




# Philip and the Nubian Official: Dimensions of Text and Narrative

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## Abstract

The encounter between Philip the deacon/evangelist and the Nubian official in Acts 8 has garnered much scholarly attention in recent decades. Numerous articles and monographs have explored issues of gender, race, and ethnicity in this pericope. This study takes a different tack by focusing on several textual issues as well as exploring unique narrational features adopted by Luke. Each character is developed within his individual trajectory in the account. After evangelizing in Samaria, Philip is directed to travel from Jerusalem along the road to Gaza. There he has a dramatic meeting with a man from Africa. Luke introduces him by using a character introduction formula adapted from the introduction of Potiphar in Genesis 39. The seven features of the formula are discussed seriatim. It is argued that understanding this formula's use is key to interpreting the identity of the African man. He is deemed to be a circumcised Jewish man, a treasury official serving the Kandake of Nubia, not a eunuch from Ethiopia. After the Nubian official learns that Isaiah's suffering servant is to be identified with Jesus, he believes and is baptized by Philip. The article provides a fresh reading that hopefully will advance discussion of why Luke placed this pivotal, divinely orchestrated meeting in Acts.

**Keywords:** Philip the Evangelist, eunuch, Nubia, Kandake, pilgrimage.

## Introduction

Philip's encounter with an African man in Acts 8 has received much attention from biblical scholars in recent years. Adele Reinhartz (2021, 20-22), in her 2021 presidential address for the Society of Biblical Literature, discussed this text. Numerous monographs and articles have appeared that explore dimensions of gender (e.g., Burke, 2013; Wilson, 2014), race (e.g., Kartzow & Moxnes, 2010), and ethnicity (e.g., Martin, 1993) believed to be in the text. This "exotic" episode has also suggested literary features similar to ancient novels (Pervo, 2006:32). This article offers a fresh reading of Acts 8:26–40 by looking at textual issues along with narrational features adopted by Luke to help readers better understand the background and identity of its two characters. Intertextual features with the Jewish Scriptures, particularly in the Septuagint, are explored throughout. The two main characters – Philip and the man from Africa – will be introduced individually even as their paths eventually intersect in a dramatic meeting on the road to Gaza. The results of this new reading are then contemplated in the conclusion.



## Philip as a Character in Acts 8

Philip is mentioned in five pericopae in the book of Acts. In 6:5–6 he is named as one of the seven faithful men chosen to serve tables.<sup>1</sup> Here Luke takes care to distinguish him from his namesake who was one of the Twelve (1:13) and who with the other apostles commissioned Philip and the other deacons by laying hands upon them (6:5–6). In 21:8 he is specifically identified as the evangelist (εὐαγγελιστοῦ; 21:8) to distinguish him again from the apostle.<sup>2</sup> When Philip became a Jesus follower is unstated; however, he might have been among the Judeans in Peter's audience at the Feast of Pentecost (2:14).

### *Deacon in Jerusalem, evangelist in Samaria*

Philip the deacon is sometimes described as a Hellenistic Jew. Haenchen (1971:267) states: "We may surely conclude that Stephen and the 'Hellenists' were in fact Hellenistic Jews of the diaspora who had taken up residence in Jerusalem. That we are on the right lines here is evidence not only by the names of the Seven, which are Greek without exception, but by the scene at 9.29f."<sup>3</sup> As Ilan (2002:310; 2008:388-390) has shown, Philip was a name used by males both in Palestine and in the western diaspora. Notwithstanding verses 9:29–30 which deal with Hellenists opposing the followers of Jesus, was Philip necessarily a Diaspora Jew because of his name? Williams (1995:99, 112) notes that Philip also "was a well-established, if not especially popular, name among 1st-century Palestinian Jews." Since the name had entered the Jewish onomasticon as early as the second century BCE, she names three other Philips known from historical texts. Therefore, Williams concludes that "it is quite likely that he was a hellenised Jew from Palestine itself."<sup>4</sup> But was a Palestinian Jew with a Greek name necessarily a hellenised one? The apostle Philip was from Galilean Bethsaida, also the residence of Andrew and Peter (John 1:44), and none of these disciples were hellenised.

