existence, but more importantly for the actors in the drama of the spiritual life.

It is by means of this permeability of gender categories that Philo fashions his language of human religious experience. The human subject in Philo's writings is almost invariably a male subject. This male subject must navigate a double transformation in order to adopt a feminized and passive relationship to the divine, while still safeguarding his male identity. The embodied male subject sheds his female corporeal aspect, here conceived of as the 'emasculating passions', while, at the same time, imagining his soul as a receptive and passive virgin impregnated by God's divine seed. All the while, he must safeguard his social and physical reality as a man. I want to argue that the gender indeterminacy of the eunuch, his status as 'neither male nor female', οὐτ' ἄρρεν οὐτ' ἥλυ, a common phrase echoed in Philo, represents an alternative strategy for this crisis of embodiment.

Eunuchs and castration in Philo

Philo include castrates among a lengthy list of different types of male gender-bending and consistently censures them as transgressors of divinely ordained gender categories. In one colourful and strident passage, Philo writes:

In former days the very mention of (pederasty) was a great disgrace, but now it is a matter of boasting not only to the active partner but to the passive

partners, who habituate themselves to endure the disease of effemination (νόσον θήλειαν). They let both body and soul run to waste, and leave no ember of their male nature to smoulder. Mark how conspicuously they braid and adorn their hair, and how they scrub and paint their faces with cosmetics and pigments and the like. In fact, the transformation of the male nature to the female is practiced by them as an art and does not raise a blush... Certainly you may see these hybrids of man and woman continually strutting about through the thick of the market, heading the processions at the feasts, appointed to serve as unholy ministers of holy things, leading the mysteries and initiations and celebrating the rites of Demeter. Those of them who, by way of heightening still further their youthful beauty, have desired to be completely changed into women and gone on to mutilate their genital organs, are clad in purple like signal benefactors of their native lands..., each of them a curse and a pollution of his country.¹³

Philo's language here is sweeping and inclusive. He associates the passive male partner with the ritual attendant of Demeter,¹⁴ who represents the goddess in the public space of the city. He is attuned to the minute details of the body language and self-presentation that these 'effeminate' figures share, believing the ruined state of their souls to be displayed on the outside. The 'mutilation' of the male genitals represents the most extreme manifestation of this degeneracy. Yet, even this remarkable and coherent condemnation betrays undercurrents of ambivalence. Philo seems to recognize the allure and sheer physical beauty of these effeminates, even if their powerful sexuality is dangerous and illicit. It is precisely this juxtaposition of sexuality and the negation of reproductive capacity that so infuriates Philo. Castration generates an ambivalent product, desexed, yet unlawfully sexual, non-reproductive, yet associated with fertility cults

Philo offers a variety of metaphors for the eunuch scattered throughout his writings. This imagery fuses the ritual vocabulary of biblical cult with the rich philosophical language associated with correct perception and reason. The eunuch is variously like an infertile field¹⁵ or the urban multitude,¹⁶ in each case unable to generate wisdom, ἄγονος σοφίας. He employs traditional philosophical vocabulary to link the eunuch's genital mutilation to the deformation of the capacity to use the organs of perception to pierce through the veil of appearances. The eunuch is like a man with a cataract, who is 'under the dominion of appearances and does not perceive what is truly excellent'.¹⁷ Like Lucian's exploration of the fate of a eunuch philosopher whose reproductive organs are considered prerequisites for attaining a chair of philosophy,¹⁸ Philo attests to the fact that a man's reproductive capacity was brought to bear on his capacity to participate in philosophical debate and speculation

In many of the passages in which he voices his condemnation of eunuchs along with other effeminate men, Philo brings the same proof text, Deuteronomy 23.1: 'He whose genitals are crushed (θλαδίας) and he whose testicles have been cut out (ἀποκεκόμμενος) shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord.' Here, as in Leviticus 21.18–24, the θλαδίας, the man with crushed testicles, and the ἀποκεκόμμενος, the man whose testicles have been cut out,¹⁹ are barred from the communal cultic service along with the child of the prostitute²⁰ and certain classes of foreigners.²¹ It is the crushed testicles of the θλαδίας that characterize those who 'destroy the perfect Forms', and thus adulterate the unified image of god. Likewise, the ἀποκεκόμμενος (or in parallel texts the ἀποκόπων) is likened to the atheist, one who 'denies the very existence of god'.²² His severed genitals embody this absence. Philo's imagery thus brings the ritual system governing the boundaries of the cultic community to bear on philosophical activity. The Hebrew Bible is concerned with a wide range of physical deformities, which disqualify one from participation in sacrificial cult; physical integrity is more central than ethical character *per se*. In contrast, Philo explicitly links embodied states to ethical and philosophical disposition. The more abstract notion of properly gendered male identity is, for Philo, a prerequisite for participation in both ritual community and the philosophical life.

