

# Encountering the Ethiopian Eunuch

The Place of the Ethiopian Eunuch in the Book of Acts (8:26–40)  
and its Ethical Implications for Missions

By Gifford Rhamie

**W**ith the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts chapter 8, Africans can authentically trace their Christian roots back to the apostolic age. This is just one of many fascinating aspects to this story that takes the reader into a world of a very powerful international figure who accepts the gospel of Jesus Christ along his travels.

At face value, Luke's narrative reads as a beautiful conversion story, especially when set against the preceding story of Simon Magus (8:4–25). Yet it has been suggested that this narrative has scant connection with the rest of Acts and adds little to the development of Luke's narrative and theology, never mind his missiology.

In fact, the vast majority of commentaries focus on the eunuch's conversion, and in particular the baptismal formula mentioned in verse 37, as an indicator of early set procedures and practices of baptism in the early Christian church.<sup>1</sup> But few comment on the Ethiopian eunuch's status, especially in light of Luke's rhetorical strategy of chapter 8, and even less on the narrative's strategy for missions in view of 1:8.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of comment has had the

unwitting effect of perpetuating the invisibility of the Ethiopian on the world scene of interpreters, even though Luke-Acts goes some way, whether directly or indirectly, to reflect the inclusive need of people of color to be seen as part of God's new kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, there is a tendency to ignore basic questions such as:

*What is an Ethiopian eunuch doing worshipping in Jerusalem during the Passover?*

*Who is he?*

*How is he able to read the Septuagint and why is he reading Isaiah 53?*

*Where is the Ethiopian going? Why Gaza?*

*Does his question to Philip for an explanation of the text reveal something of the acceptance of its authority, and a familiarity with Old Testament Hebrew tradition?*





Such questions are important because, as will be shown, the strategic place of the text of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) not only provides the missiological link to the early Christian Church in Africa but also has ethical implications for understanding missions today. In this way, the eunuch's conversion foreshadows the inauguration of the Gentile mission and its ultimate geographical and cultural scope symbolic of including all peoples.<sup>4</sup>

## The Story of the Eunuch

Let us recount the story with some annotated comments. According to Luke's narrative, the eunuch had gone up to Jerusalem to worship (8:27). The time was probably the season following Pentecost of Acts 2. Pentecost was apparently quite an international affair with nationals from provinces of the Roman as well as Parthian empires (Acts 2:9–11).

The eunuch might have been in Jerusalem from even the time of the Passover, as it is unlikely that he would have traveled so far (several weeks journey) to worship and miss the most important event of the Jewish calendar. He was returning home via Gaza, a coastal town on the western tip of Palestine that would have provided transportation either by a coastal road or by sea to the Nile, where he would travel southward toward the capital city, Meroë, between the fifth and sixth cataracts of the Nile.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that he came from Ethiopia, which was deemed by Luke as "the ends of the earth" (Luke 11:31),<sup>6</sup> and purposefully to worship indicates that he was most likely a Jew, if not a Gentile God-fearer, or, but not necessarily the least likely, a full-fledged proselyte.<sup>7</sup> My preference for a Jewish identity comes out of the burgeoning data of the historical records of Ethiopia. (Ethiopia is the popular appellation for Nubia, which covered the then-vast parts of the sub-Saharan desert of Africa during ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism.)<sup>8</sup>

Oral tradition and DNA analysis convincingly accounts for the settlement of Jews in Ethiopia from the time of King Solomon due to his alleged dalliance with the Queen of Sheba.<sup>9</sup> It should not come as a huge surprise that Jews from Africa regularly attended the festivals in Jerusalem, even if the Jews might not have fully accepted them.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that he was an Ethiopian eunuch could pose a double whammy to a modern reader. His "Ethiopian-ness" conjures up the many stereotypes of deprived, poor, marginalized, dispossessed, malnourished, under-

developed Africans. His eunuch status, on the other hand, raises questions of virility or, for that matter, sterility and of a complicated gender, not least dubious sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Hence, he was a marginal of the marginalized.

To Luke's readers, however, the Ethiopian might have represented a prestigious, powerful figure if partially in terms of his ethnicity, then most certainly in terms of his social status because he was a key member of the government of Queen Candice, the traditional title of the dynasty of queens, rather like that of pharaoh.

