

5: About Whom Isaiah Spoke (Acts 8:26-40)

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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As the messianic movement associated with Jesus of Nazareth grew, it began to move from Jerusalem into the greater Mediterranean world. Philip, one of the seven Hellenistic messianic Jews upon whom the apostles had laid hands, went north from Jerusalem into Samaria with the declaration that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He was later instructed by the Spirit of God to meet a carriage carrying an Ethiopian nobleman returning home from a visit to Jerusalem.

*When the ones giving witness had spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, and they were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans 26: and an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Arise and go toward the south to "the desert route" going down from Jerusalem to Gaza [the road running along the coastline of Israel leading into the desert of Idumaea in route to Egypt], 27: and he arose and proceeded. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch, a person of authority under the **Can'dace**, queen of the Ethiopians, who was over of all her treasure, who had come to worship in Jerusalem, 28: and was returning seated in his carriage and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29: And the Spirit spoke to Philip, "Approach close to the carriage." 30: So Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31: And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32: Now the portion of the Scripture that he was reading was this:*

As a sheep to the slaughter he was led and as a lamb before the shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. 33: In his humiliation justice was denied

him. Who will declare his descendents for his life is taken from the earth, [Isaiah 53:7-8 LXX text]

*And the eunuch inquired of Philip, "About whom is the prophet saying this, about himself or about some other person?" 35: Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached to him Jesus. 36: Now as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Behold, here is water, what prevents me from being baptized/immersed?" 38: And he commanded the carriage to stand still, and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized/immersed him. 39: And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord seized (*arpizo* - literally "to seize or apprehend") Philip; and the eunuch no longer saw him, and went on his way rejoicing. 40: And Philip was found at Azotus and he preached the gospel to all the towns [along the coast] until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:25-40 my translation-MWLIII)*

The Spirit Sends Philip to the Southern Coastline (Acts 8:25-26)

When the ones giving witness had spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, and they were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans 26: and an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Arise and go toward the south to "the desert route" going down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Following his preaching mission to Samaria, Philip was told by an angel of the Lord, "Arise and go toward the south to the desert route going down from Jerusalem to Gaza." There were two roads leading from Jerusalem toward the south, one of them was "the desert road," which was a caravan route running along the coastline of Israel leading into the Idumean desert in route to Egypt and Ethiopia.

It is worthy of note that it was an angel of the Lord who spoke to Philip, as is the case in numerous OT revelations (cf. Gen 31:11; Exodus 3:2; 1 Kings 13:18; 19:5, 7; 2 Kings 1:3, 15; Zech 1:8-9; and

Daniel especially in the apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period such as 1 Enoch 1, 2 Enoch 1, 3 Enoch 1, 4 Enoch 2, Psalms of Solomon 2). So also in the NT: Luke 1:1, 13, 18-19, 26-38; 15:10; 16:22; 22:43; Acts 10:3, 7; 12; 27:23; as well as Matt 3:41; 16:27; 18:10; Hebrews 2:5f; 12:22). So there is a significant presence and activity of angels in the history of God's interaction with men in both the Old and New Testaments records.

The Man from Ethiopia (8:27-28)

. . . and he arose and proceeded; and behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch, a person of authority under the Can'dace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was over of all her treasure, who had come to worship in Jerusalem, 28: and was returning seated in his carriage and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

The description given of the person Philip was sent to meet is somewhat detailed. He was "a man of Ethiopia," the country located below Egypt in northern Africa. This designation is thought to be taken from the Greek *Aithiops* meaning "a person with a burnt face," and also in Hebrew, "Cush" as in the descendents of Cush in Genesis 10:7 and in Isaiah 11:11. Ethiopia is the modern day Sudan in North Africa.

Whether he was a Diaspora Jew, a proselyte to Judaism, or a godfearers is not known. But the fact that he had been to Jerusalem to worship and was reading from the OT Scriptures tells us that he had in some way connected with the God of Israel.

He is also called a "eunuch," which is typically understood to be a person who has been emasculated (castrated) to prevent him from having sexual desires and activity which was usually associated with a male who was given responsibility for a royal harem (Esther 2:14), or because he was a close servant of a royal person who was female, such as a queen or princess.

