

THE END OF THE EARTH HEARS THE GOSPEL (8:26–40)

This part of the narrative³⁹ is as dramatic as [Acts 2](#). In fact, these two portions of Acts share more than one feature. In [Acts 2](#), the Spirit came upon the disciples with the sound of rushing wind and let them speak in tongues in a manner that they had not learned to speak before. In this section, Philip is snatched by the Spirit to appear and disappear from place to place as fast as wind ([8:26, 29, 39](#)). [Acts 2](#) presents 120 disciples ministering to a gathering of people who had different languages and cultures but apparently having commonalities in faith with all who had come from nations around the world to worship in Jerusalem. Philip also ministers to a foreign worshiper in Jerusalem in a language they can communicate in. The preaching in [Acts 2](#) that Peter sourced from a prophetic book in the [OT](#) and his interpretation of its meaning for the day and the sign yielded conviction and baptism of the hearers who had been puzzled by the phenomenon of Pentecost. Philip too picked his explication of the suffering servant from a prophetic book in the [OT](#) ([8:32–33](#)), a reading the Ethiopian eunuch had been trying to make sense of with difficulty. Their conversation also had a return—the eunuch believed in the gospel of Jesus and requested to be baptized ([8:35–36](#)). Also, Luke leaves us in no doubt that Peter and Philip both were guided by the Spirit; their proclamation had prophetic and scriptural foundation. The Spirit empowers them to proclaim God’s word that creates faith in the hearts of the hearers. In addition, just like Peter’s message in [Acts 2](#) sends flashes of light of the [New Covenant](#) to the uttermost parts of the world from Jerusalem, the encounter of Philip and the eunuch opens a door of the church to the Gentiles at the ends of the earth.

As to the geographical setting⁴⁰ ([Acts 8:26–27](#)) and description of who was the Can-

³⁹ Spencer 1992: 135–45 contends that both the Elijah/Elisha material in Kings and the narrative of Emmaus can be comparable with Philip’s mission toward the eunuch.

⁴⁰ Bruce 1988: 174 explains the Jerusalem-Gaza road and what *ēremos* (desert) means as follows: “The Jerusalem-Gaza road—probably the road which ran by way of Beth-govrin, Ptolemy’s Beto-gabris (refounded later as Eleutheropolis by Septimius Severus). The word ‘desert’ might refer either to Gaza or to the road. The older city of Gaza was destroyed by the Hasmonaean king Alexander Jannaeus in 96 BC; a new city was built nearer the Mediterranean by Gabinius in 57 BC, the old city, as Strabo says, remaining desert.”

dace,⁴¹ much has been said regarding the Ethiopian eunuch's ethnic identity along with his socioeconomic status.⁴² One general perspective purports that this was not a mere Gentile visiting Jerusalem but a Diaspora Jew, while another view would see the treasurer of the Ethiopian kingdom⁴³ as a pure Gentile converted to Judaism before or during his visit. A counterargument of the latter position goes back to the Mosaic law and sees no possibility for a eunuch to be a proselyte, because in accordance with that law, such a person could not be given this kind of privilege (*Deut 32:1–3*). Against this view, Bock argues that “all the eunuch needs to be is one who has embraced Judaism, not a full proselyte” and concludes that “this would put him somewhere between one who has been merely exposed to Israel's God and may have respect for this deity and one who is fully circumcised.”⁴⁴ While all these considerations are possibly true historically, they do not have a bearing on how and to whom the gospel of Jesus should be preached. We see Philip not caring to ask about who this visitor was socially,⁴⁵ ethnically, and religiously. Rather, Philip followed the leading of the Spirit, who took him to that very road (*Acts 8:29*; cf. *8:26*, an angel of the Lord⁴⁶). As a matter of fact, it is

⁴¹ Candace or Kandake, sometimes also spelled as Kentake, was the title for queens and queen mothers of the ancient African kingdom of Kush, called Nubia and Ethiopia. It is generally well-known that much veneration was ascribed to the king of Ethiopia who was thought to be the son of the sun. And as such, the king of Ethiopia would not discharge nonreligious duties considered as secular and not fit for him. On his behalf, the queen mother, who bore the name of Kandake, the name of the dynasty, would take care of those duties. See Bruce 1988: 174–75; Keener 2013: 1571–72.

