

## Lost Stories: The Eunuch

Dear Philo:

I hope this letter finds you well and healthy.  
My journey to Jerusalem has so far been uneventful,  
Though I always enjoy seeing new places.  
The city of Jerusalem itself is quite small,  
Perhaps the equal of the Jewish Quarter in Alexandria,  
Where among your people I have lived these eleven years  
And in which in many ways feels more like home  
Than Meroe where I was born.  
For this, my dear Philo, you deserve much credit.  
You welcomed me to eat at your table  
When other Jews would not.  
Under your hospitality and teaching,  
I have learned so much about the art and beauty of philosophy,  
About the reading and interpretation of ancient texts,  
And of course of the power and wonder of the one true God.  
Long have I desired a true conversion,  
To become a Jew in the eyes of God  
And to share in the promise and heritage of your people.  
And while you may not believe it necessary,  
I feel deeply in my heart that I must see the Temple,  
That I must bathe in the waters of the mikveh  
And ascend to where our God lives and reigns in power,  
To make the sacrifice to God that completes the ritual of conversion.  
A bath and a sacrifice in Alexandria, you said,

Was plenty for you to consider me a Jew.

But as you know, my foreign birth and my irregular anatomy,  
Weigh heavily on my mind when it comes to the respect of others.  
It is important to me that my conversion be of such impeccable purity,  
That no man may question if God honors my sincere commitment.

As you have taught me, God desires a humble spirit  
And a mind eager to learn the Scriptures and the Laws of God.

Have I not been more eager to learn,  
More hungry for God's Law than any Jew in Alexandria?  
Have I not kept Jewish purity laws faithfully for 5 years now,  
Despite being a Gentile and a eunuch?  
In any case, my dear Philo, my arrival in Jerusalem gives me cause  
To write to you in thanks for everything you have done for me,  
Without which I could never have come to the City of David.

Your beloved friend and companion,

Abara

Dear Philo:

I write to you with joy from the house of your relative Anaiah in Jerusalem.

These past few months in Jerusalem have given me  
The opportunity to study Torah with some of Judaism's leading scholars.

I have made many friends among the Pharisees,  
Whose devotion to the law exceeds that of any I have met.

Daily they are amazed by the quickness of my learning,  
And by the eagerness and zeal I show for the Law.

They call me Fainting Goat  
Because the first time I saw the Temple from the Court of Gentiles,

I was so eager to please God that I fasted for 5 days  
Before the day when I was to go there.  
When I saw the beauty of the Temple,  
And realized I was seeing the dwelling place of the one true God,  
I collapsed and fainted like a young goat frightened by a jackal.  
There are three young scholars I will ask  
To be witnesses to my conversion.  
Shammai, Gamaliel, and Saul.  
These three have been my companions in study  
And in many philosophical conversations,  
Such as I used to have with you, dear Philo.  
These men will bear witness to my study of the Law,  
And they will witness my immersion in the mikveh,  
And stand with me in the Temple when I offer sacrifice,  
Completing a true and pure conversion in the eyes of God.  
Normally, circumcision would be part of the ritual as well,  
But as you know I am already more thoroughly circumcised than any Jew!  
In any case I have read that a drop of blood from the same area  
May substitute for circumcision.  
I may not appear like most men, but I can bleed as well as anyone.  
The subject of my being a eunuch has not come up yet.  
Why would it?  
I do not think sharing the particularities of one's hidden parts  
Is expected of any other potential convert.  
The other scholars and Pharisees have remarked so many times  
On my zeal for the Law and my dedication to God.  
Both you and they have assured me that God's desire for converts

Is a sincere heart and desire to follow God's ways.  
These I have in full, thanks to your encouragement and my own faith.

The next time I write to you,  
It will be as a Jew, in the eyes of God and men.  
Great is the Lord and worthy to be praised!  
In deepest gratitude and warmest feeling,  
Abara

Dear Philo:

There are no words to convey the sadness in my heart,  
As I write you this letter.

My despair is lessened only by the knowledge  
That I will again be welcomed by you in Alexandria,  
Much sooner than I thought.

I am packing up my belongings to leave Jerusalem.  
I cannot bear to see the glory of the Temple Mount,  
Knowing I am forever cut off from its holy sanctuary.  
I will travel by chariot to the sea, and then find passage on a ship.

I expect to reach Alexandria within 3 months' time.

I will return as I left, a Gentile, a eunuch,  
Though with a much heavier heart.

It is almost too painful to write down what has happened to me  
Here in Jerusalem in the last few days.

My humiliation and anger are so fresh in my mind,  
That I can hardly bear to speak of them, even in writing.