Philo's exegesis of the Joseph narrative

Philo's use of the figure of the eunuch in his allegorical writing highlights these tensions. The vast majority of occurrences of the term εὐνοῦχος and of the related term σπάδων in the Philonic corpus are in fact found in Philo's exegesis of the Joseph narrative in his several separate treatments of this theme.²³ Picking up on the use of these terms by the *Septuagint* in its description of Joseph's first master Potiphar,²⁴ Philo creates a vivid presentation of the events that take place in Potiphar's house. In so doing, Philo develops Joseph into an ethical and spiritual model.

The story recounted in Genesis chapters 37 to 48 is familiar. Joseph is the favourite son of Jacob who, having provoked the jealousy and ill-will of his brothers, is taken down to Egypt by traders and there sold into slavery. After several notable adventures, including his initial period of employment in the house of a high government official named Potiphar, whom the *Septuagint* labels an εὐνοῦχος rather than the ambiguous כַּרְיִים of the Hebrew Bible, Joseph moves his way through the administrative bureaucracy, finally securing the most powerful position in the Egyptian government after the Pharaoh. And, through a series of dramatic circumstances, Joseph's newly acquired position of power enables him

to ensure for himself and his family material survival in the face of dwindling resources.

The gaps in this story are as impossible to resolve as they are numerous. At the heart of any understanding of this narrative is the hermeneutic puzzle of how we should read the character of Joseph; is he a model for self-restraint and piety in the face of temptation or perhaps a vain, self-promoting pretty-boy?²⁵ This question vexed the Rabbis as well. Both possibilities are found side-by-side in *Genesis Rabba*, a compilation of Rabbinic exegetical traditions on the book of Genesis. In an extended treatment of this passage found in *Genesis Rabba* 87.3, the Rabbis present Joseph as an ethical model, but also as a tattle-tale who acts with condescension towards his brothers and as a dandy who calls attention to his beauty and flair.²⁶ They suggest that Joseph has been purchased by Potiphar to serve as a catamite and that Potiphar's castration for his transgressive sexual preference is a punishment from God.²⁷ The Midrash here even suggests that Joseph 'may be compared to a man who is sitting in the marketplace penciling his eyes, fixing his hair, and prancing about (ממשמש בעניו ומתקן בשעריו ומתלל בעקבו).'²⁸ The Midrash explains that God, infuriated by Joseph's vanity, sends the wife of Joseph's master to test his self-restraint. 'If you are a real man,' God says in the Midrash, 'here is a she-bear, come, wrestle with it.' This description of Joseph's body movements, mannerisms and personal grooming habits go hand in hand with the characterization of Joseph as Potiphar's potential catamite. In fact, a careful reading of this description of Joseph's distinctive *habitus* suggests that the Rabbinic composers of this Midrash were as attuned as their Hellenized counterpart to the connection between body language and ethical character.²⁹ Like Philo, the Rabbis were sensitive to the clues encoded in the biblical narrative.³⁰

Certainly Joseph's beauty and self-presentation make him suspect. This characterization, coupled with the nature of Joseph's career – first as a household slave and then as a powerful figure within the Egyptian bureaucracy – lends credence to my suggestion that his is the classic career of a eunuch. Like many eunuchs, Joseph begins his career as a young slave. Joseph, like many young slaves, especially the more attractive ones,³¹ would have fetched a far higher price for the nomadic traders on the Egyptian slave market if he had been castrated before the sale or by the traders en route. Like many eunuchs in the ancient world, Joseph is foreign born and from beyond the boundaries of the ruling empire. And, like them, once his social and family ties are severed, he becomes entirely dependent on the support and goodwill of his employers.³² The jobs he is given both at the beginning of his career and at its culmination are the highly

specialized jobs of household administration and government planning and policy. A rigorous education would have been absolutely essential for a Canaanite shepherd-boy to learn and master the intricacies of the Egyptian governmental bureaucracy. Of course, this reading goes against the grain of the explicit biblical narrative in which Joseph ultimately marries and has children.³³ Nevertheless, the question of how to read his character and his identity as a man lies at the heart of any interpretation of this narrative. As we will see below, Philo himself grasped the logic of this portrait of Joseph as a 'literary' eunuch.