The suggestion of his ethnicity presenting a physical force to be reckoned with comes from the way in which the ancients viewed Africans. From the time of Homer, the Greeks and later the Romans would normally measure people of color against, for example, the blackness of the Ethiopian skin.<sup>12</sup> Their internationality was often acclaimed for their inclusive education, their bravery on the seas, and the wealth of resources that would accompany them for commerce.<sup>13</sup>

The Ethiopian eunuch was not merely an object of exotic curiosity, but an influential, imposing figure of power, wealth, and prestige. Even his identity as a eunuch, although rendering him marginalized in Jerusalem, could have conceivably been viewed with admiration on the part of fellow Africans.<sup>14</sup> He was both marginal and elite at the same time.

In short, the Ethiopian eunuch stood paradoxically for Luke as a premier prototype, symbolic of including all peoples, representative of the ultimate geographical, cultural, and gender scope of the spread of the gospel.

Rather than triggering cognitive dissonance in his readers, Luke's inclusion of this story could have added credibility, honor, and status to a fledgling Christianity for converting not merely a remote figure, in terms of his origins in the outer regions of the then-known world, but a wealthy, educated, and aristocratic figure—someone the likes of Theophilus (1:1–4) might have welcomed.<sup>15</sup>

Now, I do not wish to dilute and thereby deny any dissonance the prominence given to an Ethiopian in Luke might have caused in later readers, for it is well known that later rabbinic tradition held very negative views of blacks in antiquity.<sup>16</sup> The point here is, though, that he stood with all his inconsistencies and inherent contradictions as a suitable candidate to embody the *raison d'être* of 1:8c.

The significance of Ethiopia as a fulfillment of 1:8, as symbolic of the "ends of the earth," has been all too lost in the exegesis of modern scholars. Few seem

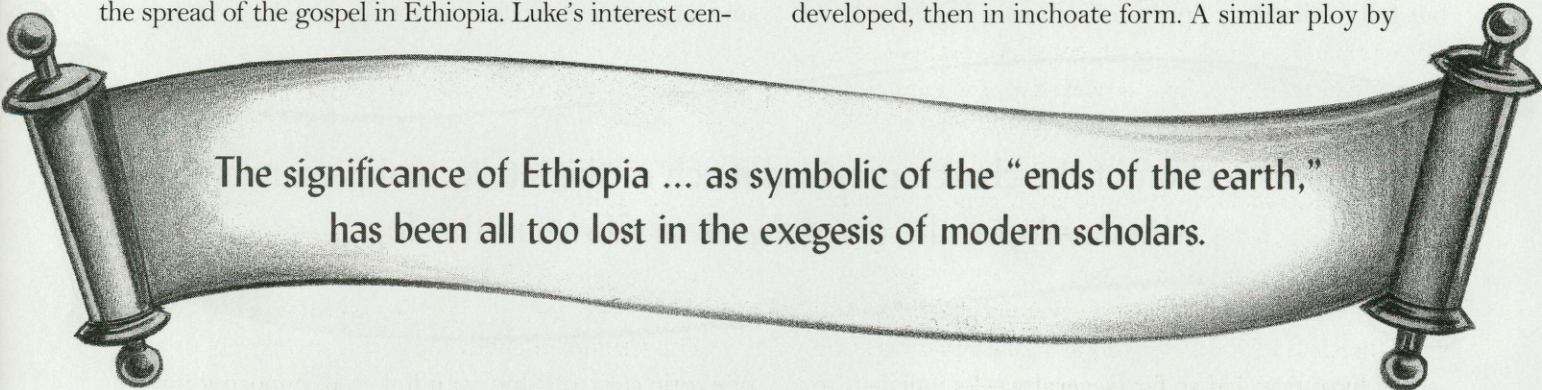


to have noticed that in the context of culture this baptized and now fully fledged member of the new Christian family, indeed this Ethiopian, is returning to his home with a mission. In support of this, the Western MSS longer variant reading of the Holy Spirit falling upon the eunuch before sending him on his way rejoicing (8:39) is undoubtedly efficacious of a departing with intent, missiological intent.<sup>17</sup>

There is a clear reason for Luke not pursuing this trajectory of missions, for not processing his readers through the spread of the gospel in Ethiopia. Luke's interest cen-

The emphasis of the quote is clearly to project the humiliation-exaltation experience of Jesus Christ, a pattern that is a feature of Luke's writing (Luke 1:52; 3:5-6; 5:12-26; 14:11; 18:9-14, 24:25-27).<sup>22</sup> This language of reversal of fortunes could well have had rhetorical impact on the eunuch given how he might have been generally received in Jerusalem.