However, I hope this letter reaches you before I do.  
And perhaps will save me the task of telling this tale out loud.

My dear Philo,

In my last letter I told you that I was unknown as a eunuch in Jerusalem.

I was sure that it could not be an issue.

I had studied the Law, and while there does seem to be

One particular verse in Deuteronomy that could be a problem,

Surely that is outweighed by the many verses

That speak of the importance of loving the Law and studying Scripture,

And of showing kindness and mercy and generosity,

All of which I have done with eagerness all my time in Jerusalem.

Indeed, my dear Philo,

It seems that for some here in Jerusalem,

None of that matters.

None of my zeal for the Lord or my character matters.

To them, it matters only that I am not normal in their eyes.

To them I am not a true man.

But what makes a man, my dear Philo?

Is it not how he presents himself to the world?

Is it not how he treats those around him?

Is it not enough to live as a man, to feel like a man, to walk as a man?

One must also look like a man under his robes?

It all happened at the mikveh.

I knew that when I removed my clothing to enter the water,

I knew my witnesses would see my body plainly.

I did not imagine that it would be the end of my journey toward conversion.

Gamaliel and Saul said nothing.

But Shammai ran down the steps and grabbed me by the shoulders.

Do not enter the mikveh, Shammai yelled.

You have come to be purified as a man, but you are no man.

I am as much a man as you are, I replied.

In every way that matters, I am a man, that is who I am.

Do you think I chose to become a eunuch?

Where in the scripture is a man condemned for another's sin?

How can God reject me for what I did not choose?

Shammai wrapped my clothes around me and ushered me out.

Gamaliel and Saul said nothing.

As I dressed myself in a private space,

Shammai changed his tone.

Abara, Fainting Goat,

If you had come to us for conversion as a woman...

My dear Philo, I could have shoved him down the steps.

This man who knew me as a man,

Welcomed me as a man,

Studied Torah with me as a man,

Was now suggesting that I could make vows and sacrifices

Before God as a liar.

I would rather God strike me down where I sit

Than undergo conversion as something I am not!

Should I be forced to live a lie before God

Just to enter the assembly of God?

Should I deny the truth of who I am, of who God knows I am,

Just to make people like Shammai feel more comfortable?

Never, my dear Philo.

Later Gamaliel and Saul came to my home.

They said they were so sorry for what happened,

But they didn't know what to do.  
Defend me, I said.  
They looked at each other and could not meet my eyes.  
We can take it to the High Priest, Gamaliel said.  
I know him well, he may yet overrule Shammai.  
But I knew it was over.  
I knew that Shammai would never accept me,  
And others would follow his lead.  
A suspect or incomplete conversion  
Was exactly what I came to Jerusalem to avoid.  
And how could I return to the Temple?  
How could I return to that mikveh,  
Where God allowed me to be humiliated,  
Crushed, an object of disgust  
To go from valued believer to outcast instantly.  
If I had not sought out conversion,  
If I had simply studied Torah without revealing my secret,  
Shammai would never have turned against me.  
How could I remain in Jerusalem,  
Knowing that the only way I could have stayed among my friends  
Would be to live a lie, to keep a secret?  
No, my dear Philo, my time here is over.  
I will return to Alexandria, perhaps to Meroe.  
I will return to where I am valued for my skills and accomplishments,  
And especially for what is in my heart,  
Not what is or isn't between my legs.  
God's grace and blessings be upon you and your family, Philo.

May we see each other soon.

Your tearful friend,

Abara

Dear Philo:

You may have noticed that many months

Have passed since my last letter,

Yet I have not returned.

Something incredible has happened,

And as a result I am remaining in Judea for a time.

You will remember that I had decided to leave Jerusalem,

After the events that need not be repeated.

In despair, I retreated into study of the Scripture,

Which had always comforted me before.

In my carriage with me, I had the precious scroll

You gave me to take with me on my journey.

I was reading aloud from your scroll of Isaiah,

When this dirty, dusty, and truly ignorant-looking Jew

Flagged down my driver and climbed aboard.

I know it is the custom along desert roads

For travelers on foot to be taken aboard horse-drawn vehicles.

But I thought he might ride with the driver,

Or hang onto the side or something.

But this Judean was bold and hopped right alongside me

And started looking over my shoulder.

He asked me,

Do you understand what you are reading?