The home of Philip is later said to be Caesarea (8:40; 21:8), the initial seat of King Herod the Great and later of the Roman governors of Judea. Greek was its *lingua franca* with some Latin being spoken. Its residents were a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles (Josephus, *B.J.* 3.409). This social and ethnic mix, according to Isaac (2019:419), "apparently caused tension and occasional open conflict from the beginning. Aramaic and Hebrew were spoken widely, and the city had a synagogue (Josephus, *B.J.* 2.13.7, 2.14.4; *Ant.* 19.349-50; 20.8.7). About their religious identity, Levey (1975:73) writes, "We must assume that they practice the tenets of their religion, mostly Biblical to be sure, just as their brethren do throughout Palestine and the Diaspora."

Philip appears next among those believers who were scattered (διασπείρω; 8:1, 4) from Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom and the subsequent persecution initiated by Paul. Philip is then identified as one who went into Judea and Samaria preaching the word and proclaiming Christ (8:4–5). The Samaritans spoke a dialect of Aramaic in the first century CE so this would

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<sup>1</sup> A book title will be given only for biblical texts not found in Acts. Translations from Greek texts are from the Loeb Classical Library (LCL).

<sup>2</sup> For the discussion on the two Philips, particularly the confusion related to their identities, see Wilson (2022a:75-80).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce (1990:183) notes that, while their Greek names do not necessarily prove they are Hellenists, "since they were appointed in the interest of the Hellenists it was natural that they themselves should be Hellenists." But as this discussion shows, this need not be the case.

<sup>4</sup> Ilan (2002:310) identifies three other men with the name Philip.



probably be the language of Philip's proclamation.<sup>5</sup> His facility in Greek is later demonstrated in 8:32–33 when asked to interpret a text from Isaiah 53 in the Septuagint. To summarize, Philip was a Palestinian Jew and resident of Caesarea who was one of many trilingual Jews in Judea in the first century. His profile then is not of a Hellenized Jew who spoke only Greek.

### *Return to Jerusalem*

Philip seemingly disappears from the narrative until 8:26 when he reappears in Jerusalem. Earlier in the chapter his departure from Jerusalem had been introduced using a departure-arrival formula drawn from the Septuagint (Wilson, 2022b). This observation regarding Luke's attention to and imitation of Septuagintal language is significant for our upcoming discussion. The mission in Samaria, later involving Peter and John, concludes with an arrival back in Jerusalem. Many English translations (e.g., NRSV, NIV, NLT, NET) construe the antecedent of Οἱ...διαμαρτυράμενοι καὶ λαλήσαντες τὸν λόγον in verse 25 as only Peter and John since they were the subject of the previous twelve verses (14-25).<sup>6</sup> However, the verse functions as an *inclusio* with the departure formula:<sup>7</sup>

8:4–5 Οἱ μὲν οὖν διασπαρέντες διήλθον εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον. Φίλιππος δὲ κατελθὼν εἰς [τὴν] πόλιν τῆς Σαμαρείας ἐκήρυσσεν αὐτοῖς τὸν Χριστόν.

8:25 Οἱ μὲν οὖν διαμαρτυράμενοι καὶ λαλήσαντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου ὑπέστρεφον εἰς Ἱερουσόλυμα πολλὰς τε κώμας τῶν Σαμαριτῶν εὐηγγελίζοντο

Parsons (2008:113) likewise notes this rhetorical feature: "Acts 8:4–25 is marked off by an *inclusio* in Acts 8:4 and 8:25. Both summary statement refer to 'preaching' and the 'word/message.'"<sup>8</sup> While also noting this *inclusio* and that "they" in 8:25 could include Philip, Schnabel (2012:415; cf. Barrett, 1994:418 ) nevertheless concludes that "it is more plausible that only Peter and John are in view."<sup>9</sup> However, the implied subject of verse 25 is not just the two apostles. Since the *inclusio* points backward, it would seemingly include everyone who had been scattered and preached in Samaria. A suggested translation might read: "Those scattered including Philip, along with Peter and John, continued to testify and speak the word of the Lord as they evangelized many villages of Samaria during their return to Jerusalem." Translations that suggest it was only Peter and John who returned to Jerusalem leave the reader with a logistical problem in 8:26: When and how did Philip return to Jerusalem? By including Philip in the return, he is now positioned for the next scene in the narrative.