The explication of the text, Isaiah 53:7-8, by Philip was most likely a recapitulation of an early evangelistic strategy of apologetics for converting Jews, if not fully developed, then in inchoate form. A similar ploy by



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tered around the activities of the apostles, especially Paul, "the apostle to the Gentiles" (see Acts 13:46, 47). Consequently, Luke colludes with a cultural ideology that focuses on Rome as the center of the Mediterranean world, with the outer regions of Spain to be eventually explored, with Ethiopia not even in the running.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, by shifting the center from Jerusalem, if only ideologically, the case for Christianity being for all people is emphatically made. Paul's focus becomes Luke's focus, which in turn becomes the reader's focus. This has the unwitting effect of making "the darker races outside the Roman orbit ... circumstantially marginalised by NT authors."<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the sociopolitical realities of the text could deny the modern reader of new possibilities of a vision of racial inclusiveness and universalism. One has only to examine maps of the New Testament world, for example, and see the paucity of information on Africa. Africa is not there; only the northern region of the Nile—Egypt.<sup>20</sup>

Notice that the eunuch was reading aloud. It was uncommon for one in antiquity to read silently to oneself. Everyone read aloud. But the eunuch was reading the Isaiah scroll, in particular the Suffering Servant passage of chapter 53, which is projected in literary terms as "the structural pivot of the entire eunuch story."<sup>21</sup> Luke does not have the eunuch read the entire passage, but it is substantial enough to warrant due study by him.

Jesus himself with the two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) could be invoked here. Thus, the Isaiah text probably emerged in early Christianity as a foundational chatechistic (or even prophetic) text, proving the martyrdom of the Messiah.<sup>23</sup>

Given this evangelistic platform, it is very likely that the text was being read and talked about in Jerusalem in the aftermath of the witness of Jesus' death and resurrection, where the phenomenon of speaking in tongues must have caused quite a stir. This must have played on the mind of the eunuch as he traveled, and as is evident from the text, the Holy Spirit seized the opportunity.

After receiving satisfactory guidance, where the topic of baptism must have arisen along the way, the eunuch is foregrounded in the story and given prominence. He exerts his authority and almost demands to be baptized at once (36-38). Philip acquiesces. Then they both emerge out of the water with the Holy Spirit falling upon the eunuch and the angel of the Lord snatching Philip away.

All of this took place before Saul's conversion. The Suffering Servant text of Isaiah (Chap. 53) no doubt became the eunuch's catechism. Charles E. Bradford calls him, "the first missionary with a national con-



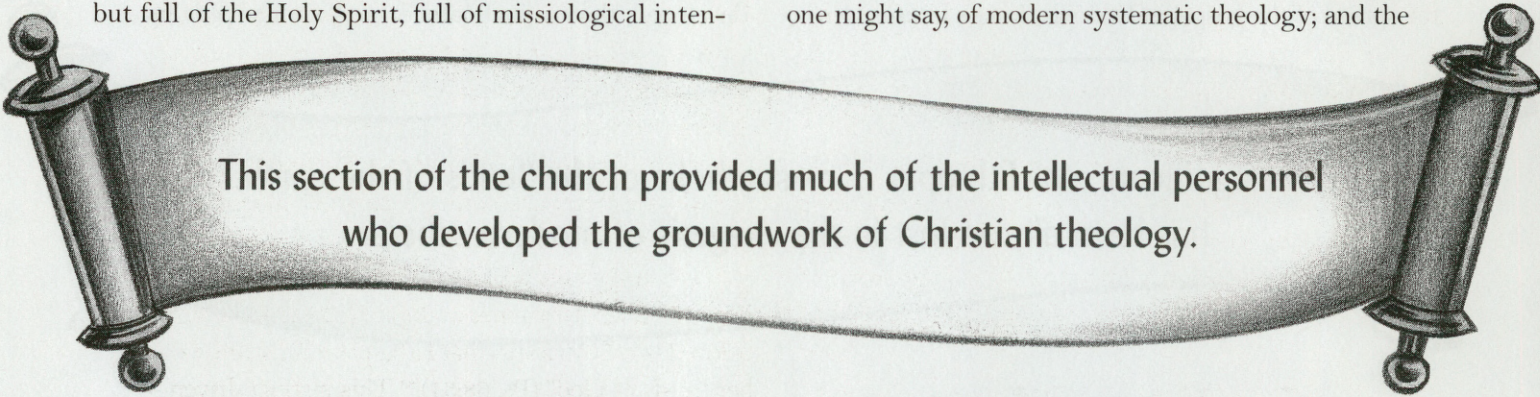


stituency.”<sup>24</sup> Luke’s strategic employment of the text undoubtedly provides a clue to the spiritual mandate for such a sociopolitically, commanding man.