Dependent on the Greek translation of the Bible, Philo emphasizes the fact that Joseph encounters a number of eunuchs during his time in Egypt.³⁴ Philo describes Joseph's first master, Potiphar, as:

a eunuch gelded of the soul's generating organs, a vagrant from the men's quarters, an exile from the women's, a thing neither male nor female, unable either to shed or receive seed, twofold yet neuter, base counterfeit of the human coin, cut off from the immortality which, through the succession of children and children's children, is kept alive for ever, roped off from the holy assembly and congregation.³⁵

Philo's allegorical reading of Joseph's encounter with his master's wife similarly emphasizes her husband's eunuchism. He writes:

For the eunuch and chief cook, in truth the mind itself, deals not in the simple pleasures but in excessive ones also; it (this type of mind) deserves the title of eunuch as one who is incapable of begetting wisdom (ἀγονος σοφίας).³⁶

He goes on to elaborate that Potiphar's wife represents Pleasure in its most extreme form, because she is not only a woman, but, as the wife of a eunuch, depends on a man whose business it is to provide the excessive pleasures of the appetites.

This same language is echoed in Philo's allegorization of the baker and wine-steward whom Joseph later encounters in prison:

Why is it that not a single one of these offices is entrusted to a real man or woman? Is it not because nature has trained men to sow the germs of life and women to receive them, and the mating of these two is the cause of generation and of the permanence of the All.

These eunuchs are instead to be likened to:

a soul which is impotent and barren, a soul which has been made so by emasculation (ἐξευνουχισμένης). For such a soul is neither able to drop the truly masculine seeds of virtue (τὰ ἀρετῆς ἄρρενα ὡς ἀληθῶς σπέρματα) nor yet to receive and foster what is so dropped, but like a stony field is only

capable of blighting the successive growths, which were meant to live. (He is like) a craftsman whose work it is to produce pleasure and can produce no fruit of wisdom. He is neither male nor female (οὔτε ἄρρην ὄν οὔτε θήλειαν), for he is incapable of either giving or receiving seed (σπέρματα). None such does Moses permit to enter the congregation of the Lord, for what use can he find in listening to holy words when the knife has cut away the power of faith and the store of the truth.³⁷

In this passage, Philo explicitly compares the stewards at the Egyptian court to those who, by separating themselves from the cycles of reproduction, have removed themselves from the community of Israel. These passages employ a set of stock images that travel from one context to another. For Philo, the eunuch combines physicality, passion, and pleasure with a lack of reproductive capacity. Eunuchs are a perversion of Philo's conception of human nature, an embodied nullification of his cosmic economy.

Joseph as eunuch in Philonic exegesis

Negative symbolic valence

Considering the complexity of the character of Joseph and the potency of the figure of the eunuch within Philo's allegorical idiom, it is perhaps no surprise that Philo plays with the notion that Joseph himself is a eunuch. Comparing Joseph unfavorably to Abraham's wisdom and Noah's nobility, Philo writes that Joseph here represents:

the mind which loves the body and the passions and has been sold into slavery to the chief-cook of our compound nature, Pleasure. Castrated of all the male reproductive organs of the soul, and living in indigence of noble practices, he is unable to receive the divine message, debarred from the holy congregation in which the talk and study is always of virtue.³⁸

Philo articulates his doubts about Joseph as an ethical model using the very same language and imagery he has otherwise reserved for other castrated characters from the biblical Joseph narrative. At the conclusion of this passage, Philo prays on his own behalf that he be unlike this castrated Joseph figure: 'My soul, if you are snared by the hook of passion, endure to become prisoner rather than a prison keeper.' Embedded in a cultural context in which the social reality of eunuchism and castration was always close at hand, Philo too recognizes the logic of applying this image to Joseph in order to condemn what he sees as Joseph's less noble characteristics.

Positive symbolic valence

Even more provocative, however, is Philo's portrayal of Joseph as a eunuch, not in negative hermeneutic play on the complexities of Joseph's

characterization, but instead with the aim of depicting Joseph as a paragon of self-control and abstinence. This piece of exegesis comes in one of the passages I have cited above, *Legum Allegoriae* 3.236, in which Philo depicts Potiphar's wife as the figure of corrupting Pleasure, wed to a eunuch who serves 'none other than Pharaoh, destroyer (lit. scatterer) of noble things'. Yet, Philo interrupts the flow of this invective in mid-stream with a 180-degree turn in argumentation, offering a radically different understanding of eunuchism.

