

Acts 8:26-40

– Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch –

Introduction

Although most of the book of Acts focusses on the activities of Peter and Paul, the author makes it clear that the mission of the young Church to take the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” (1:8) was gradually realised through the work of many people. Philip’s contribution is highlighted in Acts chapter 8, of which his meeting with an Ethiopian eunuch forms the second half.

Philip is mentioned 17 times across three passages of Acts but nowhere else in the New Testament. In the first passage (6:5), Philip is selected as one of seven men to arrange food distribution within the Christian community. In the second (8:4-40), Philip initiates a mission to Samaritans that gives rise to a confrontation with a magician named Simon, and then has an encounter with a man who is described as “an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians” (8:27). In the third, Philip’s home is visited by Paul (21:8-9)

In this essay, I provide a background to the book of Acts in order to understand the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian. Attention is then given to the encounter itself and in particular the element of supernatural intervention, the textual difficulties with v. 37, the significance of the Ethiopian being a eunuch, the quotation of two verses from Isaiah, and how this incident is used within Luke’s overall purpose.

The genre and purpose of Acts

Although it is almost universally accepted that the book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, scholars have disagreed about what genre to assign. The genre needs to be considered in the light of contemporary literary styles in Greco-Roman antiquity rather than modern ones (Witherington 1998, p. 3) and the three genres most similar to Acts are history, biography and novel. The attribution of all three have their proponents, for instance Sterling claims it is apologetic historiography, Talbert that it is a biographical succession narrative, and Pervo that it is historical fiction (Powell 1991, pp. 9-13).

To some extent, the selection of a genre will influence how we interpret the purpose and reliability of the work’s content. If the work was intended to be some form of written history¹, then we would interpret the miraculous elements in Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian quite differently than if it was written as fiction. If we set aside the minority suggestion of Acts being a work of fiction, however, the implications of genre choice become minimal. Acts contains *both* historical and biographical elements as it recounts events, in roughly chronological order, during the first 30 years or so of the Christian community after the death of Jesus in 30 CE (Witherington 1998, p. 81). Since Acts records a curated selection of episodes rather than an exhaustive account of all events in that period, a more important question than distinguishing between historical and biographical genres becomes that of purpose.

¹ Powell considers this the most widely accepted position (Powell 2009, p. 197).

Like genre, however, the purpose of Acts is also a matter of dispute. Powell reports at least six distinct proposals about the work's purpose² (Powell 1991, pp. 13-19) and most likely the author had several of those in mind. If Luke and Acts are considered together, then the flow of the overall narrative suggests the writer's purpose. In Luke, the narrative tracks Jesus going from Galilee through Samaria to Jerusalem. Resurrection appearances of Jesus link the end of Luke with the beginning of Acts, and then the author tracks the outward flow of the "good news" from Jerusalem to Rome. The words of Jesus at both the end of Luke (24:47) and the beginning of Acts (1:8) include what can either be interpreted as a prediction or as an instruction about the role his followers will take in being his witnesses from Jerusalem to all nations. From both the narrative flow and these key linking words by Jesus, the writer's purpose can be seen to be documenting "the universal spread of the good news not only up and down the social scale but geographically outwards to the world" (Witherington 1998, p. 69).

Author, date and audience

Although the work is internally anonymous, Acts is generally accepted to have been written by the author of the Gospel of Luke (Powell 2009, p. 194). Irenaeus indicated that the author was Luke, a "fellow-labourer" with Paul (Irenaeus 1986, 3.14.1, p. 437). The same is claimed in the Muratorian Fragment (dated about 190 CE), along with the additional information that Luke was a physician³ (Stevenson and Kidd 1983, p. 144). Internal evidence suggests that Luke was a native Greek speaker, not a Palestinian Jew, and that he travelled on some of Paul's missionary journeys (Witherington 1998, pp. 51ff). Given the latter observation, Acts 21:8 suggests an occasion when Luke met Philip: a meeting at which he may have heard first-hand about the incidents he later documented in Acts 8.

