

Acts 8:26–40

The Unhindered Gospel

Peter and John return to Jerusalem, but the restless Spirit has other things in mind for Philip. In verse 26 the narrative continues, not with Philip but with “an angel of the Lord.” Philip is the protagonist of this section, or is he? It is the angel whom we meet first, ordering Philip around, ordering him to do an absurd thing—travel down a deserted road at noon! This is not the first nor will it be the last time in Acts that someone will hear a seemingly absurd order from the Lord (e.g., 5:20; 9:11–12; 10:9–16).

Only the angel talks. Philip says nothing: “And he rose and went” (v. 27). Philip is compliant, obedient, taking no initiative on his own. Out on this deserted road Philip meets, of all people, an Ethiopian. Philip responds to the Ethiopian’s questions about what he is reading, then the Spirit seizes him and takes him to Azotus. So who is the real protagonist of this story?

The eunuch Philip encounters on the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza is described in considerable detail. Contrary to popular interpretation, he need not be a castrated male who was excluded from the temple (Deut. 23:1). Rather, we are reading a story about an important man, a foreigner, though possibly a Jew, a powerful person who has much power and authority as the queen’s minister—except the power to understand the word of God. Yet he is willing to be instructed by Philip in “the good news of Jesus” (8:35).

Luke’s audience would be fascinated with this Ethiopian. In the Greco-Roman world the term “Ethiopian” was often applied to black people. The Odyssey speaks of “far-off Ethiopians ... the furthestmost of men” (1:22–23). In other words, here is a person from an exotic land, the edge of the world, timbuktu, someone whose dark skin made him an object of wonder and admiration among Jews and Romans (cf. F. M. Snowden). This warns us not to consider the Ethiopian as a despised or deprived person—quite the opposite. He is a powerful, though exotic, court official, a well-placed and significant person who is receptive to the truth. He beseeches Philip to interpret for him and then to baptize him. Here is an earnest inquirer who reaches out and is graciously included into the actions of God.

He is converted and asks what hinders him from baptism. Perhaps we have here in

the word “hindered” a fragment of the early baptismal liturgy which asks of a candidate, “What hinders this person from being baptized?” an affirmation of the inclusiveness and graciousness of baptism (cf. Cullman, pp. 71–78). Whether or not this is the case, Luke certainly places this baptism at a strategic position in his narrative. The baptism of the Ethiopian official is situated between the baptism of Samaritans and, in chapter 10, the baptism of a gentile. The Ethiopian’s religious status before baptism is left in doubt—we do not know for sure that he is a Jew, possibly he is a “God fearer” or proselyte, but we do not believe he could be a gentile. Luke leaves us with the impression that in the unhindered baptism of this man the evangelistic thrust has moved from Jew, to Samaritan, out to the boundaries of the world, at last to the threshold of the gentiles. [Psalm 68:31](#) is fulfilled, “... Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out her hands to God.”

Furthermore, Luke’s excessive use of divine prodding and interventions in this story—an angel giving directions, the Spirit commanding the presence of water, the Spirit carrying Philip away—are paralleled in only one other story: the story of Cornelius (Haenchen, p. 315). The mission to the gentiles depicted in the baptism of Cornelius, the presence of the gospel out here in the desert of Gaza with this Ethiopian of somewhat murky physical, religious, and ethnic status can only be attributed to the constant prodding of the Spirit. If the good news is being preached out there, it is the work of God, not of people. No triumphal, crusading enthusiasm has motivated the church up to this point, no mushy all embracing desire to be inclusive of everyone and everything. Rather, in being obedient to the Spirit, preachers like Philip find themselves in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people.

Eusebius says that the Ethiopian whom Philip baptized returned home and became an evangelist ([Historia Ecclesiastica, 2.2. 13–14](#)). While our text says nothing of this, we can understand how this lively story of an Ethiopian who appears from nowhere, responds to the gospel, and joyfully goes his way elicited an imaginative response from the church, for in his story we see what the good news can do.