According to another account (κατ' ἄλλον λόγον) it would be noblest (ἄριστον³⁹) to become a eunuch (τὸ εὐνοῦχον γενέσθαι), if (in this way) our soul should be able to escape wickedness and unlearn passion. So Joseph too, the self-controlling character (ὁ ἐγκρατὴς τρόπος), when pleasure says to him 'Sleep with me and, being human, indulge in human passions and enjoy the delights that come in life's course', refuses to comply with her.⁴⁰

The phrase used here, κατ' ἄλλον λόγον, might alternatively be translated 'According to an alternative interpretation'. While this phrase may merely mark the contrast between the two interpretations Philo provides, it may indicate that he is here transmitting a received exegetical tradition. Whatever the best translation of this phrase may be, it is certain that the abrupt change in discourse indicates that this 'alternate' reading stood out for Philo as much as it does for the modern reader. It is no longer Potiphar who is the eunuch, but Joseph. And the eunuch, far from representing emasculate and emasculating passion, signifies the transcendence of the physical and sexual self.

In light of Philo's frequent condemnations of eunuchs and castration, this interpretative tradition is novel and surprising. Yet, I believe that this passage articulates an undercurrent in Philo's approach to the mutually constituting problems of gender and embodiment. In fact, in a passage dealing precisely with the struggle to overcome human desire, Philo relates:

To my thinking, those who are not utterly ignorant would choose to be blind rather than see unfitting things, and to be deprived of hearing rather than listen to harmful words, and to have their tongues cut out to save them from uttering anything that should not be said... Certain wise men, they tell us, while being tortured on the wheel to induce them to reveal secrets have bitten off their tongue, and so contrived a worse torture for their torturers, who found themselves unable to obtain the information they wanted. It is better to be made into a eunuch than to rage after sexual intercourse (ἐξευνουχισθῆναι γε μὴν ἄμεινον ἢ πρὸς συνουσίᾳς λυττᾶν).⁴¹

How are we to understand such texts in which castration serves as a trope for the spiritual perfection of the wise?

Castration as spiritual progress in Philo

In his writings, Philo consistently uses the same language of excising to describe castration as well as to describe the process of separating soul from body. In these contexts, the words ἐκτέμνω, ἀποκόπτω, and ἀποτέμνω, often occurring in pairs or interchangeably, signify not the 'excision' or 'crushing' of the male genitals, but the rejection of physicality.⁴²

More significantly, the semantic field that undergirds Philo's description of both castration and spiritual progress is identical to his discussion of the allegorical meaning of circumcision.

Circumcision assimilates the circumcised penis to the heart. For as both are framed to serve for procreation, thought being generated by the spirit force in the heart, living creatures by the reproductive organ... Thus the legislators thought to punish the organ of sexual intercourse, making circumcision the figure of the excision of excessive and superfluous pleasure (περιτομήν περιττῆς ἐκτομήν καὶ πλεοναζούσης ἡδονῆς).⁴³

Philo's intentional play on the words περιτομήν (circumcision) and περιττῆς ἐκτομήν ἡδονῆς (excision of superfluous pleasure) emphasizes the ethical symbolism of the act of circumcision. For Philo, circumcision is not merely an empty commandment, but represents the profound spiritual truth that the male individual must, through struggle, learn to overcome the body by cutting out the passions from the heart. And, unlike many radical allegorizers in his own community, Philo recognized the need to enact such commandments physically as well as in spiritual terms.⁴⁴

In one sense, both circumcision and castration define the boundaries of community, one a prerequisite for inclusion, the other a mark of exclusion.⁴⁵ Within Philo's Platonizing framework, however, castration, similar to circumcision, provides an apt metaphor for spiritual progress. Philo cannot ignore the symbolic power of castration. Far from imagining the eunuch as a barren field, we might imagine him as a properly pruned vine that is to bear wholly virtuous fruit. In many respects then I believe that Philo betrays an awareness that all circumcised Jewish men have in some respects undergone an alteration to their reproductive organs as a ritual of sanctification to ensure their inclusion in a sacred community. Every circumcised Jewish man is, as it were, a sacred castrate.

