

God's Good News for a Marginalised African Man, Acts 8:26-40

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Introduction

Many people find themselves on the margins. Like the child who is left unchosen when teams are picked for a school game, many of us know what it is like to be on the outside in various aspects of our lives. And that's not only true of those who appear marginalised but also of many who *appear* to have their lives in good order and to be at the centre of all the action.

Luke's account of the expansion of the Christian message in what we call 'the Acts of the Apostles' (although perhaps 'some of the acts of some of the Apostles' is more accurate) introduces us to several such marginalised characters, but the person we will consider here is a rather surprising example, as we shall see.

Here is our passage in two recent translations:

<p>English Standard Version, Acts 8:26-40</p> <p>²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south[d] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had</p>	<p>New International Version (NIV2011), Acts 8:26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian</p> <p>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." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man</p>
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come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” ³⁰So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³²Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁸And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

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had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”^[b]

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”

^[37] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

As we proceed, I am going to assume that you will use the two printed Bible versions included above. Luke explains how God sets up an encounter between Philip and an important Ethiopian official which enables Philip to help the official understand the significance of the Scriptures and come to faith in Jesus the Messiah.

1. God's Good News

Although the human characters we meet in this narrative are significant (and we will get to know them more fully shortly), the most important actor in this encounter is God.

(a) God Has Acted to Provide the Message

We cannot really understand the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian, or the various other accounts of the evangelistic activity of the early church, without recognizing that the message which is proclaimed depends entirely on the gracious and effective act of God in the person of Jesus Christ to save a people for Himself. Brief accounts of this act (which includes Jesus' proclamation and acts of power, as well as His death and resurrection) can be found in various parts of the earlier narrative, particularly in the preaching (or *kerygma*) of this action in Acts 2.

The proclamation of God's action is also seen clearly in Acts 8:25:

^{ESV} Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

So the saving act of God in human history lies behind all that will take place between Philip and the Ethiopian. Their encounter really makes no sense without that 'big story' of the Bible as the backdrop.

(b) God Acts to Arrange the Encounter

Now we can see how God is also engaged at a micro-level in creating the encounter between these two men.

– *God sends His messenger (vv. 26, 29)*

In two places in the text, there is a clear statement of the Lord's specific direction of Philip. In verse 26, an 'angel of the Lord'¹ directs Philip to the general area where the encounter will take place; in verse 29, 'the Spirit' (which, without any further qualification, clearly refers to the Spirit of God) gives more specific direction when he is at the intended location.

¹ See D. L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 340, for references to the angel of the Lord in Acts and also in Luke's Gospel.

– *He sends his messenger to an unlikely place (the wilderness, v. 26) . . . and Philip does as he is told (unlike Jonah)*

If you were to sit down and carefully plan an evangelistic event you would probably take various factors into consideration, such as: Will the event take place in a location with a significant population? or When can we arrange this event so that people are not away on holiday? In general, we plan evangelistic events with a view to reaching as many people as possible. But God sends Philip to a desert road. It seems likely that this would be as unexpected for Philip and for the first hearers of Acts as it is for us. I imagine that is why the road's character as 'the desert road' is specifically mentioned.

The statement in verse 27 that Philip 'got up and went' indicates his immediate and willing obedience. In this respect, as well as in several others, there is perhaps an implicit comparison with the prophet Jonah (although Luke makes no explicit connection with the Jonah narrative). In the account of Jonah, God commands Jonah to go to an unexpected place in order to declare his message to outsiders. Here Philip is commanded to go to an unexpected place so that (as we shall see) he might declare the good news of Jesus to a man who was an outsider. But the striking difference between these two men is that Jonah fled from God (thus showing how little his sound creation theology affected his daily life) while Philip obeys. Although the primary purpose of this passage (and, indeed, any passage of Scripture) is to tell the reader about the character and actions of God (rather than to present us with human 'heroes' and 'villains'), Philip's obedient response to the instructions of God is the first of several aspects of the portrait of Philip presented in this passage which speak very highly of him as a faithful disciple.

We see that God has planned an encounter between His messenger and a person to whom He intends to declare this message of life and hope. Nothing is left to chance and yet the encounter requires the involvement of Philip. As Christians, we can be encouraged that the mission of the church does not rely primarily on human ingenuity or techniques. In fact, in this case, God places Philip in the most unlikely of circumstances. But if we are willing to be used by God and are willing to respond to His promptings, we may find ourselves agents of His grace in unexpected ways.

2. A Marginalised African Man

We are now introduced to the person to whom God has sent Philip. And immediately we might wonder whether the description I have given to this man is at all justified. How can this man be described as 'marginalised'? Is it not clear that he is, in fact, in a very enviable situation?

