

Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40)

Philip had been one of the seven whom the apostles appointed to supervise the distribution of assistance to Greek-speaking widows at Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6). He would have been Greek-speaking, and it is significant that he had taken the initiative in preaching the Gospel outside Judea, in Samaria, in the north. He had left Jerusalem when Saul was persecuting Christians after the death of Stephen. As a result of his preaching in Samaria there was a mass conversion, and the leading apostles Peter and John witnessed that God also gave Samaritans the Holy Spirit after Philip had baptised them. The Samaritans had accepted only the five books of Moses before that. This was the third step in Jesus' fourfold program, of Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and the furthest parts of the earth.

Next the angel of the Lord led Philip to the south, where he was instrumental in the conversion of just one man, an Ethiopian. He, too, was an outsider to Judaism. Already the Gospel of Luke showed a particular interest in the access of Gentiles to the teaching of Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian came from a remote region, and he was also an important official there and a eunuch as well. The queen of Ethiopia was called "Candace", but that was not her personal name, but a title for the mother of the reigning monarch.

The Ethiopian had gone to Jerusalem to worship, presumably at the Jewish temple that Herod had built. We do not know whether he came in contact with Christians during his stay in Jerusalem. Because he had come to Jerusalem to worship, he either already owned, or had recently bought, at least part of the Hebrew Old Testament. While he was travelling in a chariot through desert country from Jerusalem down to Gaza he was reading aloud, perhaps with the joy of a man who has recently acquired a valued book, part of the fourth song of the Messianic Servant of the Lord in the book of the prophet Isaiah. God had controlled what the Ethiopian was doing so that he had been reading one of the most important Old Testament passages that predicted that the Messiah would suffer and see success after being numbered with criminals and yielding up His life to redeem Israel. In those times people usually read aloud, even when they were reading to themselves. The Spirit told Philip to go up to the chariot and stay close to it. When Philip ran up to it, he interrupted him. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

People became dirty as they travelled on dusty roads, and, although Philip was not a social equal of this Ethiopian treasurer he was kindly invited to come up and sit with him in order to explain the reading.

The eunuch was puzzled whether Isaiah was describing himself or someone else. Philip began with that passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Since the Ethiopian had asked a question about baptism for himself, we can assume that Philip followed the story of Jesus and ended with an appeal that was similar to the one that Peter had made on the day of Pentecost. Peter had urged repentance, offered baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and promised that the gift of the Holy Spirit would come together with baptism. (Ac 2:37-39). The eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What is there to prevent me from being baptised?" He probably expected that Philip would raise some objection. At about this time, according to the Jewish tractate Yebamoth, Gentiles who became converts to Judaism were not only circumcised, but given a washing that was said to make them newborn Jews and remove Gentile ceremonial uncleanness. Perhaps he had previously been refused Jewish proselyte baptism because people who had been mutilated in any way were forbidden to enter the court of the Israelites at the temple. The man was a eunuch. The Law of Moses had stipulated, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD (Dt 23:1). Although the term translated "eunuch" came to mean merely "an official", it is likely that Luke here intends the more literal meaning. Otherwise the statement that he was also a court official (Ac 8:27) would have been unnecessary.

In the book of Acts, Luke uses the term "God-fearer" (Ac 10:2) for Gentile people who were attracted by the worship of one God by the Hebrews, and their detailed moral code. However, they had not fully adopted the Jewish faith. Jews did not call Gentile people who accepted circumcision "proselytes of the gate", but "proselytes of righteousness." If the Ethiopian was a Gentile "God-fearer" then he, and not the centurion Cornelius, was the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity about whom we know. In this way, Philip, and not Peter or Paul, became the father of the Gentile mission. God had Himself led Philip to do this.

The eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What is there to prevent me from being baptised?" In two other passages connected with baptism, a question is asked whether there is some obstacle that might prevent it. John the Baptist asked such a question when Jesus presented Himself at the Jordan (Mt 3:13). Peter asked a similar question after he had been given the vision of clean and unclean animals coming down to him, had entered a Gentile's home, and when he was confronted with the important decision whether even Gentiles should be baptised (Acts 10:47).

Sometimes Christian evangelists ask for long and detailed courses of instruction that lead up to baptism for an adult, especially one who has recently come from paganism. However, long delay of baptism teaches people the unfortunate assumption that baptism is not important: it can wait! The book of Acts also mentions the jailer at Philippi. At midnight he was so alarmed by the possibility that his prisoners had escaped during an earthquake that he was ready to commit suicide. He asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas urged him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. By daybreak he had taken Paul and Silas into his house, and he and his whole family had been baptised. Philip also offered baptism to the Ethiopian eunuch on the same day after what many people would consider a very minimal period of instruction.

Verse 37 represents what we call the "Western text", and it is not found in the oldest and manuscripts of Acts. The verse in the Western text, Philip's response, "If you believe with all your heart, you may", and the Ethiopian's reply, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" may reflect the way baptism was administered at Rome. The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (about 215 AD) is already evidence of three questions about the persons of the Trinity, to which the candidate responded "I believe", and water was applied after each response. This formula gives us the origin of the Creeds, which were first used as instruments of baptism. However, if the Western text here is an interpolation, Philip's response to the Ethiopian's question was not with words, but with actions. They went down to the water beside the road, and Philip baptised

the eunuch there and then.

The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and he later appeared at Azotus. That was the earlier Philistine city of Ashdod. Gaza and Ashdod had been two of the five chief cities of the Philistines, and in the first centuries after Christ the area continued to be a pagan outpost that resisted Christianity. Ashdod (or Azotus) was north of Gaza, and not on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Already at the time of Ahab, Obadiah was afraid that, if he left Elijah to search for Ahab, the Spirit of the LORD would carry the prophet off somewhere else (1 Kg 18:12). Jesus was sending His Spirit to establish His church on earth, and He was using remarkable means to do it.

There is no record of the church at Jerusalem examining and validating what Philip had done. Who could question it, anyhow, when this had happened at the direction of the angel of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord?

Philip continued his evangelistic activity, passing through all the towns northwards until he came to Caesarea, the headquarters of the governor of the province. Philip was still at Caesarea when Paul was returning to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, and Paul and his companions stayed at Philip's house. Luke adds the interesting information that Philip had four unmarried daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:8-9).

The eunuch continued on his way rejoicing. We can only speculate about what happened after this. If he continued reading in Isaiah he would soon have read, "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely exclude me from His people.' And let not the eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.' For this is what the LORD says: '... I shall give them an everlasting name, which will not be cut off.'" (Is. 56:3-5).

The next information we have about Christianity in Ethiopia comes in a letter of the Emperor Constantius to the rulers of Axum (in Abyssinia), in about AD 357, advising them to stop following their Christian bishop Frumentius, who had been ordained by Athanasius. Constantius wanted them to recognise George instead, whom he had thrust in as bishop at Alexandria instead of Athanasius. Frumentius and Edessius of Tyre are said to have been early missionaries there.