

Acts 8:27, 36, 38

I have heard that it would be improper to view the Ethiopian whom Philip encountered in Acts 8 as a “eunuch,” and instead that we should think of him as a “believer” from the Aramaic Peshitta, given how the Torah prohibits a eunuch from approaching the appointed place. Can you assist me with this?

The scene of Acts 8:25-40 should surely be well known to Bible readers, as Philip had been declaring the good news to Samaritans, and was then commanded to go down to Gaza, to speak the message to a court official of Ethiopia, who had come to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:26-27). Philip runs alongside this Ethiopian’s chariot, speaking to him as he was contemplating his personal reading of Isaiah 53:7-8 (Acts 8:32-33), clarifying how these passages spoke of Yeshua of Nazareth. The Ethiopian official eagerly receives the message, and as a result is immersed with water (Acts 8:34-38). Following this, Philip was supernaturally transported to Azotus (Acts 8:40), with the Ethiopian continuing his journey home in a spirit of rejoicing, as a new follower of the Messiah (Acts 8:39).

Most Bible readers see the Ethiopian’s status as a *eunuchos* (εὐνοῦχος), and think nothing of it. As is recorded in Acts 8:27, 36, 38,

“So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship...As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’...And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him” (NASU).

The hesitancy to recognize the Ethiopian as some sort of “eunuch,” is often made from how the Torah prohibited a eunuch from entering into the assembly: “No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 23:1, NASU). Proponents of an original Aramaic New Testament might argue that the Ethiopian official is a “believer” of some sort. In the view of *The Hebraic-Roots Version Scriptures* by James Scott Trimm,

“The man in Acts 8:27 appears to be a proselyte to Judaism since he seems to be making the Torah-required pilgrimage to Yerushalayim (Dt. 16:16). The Torah, however, forbids a eunuch both from becoming a proselyte Jew, and from worshipping at the Temple (Dt. 23:1f) all eunuchs are excluded from the assembly of Israel. The word for ‘eunuch’ in the Aramaic manuscripts of both theses [sic] passages is מְהַיְמְנָא M’HAIMNA which can mean ‘eunuch’ but can also mean ‘believer’ for ‘faithful one’ as it clearly means here.”¹

The HRV Scriptures renders Acts 8:27, 36, 38 with “believer” instead of “eunuch”:

“And he arose, went and he met a believer who had come from Ethiopia, an official of Kandake, queen of the Ethiopians. And he was in authority concerning all of her treasure and had come to worship in Yerushalayim...And as they went on the way, they arrived at a certain place in which there was water, and that believer said, Behold, water. What is the obstacle so that I may be immersed?...And he commanded that the chariot stop, and the two of them descended into the water and Philip immersed that believer.”²

¹ James Scott Trimm, trans., *The Hebraic-Roots Version Scriptures* (Northriding, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 2006), 1388 fn#1229.

² “believer” also appears in Andrew Gabriel Roth, ed. and trans., *Aramaic English New Testament* (Netzari Press, 2008), pp 326, 328; the traditional “eunuch” is used in the Lamsa version.

Notwithstanding some of the Ancient Near Eastern factors involved with the Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibition, perhaps in that God not want members of Canaanite sexual cults to enter into *qahal* *ADONAI* (קָהָל יְהוָה),³ without any consideration for other factors, the Ethiopian being some kind of a “believer” might on the surface appear to make sense. However, many interpreters of Acts—particularly those who read the text in an historically conscious manner—have had to weigh in more thoroughly both the background of the Ethiopian, as well as the textual relationship of Isaiah 53:7-8 to other passages.

The Greek noun *eunouchos* (εὐνοῦχος) has a variety of meanings, including: “**a castrated male person, eunuch,**” “**a human male who, without a physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children, impotent male,**” “**a human male who abstains fr. marriage, without being impotent, a celibate**” (*BDAG*).⁴ In all probability, the first definition is what is intended for Acts 8:27, 36, 38, but this is not entirely required. Noting how Candace or *Kandakē* (Κανδάκη) was not a proper name, but rather the “title of the queen of Ethiopia” (*BDAG*)⁵—the NEB having “This man was a eunuch, a high official of the Kandake, or Queen, of Ethiopia, in charge of all her treasure”⁶—Tim Meadowcroft directs how the Ethiopian being a “eunuch” could have only been in a titular sense:

“The term ‘eunuch’ used to describe him had its origins as a term for one in charge of the harem. This would have been a man who had been castrated or rendered sexually incapable by some naturally occurring physical disability. Over time eunuchs came to hold a number of roles in the courts, to the point where the term was sometimes used generically for a court official. So we cannot be certain whether the man riding in the chariot is physically a eunuch or simply a high official. In any case, he was a man used to exercising power.”⁷