### *Departure from Jerusalem*

Philip's second journey in chapter 8 is initiated not by persecution but through divine guidance. The amount of time between his return to Jerusalem and the angel's command is unstated (8:26). Because of his spiritual success in Samaria with group evangelism, Philip is now chosen for a mission of personal evangelism. He is directed to go down from Jerusalem along the road to

<sup>5</sup> Van der Horst (2001:182) believes that besides Aramaic, inscriptional evidence suggests that some Samaritans also had facility in Greek.

<sup>6</sup> Other translations (e.g., NKJV, ESV) leave the pronoun indefinite simply stating, "they" testified, preached, and returned.

<sup>7</sup> For Luke's use of an *inclusio* to frame the first journey in Acts 13–14, see Wilson (2018:356).

<sup>8</sup> Parsons, however, does not use this insight to inform a more inclusive translation of verse 25. He further observes that within the *inclusio* are two panels telling the same story. However, while the setting in Samaria is similar, each panel depicts different characters involved in different aspects of the story.

<sup>9</sup> This is also the view of Lightfoot (2014:203): "The narrative leads us to suppose that St. Philip did not return to Jerusalem with the Apostles."



Gaza; however, no reason is given for this action. Upon reaching the barren coastal plain Philip receives a second directive, this time from the Spirit, to introduce himself to someone riding in a carriage (8:29). Philip receives guidance a third time when the Spirit of the Lord snatches him away to Azotus (8:38).<sup>10</sup> Philip's movements in Acts 8 occur through a departure/arrival formula and then three divinely guided directives and actions.

### *Meeting and baptism on the "desert" road*

The direct route descended from Jerusalem southwest 24 Roman miles (34 km) to Caper(zac)aria, as marked on the Peutinger Map (cf. Wright 2019, 199-200).<sup>11</sup> This station provided the first stop for travelers going to the coast. The route then turned southwards to Betogabris (Bet Guvrin), 32 Roman miles (47.4 km) from Jerusalem. At Betogabris the road left the Judean hill country and ran southwest through deserted countryside (ἔρημος; 8:26). The localization of the baptismal site at Wadi el-Hesi is most convincing. Because of the wadi's distance from Betogabris, Philip had at least two hours to explain the Isaiah text before reaching the pool of water. After Philip's departure to Azotus (8:40), the carriage continued its journey to the coastal road where it turned south to Gaza.<sup>12</sup>

### **The African Man as a Character in Acts 8**

While several textual and narrational issues surround the figure of Philip, they are few compared to the second person introduced in this pericope, whom Barrett (1994:426) describes as "certainly a rare bird." Interestingly, Theophilus and the implied audience are introduced to the object of the angelic directive (8:27) before Philip himself meets this individual. English translations that state, after Philip started out "he met..." (NIV, NLT), have introduced this verb without textual basis. Only in 8:29-31 does the angel direct Philip to approach the carriage. He is invited inside by its occupant, whereupon introductions are presumably made and Philip now learns the identity of this traveler. To reveal his identity, Luke utilizes another narrational feature drawn from the Jewish Scriptures. Rosner (1993:66, cf. 72-73) has noted the influence of the Septuagint "on Luke's language, literary techniques, narrative style and employment of various themes."<sup>13</sup> Luke adopts a character introduction formula to introduce this African man to his audience. Failure to recognize its use can lead to inadequate interpretations of the pericope.

### *Character Introduction Formula*

The departure formula used by Luke to introduce Philip's journey to Samaria was patterned after Abraham's departure from Haran (Genesis 12:1-5). Now in 8:27 Luke uses a character introduction formula to introduce the African man: ἀνὴρ Αἰθίοψ εὐνοῦχος δυνάστης Κανδάκης βασιλίσσης Αἰθιόπων, ὃς ἦν ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γάζης αὐτῆς, ὃς ἐληλύθει προσκυνήσων εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ. Although their order differs, the features are modeled after the introduction of

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<sup>10</sup> Philip's snatching (ἤρπασεν) to Azotus suggests an intertextual echo with Elijah. As Witherington (1998:300) writes, "Like the prophet Elijah, he was moved by God to his next point of ministry (1 Kings 18:12, 46; 2 Kings 2:16)."

