

3. Philip the evangelist and an Ethiopian leader (8:26–40)

Soon after the departure of Peter and John from the Samaritan city, Philip was given another evangelistic commission. He was told to ‘Go south.’ The person who gave him this instruction is called *an angel of the Lord*, although in later stages of the story, it is ‘the Spirit’ who directed him to the Ethiopian (29) and ‘the Spirit of the Lord’ who then took him away again (39). Philip was sent to (and along) *the desert road that goes down about sixty miles from Jerusalem to Gaza*, which was the most southerly of the five Philistine cities, and near the Mediterranean coast. Whether the Gaza in question was ‘old Gaza’ which had been destroyed in 93 BC, or ‘new Gaza’ which had been built further south some thirty-five years later, we are not told. In either case, the road was well used, for it continued past Gaza to Egypt and so to the African continent.

a. Philip meets the Ethiopian (8:27–29)

The ‘Ethiopia’ of those days corresponded to what we call ‘the Upper Nile’, reaching approximately from Aswan to Khartoum. The man from that region to whom Luke introduces us was not only a *eunuch* (as were most countries at that period) but *an important official in charge of all the treasure of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians* (27). ‘Candace’ is known to have been not a personal name but a dynastic title for the Queen Mother who performed certain functions on behalf of the king. The Ethiopian official to whom Philip was sent was her treasurer or chancellor of the exchequer, presumably a black African. But he *had gone to Jerusalem to worship*, a pilgrim at one of the annual festivals, and now *on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the scroll of Isaiah the prophet* (28). This may mean that he was actually Jewish, either by birth or by conversion, for the Jewish dispersion had penetrated at least into Egypt and probably beyond, and perhaps by now the promise to eunuchs of [Isaiah 56:3–4](#) had superseded the ban of [Deuteronomy 23:1](#). 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 . It is especially significant that this African, who *had gone to Jerusalem to worship*, was now leaving it and would not return there. The story

ends with Luke's statement that 'he went on his way rejoicing' (39), distanced from Jerusalem although accompanied by Christ.

b. Philip shares the good news with the Ethiopian (8:30–35)

Told to 'go to that chariot and stay near it' (29), Philip ran alongside it, close enough to hear the man reading Isaiah the prophet (because everybody read aloud in those days), and close enough to shout to him the question, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' (30). Replying that he could not understand unless someone explains it to him, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him in his carriage (31).

Calvin contrasts the Ethiopian's modesty, in that he 'acknowledge his ignorance freely and frankly', with a person who is 'swollen-headed with confidence in his own abilities'. He goes on: 'That is also why the reading of Scripture bears fruit with such a few people today, because scarcely one in a hundred is to be found who gladly submits himself to teaching.'³⁷ The fact is that God has given us two gifts, first the Scriptures and secondly teachers to open up, explain, expound and apply the Scriptures. It is wonderful to note God's providence in the Ethiopian's life, first enabling him to obtain a copy of the Isaiah scroll and then sending Philip to teach him out of it. As Professor Howard Marshall writes, 'The way in which the story is told bears some structural resemblances to another story in which a Stranger joined two travellers and opened up the Scriptures to them, took part in a sacramental act, and then disappeared from view (Lk. 24:13–35).'³⁸

So we are to picture the Ethiopian with the scroll of [Isaiah 53](#) spread out on his lap, and with Philip now sitting beside him, as the carriage jolted its way further south. The verses Luke quotes³⁹ speak of a human sufferer who is *led like a sheep to the slaughter* and *like a lamb before the shearer* is silent. He experiences deep *humiliation*, is *deprived of justice*, and is killed (32–33). The Ethiopian asks who *the prophet is talking about, himself or someone else?* (34). In reply, beginning *with that very passage of Scripture*, Philip told him *the good news about Jesus* (35). Now there is no evidence that anyone in 1st first-century Judaism was expecting a suffering rather than a triumphant Messiah. No, it was [Jesus](#)

³⁷ Calvin, I, p. 247.

³⁸ Marshall, *Acts*, p. 161.

³⁹ [Is. 53:7–8](#).

who applied [Isaiah 53](#) to himself, and understood his death in the light of it.⁴⁰ It was, therefore, from him that the early Christians learned to read [Isaiah 53](#) in this way. So well prepared by the [Holy Spirit](#) was the Ethiopian's heart that it seems he believed immediately, and went on to ask for baptism.

Chrysostom contrasts the conversion of the Ethiopian with that of Saul of Tarsus, recorded in [Acts 9](#). 'Verily', he says, 'one has reason to admire this eunuch.' For, unlike Saul, he had no supernatural vision of Christ. Yet he believed, 'so great a thing is the careful reading of the Scriptures!'⁴¹

c. Philip baptizes the Ethiopian (8:36–39a)

As they travelled along the road, they came to some water, presumably in a wayside wadi, and the Ethiopian said: 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?' (36). The following verse (37), found in the text of AV and NIV margin, is a Western addition, not found in the earlier manuscripts: 'Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."' The two sentences seem to have belonged to an early baptismal liturgy. They were probably inserted into the text by a scribe who felt certain that Philip, before baptizing the Ethiopian, would have made sure that he had believed in his heart, in contrast to Simon Magus, whose heart was 'not right before God' (21). At all events, the Ethiopian gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him (38). The water was a visible sign of the washing away of his sins and of his baptism with the Spirit. Incidentally, the words 'went down into the water', as J. A. Alexander comments, 'can prove nothing as to its extent or depth'.⁴² Total immersion may be implied, but in that case the baptizer and the baptized will have been submerged together, since the same statement is made of them both. So the expression may rather mean, as the earliest paintings and baptistries suggest, that they went down into the water up to their waist, and that Philip then poured water over the Ethiopian.⁴³ Several MSS add that 'the Holy Spirit fell on the eunuch', and some scholars accept these words

⁴⁰ E.g. [Mk. 10:45](#); [14:24ff.](#); [Lk. 22:37](#).

⁴¹ Chrysostom, [Homily XIX](#), p. 126.

⁴² Alexander, I, p. 350.

⁴³ See Hanson, pp. 107, 111.

as original. But it seems more likely that they were added specially ‘to make explicit that the baptism of the Ethiopian was followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit’.⁴⁴

d. Philip is parted from the Ethiopian (8:39b–40)

Luke implies that immediately after *they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away (39)* ... and he *appeared at Azotus*, that is, Ashdod (40a). Some understand this trip as ‘a supersonic ride’,⁴⁵ undertaken ‘with miraculous velocity’,⁴⁶ and, to be sure, the Greek verb for ‘took away’ (*harpazō*) normally means to ‘snatch’ (NEB) or ‘seize’, as at the rapture.⁴⁷ But I think Campbell Morgan was right: ‘It is not at all necessary that this should be accounted a miracle. I am never anxious to read miracles in, where they are not; any more than I am anxious to rule out miracles, where they are in.’⁴⁸ At any rate, *the eunuch did not see him (Philip) again, but went on his way rejoicing (39b)*, without the evangelist but with evangel, without human aid but with the divine Spirit who not only gave him joy but also, according to Irenaeus, gave him courage and power in his own country ‘to preach what he had himself believed’.⁴⁹ Philip also went on evangelizing, working his way north along the coast, *preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea (40b)*, where, later if not already, he made his home (21:8).

⁴⁴ Metzger, pp. 360–361.

⁴⁵ Horton, p. 112.

⁴⁶ Bengel, p. 592.

⁴⁷ 1 Thes. 4:17.

⁴⁸ Morgan, p. 171.

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.12.8.