Moreover, the longer plausible MSS reading of Acts 8:39 posits the Holy Spirit as falling upon the Ethiopian as a result of the baptism which is not only an allusion to but also a fulfillment of 1:8, whereupon receiving the Holy Spirit the disciples were bound by power to evangelize. The Ethiopian went “on his way rejoicing,” not merely with an emotional, holy dance, but full of the Holy Spirit, full of missiological inten-

notable record of suffering under persecution. We have records of this primarily because the provinces were part of “representative” Christianity, meaning that North Africa constituted the southern region of the Roman Empire and thus formed part of the locus of Christian activity.

It was a time when martyrdom was the test of Christianity. This section of the church provided much of the intellectual personnel who developed the groundwork of Christian theology. For example, Origen the founder, one might say, of modern systematic theology; and the



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tion. Herein lies the subtext of missiological intent.

The Ethiopian eunuch was to reach an entire nation, rather on the scale of Paul’s mission to the European-dominated Gentile world, and his was a first in the Christian era.

If one sees the European trajectory of church growth emanating from 1:8 with its territorial expansionism across Asia and Europe as the central concern of Luke (since he is eventually following Paul’s story), then surely the Ethiopian eunuch’s story ought to be relegated to a footnote. The problem, however, is the prominence that Luke gives to the story. It is too significant to Luke to be footnoted.

The story has to be construed in light of the fuller plot of 1:8, not merely territorially but ethnically. Only then will the Ethiopian story be seen for what it is: a symbol of the conversion of all nations, and of the fulfillment of 1:8c as mission “to the end of the earth.”<sup>25</sup> So although Luke eventually follows Paul’s work, he pauses for a significant while on the incursions made into the ends of the world, Africa.<sup>26</sup>

## The Church in Africa

By the second century C.E. churches were already established in Africa.<sup>27</sup> Between Egypt and the stretch of North Africa, which the Romans incidentally referred to as “Africa” even though they were both provinces of the Roman Empire, churches had a

three African lawyers, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, who laid the foundations of Western theology.

This was so because the North African church pioneered the vernacular use of Latin. It was working with the fashionable Latin (the soon-to-become ecclesiological language), whereas the church in Rome was still working in Greek. Interestingly, Victor, the first bishop of Rome, wrote his letters in Latin and was from Africa.

In the meantime, the gospel was taking root in Ethiopia. This surfaces in fourth century literature. Rufinus, for example, cites the story of Frumentius and Aedesius, two Syrian Christians, who were shipwrecked off the coast of what is now Eritrea (Horn of Africa) and taken to the capital, Axum, where because of the kind show of hospitality they settled.<sup>28</sup>

Since the Ethiopians were accustomed to hosting foreigners, the new settlers noticed how tolerant the people were in matters of religion, as, indeed, Africans tend to be. They were amazed at the evidence of Christianity and Hebraism so freely practiced among the indigenous even though the emperor at the time, Ella Amida, practiced paganism.<sup>29</sup> This has much to commend for pluralism, with its inherent characteristics of tolerance and respect for the other’s set of values.

After the death of the emperor, King Ezana, who was a monotheist anyway, joined Christianity and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was instituted in 331 C.E. as the national church. In the same year Emperor



Constantine was converted to Christianity, which implies that the Christian Church in Ethiopia enjoyed the status of national provenance before the Church in Rome.

However, it must be noted that Christianity was Ethiopianized (indigenized) more than Ethiopia was Christianized. In other words, the religion was incarnated into the culture of the day, and thereby owned by the indigenous. Hence, it was comfortable with itself and confident with its identity. This, it must be emphasized, was without getting territorial in the “Christendom,” or expansionist, sense of the word, as was already the practice in Western Christianity.

Thus, cultural as well as ecumenical diversity was built into the psyche of the early Ethiopian church.<sup>30</sup> It was at this time and in this context that the church in Ethiopia forged close lasting ties with the church in Alexandria, the then-capital of Egypt, during the time of Patriarch Athanasius, while maintaining its distinct form of Christianity.

## Cross-Cultural Diffusion

It would appear that the motive over the centuries for maintaining ties with Christians so far away was that they saw Christianity as one organic whole. This sense of an umbilical cord linking the isolated Ethiopia with the outside world over the years, yea centuries, is a witness to Christian universality. Yet this universality did not negate the unique interpretations and practices of Christianity. This might have something to say about a phenomenon of Christianity that Andrew Walls calls “cross-cultural diffusion.”<sup>31</sup>

By this, Walls refers to the way centers of Christianity have adapted to the impact of a new culture—religious or social—without compromising its core beliefs. This could be seen in Acts 15, for example, in the way Jewish Christians soon accepted the legitimacy of a Gentile expression of Christian religion exclusive of circumcision and, say, separatism.