Literal and allegorical reading strategies: Philo's legacy

This parallelism between circumcision and castration, of course, raises the question of literal as opposed to allegorical understandings of such radical acts as castration and other forms of self-mutilation. I believe that what we find here are early signs of a massive shift between the world of sacrificial cult, in which wholeness of body, just as proper genealogy, is

a prerequisite for approaching the divine, and a world in which impurity is understood as a state inherent in the human condition. We are thus not far from a world in which the rationale for Origen's alleged self-castration would have been clearly understood as a spiritual lesson inscribed in the body. Indeed, although Origen attenuated in his writings the message of this lesson enacted in his youth,⁴⁶ he is still grappling with the significance of castration for the problem of embodiment in his later works. In his commentary on Matthew, likely penned in his old age,⁴⁷ Origen uses Philo's approval of castration cited above in his justification of Jesus' call to self-castration at Matthew 19.12:

And Philo, who enjoys a high reputation among intelligent people for many subjects discussed in his treatises on the Law of Moses, says in the book entitled *On that the worse is accustomed to attack the better* that 'it is better to be made into a eunuch than to rage after sexual intercourse'.⁴⁸

Although elsewhere in this commentary Origen repudiates castration, the inclusion of Philo's unusual endorsement of the practice attests to the durability of the logic that sustained it as well as the controversial power it continued to impose on the philosophical imagination.⁴⁹ Within Origen's radical call to self-transformation, this act makes perfect sense.

In many respects, the eunuch resembles the primordial human being in Philo's reading of the Genesis creation story, the πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος. Like the eunuch, this figure, created in the divine image (τοῦ κατὰ τὴν εἰκόνα θεοῦ), is 'neither male nor female' (οὐτ' ἄρρεν οὔτε θῆλυ).⁵⁰ It refuses the consequences of gender differentiation which first established the irreparable barrier between the human and the divine. The fall of the primordial human into an embodied, engendered existence is inverted by the eunuch's repudiation of his human condition. Yet, unlike this primordial human, Philo's gender hierarchy guarantees that the figure of the eunuch must always also represent the dangerous slippage back into the passive and emasculating experience of sensual perception and passion. In his often contradictory reflections on the ethical and spiritual valence of the figure of the eunuch, Philo prefigures intellectual debates concerning the role of self-mutilation within early Christianity. The figure of Joseph represents an important interpretative locus for Philo's seminal articulation of the increasingly vital desire among his contemporaries to mould and transform the gendered and embodied self.

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Notes

¹ For the texts of Philo's writings extant in Greek, I have used Colson 1929–65, unless otherwise noted. For *Quaestiones in Genesin* and *Quaestiones in Exodum*, I have used Marcus 1953.

² For the impact of Philo's thought on Origen's conception of castration, see Caner 1997 and Stevenson in this volume.

³ For the classic discussion of Philo's use of gender categories, see Baer 1970. Baer's remarks are surprisingly close to feminist readings of Philo's use of gender categories, despite his 'ideological' naiveté. 'It is precisely Philo's depreciation of woman that permits him to use her as a symbol of sense-perception, and, on the other hand, his castigation of female sense-perception and the natural world which leads in turn to a further devaluation of woman' (p. 40). However, where Baer perceives a fundamental difference between Philo's use of male and female within the created sphere and within the sphere of the undifferentiated and uncreated Original Man, πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος, Mattila 1996 rightly argues that Philo's gender categories pervade his anthropology and ontology at every level, thereby shaping his conception of the divine as well.

⁴ For discussion of Philo's attitude towards and conception of circumcision see Borgen 1982, Hecht 1984 and Collins 1985.

⁵ I provide here a very partial list of only the most important discussions of circumcision as a mark of difference: Barclay 1998; Borgen 1982; Boyarin 1992; Collins 1985; Cohen 1993. Tacitus himself already states this rationale explicitly: 'They (the Jews) instituted circumcision of the genitalia so that they could be recognized by their difference' (*Hist.* 5.5.1–2).

⁶ This characterization of Philo's 'gender gradient' as dynamic and permeable is intended as a corrective to Mattila's emphasis on its 'pervasiveness and rigidity' (1996, 129). Mattila's systematizing treatment of Philo's conception of gender leads her to formulate an almost algebraic model that does not take seriously the dialectic between Philo's penchant for static abstractions and his commitment to a transformational anthropology.

⁷ *Quaest. in Ex.* 18.