It is certainly not inappropriate, with “Candace” being a title like “Pharaoh” or “Caesar,” to suggest that “eunuch” might have also been a title to represent a high office in Ethiopia.⁸ However, most Acts examiners consider the Ethiopian official to have been a physical eunuch of some sort—having either a natural deformity or an unnatural operation—who likely went to Jerusalem to seek after Israel’s God, and was seemingly turned away from the Temple complex per the Torah’s prohibition. Ben Witherington III thinks that “at the most he might have been permitted in the Court of the Gentiles, or in some of the local synagogues.”⁹ Some First Century Jewish thought on the status of eunuchs, as seen in the works of Philo and Josephus, was hardly positive:

“But the law, being most especially an interpreter of equal communion, and of courteous humanity among men, has preserved the honor and dignity of each virtue; not permitting any one who is incurably sunk in vice to flee to them, but rejecting all such persons and repelling them to a distance. Therefore, as it was aware that no inconsiderable number of wicked men are often mingled in these assemblies, and escape notice by reason of the crowds collected there, in order to prevent that from being the case in this instance, he previously excludes all who are unworthy from the sacred assembly, beginning in the first instance with those who are afflicted with the disease of effeminacy, men-women, who, having adulterated the coinage of nature, are willingly driven into the appearance and treatment of licentious women. He also banishes all those who have suffered any injury or mutilation in their most important members, and those who, seeking to preserve the

³ Deuteronomy may exclude emasculated men from the Assembly because of association of emasculation with paganism or because of revulsion against emasculation. Since emasculation also disqualifies priests from officiating, and invalidates animals for sacrifice, such defects may have been considered incompatible with the holiness demanded of Israelites” (Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996], pp 210-211).

⁴ *BDAG*, 409.

⁵ *Ibid*, 507.

Also W.A. Beardslee, “Candace,” in *IDB*, 1:498; “Candace,” in *ISBE*, 2:591; Ben Witherington III, “Candace,” in *ABD*, 1:837.

⁶ “the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians” (RSV/NRSV); “the Kandake (which means ‘queen of the Ethiopians’)” (TNIV); “the Kandake, or queen, of Ethiopia” (CJB).

⁷ Tim Meadowcroft, *The Message of the Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 209.

F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 103 thinks “that he was a eunuch in an anatomical as well as administrative sense.”

⁸ That there is some variance in what it means to be a “eunuch,” is clear enough from Yeshua’s own word, “For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are *also* eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept *this*, let him accept *it*” (Mathew 19:12, NASU). *Lattimore* offers a unique rendering of Matthew 19:12: “For there are sexless men who have been so from their mother’s womb, and there are sexless men who have been made sexless by other men, and there are sexless men who have made themselves sexless for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let him who can accept, accept.”

⁹ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 297.

flower of their beauty so that it may not speedily wither away, have altered the impression of their natural manly appearance into the resemblance of a woman" (Philo *Special Laws* 1.324-325).¹⁰

"Let those who have made themselves eunuchs be had in detestation; and do avoid any conversation with them who have deprived themselves of their manhood, and of that fruit of generation which God has given to men for the increase of their kind: let such be driven away, as if they had killed their children, since they beforehand have lost what should procure them; for evident it is, that while their soul is become effeminate, they have withal transfused that effeminacy to their body also. In like manner do treat all that is of a monstrous nature when it is looked on; nor is it lawful to geld men or any other animals" (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.290-291).¹¹

The Ethiopian, still being wooed by the Lord, was searching for truth, as is demonstrated by his deep pondering over the scroll of Isaiah. Certainly, the good news of Yeshua as the sacrificed lamb of Isaiah 53:7-8 was powerful enough to save even this eunuch from Ethiopia, as one can see some fulfillment of Psalm 68:31 in view: "Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God" (NASU). More significant to the context of this Ethiopian eunuch recognizing Yeshua as Redeemer, is how Isaiah 53:7-8 and Yeshua's Messianic fulfillment is directly related to further Isaianic expectations. Darrell L. Bock, for example, draws out how "In the eschaton, eunuchs will be restored to full worship (Isa. 56:3b-6)...For Luke, this story likely is an indication that the hope of worship expressed in Isa. 56 is beginning to take place..."¹² A variety of examiners, certainly recognizing the Torah prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:1,¹³ have focused readers' attention on Isaiah 56:3-6¹⁴ and how eunuchs will be welcomed in during the Messianic Age:

"Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from His people.' Nor let the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD, 'To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant'" (NASU).

Here, the Hebrew term *saris* (סָרִיס), while often involving some sort of removal of the male testicles, can also be closely involved with some sort of high role as an official: "The noun, meaning '(court) official,' has its origin in the Akkadian title *ša rēši* (*šarri*) 'the one of the (king's) head.' The meaning 'eunuch' arose with the practice of utilizing castrated men in key positions in the various nations of the ancient near east (e.g. in Persia, Esth 2:3ff; Esth 4:4ff)" (*TWOT*).¹⁵ So, it might not always be that a "eunuch" was one who had his testicles removed or made inoperative in some fashion, although they frequently were.