The church had to be vulnerable, if fragile. In this case, the Jewish form of Christianity with the “old-style” believers retaining the Torah-keeping way of devotion to the Messiah, characteristic of the Jerusalem church, soon gave way to the vibrant innovative Gentile church, with the death of James the Elder probably prompting the former’s demise.

Here the center of gravity shifted from Jewish Christianity to Hellenistic Christianity. At different times, different peoples and different places have

become the church’s center. Then the “baton,” to use Walls’s metaphor, is passed on to another.<sup>32</sup>

This is what we witnessed in the early Ethiopian church. Cultural diversity was built into its origins in that it embraced an ecumenical partnership with a distinctly different community in Alexandria, Egypt. Over the centuries, however, Ethiopia hosted a Christian “empire,” whereas Alexandria was swallowed up in an Islamic one.

Today, we are witnessing a resurgence of Christianity in Africa. What is noteworthy is its deep sense of belonging to its Ethiopian-Christian past.

Walls cites an example. More than a century ago, different groups of African Christians independent of each other, dotted all over the continent, and frustrated by missionary control, established churches free of Western missionaries.

When they did so, some took on the title, “Ethiopian,” to assert their Africanness, adopting the famous text beloved by all Africans, that Ethiopia will “stretch forth her hands to God” (Ps. 68:31).<sup>33</sup> This instinct driven by a keen consciousness ought to be taken seriously.

Thus, Africans can authentically trace their Christian roots not only to Africa but virtually back to the apostolic age. This has serious implications for the way mission is understood in Christianity today.

Christianity in Africa cannot be treated as colonial crumbs from the European master’s table. Christian origins, discourse, and the history of Christian missions need to recover the place of Africa from the margins.

Although Greco-Roman categories have influenced African Christianity, it owes most of its formation to Hebraistic influences. It has more in common with Hebrew thinking and practice than with the Greco-Roman worldview.

African Christianity was not launched with an impoverished beginning at the gratuitous mercy of foreign missionaries, but, as has been shown exegetically, enjoyed a rich indigenous historical beginning most likely at the hands of the Ethiopian eunuch. Indeed, Luke meant for his readership to understand that the eunuch once empowered by the Holy Spirit left with missiological intent.

Although Christianity was born in an eclectic





context within African life that resonated with much of the culture of Old Testament Scripture, its birth was probably not as syncretistic as the religious context of its counterpoint in the West, especially in the outer region of the Roman Empire toward the Barbarian (Greco-Roman language) countries of Central and Northern Europe.

Just as the Ethiopian eunuch came to symbolize for Luke the fulfillment of the plot of 1:8c ("And you will be my witness ... in the ends of the earth"), so African Christianity ought to be seen as the embodiment of all peoples, even with their inherent inconsistencies and contradictions. In this way, the example of indigenized Christianity could serve as a template for a Christianity in the West that is attempting to reinvent itself.

The African religious reality is pluralistic. Traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity, existed and still exist side by side in many varieties, and "that's OK," to use a colloquialism.<sup>34</sup> Because of this, the cultural diversity that was built into its origins predisposed it for collaborative work with other religions.

The history of Christianity from the Apostolic Age is incomplete and one-sided when the African data is not given. This has serious pedagogical implications.

Does the standard Adventist prophetic interpretation of, say, Daniel 2 with respect to the feet of "iron and clay" and ten toes need revising in light of the African story?

Indeed, given Western preoccupation with the Middle East, Europe, and America, where is Africa in eschatology?

Perhaps, then, in light of the above and as a show of solidarity with the rest of Christianity we could adopt a missionary song composed by the nineteenth-century Lovedale Mission Press, as did the new South Africa for its National Anthem:

Nkosi sikelel' I Afrika : God bless Africa  
Makube njalo. : May it be so for ever.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes and References

1. Interestingly, the Church Fathers of the second-fifth centuries centered their arguments around questions about the use or nature of baptism. See William Frank Lawrence, "The History of the Interpretation of Acts 8:26-40 by the Church Fathers Prior to the Fall of Rome" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1984). The narrative does give historical clues to approaches of the witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus in league with other citations in Luke-Acts (Luke 1:1-4; 24:48; Acts 1:21-22; 4:3; 10:39-41;

22:14-15). Still, many refer to the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the conversion of the Ethiopian through preaching and evangelism (8:29, 39) and against the broader backdrop of Luke-Acts (Luke 4:18; 24:44; Acts 1:8; 4:8-10; 7:55; 10:11-12; 13:4-10; 16:6-7).

2. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Many see this as the keynote or programmatic focus of the narrative of Acts. James Scott, for one, makes an interesting case for seeing 1:8 as programmatic for "three missions, according to the three sons of Noah who constitute the Table of Nations: Shem (Acts 2:1-8:25), Ham (8:26-40), and Japheth (9:1-28:31)," in "Luke's Geographical Horizon," in *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting*, eds. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. B. Winter (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 531. Scott makes this point by comparing the League of Nations table of Genesis 10 with Acts 2 and suggests that the ethos is the same in terms of its "geographic orientation" (530).

3. Luke-Acts appears to pay particular attention to people of color, e.g. Simon of Cyrene, Simeon Niger and Lucius of Cyrene, if, of course, geography is an indicant.

4. This is, in essence, Clarice Martin's point in "A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 105-35.

5. Traveling by road seems a likely option given the mention of chariot in 8:28, 29. The only other place in the Bible it is mentioned is Revelation 9:9 (in a war context). It was probably a horse-drawn carriage that accommodated the transportation of goods.

6. Clarice Martin argues quite scrupulously and convincingly for the geographic significance of the provenance of Ethiopia from Greco-Roman sources such as Homer (*Iliad*, 23.205-7), Herodotus (3.114-15) and Strabo (*Geography of Strabo*, 1.2.27) where Ethiopia lies on the edge of the "Ocean" at the southernmost limit of the world. Furthermore, if, as Bauckham posits in light of the league of nations in Acts 2, Jerusalem is at the center of Luke's geographic world, then the other three corners of the boundaries of the world would be India, Scythia, and Spain, since ancient authors often identified the physical boundaries with these locations. See Richard Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, vol. 4 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. B. Winter (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 422. Bauckham acknowledges that although the reference to "the ends of the earth" in Acts 13:47 might have had Spain in mind it is only one instance of the gospel reaching the ends of the earth: "Acts 1:8 surely has a more universal reference" (*ibid.*, 422, n. 19). Indeed, early Christian writers appear to have placed Spain at the outer limits of the West, since it was part of the outer reaches of the Roman Empire. See, for example, 1 Clem.5:7, "the limits of the west," and Ernst Kasemann's commentary on Romans 15:28, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 402. Interestingly, Bauckham also cites later traditions as taking the gospel to the other "corners" of the world: Thomas (*Acts of Thomas*) or Bartholomew (Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* 1:9-10)—India; Andrew (Origen, *ap. Eusebius, Hist. Eccl.* 3.1; *Acts of Andrew and*



*Matthias*)—Scythia; and even Matthew (Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.9–10)—Ethiopia (Bauckham, *Acts*, 4:422, n. 19). How much these are attempts to rewrite history, however, is open to question.

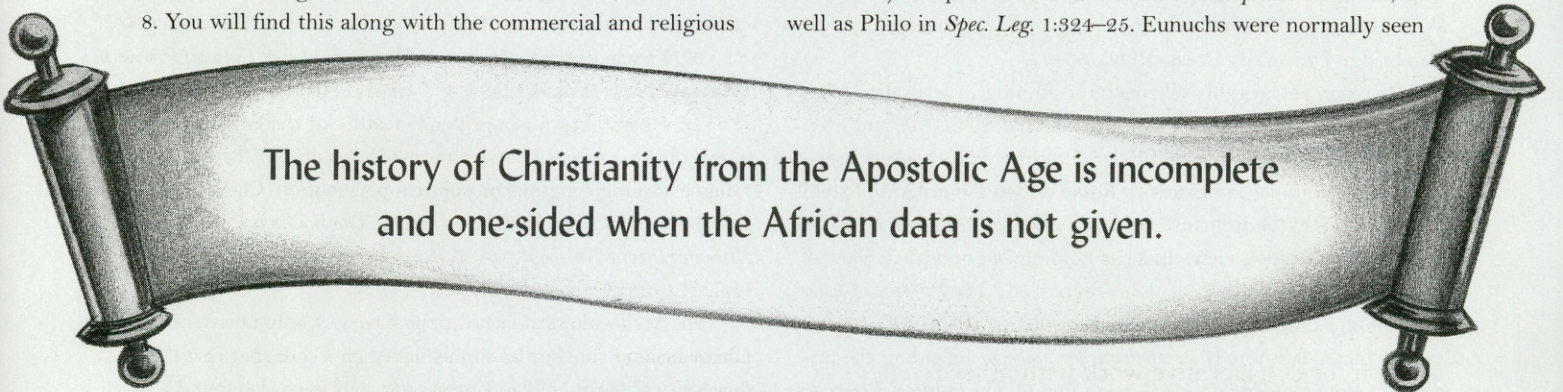
7. Although virtually all commentators argue that the eunuch was either a Gentile God-fearer or a proselyte—see F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1992), 160–73, for an argument in favor of God-fearer—they all signally ignore the trail of data linking Judaism to Ethiopia through the Queen of Sheba. This latter could account for Luke's uncharacteristic failure to label the religious status of the eunuch. Indeed it could have formed part of the cultural knowledge of Luke's readers or, not least, himself.