⁸ Foucault 1986, 64–5, has noted the importance of self-control for the cultivation of the male subject in late antiquity. 'Enkrateia is characterized more by an active form of self-mastery, which enables one to resist or struggle, and to achieve domination in the area of desires and pleasures... Located at the axis of struggle, resistance, and combat, it is self-control, tension, continence; enkrateia rules over pleasures and desires, but has to struggle to maintain control.' As many critics have noted, Foucault does not pay sufficient attention to the gender-specific

aspect of this ethos of *enkrateia*. In Philo, spiritual and material self-cultivation through the practice of physical restraint coupled with philosophical activity is consistently formulated in gendered language.

⁹ See Baer 1970, 51–5, on Philo's spiritualization of virginity and its relationship to the divine impregnation of the soul. See also *Som.* 2.273, *Deus Imm.* 138, and *Spec. Leg.* 1.129 for the comparison between virgins and widows.

¹⁰ Recent discussions of Philo's representations of women, both biblical figures and contemporaries, have been superficial and unsatisfying (Wegner 1982 and 1991; Sly 1990). Kraemer 1989 provides a richer account of the function of gender within Philo's idealized portrait of the female proto-monastic Therapeutae in *De Vita Contemplativa*.

¹¹ *Cher.* 50. In *Praem. Poen.* 158–60, Philo writes: 'For when the soul is "many," full that is of passions and vices with her children, pleasures, desires, folly, incontinence, injustice, gathered around her, she is feeble and sick and dangerously near to death. But when she has become barren and ceases to produce these children or indeed has cast them out bodily she is transformed into a pure virgin.' Cf. *Quaest. in Gen.* 4.117–19, 242; *Quaest. in Ex.* 2.3.

¹² See the comprehensive table at Baer 1970, 58–61 for sources relating to the divine impregnation of the soul. Adjectives such as 'untrod' (ἄβατος), 'simple' (ἀπαλός), 'young' (νέος), and the noun 'blossom' (ἄνθος), normally used to describe the virgin (παρθένος), are in this context juxtaposed to Philo's procreative language; see especially *Som.* 1.199 where the invisible seed (ἀόρατος σπορά) of divine speech (λόγοι) is said to impregnate 'the still young and simple souls' (αἱ ἐτι νέαι καὶ ἀπαλαὶ ψυχαί). Cf. *Cher.* 46; *Migr. Abr.* 34–5; *Mut. Nom.* 134; *Abr.* 100–1; *Deus Imm.* 136–7; *Praem. Poen.* 159–60; *Poster. C.* 134–6; *Spec. Leg.* 2.29–31; *Leg. All.* 3.40; *Det. Pot. Ins.* 60, 147; *Ebr.* 30 for similar uses of σπέρμα and σπορά. For the use of agricultural imagery in Graeco-Roman ethical literature, see du Bois 1988 and King 1994.

¹³ *Spec. Leg.* 3.40–42. The notion of the 'female disease' is contained in a wide variety of passages in the Philonic corpus, e.g. *Vit. Cont.* 60 and *Spec. Leg.* 1.325 and 3.38–40. See Szesnat 1998, 97–107, for an excellent discussion of this theme.

¹⁴ The reference here to Demeter is inexplicable. Philo, or a later tradent, no doubt conflated this native Greek deity with one of several mother goddesses whose attendants were castrated priests, such as the *galli* of the Anatolian goddess Cybele. On the relationship between goddesses and their castrated attendants, see the standard treatment by Vermaseren 1977 and, for a recent reassessment, Södergard 1993. See also Lightfoot and Hales in this volume.

¹⁵ *Ebr.* 211.

¹⁶ *Jos.* 58–66.

¹⁷ *Jos.* 58–9.

¹⁸ *Eunuch* 10, *Demonax* 12. See Gleason 1990 and 1995 for brilliant discussion of this material. She analyses the function of rhetorical training and performance for the cultivation of authority and the concomitant construction of masculinity among Roman sub-elites, arguing that a rigorous semiotics of gesture, tonality,

and style by which men scrutinized each other undergirded their strategies of competition and alliance.

¹⁹ This distinction between 'crushing' and 'cutting' perhaps echoes the medical procedures of *compression* and *excision* described by Paul of Aegina in his *Epitome of Medicine*, VI.68 (cited in Tougher 1997, 175).

²⁰ LXX translates Hebrew **סָמוּר** (meaning uncertain, probably 'bastard') as ὁ ἐκ πόρνῆς ('son of a prostitute').

²¹ The Ammonite and Moabite of the following verse, Deuteronomy 23.4

²² *Spec. Leg.* 2.344.