⁴² Keener 2013: 1550–79 presents us a rich review of opinions about the eunuch. See also Bock 2007: 338.

⁴³ This kingdom is generally regarded as the ancient kingdom of Meroë, which is located in present Sudan. Ethiopia was often identified with the ends of the earth according to the ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.25.114. Witherington 1988: 290.

⁴⁴ Bock 2007: 338. See also Schnabel 2012: 425.

⁴⁵ On the other hand, Peterson 2009: 293 comments that Luke himself is interested in commenting on the eunuch's profession, chief finance officer, whose social status was high.

⁴⁶ It is uncertain whether the angel of the Lord in *8:26* designates “angel” or “the Spirit.” While it is possible that it indicates “angel” in Luke-Acts (cf. *Luke 1:11*; *2:9*; *Acts 5:19*; *10:3, 7, 22*; *12:7, 23*;

unimaginable for a traveler of his status to have allowed a stranger aboard his chariot (8:31); equally outrageous is for Philip to have bothered to ask the question. However, Philip obeyed the voice of the Spirit and overcame his natural instinct of what is right or wrong in this given occasion. The Spirit guides both ends in setting the scene for the gospel to spread far and wide from Jerusalem. Here again, Luke still has his thesis, anticipated in 1:8, in mind: “the Spirit empowers Christ’s witnesses to cross cultural barriers with his message (1:8).”⁴⁷

The mission of the evangelist was immediately clear from the time he had heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:30–31) concerning the suffering servant, Messiah. Perhaps not just as a matter of coincidence but because Greek was not his familiar language, the eunuch was reading the Scripture loudly, a common practice in those ages, in order to grasp the meaning from the reading.⁴⁸ Incidentally, the reading by the eunuch was from Isa 53:7–8 (8:32–33), which is known as a prophetic passage about the suffering servant of the Lord. Although the passage is not interpreted in the following conversation, it becomes a significant opportunity for Philip to preach Jesus to him (8:34–35).⁴⁹ The divine monitoring and coordination of the eunuch’s need and Philip’s ministry of evangelism sent the latter to the very person at the very place at the exact timing for Philip to bring his experience with the character in the reading of the eunuch. For the effectiveness of the conversion of this visitor from the kingdom of Meroë,⁵⁰ Philip had to obey the Spirit presiding on the mission,⁵¹ draw near the chariot, ask the right question, and share the gospel of Jesus as his eyewitness (8:35). Although Luke does not explicate the sequential dialogue between Philip and the eunuch in detail, “the implication is that some period of instruction intervened, allowing Philip to explain the meaning of baptism and the nature of commitment to the risen Lord

⁴⁷ Keener 2013: 1581.

⁴⁸ Bruce 1988: 175 points to the fact that “reading in antiquity was almost invariably loud.”

⁴⁹ Tannehill 1994: 111.

⁵⁰ Since the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion story is recorded after the mission to Samaria, it is possible to say that Philip’s mission to this African eunuch is the first outreaching step to the ends of the earth. See Thornton 1977–1978: 374–75; Spencer 1992: 151.

⁵¹ Penney 1997: 122 argues that “Lukan pneumatology is thoroughly oriented towards mission.” Cf. Bennema 2011: 242–46.

Jesus.”⁵² We remember that Peter and John did not disregard the lame that they helped walk inside the Temple where such people were not welcome. Their mission was clear when they came to worship that day. At any rate, if the eunuch had not been welcome in Judaism because of his physical state, it would not have been a case to prevent him to adhere to the new faith in the resurrected Lord of both Jews and Gentiles. One thing was hanging on Philip’s mind all the time—all nations must be disciples.