<sup>11</sup> For a full discussion of the geographical, historical, and archaeological dimensions of this pericope, see Wilson (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Mbuvi (2021: 483) notes that another narrative feature in chapter 8 is a "journey pattern": "Philip journeyed to Samaria and to the Southern Gaza road to meet an African royal in his journey back home."

<sup>13</sup> See Nguyen (2019) for several other narrative patterns that he finds in this chapter.



Potiphar in Genesis 39:1: Πεπεφρης ὁ εὐνοῦχος Φαραω ἀρχιμάγειρος ἀνὴρ Αἰγύπτιος.<sup>14</sup> Luke uses the introduction of this other African man as a pattern to use in Acts 8. For as Adewumi, Olaniyi, & Oyekan (2023:3) rightly observe, “the writer of Acts considers the events in the Old Testament to be significant to the New Testament narrative, thereby providing a connection for the readers of Acts.” The formula and its comparative features are presented in the following chart:

Feature	Acts 8 Character	Genesis 39 Character
Gender	ἀνὴρ	ἀνὴρ
Nationality	Αἰθίοψ	Αἰγύπτιος
Position	εὐνοῦχος	εὐνοῦχος
Portfolio	δυνάστης... ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γάζης	ἀρχιμάγειρος
Dynasty	Κανδάκης βασιλίσσης Αἰθιοπῶν	Φαραω
Religion	προσκυνήσων εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ	Absent
Name	Absent	Πεπεφρης

Each of these features will be developed as they relate to the African man that Philip met on the road to Gaza.

### *Gender*

Luke introduces this man with the formulaic use of ἀνὴρ. That this is a gender designation is seen in the similar introduction of Lydia in 16:14 where γυνή is used: τις γυνή ὀνόματι Λυδία (cf. Luke 8:3).<sup>15</sup> In a review of the uses of γυνή in Acts, particularly to introduce Damaris in 17:34, Evans (2020:50) notes that Luke’s introduction “seems to be a standard structure.” This observation is significant because it captures the intentionality of Luke’s use of gender-related words in his introduction of characters. Potiphar generally considered to be a eunuch of Pharaoh is similarly introduced as an ἀνὴρ using gendered language (Genesis 39:1).

### *Nationality*

The man whom Philip meets is called an Αἰθίοψ. English versions that translate literally as “Ethiopian” (NRSVUE, NIV, ESV, etc.) fail to note that Ethiopia in antiquity was not the modern nation.<sup>16</sup> Commentators like Schnabel (2019:51, 58-59) often clarify the geographical referent. Marshall (1980:162) observes that he “came from the country now known as Sudan (rather than modern Ethiopia),” while Bock (2007:231) notes that in the Jewish Scriptures the land was known as Cush<sup>17</sup> and “today is known as the Sudan... and was in the Nubian kingdom, whose capital was Meroe.”<sup>18</sup> If translators persist in translating 8:27 literally, then a clarifying footnote is needed such as: “Although the Greek text reads ‘Ethiopian,’ the ancient kingdom of Nubia once situated in Sudan is meant rather than the modern nation of Ethiopia.”

<sup>14</sup> Clarke (1979:101) thinks this pericope is built up of intertexts primarily from Zephaniah with the introduction of the African man in 8:27 having parallels with Zephaniah 2:11–12 and 3:30. However, the overlap is for only two words – worship and Ethiopian/Ethiopia.

<sup>15</sup> Note that Lydia’s position (πορφυρόπωλις) and civic nationality (πόλεως Θυατείρων) are other explicit features of her introduction, as is her religious status to be discussed later.

<sup>16</sup> The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) does provide a note reading “Nubia.”

<sup>17</sup> See Burrell (2020) for a brief introduction to Cush.

<sup>18</sup> Keener (2013: 1535) agrees but confusingly suggests that Greeks and Romans did not include Meroe as part of Nubia.