Acts was probably written in the mid-80's CE⁴ (Powell 2009, p. 195) and followed the pattern of the previous Gospel by being addressed to "Theophilus" (1:1) about whom nothing else is known. The name is Greek, though used by both Jews and Gentiles. Internal evidence may suggest that Theophilus was a patron of some social standing, perhaps a recent convert to Christianity or at least someone familiar with Christian beliefs. (Witherington 1998, p. 63)

Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch

In Acts 8:26-40, Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch and explains enough of "the good news about Jesus" (v35) that the Ethiopian asks to be baptised. Luke's recount is presented in a chiasmic structure that can be summarised⁵ as:

² Irenic (to bring unity to the church), polemic (against Gnosticism), apologetic, evangelistic, pastoral and theological.

³ See also Colossians 4:14.

⁴ Or perhaps late 70's to early 80's (Witherington 1998, p. 60).

⁵ This is my construction, but it is a simplified form of a 10-level nesting proposed by Scott Spencer (Spencer 1992, p. 132)

Philip is instructed by an angel to go on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza (26)

- | Philip meets the Ethiopian (27)
 - | | The Ethiopian had been to Jerusalem to worship and is reading Isaiah (27-28)
 - | | | Who can explain what is being read? (30-31)
 - | | | | Ethiopian invites Philip to join him in the chariot (31)
 - | | | | | Quotation from Isaiah 53:7,8
 - | | | Ethiopian invites Philip to explain the Isaiah reading (34)
 - | | | | Philip explains the Isaiah passage (35)
 - | | The Ethiopian is baptised (36-38)
- | Philip leaves the Ethiopian (39)

Philip continues on his way to Azotus and Caesarea (40)

Context within the broader narrative

An earlier chapter of Acts describes the selection and commissioning of seven men to manage food distribution, after which Luke comments “So the word of God spread” (6:7). That statement is followed by examples of how “the seven”, even though set apart for an administrative task, contributed evangelistically: chapters 6 and 7 describe the efforts of Stephen; chapter 8 describes those of Philip. Luke then turns the focus onto Peter and Paul for the rest of the book.

In Jesus’ farewell to the apostles he declares that they will “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Up until chapter 8 this witness has not extended beyond the Jews in Jerusalem. But then Philip engages with the Samaritans (8:4-8) who, although not Jewish, share a common racial heritage (Douglas 1962, p. 1131f), and then with the Ethiopian, a God-fearing Gentile. In both of these expansions of the missionary horizon, Philip is a trail-blazer who sets the scene for Peter’s subsequent engagement with the Samaritans (8:14-17) and God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 10).

Some scholars have suggested that Luke deliberately sought to connect this story in the readers’ mind with other Biblical passages about Elijah (1 Kings 18), Elisha and Naaman (2 Kings 5), or the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) (Spencer 1992, pp. 135-145). In my opinion, these links are very tenuous, with the connection to Luke 24 being somewhat more likely. The very fact that *three diverse* passages can be proposed as parallels would indicate to me that the project is unwarranted retro-fitting rather than the intention of Luke.

Analysis

Supernatural intervention

The passage begins and ends with supernatural intervention. Philip is instructed by an angel (26), instructed by the Spirit (29), and whisked away by the Spirit (39). Perhaps the use of ἰδοὺ (“behold”) in v27 and v36 also implies something so surprising as to be supernatural (Spencer 1992, p. 154). This reinforces a repeating theme in Acts: that extending the Gospel to Gentiles is orchestrated and approved by God.

Textual variations in verse 37

Acts 8:37 contains a declaration of faith by the Ethiopian that is included in the Western text but not in the Alexandrian or Byzantine. “The Western variant at Acts 8:37 is one of the most theologically significant in the entire work” (Strange 1992, p. 69) since it may be the earliest description of the baptismal ritual, or alternatively an addition by a later editor that reveals an

early concern over the preconditions of that ritual. The latter is more commonly accepted (Head 1993, p. 418; Barrett 1994, p. 433), implying that it had become unthinkable that baptism would occur without a prior profession of faith (Witherington 1998, p. 300). On the other hand, W. A. Strange argues that the need for secrecy within the early Christian community gives good reason why the longer text may have been deliberately *removed* by a second-century scribe (Strange 1992, p. 76).