²³ The relevant texts are found in *De Somniis* 2, *De Josepho*, and finally in a more general work called *Legum Allegoriae* 3.

²⁴ HB Genesis 37.36 and 39.1 both read **פָּרִים פֶּרְעָה**. LXX translates τῷ παύδοντι Φαραῶ and ὁ εὐνοῦχος Φαραῶ respectively. The Hebrew **פָּרִים** has two possible, and not necessarily incompatible, meanings in the present context, 'eunuch' and/or 'officer'. In only some biblical texts does **פָּרִים** carry the particular meaning of 'eunuch' (e.g., Isaiah 56.3–4; Esther 2.3, 14–15; 4.4–5). The Akkadian origin of the word is *sha-rēshi*, 'he who is chief'. There is still no scholarly consensus about the exact meaning of this term. A large number of artistic representations of the unbearded *sha-rēshi* exist in which they are depicted alongside the *sha-ziqni*, the bearded ones; these two classes of court officials are frequently used together as a comprehensive term for Assyrian governmental officials, but what exactly these words signify has received insufficient attention. See Grayson 1995 for the latest synthetic treatment of the question. LXX makes this identification unambiguous.

²⁵ For a collection of such traditions see Kugel 1990 and Neihoff 1992.

²⁶ For similar traditions, see BT *Sotah* 12b, 36b; *Genesis Rabba* 83.6, 86.3–6, 91.6. Levinson 1997, 269, reads these traditions through the lens of Graeco-Roman theatrical culture, demonstrating that 'through a cross-coding of the gender and cultural codes in the Joseph narrative, the hegemonic discourse of the theater is exploited to denigrate the dominant foreign culture as a form of deviant identity'. Although sympathetic to Levinson's focus on ethnicity, this chapter instead emphasizes the way Philo's ethical and philosophical categories are mapped as gender transgression and transformation. It still remains to contrast Rabbinic and Philonic exegesis of the Joseph narrative in terms of their (differing?) relationships to the surrounding Graeco-Roman culture.

²⁷ In an attempt to explain the apparent identification of Potiphar (**פּוֹטִיפָר**) the 'eunuch' with Potiphara (**פּוֹטִי פֶּרְעָה**), the priest of On of Genesis 41.45, the father of Aseneth and eventual father-in-law of Joseph, the Rabbis suggest in *Genesis Rabba* 87.3 that Potiphar had acquired Joseph in order to use him for sexual purposes and was castrated as a result. The punishment of castration is derived from a word play on Potiphar's name, whose last element **פֶּרְעָה** means 'to destroy', and hence 'to castrate'.

²⁸ *Genesis Rabba* 87.3. Translation mine.

²⁹ Bourdieu 1977, 74, defines *habitus* as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring

structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations'.

³⁰ Along with Philo, other Hellenistic retellings of the Joseph narrative pick up on many of these same clues in the biblical text. In *the Testament of Joseph*, as in Philo, Joseph is portrayed as the *enkratic* man (τοῦ ἐγκρατοῦς) par excellence, an ethical model of temperance and chastity (Hollander 1981). His obsessive concern for his chastity transforms his sexual potential into a powerful and attractive religious force. Similarly, in the proto-Romance *Joseph and Aseneth*, Joseph's combination of beauty and aloofness lend him power and authority. Aseneth even mistakes the angel who comes to her for Joseph, perhaps alluding to Joseph's youthful and indeterminate beauty.

³¹ Joseph is the only man in the Bible described as beautiful and comely, **יִפְה־תָּאֵר יִיפָה־מְרָאָה** (Genesis 39.6). These epithets may merely echo Joseph's maternity through Rachel, since the phrase is only otherwise used to describe her (Genesis 29.17). Yet, later narrative and exegetical treatments of Joseph's character and behaviour, Jewish, Christian, as well as Islamic, make his beauty central to their interpretations of the narrative.

³² This description of the court eunuch draws heavily on Hopkins 1978, where for the first time a sociological analysis is applied to the function of the eunuch at the late Roman imperial court.

³³ Genesis 41.50–52.

³⁴ Jubilees chs. 34 and 39 likewise emphasizes that, like Potiphar, the two stewards whom Joseph encounters in prison are eunuchs.

³⁵ *Som.* 2.184.