Some interpreters suggest that Αἰθίοψ denotes ethnicity and not just nationality. Jeremiah 13:23 is cited: “Can Cushites change their skin or leopards their spots?” (NRSVUE). Thus, it can be inferred that in other Old Testament references Cushites are black. Snowden (1970:335 n.63) also believes that for the reader of Acts, ἄνθρωπος Αἰθίοψ “would mean a black man, perhaps a Negro, from the region above Egypt.” Reinhartz (2020) in her SBL presidential address faulted Bible translators for not making explicit that the Ethiopian eunuch would be a black African. That Nubians – Cushites – were black is undeniable both from textual sources (e.g., Herodotus *Hist.* 2.22; 3.101; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.1) as well as in frescoes and reliefs.<sup>19</sup>

But should an ethnic designation necessarily apply to our person of interest here in Acts? Many nations and regions appear in Acts starting at Pentecost where around fifteen are mentioned, for example, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, etc. (2:9–11). Twice Luke clarifies the identity of those gathered by noting they are Jews who are only living in these countries and regions (2:5, 11). Similarly, among the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem were Jews from Cyrene, Cilicia, and Asia (6:9). Hence, interpreting Αἰθίοψ not as ethnicity but as nationality, such as “inhabitant of Ethiopia” (Friberg et al., 2006:s.v.) or “person from Ethiopia” (Bauer et al. 2000:s.v.) is a viable interpretive option.<sup>20</sup> Since the country of origin for Luke’s character from Africa is now clarified, he will henceforth be designated as the “Nubian man.”

### *Position*

The Nubian man is described five times as a εὐνοῦχος (8:27, 34, 36, 38, 39). However, whether this is his “dominant, defining characteristic” (Parsons 2008:120) is debatable. The meaning is seemingly so self-evident that commentators like Kurz (2013:146) simply state: ‘Eunuchs were castrated men.’ Lightfoot (2014:208) comments that “though it is sometimes used generally to signify ‘an officer of the court,’ yet it most frequently implies a physical defect, and as this chamberlain was in the court of Candace, we may suppose that this is the case here.” Williams (1990:161), conceding that in some contexts like the LXX of Genesis 39:1 eunuch might mean simply “an official,” nevertheless concludes that here it appears “intended in the literal sense.” This begs the question, of course, whether translating it as “official” might also be its literal sense.<sup>21</sup>

Witherington (1998:296), although noting that εὐνοῦχος can mean just an official, likewise believes that it “normally refers to a man who has been castrated and often also dismembered.” But how can “normal” be established with such limited lexical usage in the New Testament (3x also in Matthew 19:12)? Barrett (1994:424) is one of the few Acts commentators to venture that “[t]his word had originally nothing to do with sexual impotence.” An exhaustive survey of Old Testament texts using εὐνοῦχος is beyond the scope of his article. Instead, several citations relevant to the introduction formula will be given. Its first use is to translate the Hebrew word סָרִיס (*sārīs*; cf. Genesis 37:36) to describe Potiphar<sup>22</sup> as a εὐνοῦχος of the Pharaoh.<sup>23</sup> Joseph was sold

<sup>19</sup> For a fresco featuring three Nubian men, see

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA922](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA922); for a relief of a Nubian princess, see <https://www.livescience.com/25944-ancient-carving-african-princess.html>.

<sup>20</sup> A contemporary example from Turkey, where I live, might be cited. The ethnicity of a Turkish person may be Turk, Kurd, Greek, Jew, Armenian, Assyrian, or Arab. Their religion may be Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. Yet no matter their ethnicity or religion, the person is from Turkey.

<sup>21</sup> Parsons (2008:119) also cites Genesis 39:1 and states there is some evidence that it “is simply a royal title.”

<sup>22</sup> Josephus’s account (*Ant.* 2.39) introduces Potiphar in a similar way but omits that he was a εὐνοῦχος.

<sup>23</sup> Wenham (2000:356) translates as “captain of the palace guards,” although acknowledging: “The exact function of this office is uncertain, but he was in charge of the prison for royal officials.”



to Potiphar who importantly is also said to be married (39:7–19).<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, Joseph's dilemma: his master has entrusted everything to him except his wife (γυνή; 39:7). To succumb to her advances would betray his trust. Since Potiphar is presented as a married official, it is possible that the Nubian was also a married man.