If the verse was an addition it was a fairly early one, since Irenaeus quotes it, without any comment about it being questionable, in around 180 CE (Irenaeus 1986, 3.12.8, p. 433).

The eunuch

Luke tells us that the person Philip meets is male, Ethiopian, a eunuch, an important official, that he managed the royal treasury (an accountant?), was educated enough to be reading Greek⁶, and was a worshipper of the Jewish God. Each of these attributes has a bearing on the story and it would be unnecessarily limiting to define the person's identity purely by the act of his castration⁷. Nevertheless, being a eunuch makes the episode particularly significant for both the man himself and for Luke's narrative purpose.

As a eunuch the man would not have been able to become a Jewish proselyte nor allowed to enter the Temple's inner court. Although he had considerable wealth and influence, he would have been ostracised in both Greek and Jewish cultures (Spencer 1992, pp. 168, 172).

Quotation from Isaiah

One of the consequences of the chiasmic form is that the readers' focus is drawn to the central point, which, in this case, is the two verses quoted from Isaiah. The quotation comes from the Septuagint version (Spencer 1992, p. 175; Witherington 1998, p. 298) of Isaiah 53:7-8, in the middle of the fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). The Greek syntax does not make clear whether these two verses are the whole of what the Ethiopian was reading or a specimen of a longer passage being read. But in the context of a long slow journey it is more likely that the passage under discussion was at least the whole of the fourth Servant Song (Barrett 1994, p. 429).

These two verses contribute to at least four Lukan purposes. First, when the Ethiopian asks to whom Isaiah refers (v34) he joins a long list of Jewish and Christian scholars: is the Servant a specific person in Israel's past, Israel as a whole, or Isaiah himself⁸? Although Philip's exegesis is not recorded, we may assume that he proposes Jesus as the fulfilment of Isaiah's words (Barrett 1994, pp. 430f).

Second, Luke seems to imply that the man's question is more personal than theological. By quoting those two verses in particular, Luke highlights the relevance of the broader passage to the Ethiopian: a man who, like Isaiah's Servant, has been humiliated, deprived of justice and devoid of descendants. When the man asks whether Isaiah is talking about "himself or someone else", his deeper but unstated question may have been "Can these words be applied to me?". The Ethiopian implicitly poses the question of what it means to be accepted and to belong. Philip is clear that the "good news about Jesus" (v35) is equally good news to a non-Jewish social pariah as it is to Jews, and he does not hesitate to baptise the Ethiopian. "The way to acceptance and fruitfulness, formerly denied to the foreigner/eunuch within a restrictive community, is at last opened wide through the salvific work of the humiliated-exalted servant, Jesus Christ" (Spencer 1992, p. 182).

⁶ Assuming that the text quoted in vv. 32-33 is the same version as that read by the Ethiopian.

⁷ ... and possibly dismemberment (Witherington 1998, p. 296)

⁸ Jeremias claims there is no tradition of interpreting this passage as referring to Isaiah (Barrett 1994, p. 431) so this seems to be an idea purely of the Ethiopian's.

Third, it is hardly a surprise that *shortly after* the quoted passage, Isaiah writes that even eunuchs can experience God's favour (Isaiah 56:4-5). Thus, the misfortune of being a eunuch rather than some other form of un-belonging becomes central to the narrative.

Fourth, contributing to the larger narrative purpose of Acts, we find *shortly before* the quoted passage the sentence "All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10), a prophecy that is echoed by Jesus in Acts 1:8.

Conclusion

To repeat Witherington, the book of Acts tracks "the universal spread of the good news not only up and down the social scale but geographically outwards to the world" (Witherington 1998, p. 69). The author, Luke, writes a combination of history and biography to inform a specific reader, Theophilus, about how that spreading took place. According to Acts 8:1 and 8:4, the proximal cause of the spread of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem was the scattering of Christians in the face of persecution after the stoning of Stephen. But as Luke presents the story, the ultimate cause was the intention of God.

The story of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian is integral to this overall purpose of Acts. It describes an important step away from a Jewish-only portrayal of the Christian message towards an extension of that message to the whole world. At the same time it is a deeply personal story that reminds us of the impact that the radical acceptance implied by the "good news of Jesus" can have on each person, even the most marginalised.

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