The term, however, is also used of a person who served in roles not associated with females, but with males, and they were not emasculated (castrated). In Genesis 39:1, Potiphar, whose wife tempted Joseph, is called in the Greek LXX "*eunouchos*," (usually in English translations, "officer" or "chamberlain"). In Genesis 40:2, Pharaoh had two "officials" (*eunouchois* - eunuchs), who were sent to prison with Joseph, one a chief wine taster and the other a baker. Both are called eunuchs even though their service to Pharaoh had nothing to do with females; in fact within the Egyptian culture the term is more of an official servant than a person who has been emasculated. Even in Israel, when (1 Samuel 8) the people of Israel were requesting a king, Samuel tells them that the king would make servants of them and in verse 15 says, "he will take a tenth of your grain and give it to his eunuchs (*eunouchois*)."¹ What would the king of Israel be doing with emasculated men called eunuchs?

This would be very inconsistent of the king given the prohibition against allowing fellowship with a eunuch. In Deut 23:1, God commanded, "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." In the OT, the term is used in more than eighteen occurrences and in no instance may it be assumed that this person was emasculated. It may have been the case that Luke calls the man a eunuch in the broader sense, as the word was used in Egypt, a "person of authority" as he says in Acts 8:27. One cannot know whether this man was emasculated or not and to take a dogmatic position on the issue is to do so without any real certitude of data.

This eunuch was a man of authority (*dunastes* - a powerful man) under the Candace or Queen of the Ethiopians. The term "Candace" is not the name of a specific queen; rather, it is like the word "Caesar," a designation for one who is a monarch, which Luke defines as "queen of the Ethiopians." Ethiopia is unique in the history of the ancient world in that it was a culture wherein only a female could sit as monarchs of the realm. Males served as secondary monarchical figures.

This Ethiopian man was the one in charge of all of the queen's treasure, and had come to worship in Jerusalem. The word for "worship" is not the word for ritual service (*leiturgeo*) but the more generic *proskuneo* meaning literally, "to proceed toward with expressions of adoration," which could suggest non-cultic worship. This is the word for worship used by Jesus in John 4:21-24. This man, if a true Ethiopian, would have only been allowed to enter the court of the gentiles in the Temple, there he would be allowed to offer his prayers to the God of Israel who the priests claimed to be dwelling inside the Holy of Holies of the Temple.

He was returning to Ethiopia seated in his carriage. The word *harmatos* does not have the primary meaning of chariot, even though it can mean a war chariot. No one of this culture would have traveled such a distance in a war chariot. The term *harma* is anything that is yoked to something pulling it, which is the meaning of its root *harmos* - the joining or yoking together as with horses or oxen. It is very unlikely that someone of this man's stature was making such a journey in something less than a four wheel coach or carriage. The fact that he was reading aloud suggests that someone else was driving and the fact that Philip heard him reading from the text of Isaiah tells us that the man had room to open a large scroll and was reading it aloud, indicating that he was traveling in a leisurely manner.

He Was Reading from Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:29-35)

And the Spirit spoke to Philip, "Approach close to the carriage." 30: So Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31: And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the portion of the Scripture which he was reading was this:

As a sheep to the slaughter he was led and as a lamb before the shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. 33: In his humiliation justice was denied

him. Who will declare his descendents for his life is taken from the earth,[Isaiah 53:7-8 LXX text]

And the eunuch inquired of Philip, "About whom is the prophet saying this, about himself or about some other person?" 35: Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached to him Jesus.

It was **an angel** that spoke to Philip in verse 25, here it is **the Spirit** who speaks to him, then in verse 39 it is **the Spirit of the Lord** that removes Philip and sends him to Azotus. It is God acting through a direct means (through the agency of his Spirit) or indirectly (through the agency of a heavenly messenger) to accomplish a given objective.

The section of Scripture being read aloud by the Ethiopian was from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was one of the most popular books of the Hebrew Scriptures. More copies of it were discovered among the Dead Sea scrolls than any other book and the longest and most preserved scroll discovered was the scroll of Isaiah, which is on display in a building called *The Shrine of the Book* in Jerusalem, encased in an air-tight chamber which can only be viewed through a protective glass.