8. You will find this along with the commercial and religious

than 50 percent of the members of the Lemba's hereditary priestly clan have it, indicating that they, too, are *cohanim*.

10. Rebecca Denova in *The Things Accomplished Among Us: Prophetic Tradition in the Structural Pattern of Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 173, sees the Pentecost scene of the League of Nations as a fulfillment of Jewish eschatological prophecy where the exiles will eventually be ingathered. This accords with data from the pseudopigrapha.

11. Leviticus 21:20; 22:24; and Deuteronomy 14:1 state that the eunuch was banned from worship in the inner temple. The Mishna also enforces the Deuteronomic ban against eunuchs (m. Yeb. 8:1–2). Josephus corroborates this in *Antiquities* 4:290–91, as well as Philo in *Spec. Leg.* 1:324–25. Eunuchs were normally seen



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acumen of blacks (Nubians) in texts and traditions associated with the wisdom of the Queen of Sheba. See *KEBRA NAGAST or The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son* Menyelek (I), trans. E. A. Wallis Budge (London: Humphrey Milford, 1932); C. E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of SDAs, 1999), 91. There is a wealth of material in Greco-Roman literature from as early as Homer, Herodotus, and Seneca that links Ethiopians to Mediterranean society and culture. For a survey, see Clarice Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey," 111–16.

9. For example, DNA analysis has been used to identify as genuine Jews the Lemba, a tribe of black, Bantu-speaking, non-pork-eating, circumcision-practicing, Sabbath-observing people living in southern Africa who have for centuries claimed that they were Jews. Oral traditions reported that they were Jews living in Senna, Ethiopia, and were forced to leave due to a flood that destroyed their homes. Since rumors about the "Lost Tribes of Israel" abounded, these Lemba traditions were dismissed as mythical. However, archaeological excavations actually uncovered the site specifically mentioned, which was destroyed by a flood about a thousand years ago. "Beta Israel Studies Toward the Year 2000," in Steven Kaplan, Tudor Parfitt, and Emanula Trevisan Semi, eds., *Between Africa and Zion* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1995), 9–20; T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi, eds., *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel Studies on the Ethiopian Jews* (London: Curzon Press, 1999), 304.

The DNA analysis pinpointed a characteristic genetic signature found only in the DNA sequences of 50 percent of Jewish men claiming to be *cohanim*—members of the priestly class descended from Aaron. K. Skorecki, et al., "Y chromosomes of Jewish priests," *Nature* 385 (1997): 32; M. G. Thomas, et al., "Origins of Old Testament Priests," *Nature* 394 (1998): 138–140. Moreover, more

as disfigured victims of violence, the famililess, the sexually ambiguous, the socially downtrodden slaves, the childless, the publicly maligned, and culturally impure.

12. See Frank M Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 2–7, for a close and detailed demonstration of this point.

13. Feldman, Louis H., *Jews and Gentiles in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 137.

14. Even if he were a Jew back home in Africa, at best he was a God-fearer in Jerusalem, not being allowed to enter the inner courts of the temple and inner courts of Jewish circles. Cf. P. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 154–63.

15. He was traveling in style—a chariot, probably escorted by an entourage—and he had purchased an expensive Isaiah scroll. Cf. K. Bornhauser, *Studien zur Apostelgeschichte* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1934), 96, cited in Spencer, *Portrait of Philip in Acts*, 159.

It is generally gathering acceptance that Luke's audience was a learned one. For example, in this verse 31 of the passage Luke has the Ethiopian speaking eloquent Greek and employing the unusual optative mood. J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. I. Prolegomena*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 197–99, when he asks, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

16. For example, some rabbis believed that blackness of the skin was the result of a direct curse of God. "Our rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished—the dog,





the raven and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates (his seed into his mate's mouth), and Ham was smitten in his skin." Isadore Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: Hebrew-English Edition*, rev. ed., Jacob Schacter and H. Freeman, trans. (London: Socino Press, 1969), 108B. Also, "Moreover because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren's hair shall be twisted into kinks, and their eyes red: again because your lips jested at my misfortune, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked ... Men of this race are called Negroes."