Two other persons who serve the Pharaoh soon appear in the narrative in 40:1 – the chief cupbearer and the chief baker – both of whom end up in prison with Joseph. They are similarly introduced as σῆφ/εὐνοῦχος (40:2; cf. 40:7). English versions routinely translate σῆφ/εὐνοῦχος as “official” not only in these texts but also in many others (e.g., Genesis 39:1; 1 Samuel 8:15; 1 Kings 22:9; 2 Kings 8:6; 23:11; 24:12,15; 25:19).

Regarding this point, the comments by contributors to three major reference works are instructive. Schneider (1964, 766) notes that σῆφ/εὐνοῦχος is used “for high military and political officials; it does not have to imply emasculation.” Baltensweiler (1975:560) similarly observes about the use of eunuch in Acts 8:27 that “perhaps it should not be taken literally. It could mean no more than a high court official.” Patterson (1980:635), summarizing the use of σῆφ, makes this trenchant observation: “since thorough study fails to uncover conclusive evidence for the employment of eunuchs as officials in ancient Egypt, the reason why the Egyptian officers in the Joseph narrative were called by this term is probably that in all three cases (Genesis 37:36; Genesis 39:1; Genesis 40:2, 7) these men were special officials of Pharaoh.”

Most occurrences of εὐνοῦχος in the book of Esther rightly receive the English gloss “eunuch.” Their context is an oriental harem in which Esther is placed under the care of a eunuch called Hegai or Shaahgaz (cf. Gai; 2:8, 14). His official duty is clarified by an appositional phrase: ὁ εὐνοῦχος ὁ φύλαξ τῶν γυναικῶν (Esther 2:14, 15; cf. 2:3, 8).<sup>25</sup> That the official duty of the Nubian man is *not* described in a similar way – the usual role of a physical eunuch in the palace – again suggests that our character is not genitally impaired. Elsewhere in Acts, Luke similarly gives the character's position immediately after a name is introduced. Simon is a magician (μαγεύων; 8:9), Cornelius a centurion (ἐκατοντάρχης; 10:1), Lydia a purple-seller (πορφυρόπωλις; 16:14), and Demetrius a silversmith (19:24).<sup>26</sup>

While this section has been long, the detailed discussion was necessary to understand that Luke's use of εὐνοῦχος to indicate an “official” is consistent with its usage in the Jewish Scriptures. In conclusion, we concur with the assessment of Willimon (1988, 71): “Contrary to popular interpretation, he need not be a castrated male who was excluded from the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1). Rather, we are reading a story about an important man, a foreigner, though possibly a Jew, a powerful person who has much power and authority as the queen's minister—except the power to understand the word of God.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nolland (2005:778 n. 46) alternatively suggests: “It is just possible that we are to understand the marriage between Potiphar and his wife in Gn. 39 as a celibate marriage since Potiphar is a eunuch, and that this background is intended to illuminate his wife's attraction to Joseph.” However, the emphasis in Genesis 39:7-12 is not on Potiphar's sexual inadequacy but on his wife's salacious proposition that Joseph sleep with her.

<sup>25</sup> A parallel is found in Arrian (*Anab.* 4.19–20) where King Darius, after his defeat at Issus, interrogates the escaped eunuch who had been the guardian of his wife (τὸν εὐνοῦχον τὸν φύλακα αὐτῷ τῆς γυναικός; 4.20.1), who was now a captive of Alexander.

<sup>26</sup> In the Gospel of Luke some examples include Jairus a synagogue ruler (ἄρχων; 8:41), Zacchaeus a chief tax collector (ἀρχιτελώνης; 19:2), and Joseph a council member (βουλευτής; 23:50).

<sup>27</sup> Philips (2019, 97) acknowledges that “eunuch” could either mean court official or emasculated physical condition, but nevertheless states “the label undoubtedly carried a stigma.” If the word was so widely