I covered my mouth to hide my laughter.  
Do I, who have studied the Scriptures with the best scholars,  
Particularly the book of Isaiah,  
In both Aramaic and Greek,  
Do I understand what I am reading?  
His boldness intrigued me, so I indulged him. I replied,  
How can I, unless someone guides me?  
I masked my sarcasm with intense sincerity,  
Hoping he wouldn't notice.  
Which passage are you reading?, the man asked.  
I lied to him, dear Philo.  
I didn't tell him that I was reading the same passage  
That I had been reading over and over since Jerusalem.  
Do you remember showing me this passage  
When I first started studying the Scriptures?  
Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
The Lord will surely separate me from his people,  
And do not let the eunuch say,  
I am just a dry tree.  
For thus says the Lord  
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
Who choose the things that please me,  
And hold fast my covenant,  
I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
A monument and a name  
Better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name

That shall not be cut off.  
And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
To minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
And to be his servants,  
All who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,  
And hold fast to my covenant---  
These I will bring to my holy mountain  
And make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
Will be accepted on my altar;  
For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.  
Even now as I copy these words, tears fall from my eyes.  
Of course I was not prepared to discuss these precious words  
With a dusty Judean traveler.  
So I decided to test him.  
Let us see, I thought, what level of knowledge this man has.  
So instead I read him some verses from a few chapters earlier,  
Some verses that were still visible on the scroll as I was reading it.  
I read him the following, from Isaiah's servant song,  
Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
And like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
So he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.  
My dear Philo,  
My voice caught a bit as I read these verses.

Was I not one who was denied justice in my humiliation?

I felt like my life was taken away from the earth.

But I kept my reaction to myself and pressed the man

With my test of his Scriptural knowledge.

About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this,

About himself or about someone else?

I have to admit I was astonished by his answer.

This man, whose name was Phillip,

Made an argument that this verse referred to Jesus of Nazareth.

I may not have mentioned him in my previous letters,

But Jesus of Nazareth made quite a stir in Jerusalem

In the past few months.

Being engrossed in my studies, and later my humiliation,

I guess I allowed the phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth to pass me by.

But during that time, this Jesus assaulted the Temple money changers,

And brought his huge crowd of followers into the Temple courtyard,

Where he started teaching things that shocked both Priests and Pharisees.

To be honest, I still don't know everything he taught.

Phillip tried to explain Jesus' teachings to me,

But he talked too quickly, and in a heavy Galilean accent.

And it seemed that a lot of Phillip's information was secondhand.

But the core of his message

Was that Jesus was the Jews' promised Messiah,

And that 3 days after he was crucified, he rose again,

And appeared to many people.

Of course I have studied the Scriptures that predict the Messiah.

And I certainly had my doubts about this Jesus character.

But after my experience in Jerusalem,  
I was desperate to know only one thing.  
Was this belief in Jesus as the Messiah,  
A way for me to be accepted as a servant of God,  
To share in the inheritance of God's chosen people?  
According to Phillip, the answer was yes.  
So not wanting to waste any time, I waited until we passed a well  
That could pass as a mikveh in a pinch.  
Phillip prayed over me and asked if I believed in God,  
And that Jesus was God's messiah.  
I said yes, and I removed my robes.  
I saw Phillip's eyes move down.  
I saw him see what wasn't there.  
Then I saw him reach out his hand,  
And welcome me down into the water.  
And he baptized me in the name of Jesus.  
Now my dear Philo,  
I don't know that this man Phillip was prepared to baptize a eunuch.  
In truth, after my baptism, he joined a different caravan and journeyed on.  
But honestly, my dear Philo, I don't care if he was uncomfortable.  
Because in the moment of his discomfort,  
He reached out his hand to include me, to welcome me in.  
My friends in Jerusalem either rejected me or kept silent.  
But Phillip reached out his hand.  
I still don't know that much about Jesus of Nazareth.  
But if his followers are willing to accept me as I am,  
If God is willing to accept me through Jesus,

Then I choose Jesus.  
If there are people, my dear Philo,  
Who value me for my love of God and my character,  
More than they care about my anatomy,  
Who recognize that God's word promotes acceptance  
More than it promotes exclusion,  
Who are focused on building a future,  
More than making an idol of tradition or of generations past.  
If these people exist, dear Philo, I must join them.  
I am not sure when I will return to Alexandria,  
But I have no choice but to seek out these followers of Jesus.  
Rejoice for me, my dear Philo!  
I have found a place where I can serve God and be myself.  
Is there any higher purpose a man could seek?  
I am sure you will agree with me and send your blessings.  
Be well, my dear Philo, and do not forget me.  
The day may come when I am preaching Jesus of Nazareth  
On the streets of Alexandria, or even Meroe.  
Nothing confirms the truth of God's love  
Like the acceptance of a community.  
Thank you for always accepting me.  
Your servant, always,  
Abara.