³⁶ *Leg. All.* 3.236. Translation mine. *Mut. Nom.* 173, a passage likewise linking Potiphar's eunuchism and his role as chief-cook, argues: 'Potiphar is eunuch and chief-cook; eunuch because he has scant store of excellence and has lost by mutilation the soul's organs of generation, unable further to sow and beget anything that tends to discipline; cook because in cook-like fashion he slaughters living beings, chops and divides them, piece by piece, limb by limb, and moves in a chaos of lifeless carcasses, immaterial rather than material.'

³⁷ *Ebr.* 211–12. Cf. *Ebr.* 220.

³⁸ *Deus Imm.* 111.

³⁹ ἄριστον can also mean 'finest' or 'best'. Regardless of what the best translation is, this word is especially emphatic in this context, where it possesses both a normative and a philosophical meaning.

⁴⁰ *Leg. All.* 3.236–7.

⁴¹ *Det. Pot. Ins.* 176. Origen cites this very passage in his justification of Jesus' call to self-castration at Matthew 19.12. See below for discussion.

⁴² See *Som.* 2.64 where Philo writes: 'For just as we find on trees, to the great damage of genuine growth, superfluities which the husbandmen purge (καθαίρουσι) and cut away (ἀποτέμνουσι) to provide for their necessities, so the true and simple life has for its parasite the life of falsity and vanity, for which no husbandman has hitherto been found to excise (ἀπέκοψε) the mischievous overgrowth, root and all.' Cf. *Mut. Nom.* 173; *Leg. All.* 3.8; *Som.* 25; *Ebr.* 69.

⁴³ *Spec. Leg.* 1.9. Later in *Spec. Leg.* 1.303 Philo adds: 'But the law says that some are uncircumcised in the heart. Circumcise the hardness of your heart...prune away from the ruling mind the superfluous overgrowths sown and raised by the immoderate appetites of the passions and planted by folly, the evil husbandman of the soul.' Likewise, at *Mig. Abr.* 92, he writes: 'It is true that receiving circumcision does indeed portray the excision of pleasure and all passions, and the putting away of the impious conceit, under which the mind supposed that it was capable of begetting by its own power: but let us not on this account repeal the law laid down for circumcision. Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things, if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shown us by the inner meaning of things. Nay, we should look on all these outward observances as resembling the body and their inner meaning as resembling the soul.'

⁴⁴ *Spec. Leg.* 1.1–10.

⁴⁵ Wolfson 1987, 196, likewise highlights the role of circumcision as a prerequisite for inclusion in the religious community and, therefore, for access to religious experience in Rabbinic and mystical Judaism. He finds the most powerful expression of this 'nexus between circumcision and the appearance of God' in a text from *Numbers Rabba* 12.10. At the core of this complex exegetical passage lies the statement: 'The "Daughters of Zion" are those [males] who were distinguished by circumcision, for if they were uncircumcised, they would not have been able to look upon the [divine] presence.'

⁴⁶ Hanson 1966, 82, argues in favour of the historicity of Origen's self-castration: 'In view of this evidence of self-castration as a known and on the whole approved custom in the Christian Church of Origen's time, it seems capacious to doubt that he did perform this act in his youth, even if in his old age he decided that it was not a permissible one.' Brown 1988 likewise supports the historicity of this report.

⁴⁷ Crouzel 1989, 43.

⁴⁸ *Commentarium in Evangelium Matthaei* 15.3 citing *Det. Pot. Ins.* 176. See n.41 above. Translation from Runia 1993, 160.

⁴⁹ Stevenson, in his contribution to this volume, argues that, even here in his interpretation of Matthew 19.12, Origen's affirmation of the practice of castration is embedded in a rhetorical method that aims to 'sublimate' the reader's desire for self-mutilation into the realm of language. Whether or not this interpretation is valid, Origen's embodied state as a castrate in conjunction with his radical call to self-transformation continued to exert a hold on the Christian imagination. His willingness to cite Philo approvingly in the context of Jesus' call to self-castration reaffirms the vitality of this practice. This view of Origen is indebted to Brown (1988, 169) who writes: 'What Origen may have sought, at the time, was something more deeply unsettling. The eunuch was notorious (and repulsive to many) because he had dared to shift the massive boundary between the sexes. He had opted out of being male... Deprived of the standard credential of a philosopher in late antique circles – a flowing beard – Origen would have appeared in public with a smooth face, like a woman or like a boy frozen

into a state of prepubertal innocence. He was a walking lesson in the basic indeterminacy of the body.' See also Kuefler 2001 for synthetic analysis of Christian discourse concerning the figure of the eunuch.

⁵⁰ *Op. Mund.* 134.

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