The Ethiopian was reading from the fourth servant song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), specifically 53:7-8. The question "Do you understand what you are reading?" was a typical Jewish model for a joint study of Scripture. A given section of Scripture may be read, and then the teacher or rabbi would ask, "Do you know the meaning of what you have read?" The student (*talmid*/disciple) would respond with a request for an interpretation. This can be exemplified in the Habakkuk Commentary (1QpHab) of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection. Each text is prefaced with a question and then followed with an interpretation. This format is also found in much of the rabbinic literature of the period.

The Ethiopian was reading,

As a sheep to the slaughter he was led and as a lamb before the shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. 33: In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who will declare his descendents for his life is taken from the earth," [Isaiah 53:7-8 LXX text, my translation-MWL].

The text of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is given a variety of meanings by Jewish interpreters. Joseph Fitzmyer, drawing from Joachim Jeremias (*Theological Dictionary of the NT* 5:684-89), gives the three most prevalent interpretations:

. . . three interpretation were used in Palestinian Judaism in the first millennium AD: (a) the collective interpretation, in which *pais theou* [servant of God] was understood of Israel as a whole; (b) an individual interpretation, in which it was understood (esp. in Isaiah 49:5 and 50:10) to refer to the prophet himself; and (c) an individual interpretation, in which it came to be applied to *Elias redivivus* [the return of Elijah-MWLVIII], (Sirach 48:10), or to the Messiah (esp. Isaiah 52:13 and 53:11, phrases of which are used in 1 Enoch 37-71 and the late *Targum* [Aramaic paraphrase-MWLVIII] of Isaiah), (Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* in *The Anchor Bible*, p 414).

This "fourth servant song" of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 was used directly and indirectly by the apostles as an interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus. If he was the Messiah, why did God allow him to be crucified by the Romans? The answer was given by Peter in Acts 2:22-36. His death was part of a divine plan in which God allowed the evil of man to crucify his messenger and then reversed the evil deed by raising him from death. The cross or "suffering motif" appears in every sermon preached by Peter (Acts 2:22-36, also in 3:13-26), and is also in his letters, as can be seen in and 1 Peter 1:3-6, 18-21; 3:18-22; but it is never interpreted as a saving event.

What Prevents Me from Being Baptized? (Acts 8:36-40)

And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent me from being

baptized?" 38: And he commanded the carriage to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39: And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip was found at Azo'tus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesare'a.

The water they came to has been traditionally identified as *Wadi el Hasi*, a stream found north of Gaza. Whether or not this was the site cannot be affirmed, but what is certain is that they came to a body of water large or deep enough for the two of them to go “down into” and for Philip to immerse (*baptizo*) the Ethiopian. It is of no little significance that when Philip preached Jesus to this man, his message must have included the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins, and his burial in *Wadi el Hasi* was a reenactment of the burial of his old existence in water that he may be raised out of the water into new existence in Christ.

The Greek manuscript tradition used by Tyndale and the English translators of the Authorized Version (KJV) contained a verse that is not found in the older and more complete manuscripts (appearing in some text as a marginal or copyist note) and it does not agree syntactically with the writing style of Luke. This is why verse 37 has been eliminated from the later English translations (ASV; RSV; NIV).

The expression "the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip," has given place to a good bit of ink. The Greek term used to describe what happened to Philip is *arpazo* meaning "to seize" or "to take hold of." The expression only means that Philip was under the control of the Spirit of the Lord and that he led him to the coastline to preach from *Azotus* up to Caesarea. *Azotus* was the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod on the southwestern coastline of Israel, approximately 60 miles south of Caesarea on the coast. The translation “caught up Philip” would have been better translated as, “the Spirit of the Lord seized Philip,” (i.e. the HS came upon Philip in an act of revelation).

Application

What can be drawn from this text in terms of application or insight into the evangelistic activity of the earliest Christians? First, we can learn that someone who is religious may be the easiest person to talk to about belief, theirs and yours. Philip "heard" this man reading from Scripture and he simply asked him "Do you know what that means?" and the discussion began.

Also, there was no show of prejudice on the part of Philip (a Jew), nor intimidation resulting from the fact that the Ethiopian was a powerful man and was someone of significant means. "Don't try to talk to him," we say, "look at that coach he's riding in." Philip approached the coach and showed an interest in what he was reading from the book of Isaiah.