### Portfolio

The generic term “official” is now clarified by an appositive δυνάστης, which describes the specific portfolio of the Nubian man. Potiphar’s portfolio is named as ἄρχιμάγειρος / ἀρχιμάγειρος (Genesis 37:36; 39:1). Despite a literal meaning of “chief cook,” English versions uniformly translate this in a military sense. The reason is that his office is mentioned again in 41:10. The prison where Joseph, the chief cupbearer, and the chief baker were incarcerated was in a dungeon beneath his house. Therefore, a contextual rather than lexical meaning provides a more precise idea of his portfolio. So ἀρχιμάγειρος functions as an appositive to εὐνοῦχος to describe more specifically the nature of his official duties. This grammatical relationship is seen in more literal English translations: “Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard” (NKJV, ESV). This same appositional relationship is seen in Genesis 40:2 where the pharaoh is angry with his two officials: the chief cupbearer (ἀρχινοσοχόω) and the chief baker (ἀρχιστοποιῶ). Again, the specific duties of their position are given appositionally after their introduction as *sārīs/eunouchos*. The word δυνάστης is often translated “ruler” or “leader” in its many uses in the LXX.<sup>28</sup>

Luke in 8:27, rather than use a single word in apposition to εὐνοῦχος, must use an appositional phrase, δυνάστης ...ὃς ἦν ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γάζης αὐτῆς, to further describe his duties. The NIV captures this relationship with its reordered translation: “an important official in charge of all the treasury.”<sup>29</sup> The portfolio using modern terminology would be “minister of finance” or “secretary of the treasury.” Interestingly, Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 2.i.13) uses δυνάστης to describe the Nubian official. He never mentions that he is a eunuch and finds his conversion a fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalm 68:31 (67:32 MT) rather than Isaiah 56:3, which many commentators point to as a prophetic fulfillment.<sup>30</sup>

### Dynasty

The Nubian kingdom of Meroe was ruled by a Kandake, the hereditary title carried by its queen mothers. They reigned from Meroe’s two chief cities – Napata and Meroe. Amanitire (or Amanitaraqide) ruled from 20-41 CE, so was probably the Kandake referred to in Acts 8.<sup>31</sup> Just as Potiphar served the Pharaoh (Genesis 39:1), the Nubian treasurer served the Kandake.

### Religion

The religious activity of the Nubian is described as someone who had traveled to Jerusalem for the purpose of worship (προσκυνήσων εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ). While the verb προσκυνέω is seldom used in Acts, identical language is found in 24:11. There Paul told the Roman governor Felix that he had gone up to Jerusalem to worship (προσκυνήσων εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ). The Nubian and Paul are both described as Diaspora pilgrims who traveled to the temple to worship at a feast (cf. 2:5-

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used both in religious and secular texts, why would it carry a stigma? Welch (2019, 98) is ambivalent regarding which connotation should be accorded the Nubian man.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the NET translates δυνάστας as “eunuchs” in 1 Chronicles 28:1. Its only other New Testament uses are Luke 1:52 and 1 Timothy 6:15.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke (1979:101) observes about 8:26, 27: “Note the double meaning of γάζα, ‘Gaza’ and ‘treasure.’”

<sup>30</sup> Bock (2007:342), writes that “this story likely is an indication that the hope of worship expressed in Isa. 56 is beginning to take place.” If this were the case and the Nubian man was a physical eunuch, Luke could easily have had him reading Isaiah 56 rather than chapter 53 when Philip approached.

<sup>31</sup> For a full discussion of the history of this dynasty, see Wilson (forthcoming).





11).<sup>32</sup> While this connection is suggestive, is it enough to construe that the Nubian official was Jewish? His religious status has also been suggested as Gentile, proselyte, or God-fearer.

Tannehill (1990, 110) claims that “Philip also initiates the Gentile mission.” The Nubian became the first Gentile convert (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 2.i.13), although his conversion was a private event. Peter, according to Tannehill, was later called upon to initiate the public conversion of Gentiles. Cadbury (1979, 67) suggests that the Nubian was perhaps offering gifts on behalf of his queen, since such Gentile offerings were not unusual at the temple. He concludes: “It is therefore possible that Luke regarded the eunuch as a Gentile, and ranked him as a notable convert from heathenism.”<sup>33</sup>

Proselytes (προσήλυτος) – converts to Judaism who had undergone circumcision– were present at Pentecost (2:11). Nicholas was a proselyte from Antioch who served as a deacon in the Jerusalem church (6:5; cf. 13:43). Barrett (1994:425) claims that as a eunuch, the Nubian “could not have become a proselyte.” Lightfoot (2014, 208), however, argues he could be a proselyte, despite his inability to be circumcised. Despite the exclusion of eunuchs under Mosaic law, he writes that “from Isaiah 56:3 and from the position of Ebedmelech in the court of Zedekiah (Jeremiah 39:15-17), it would seem that this prohibition had been relaxed. Still the admission of such a person was only a sufferance. The prohibition still stood on the statute-book.”