Thus, Luke’s pattern of the well-accomplished work of evangelism is found perfectly in this brief story involving the encounter of the evangelist Philip and the eunuch, namely: (1) the enabling power of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 8:29](#)); (2) the proclamation of Christ ([8:35](#)); (3) repentance or (confession of faith in Christ) ([8:36–\[37\]](#)⁵³); (4) water baptism as a public, outward declaration of the inward decision to follow the new way henceforth ([8:38](#)); and (5) the joy of the saved soul ([8:39](#)). Finally, after the mission was accomplished, **the Spirit of the Lord** (*pneuma kyriou*)⁵⁴ **snatched** (*harpazō*) **Philip**⁵⁵

⁵² Peterson 2009: 295.

⁵³ Although [8:37](#) is not attested by the early and highly regarded texts (P45, 74 A B C 33 81 614), the Western text provides the continuation: “If you believe with all your heart, you may. He answered, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Epp 1966: 63 contends that this addition emphasizes the messiahship of Jesus. However, as Metzger 2000 [1971]: 315 argues, it is difficult to find the reason why scribes should have removed this important confession, if it had been part of the original text. On the other hand, Peterson 2009: 297 comments that its addition was presumably “because copyists felt that the Ethiopian would not have been baptized without such a confession of faith.” However, Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger 2006: 162 disagree with commentators who view the confession along with Christian liturgical practice because of two reasons. First of all, [Acts 8:37](#) “is found in witnesses as early as the latter half of the second century CE, but the earliest evidence for baptismal confessions of faith dates from after the fourth century.” Second, “the contents of the eunuch’s statement of faith differ from the baptismal or creedal formulas found either in the New Testament or in the early Church Fathers where the focus is on declaring Jesus as the Lord (see, for example, [Acts 11:17](#); [16:31](#); cf. [9:42](#); [18:8](#)).”

⁵⁴ Some late MSS (A 36 323 453 945 1739 1891) offer a fuller form of reading (marked in italics): “the *Holy Spirit fell upon the eunuch, and an angel of the Lord* snatched Philip.” Most scholars and English translations (TNIV, ESV, NRSV, NKJV) take the shorter reading as the original. Cf. Metzger 2000 [1971]: 316. On the other hand, Epp 1966: 117–18 comments that it is the tendency

and took him to another major city north of Gaza, **Azotus**, and other cities to continue the work (8:40). After this missionary journey, **Philip came to Caesarea**.⁵⁶ It can be possibly assumed that his ministry was actively carrying on in this place⁵⁷ when he reappears in 21:8 in an encounter with Paul around twenty years later. This geographical information provides a string in order for the author to be connected to his narratives (9:30; 10:1–48).

In sum, what is particularly notable in the pericope covering Acts 6–8 is the preeminence of non-apostolic figures that Luke depicts as the leading anointed ministers to the standards of fully apostolic servants, namely Stephen and Philip. Ethnic boundaries that had become dividing margins, and cultural preferences that had penetrated so deeply, even in the matters of waiting on tables and eating food (Acts 6:1–2), as delineated in the interpretation of Jewish history and historical faith (Acts 7), have no bearing on the work pioneered by the Spirit through Philip in Samaria anymore.⁵⁸ Luke is a careful recorder of God’s works through ordinary humans who accomplished extraordinary acts. Remarkable also is that the breakthrough in Samaria would divinely be a presage for what Peter (Acts 10) and Paul (Acts 9; 13) would later give heed to when God called them individually to show consideration to the Gentiles, who ethnically are even more distant from the Jews.

⁵⁶ The geographical movement of Philip’s ministry is as follows: Jerusalem - - -> Samaria - - -> Gaza - - -> Azotus - - -> (some other cities) - - -> Caesarea.

⁵⁷ If so, it might be presumed that Cornelius, who was living in Caesarea, could probably hear some portion of the gospel about Jesus if we take Acts 10:36–37 into consideration. Cf. Rackham 1925: 120.

⁵⁸ Cf. Barreto 2011: 129–37 [131] picks on Luke-Acts to demonstrate how this evangelist and historian has rightly established that ethnic differences are not “obstacles to overcome” but God’s gifts to be “treasured.” While he recognizes the binary mind-set of biblical interpreters who put “nationalistic, ethnocentric and Judaists” in one box, and “universal, ethnic-free and Christianity” in the other, the author does not, however, hesitate to caution Bible readers about the danger of theological blindness in overlooking the “innocuous” character of those differences.