

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 8:26-27

As we finished last time, we noted that Philip's bold foray into Samaritan territory forged a path for the apostles to take the gospel to its other regions.

While the apostles had confined their ministries to the populace in Jerusalem for some three years, were now evangelizing other parts of Samaria. The outer-circle disciple had paved the way for the apostle's success as they took the southern route back to Jerusalem.

As Luke resumes his history of the Acts Church, he tells yet a second story involving Philip and evangelism. This one, rather than being about an entire city, is about one influential man.

As we get started, one of the things we want to note is that Luke changes writing styles when he tells this next story. As F.F. Bruce points out, "This part of it is told in a style which is in some respects reminiscent of the Old Testament narratives of Elijah."

Let's look at verse 26:

"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

There are a couple of interesting things about how Luke begins this new narrative. One is the use of the phrase, "an angel of the Lord" or "the angel of the Lord".

The Greek phrase used here and in Acts 5:19 is paralleled in the Old Testament as meaning an appearance of the Second Person of the Godhead. An example would be the “Angel of the Lord” who appeared to Joshua prior to the fall of Jericho.

Does Luke mean that on this occasion Christ appeared to Philip? We can't be sure. He may be using the phrase as a way to point out the supernatural quality of the messenger who is giving Philip his next assignment. In the same way, in verse 39 it will be the Spirit of the Lord who whisks Philip away after he baptized his newest convert.

The second thing we want to note is the directions for Philip to “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

While Philip's prior mission had him going some 60 miles north of Jerusalem, Philip is now sent to the desert road that goes down about sixty miles from Jerusalem to Gaza.

A little history on Gaza is important to Luke's story:

Gaza was located south of Ashkelon and Ashdod. It was on the Mediterranean Ocean and was the southernmost city of the Philistine Pentapolis.

Ancient Gaza was situated on a hill rising about 200 feet above the valley floor. There were sand dunes between it and the sea, which was about 2 miles away.

In the Old Testament, Gaza figures somewhat prominently.

When Joshua conquered Canaan, Gaza was one of the cities they failed to defeat – along with several other main cities held by the Philistines. See: Joshua 10:41, 11:22.

At one point, later on, the tribe of Judah captured Gaza but was unable to maintain control of it. Eventually, it fell back into the hands of the Philistines (See: Judges 1:18).

Perhaps the most well-known figure associated with Gaza was Samson. In one of his many encounters with the Philistines, Samson carried the heavy gates from Gaza all the way to Hebron – some 42 miles away.

It was also in Gaza that Samson met Delilah (see Judges 16:1). Samson eventually died in Gaza when he pulled down the main supports of the Philistine's temple there.

When the Spirit directed Philip to get on the road that led south from Jerusalem to Gaza, we are not told whether the old or newer Gaza is meant.

The older Gaza was destroyed in 96 BC by the Hasmonaean king, Alexander Jannaeus. The newer Gaza was rebuilt in 57 B.C. nearer the Mediterranean Sea by Gabinius. The "Old City" is said by historians to have remained "desert".

Whether Luke means the old Gaza or newer one, either way, the important thing is this: The road that went from Jerusalem to Gaza was a common caravan and trading route. It went past Gaza to Egypt and continued to the African continent.

Let's pick up with verses 27. I'm going to read it from the Contemporary English Version:

“So Philip left. An important Ethiopian official happened to be going along that road in his chariot. He was the chief treasurer for Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. The official had gone to Jerusalem to worship. 28 and was now on his way home. He was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of the prophet Isaiah.”

As Philip walked along the desert road to Gaza, he came on a travelling chariot or covered wagon that was heading south. In that chariot or covered wagon sat the treasurer of the kingdom of Ethiopia (Nubia), who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was now returning home.

The “Ethiopia” of those days corresponded to what we call ‘the Upper Nile’, reaching approximately from Aswan to Khartoum. Ethiopia lay on the Nile south of the first cataract at Aswan. It’s two primary cities were Meroe and Napata.