17. W. A. Strange argues meticulously for the longer reading. This is in spite of a huge problem with its textual originality—W. A. Strange, *The Problem of the Text of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 65–77.

18. Acts betrays this scheme by beginning in Jerusalem (ch. 2) before moving from Antioch (ch. 12), to Athens (ch. 17), and eventually to Rome (ch. 28). Philip Esler accepts that Luke-Acts presents Christianity as "no threat to Rome nor to the order and stability so prized by the Romans," in *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 218. Robert Maddox views Luke as holding "an optimistic view of the imperial government," in John Riches, ed., *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (1982; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 97. Paul Walaskay argues that Luke-Acts is an *apologia pro imperio* defending the primacy of Rome in "And So We Came to Rome": *The Political Perspective on St. Luke*, Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 49 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 64–67.

Peculiarly, J. J. Gunther suggests that Luke ignores the origins of Egyptian Christianity because its catechesis was deemed flawed. Gunther, "The Association of Mark and Barnabus with Egyptian Christianity (Part 1)," *Evangelical Quarterly* 54 (1982): 220–21.

19. Cain Felder, "Racial Ambiguities in the Biblical Narratives," in *The Church and Racism*, eds. Gregory Baum and John Coleman (New York: Seabury, 1982), 22.

20. These maps tend to go as far south as Thebes and Hierakonpolis. In fact, to find Africa one has to peruse Old Testament maps. See Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey," 121, where she refers to this phenomenon as a "politics of omission."

21. Spencer, *Portrait of Philip in Acts*, 174. Spencer demonstrates this through mapping an intricate chiasmic pattern of the pericope (131–32).

22. See *ibid.*, 179, for a further development of this theme.

23. See C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of the New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet Press, 1952), 132; and Barnabus Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 77.

24. C. E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of SDA's, 1999), 94. Long before, Irenaeus (120–202 C.E.) declared that the Ethiopian became a missionary "to the regions of Ethiopia" (*Adv. haer.* 4.23.2; cf. 3.23.20), and Epiphanius (315–403 C.E.) after him.

25. This tradition of the symbolism of universalism goes as far back as Augustine in his comments on Psalm 69:31—"Under the name of Egypt or of Ethiopia he hath signified the faith of all nations ... he hath signified the nations of the whole world." Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Augustine: Expositions on the Book of Psalms. A Select*

*Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 8:298. Athanasius does the same, see Jean Marie Courtès, "The Theme of 'Ethiopia' and 'Ethiopians' in Patristic Literature," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the Early Christian Church to the Age of Discovery*, vol. 1, pt. 1, ed., Ladislav Bugner (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 9–32.

26. Hans-Josef Klauck agrees that if it is held that the universal mission of the Church could not begin before Paul, then the place of the pericope would be problematic. He therefore concludes, "thus it is here—and nowhere else—that the final programmatic point from Acts 1:8 ... is genuinely fulfilled, in an act of prophetic anticipation." Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McMeil (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

27. I am indebted to Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002), 87, for this section.

28. Hospitality was a principle feature of the Ethiopian community in that it was known to provide asylum to Christian refugees fleeing religious or political persecution. Cf. William Leo Hansberry, *Pillars in Ethiopian History: The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook*, vol. 1., ed. Joseph E. Harris (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974).

29. Archaeological excavations have not only uncovered numerous and substantial sophisticated churches that reveal the durability of early Nubian Christianity, but have also found a schema that still persists today. Many of the churches, particularly in the countryside, are circular with three concentric rings. The innermost ring is the sanctuary (Makdas) and contains the Holy of Holies with a replica ark of the covenant. The second is the Holy Place. Only the priests and deacons may enter the innermost sanctuary. See Bekele Heye, "The Sabbath in Ethiopia" (M.A. thesis. Andrews University, 1968). For accounts on King Ezana, see also E. Ullendorf, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); cf. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

30. This could well be one of the secrets to its survival against Islamic campaigns.

31. Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 67.

32. *Ibid.*, 66.

33. *Ibid.*, 91. The Order of Ethiopia in South Africa, for example, is a robust indigenous movement within the Anglican Church. Ethiopian "consciousness" can also be seen in less orthodox movements such as the Jamaican-origin Rastafarian movement, which identifies Ras Tafari, its Messiah of hope, with Halle Sellasie, the last emperor of Ethiopia, who was able to trace his lineage all the way back to King David.

34. Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Yaounde, Cameroun: Regnum Africa and Paternoster, 2000), x–xi.

35. Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 115.

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