



The Ascent of Ethiopia (1932)
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LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Acts 8:26-40 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 26) Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) (v. 27) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship (v. 28) and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. (v. 29) Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." (v. 30) So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v. 31)

He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. (v. 32) Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
(v.33) In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.

(v. 34) The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (v. 35) Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. (v. 36) As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (v. 37) And Phillip said, “If thou believe with all thine heart, thou may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.” (v. 38) He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. (v. 39) When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (v. 40) But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Many years ago when I was a member of the First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill in Nashville, Tennessee, our pastor, the late Reverend Dr. Kelly Miller Smith, prominent leader in the Nashville Sit-in Movement, began the process of celebrating our African Heritage. The festival began on a Saturday afternoon. African students at the nearby universities were invited as special guests. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellowship Hall was beautifully decorated with African cloth. Members of the congregation dressed in African cloth, brought various African artifacts, sculptures, books, photos, and paintings for display. The sound of African music filled the air, and the youth performed various dances created in the motherland. The Saturday festivities culminated in a celebratory worship service on Sunday morning, where the Afrocentricism continued, but with a particular focus on praising the God of the entire cosmos, the God of Africa, who has chosen African peoples to play a significant role in the world.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Acts 8:26-40

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

This year marks the bicentennial anniversary of the end of the Atlantic slave trade in the United States, though slavery itself would not end on these shores until Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. For two and one half centuries, Africans had been held here in bondage followed by another century of racial segregation. On November 4, 2008, Barack Hussein Obama, the son of a black Kenyan father and a white American mother, became President-elect of the United States. Thus, Africa has been a reality in American politics

from the beginning of the Republic up to the present day. From the low estate of ancestral slavery, an African American has been elected to the nation's highest office. God has always chosen the lowly as messengers of love, justice and hope. The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch is no exception.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

I was probably in junior high school when I first encountered the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40. I remember inquiring of my Sunday school teacher what the term "eunuch" meant. She told us that a eunuch was a person in charge of the royal treasury. Whether or not she knew the right answer and had chosen not to tell us the truth of the matter, I will never know. Suffice it to say that it was not until I was in college taking a course on the Bible as Literature that I discovered that a eunuch was the name given to a man who had been castrated. Needless to say, I was shocked because I could hardly imagine a greater horror befalling anyone. I then wondered why the writer of the story felt compelled to report that particular detail. Later in seminary, I discovered the value of biblical commentaries as immeasurable resources for extensive inquiries into all such questions that biblical readers might ask.¹

Clearly, African peoples find the story of the Ethiopian eunuch altogether captivating because it reveals certain types of information about our ancestral homeland that renders all contrary sources erroneous. Here, we discover the story of a representative from the royal court of Candace, a city in Ethiopia, returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I can imagine that the royal insignia must have been displayed prominently on his carriage and that he would have been accompanied by an entourage for both protection and personal service.

Several extraordinary features attend the story. Let us mention two of them. First and foremost, we are told that he was from the court of the Queen of Candace. How she came to her royal inheritance in a patriarchal land is a matter of historical inquiry and reasonable conjecture. Suffice it to say that most patriarchal countries have experienced female monarchs from time to time. Thus, Ethiopia was no exception. Second, one cannot but ask why the eunuch was travelling from Ethiopia to worship in Jerusalem. Was he an Ethiopian Jew on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or a Gentile? The author does not say. Some scholars speculate that this omission serves Luke's purpose of demonstrating the universal nature of the Gospel made available to all peoples rather than Jews alone.

Now, on such a journey, one can easily imagine an inevitable break for rest in the midst of the day's journey. That would have been the time when the eunuch might have been sitting in his carriage reading and meditating on the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. His devotion would not have been unusual for a pilgrim. In any case, Philip approached him and asked him what I have always thought was a rather rude or arrogant question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" More likely than not, when Philip saw what the eunuch was reading, he seized upon the common ground between them by viewing it as a good opportunity to begin a discussion about the connection between that passage of scripture and his own mission of proclaiming salvation through Christ. Undoubtedly, most readers may be moved by the eunuch's hospitable spirit of welcoming the conversation and inviting Philip to sit in his carriage to discuss the matter.

Clearly, the eunuch was not afraid of Philip who was, indeed, a stranger. Thus, he welcomed him with a friendly gesture.

The story ends triumphantly as the eunuch asks for baptism which Philip gladly provides. The significance of the story lies in the place it has gained in the history of Christianity's global expansion by means of personal witness. In fact, tradition tells us that the eunuch followed Philip's example by introducing Ethiopia to the Christian message. Most important, The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has always viewed itself as connected directly to the apostles through Philip's act of baptizing their Queen's eunuch, whom the church has venerated from that time up to the present era.

Let me hasten to note, however, that though the Ethiopian eunuch was a man of high social esteem in the royal court, he had been rendered sexually powerless, nonetheless, by the deliberate actions of others. As a consequence, in the eyes of the society at large, his high public office did not conceal the marginalized social status he was forced to endure for the rest of his life. Yet, despite his marginalization,² he was entrusted with the holy seal of baptism which equipped him to become the first ambassador for Jesus Christ in his homeland: a mission that would immortalize his activities for all time by gaining for him an honorable place in the holy bible. This is yet another instance where the grace of God can overcome all human constraints.

This story reveals the most meaningful aspect of the gospel's message—its liberating and saving power for the marginalized peoples of the world. The story rekindles the dignity and worth of all descendents of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It renews the pride of all African peoples, both on the continent and around the world, as sufficient evidence that God embraced the Ethiopians as the first people outside of Israel who were entrusted to be guardians of the Christian gospel in Africa from the days of the apostle Philip up to the present age. It destroys the lie of European and American racists that Africans bequeathed no value to human civilization and did not receive the gospel prior to the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the colonization of Africa. It is an irony of the first magnitude that all of this should have taken place long before most European peoples had become either "civilized" or "Christianized."

Celebration

God has always provided a liberation movement that can be seen in the Gospel. God has always been and continues to be on the side of the marginalized. God is with us; God is with our people.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: A wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza; Philip sees the Ethiopian eunuch reading Is. 53—sheep being led to slaughter, lambs silent before their shearer, does not open its mouth, the experience of humiliation, injustice and death; the royal chariot and assumed entourage; Philip sitting in the chariot with the eunuch discussing the scriptures; the act of baptism;

Sounds: The gentle flow of the river; voices discussing the scriptures and proclaiming the gospel message; and

Textures: The cold iron surface of the chariot.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- The story connects well with African America's historical reverence for Psalm 68:31. For a detailed analysis of the meaning and influence of this passage on African Americans, see historian Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, Chapter 2.
- The focus on a marginalized person in this text discovering the gospel, being baptized and proclaiming it in Ethiopia, contains the seeds of liberation which makes it a resource for all liberation theologies pertaining to race, gender, and even poverty.

Notes

1. One of the best discussions of the meaning of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch for African Americans is, "The commentary on The Acts of the Apostles" by Demetrius K. Williams in Blount, Brian K., Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Jannette Martin, and Emerson B. Powery. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. pp. 226-228.

2. See, *True to Our Native Land* for how this marginalized eunuch may be viewed as a fulfillment of Isaiah 56:3-7 where the prophet hails the days when eunuchs will be accepted in God's plan. Most important, African Americans have viewed the story as the fulfillment of their beloved scriptural passage in Psalm 68:31, "Ethiopia will stretch out her hands to God."