(a) A Man Who Seems to Have Everything Going for Him

This man does not appear to be marginalised. Let's briefly consider what we know about him.

– *He holds a position of importance and probably wealth in the court of 'Candace' (or, more correctly in the NIV2011, 'the Kandake')*

It appears that this word is a title rather than a personal name, which refers to the 'queen mother' who was the effective ruler of ancient Ethiopia. Ethiopia at this time was not the modern state which goes by that name but a region just south of the source of the Nile which would be roughly equivalent to an area of modern Sudan. We are told that this man is not simply part of the Kandake's court, but that he is 'in charge' of an aspect of the court. What's more, that area of responsibility is the treasury. While any position of leadership in the court of the ruler would be very significant, only the most able and trusted would be placed in charge of 'all the treasury'.

– *Since he had been to Jerusalem to worship, he is clearly associated with the religion of Israel*

So it would appear that this man's social, economic and religious circumstances are all in good order. But, appearances can deceive!

(b) A Man Who Is Marginalised in Various Ways

In the light of what we have learned about this man, what justifies the description of this man as 'marginalised'? I believe that there are three areas where we may suggest that he was marginalised. None of these are stated absolutely unambiguously in the text, but I believe that there is good reason to suggest that each of the following factors led to this man being 'marginalised':

– *colour?* This man came from a part of Africa known as Ethiopia (and often described as 'Cush'). Marguerat notes that the etymology of the Greek term *aithiops* is 'burned face', suggesting dark skin colour.² It is reasonable to assume, then, that this man was probably black.³ Therefore, although he had joined the crowds in Jerusalem, he would have been immediately visible and conspicuous among the hoards of Middle-Eastern worshippers. I live and work in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Nobody in South Africa is unaware of what terrible discrimination has been carried out on the basis that one human being has a different skin colour from another. But the reality of people being marginalised because of their skin colour and physical appearance is by no means limited to the apartheid regime in South Africa.

– *ethnicity?* This man was also probably a Gentile and therefore, while he would be enabled to participate in the temple worship to a certain extent, he would never be able to enter fully into the worship of the temple unless he became a full convert to Judaism.⁴

² D. Marguerat, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (CNT5a; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007), 306.

³ So also Bock, *Acts*, 341, and others.

⁴ See the discussion in D. L. Bock, *Acts*, 338. Bock appears to be reluctant to view this man as a 'pure Gentile' because of his involvement in the worship of Israel's

– *physical features?* While some commentators note that the term ‘eunuch’ could possibly simply indicate that he was a court official, the more natural reading of the text is that this man was probably a eunuch in the literal sense of being castrated or of having damaged or destroyed sexual organs.⁵ This physical lack also leads to exclusion from the temple according to Deuteronomy 23:1: ‘No-one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.’

– *sin (from broader biblical theology) certainly!* Whatever measure of uncertainty may remain about these inferences from Luke’s description of this African man, we can say with confidence that he was marginalised from the presence of God by his sin. The figure of the tax collector which Luke records in his Gospel in Luke 18:9-14 provides a good illustration of the (quite appropriate) sense of being an outsider which sin creates.

3. God's Provision for the Man's Need

God knew this marginalised man and provided what he needed most. What did he provide?

(a) A Bible Translation

When Philip comes within earshot of the chariot of the Ethiopian, he hears him reading from Isaiah 53 (‘silent reading’ was not the norm at this time; people read out loud even when they were alone).⁶ But Isaiah was written in Hebrew. How is this man from Africa able to read a prophecy written in Hebrew? It is possible that the Ethiopian knew Hebrew, but given that, by the early first century AD, relatively few people in Israel apart from the Scribes were familiar with the Scriptures in Hebrew (and so used the Aramaic Targums), it seems more likely that this man would not have read Hebrew. A strong indication of what he was reading is given by the fact that Luke quotes the Scriptures following closely the Greek translation, the ‘Septuagint’ (or LXX), in verses 30 and 32-33. This would suggest that this man was able to access God’s word in a language other than his own through the providential way in which God had prepared a Greek translation of these Scriptures, many decades, even hundreds of years earlier.

(b) A Bible Commentator

Philip asks the Ethiopian if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian replies, ‘How can I unless someone explains it to me?’ (v. 31). It is striking that the Ethiopian states quite bluntly that the Scriptures are not suf-

God. That the Ethiopian was associated with the worship of Yahweh is uncontested, but that is a different matter from his ethnicity. With respect to the possibility of becoming a full convert, Marguerat suggests that this would not have been an option for a eunuch (Marguerat, *Actes*, 307, fn 23).

⁵ Marguerat, *Actes*, 306.