The man Philip would meet was from that region. Now Luke notes that he was a eunuch and was an important official in charge of all the treasure of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

The title, Candace, queen of the Ethiopians is somewhat confusing – unless you know the history behind it.

The king of Ethiopia was worshipped as “the child of the sun”. Consequently, he was regarded as too sacred and important to be tasked with the daily functions of royalty.

Instead, these tasks were performed on his behalf by the “queen-mother”, who had the dynastic title, “Kandakeœ” or “Candace”. The Ethiopian Philip met

was her treasurer – and almost certainly a man of black African race.

Luke tells us this man was sitting in his chariot or wagon, reading the scroll of Isaiah. He had recently gone north to Jerusalem to worship at one of the annual festivals, but now was taking the south road back to Ethiopia.

There's some important information in those descriptions that may not be immediately apparent. First, Luke notes that he was a eunuch in the queen-mother's employ.

Although it seems cruel – if not abhorrent – to our modern minds, eunuchs were common in the ancient world. Simply put, a eunuch was a man who was usually forced to undergo castration.

Often, this was done as a requirement for men who held specific social roles such as a harem servant or guardian of women. However, in many cultures it also applied to courtiers – men who served as companions or advisers to the king or queen, religious specialists, royal guards, or government advisors.

The first historical records of court eunuchs comes from the Sumerian city of Lagash from around 2000 B.C.

Why does Luke specifically mention that this treasurer from Ethiopia was a eunuch at the outset of the story? I think he's telegraphing something important that his Gentile and Jewish readers would have understood.

In the Old Testament, any man whose genitals had been mutilated or malformed at birth, were restricted from worship in the Tabernacle or Temple. Deuteronomy 23:1

stated, “If a man's private parts have been crushed or cut off, he cannot fully belong to the LORD's people.”

The Catholic Public Domain translation makes this verse a little clearer. It says, “A eunuch, one whose testicles have been debilitated or cut off, or whose penis has been cut off, shall not enter into the church of the Lord.”

If we understand the history clearly, this is a high-court official of Nubia or Kush, who has just been to Jerusalem for one of the annual celebrations. Yet, he is clearly forbidden to have full participation in those events.

If you reflect on Philip's last assignment, I think you are about to have an “aha!” moment. The Samaritans were half-Gentiles and half-Jews, who had been rejected by the rank-and-file Jews for over a century. Now Philip meets a eunuch who – according to Old Testament Law – cannot be a full member of the Jewish people.

The next question that comes up is, “Was he a Gentile or was he Jewish?”

Some scholars suggest he was a Gentile worshipper – often called “God fearers”. This suggests that he was a Gentile proselyte, subject to the various restrictions. Others suggest he was Jewish. John Stott gives this reason:

“It seems unlikely that he was a Gentile since Luke does not present him as the first Gentile convert; that distinction he reserves for Cornelius. He regards the Ethiopian's conversion rather as another example of the loosening of bonds with Jerusalem (foreseen by Stephen in his speech) and of the liberation of the word of God to be the gospel for the world.” – John Stott

There is some biblical support for Stott's position on this:

In Acts 15, as the apostolic council was dealing with the Pharisees demand that Gentile converts be circumcised, Peter told them:

“Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.” – Acts 15:7-9

Peter seems to make it clear that his visit to Cornelius' home was, in fact, the first time the Gentiles were saved. In addition, in Acts 15:13-14, James added this statement: “Simon [Peter] has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name” - Acts 15:13-14

At the end of verse 27 we read, “He was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of the prophet Isaiah.”

Luke is not only giving us information, but he is also saying something that doesn't appear in the text: The Ethiopian official was sitting in his chariot or covered wagon and reading the scroll of Isaiah out loud.

Here's a little history of reading for you. In the ancient world, almost everyone who could read did it aloud. Very few readers did it silently. Why? Anyone who has tried to read a copy of an ancient manuscript knows the words need to be spelled out. This is accomplished a lot easier by spelling out the words than reading silently.

If you think about it, we teach children to read aloud before they can read silently. Today's humans reach the higher level much easier because of our modern print. In the ancient world, it required considerable experience to read silently,