The importance of Isaiah 56:3-6, which is obviously located rather close in proximity to the Messianic prophecy fulfilled by Yeshua in Isaiah 53:7-8, is something which many are agreed is an ancillary thought present in the composition of Luke. Also noting Ephesians 2:12-13, Christopher J.H. Wright observes in his book *The Mission of God*,

"[I]t is very hard to imagine that Luke did not have this text of Isaiah [56:3-8] in mind, with some ironic sense of humor no doubt, when he recorded that the first believer in Jesus from outside the native Jewish community was indeed a *foreigner*, a *eunuch*, and was reading the scroll of Isaiah, just a few inches from this passage. Luke is careful to point out, however, in line with his understanding of the fulfillment of all such promises in Christ, that the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, though he had indeed been to Jerusalem to worship, found joy, not in the *temple* but when he heard about *Jesus*, trusted and was baptized, and went on his way rejoicing. Jesus is the one through whom people of all nations will be accepted in God's house of prayer for all nations. Mission means

¹⁰ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 565.

¹¹ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 123.

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp 341, 342.

¹³ Also to be considered for the Second Temple era could be 1QSa 2.6, 8 in the DSS:

"No man with a physical handicap—crippled in both legs or hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb, or possessed of a visible blemish in his flesh...may en[ter] to take a place in the congregation of the m[e]n of reputation" (Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996], 146).

¹⁴ Witherington, *Acts*, 299.

¹⁵ R.D. Patterson, "סָרִיס," in *TWOT*, 2:634-635.

bringing the nations to find joy in the house of the Lord by bringing them to the one who embodies that house in his own person and the community of believers.”¹⁶

Recognizing the Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibition on eunuchs entering into the assembly, and also the negative views as stated by Philo and Josephus, F. Scott Spencer draws attention to Isaiah’s expectations of eunuchs indeed being later welcomed into the people of God:

“The Isaianic prophet...foresees a day when pious eunuchs (and foreigners!) will be welcomed into the temple and given a permanent place (‘everlasting name’) in the household of God (Isa. 56:1-8)...Although the precise link is not specified in the Acts story, we may imagine that Philip identifies the rejected-vindicated, crucified-ascended Jesus as the humiliated-exalted Isaianic servant who sympathizes with the plight of social and religious outcasts and opens a way for them into the household of God. This would explain the eunuch’s eagerness to embrace Philip’s message and ask for baptism on the spot. In the inclusive messianic community founded by the suffering Jesus, the eunuch finds the understanding and acceptance he has been seeking.”¹⁷

Meadowcroft’s observations on the Ethiopian eunuch coming to faith in Yeshua are also worth noting:

“...Part of the vision of Isaiah was an expansion of the notion of the people of God. This pervades the entire Isaiah scroll and especially Isaiah 40-55. See for example the expectation that the servant of the Lord would be ‘a light for the Gentiles’ [Isa. 42:6]. The famous tent image of Isaiah 54:2-3 anticipates the expansion, and the everlasting covenant in fulfilment of the hopes invested in David promises to incorporate the ‘nations’ [Isa. 55:3-5]. If these references remain a little allusive, there is no mistaking the words of Isaiah 56:3-7. Therein the poet/prophet sees a day in which those who now are excluded from the community will take their place in the centre of God’s people. This also includes ‘foreigners’, who will ‘hold fast to [God’s] covenant’, but it also includes ‘eunuchs’. In a wonderful symmetry this searching Ethiopian official not only finds Jesus but also discovers that his response is part of an ancient vision in which old boundaries are broken and God welcomes all those who respond to his name.

“I wonder if the eunuch’s interest had been particularly piqued by that reference to eunuchs, or if it was something that Philip was able to point him towards...”¹⁸

Those who think that the “eunuch” of Acts 8:27, 36, 38 is not a eunuch of some sort, have done so at the expense of severing the Ethiopian’s pondering over Isaiah 53:7-8 from Isaiah 56:3-6, in which the work of the Messiah would decisively welcome in eunuchs and foreigners to the Kingdom of God. Perhaps they did this, without considering the relationship of Isaiah 53:7-8 and related prophecies to the scene. While nothing more is stated in the Biblical text regarding the Ethiopian eunuch, the Second Century Christian apologist Irenaeus acknowledged this Ethiopian as having returned to his country, and becoming a strong evangelist:

“Whom did Philip preach to the eunuch of the queen of the Ethiopians, returning from Jerusalem, and reading Esaias the prophet, when he and this man were alone together? Was it not He of whom the prophet spoke: ‘He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb dumb before the shearer, so He opened not the mouth?’ ‘But who shall declare His nativity? for His life shall be taken away from the earth.’ [Philip declared] that this was Jesus, and that the Scripture was fulfilled in Him; as did also the believing eunuch himself: and, immediately requesting to be baptized, he said, ‘I believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God.’ This man was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this [God] had already made [His] appearance in human nature (*secundum hominem*), and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter; and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him” (*Against Heresies* 3.12).¹⁹

¹⁶ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 495.

¹⁷ Spencer, pp 103, 104.

¹⁸ Meadowcroft, 215.

¹⁹ *BibleWorks 9.0: Schaff, Early Church Fathers.*