Philip also went right to the point of whom he believed to be the person spoken of in the Isaiah 53 text. It was Jesus of Nazareth who died like a lamb without protest and was raised by God in affirmation of his messiahship. Also, the Ethiopian man may have had his own beliefs and would not appreciate Philip's presumption that he would be interested in his thinking; but it was open to what another person might think the text meant.

The issue of baptism was not avoided. Today we hear people say, "If you mention baptism you're going to lose them; we can't say that baptism is essential," there are people who don't want to hear that. What if it is essential and they have not done what the commission of Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19; Mark 16:15-16), what do you accomplish by avoiding a conflict over something the Lord has clearly commanded? It is not so much a matter of the essentiality of baptism as it is the essentiality of recognizing Jesus' lordship. If he is Lord and told his disciples to teach all nations and baptize them, then there should be no question about essentiality. It is Jesus' lordship that is at issue, not a theological controversy about baptism. He said to do it and it is his word that carries the greatest weight on the matter. Who has the authority to say it is not essential if Jesus commanded it?

The explicit language here makes it clear that this man was immersed; he did not have water poured or sprinkled on him in the name of having experienced "*baptisma*," the Greek word meaning "immersion." You would think that on a road leading into a desert one would not be able to find enough water to immerse someone. But they did, enough for Philip to go down into the water with the man and immerse him. All the tradition in the world can't change the implication of the language here and imagery it portrays - immersion in water was the baptism of first century Christianity. Someone of later times changed it without the authority to do so, but that will be an issue between Jesus and those who had to presume to change it.

Then, Philip left and the man was left to himself with nothing but the Scriptures and the instruction Philip had give him. In Acts 2:42 we are told that those who were baptized continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and in the fellowship of the church. What was to happen to this man without the apostles teaching and the fellowship of the church?

This would have been a similar situation for those Jewish converts of Acts 2 who returned to their homes among the Diaspora spread throughout the Mediterranean world, and to their local synagogues shortly after their conversions in Jerusalem. What did they have to keep them orthodox or faithful Christians? What about such issues as the Lord's Supper? Or worship and the kind of music they were to offer? Then there's "the church?" What can we reasonably assume that this man, and those of the Diaspora who returned to their homes from Jerusalem from the Pentecost experience knew or could have known about all the issues that have caused so much concern today in the interest of orthodoxy or the faithful preservation of Christianity?

What we can be sure of is that what made this man a convert to Christ was that he believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that his death and resurrection had made it possible for him to be forgiven of his sins and reconciled to God. Because of what had happened to

him he could stand before God in judgment as one whose sins had been forgiven and washed away, and he now had access to God through prayer and the Scriptures.

One is looking at the essential nature of evangelism in this text. The Scriptures told of someone who was to come, who would bring mankind back to God. A Christian responded to a person reading one these prophecies, not understanding it or knowing who the suffering servant was, this Christian engaged in discussion with this man concerning the meaning of the Scripture he was reading, then followed with the story of Jesus, the "*godspell*" (i.e. God's story). Believing the words of Philip the man asked to be baptized. Why? Because his acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior meant that if he wanted Jesus as his Savior, he must acknowledge him as his Lord and this Lord had commanded baptism of all who would follow him.

Useful to us here is the evangelistic question asked by Philip, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Or, it could be worded, "What do you think that Scripture means?" The question aroused the interest of the nobleman, which was followed by his question, "How can I understand unless someone helps me?" His response indicated that he wanted to further investigate what was a matter of interest to him, and that led to a decision to believe the interpretation given by Philip. This was the same method used by Jesus in John 4:4-42. He aroused interest in the Samaritan woman by asking for a drink of water. Since Jewish males did not speak to Samaritan women, his lack of prejudice aroused her interest in who he might be. Her interest led to investigation that took the form of a series of questions, which led to the discovery of the identity of Jesus. This was followed by her going back to the village and arousing the interest of the people of her village with the words, "Come see this man! Could this be the Messiah" (John 4:29)? Those who knew her followed her out to investigate her claims. Their interest was aroused by this woman that interest led to further investigation by the people, and the consequent discovery of the Savior of the world (John 4:39-40).

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