⁶ So Marguerat, *Actes*, 308.

ficient in themselves. What he really needs is someone to explain the Scriptures. That is, he needs a reliable guide to help him to make sense of the words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs which he is able to read perfectly well himself but which he cannot *understand* without help.

(c) A Biblical Theologian

But even a commentator is not enough! Some of the most able archaeologists, historians and philologists have not adequately grasped the message of the text the Ethiopian is reading, even though they could provide wonderfully helpful information regarding the issues which they have studied in depth. When Philip begins with Isaiah 53 and declares the Gospel of Jesus (v. 35), he is acting as a biblical theologian. In other words, he is concerned with more than explaining what the details mean; he intends to proclaim how the details fit into a wonderful overarching story of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Now, as we see God provide a translation of the Scriptures, a Bible commentator and a biblical theologian, I hope you can see how relevant the task of theological education is. Sometimes it seems as though theological education is regarded by many in the church as a distraction from the real task of the church, which is to proclaim the Gospel – like Philip does. But, of course, without those who possess the skills to produce accurate translations of the Scriptures, those who can explain accurately and helpfully to others what the details of the text mean, and those who can explain how all these details come together in the message we call the Gospel, there will be no faithful proclamation of the Gospel. So it seems that what God provided for this Ethiopian man on a desert road was very similar to what theological colleges around the world seek to provide for the churches in their countries and communities.

(d) Most Fundamentally, a Saviour Slain for Him (vv. 32-33)

At the central point of this narrative lies the citation of the passage which the Ethiopian was reading, Isaiah 53:7-8.⁷ We do not have time to carry out detailed exegesis of this passage (which deserves a whole series of sermons devoted to it alone), but a few brief comments may be appropriate:

– *the brief citation brings to mind the whole Suffering Servant passage*

This passage speaks of quiet acceptance in the face of unjust suffering and also of the impossibility of speaking of His descendants. This seems particularly relevant to the experience of a eunuch who (it seems from contemporary literature) would have known contempt from fellow human beings (despite his high office) and who would have been denied the opportunity to father children. But the wider passage indicates that this suffering was not

⁷ See Marguerat, *Actes*, 303. Marguerat is particularly helpful on literary features of the text, although it is unfortunate that he appears to lack confidence in the historical foundations of the narratives.

simply personal misfortune, but rather suffering on behalf of others with the hope that the Suffering Servant will ultimately ‘see the light of life and be satisfied’ (Isa. 53:11).

– *the passage comes within a wider context which seems particularly relevant*

Just a few columns further on from where the Ethiopian is reading are found the following words:

Isaiah 56:3-5: ³ Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.” And let not any eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.” ⁴ For this is what the LORD says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- ⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.”

Thus, we may imagine, as the Ethiopian is guided by Philip through the Scriptures, it would not be long before he would come across this wonderful message of inclusion and life, despite the realities of his situation.

4. From the Margins to the Heart

God’s Good News – recorded in the text of Isaiah; explained, interpreted and proclaimed by Philip – has its intended effect. Although there is no explicit record of the Ethiopian responding in faith to the message which Philip presents, his responses which are recorded, read in conjunction with the teaching of the wider biblical canon, imply that this is precisely what took place.

(a) “What prevents me from being baptised?” (v. 36)

As the journey continues, they come to some water. The Ethiopian’s question indicates that Philip has included some teaching on baptism and the fact that he asks this question at the first possible opportunity suggests that he takes the matter very seriously. The form of the question is intriguing. Both the ESV and the NIV2011 capture a slight tone of concern in the question. Does this man’s previous experience raise a nagging question about whether there is something about him which will exclude him once again? He has faced so many barriers which have caused him to be marginalised; will there now be a hidden ‘catch’ in the Good News which Philip has been presenting which will lead to disappointment and exclusion once again. Well, of course, Philip and the Ethiopian get down from the chariot and the Ethiopian is baptised, so the implied answer to his question is ‘Nothing!’ That truly is good news! In fact, that baptism should bring this encounter to a close is particularly poignant since baptism indicates inclusion into the people of God. This man who has been kept at the boundaries for so long has now been brought

into the heart of God's family. Bock suggests that the Ethiopian's journey would have taken approximately 'five months each way'.⁸ Luke tells us that this encounter led to a joyful journey home (v. 39). What a different way to spend five months because of God's Good News!

(b) The Task Is Not Finished

Not for Philip. Not for us. God actively directs another mission because there are yet more who need to hear the Good News (v. 40). We may rejoice whenever someone is brought into God's family, but we dare not settle down comfortably before the fire. We must repeatedly go out to the margins, seeking God's direction, so that we may play our part in God's mission to draw people from the margins to the heart of His family.

⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 342.