Perhaps the Nubian was a Gentile God-fearer (Bock, 2007: 342) such as the Greeks (Ἕλληνες) who also had come to Jerusalem to worship (προσκυνήσωσιν) at the feast (John 12:20; Bruce, 1990, 226). In Acts 10:2, 22, Cornelius and his household are introduced as God-fearers (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν). Keener (2013, 1541) identifies the Nubian as a God-fearer like Cornelius but more biblically literate and closer to Judaism. Paul addressed God-fearers in Pisidian Antioch (13:16, 26), Thessalonica (17:4), and Athens (17:17). Lydia in Philippi (16:14) and Titius Justus in Corinth (18:7) are also called God-worshippers (σεβομένη τὸν θεόν). Luke, however, did not identify the Nubian as a God-fearer.

If the Nubian is considered a Gentile convert, according to Lightfoot (2014, 208), “then we are at a loss to understand the prominence given to the narrative of Cornelius’ conversion—and the vision of St. Peter is emptied of its meaning. Evidently the baptism of Cornelius was the *first fruits of its kind*.” Keener (2013, 1544), contrarily, states: “Luke certainly does not emphasize Cornelius as the first Gentile convert.”<sup>34</sup> However, from a narrational perspective, Luke does emphasize the conversion of Cornelius by telling and retelling it in two extended pericopae (10:1-48; 11:1-18) and in an abbreviated third version (15:7-11).<sup>35</sup> Hence the view of Keener and others that the Nubian was a proleptic Gentile convert does not accord with Luke’s narrational purposes. If the

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<sup>32</sup> Philo describes his own pilgrimage in *Prov.* 2.48, while his most extensive treatment of temple pilgrimage is found in *Spec. Laws* 1.67-70. Josephus (*Ant.* 4.203–4) also discusses the pilgrimage motivation.

<sup>33</sup> Yamauchi (2004) similarly suggests “that one of the unstated reasons for this official of this queen to visit Jerusalem was that about this time, there may have been the installation of Herod Agrippa the First as the independent king of Judea.” However, this installation took place in Rome in 37 CE, and Agrippa did not return to Judea until a year later (cf. Josephus *Ant.* 18.vi.10-11).

<sup>34</sup> Keener (2013, 1541) further notes the theological importance of his conversion “is that the Spirit acts ahead of the apostles.” This is a false dichotomy, however, pitting one form of divine guidance ahead of another. Before the Spirit directed Philip to the Nubian (8:29), an angel directed him to Gaza (8:26), just as an angel later directed Cornelius to send messengers to Joppa (10:3–7)

<sup>35</sup> Since Keener (2013, 1541) had already acknowledged this threefold repetition, his statement deemphasizing this repetition three pages later is odd.



Nubian were, in fact, the first Gentile convert, the point is so subtle as to have been missed by readers for two thousand years.

Is it possible that the Nubian official was actually born Jewish? Throughout the Ptolemaic period a Jewish population lived in Apollonopolis Magna and Ombos as well as in other Egyptian settlements on the Nile such as Diopolis Magna, Thebes, and Abydos. These Jewish communities continued into the early imperial period.<sup>36</sup> But were there Jews living farther south into Nubia? Countering the suggestion that Amantitere was herself Jewish, Mark (2018) states that this is “only based on the passage in the Bible in which the eunuch, encountered by the apostle Philip, is reading the Book of Isaiah. There is no evidence in Meroe itself which supports the existence of a Jewish community but such communities did exist throughout Kush in small numbers.” If Kandake’s finance minister was Jewish, how did he get to Nubia? The invasion of southern Egypt by the Kandake, Amanirenas, in 23 BCE extended as far north as Thebes. There they “enslaved the inhabitants, and also pulled down the statues of Caesar” (Strabo *Geogr.* 17.1.54). Jews living in Egypt might have been among the captives taken south to Meroe. Perhaps our subject was a circumcised boy taken into captivity to Meroe. If such a scenario occurred, the minister would be approximately sixty years old when he met Philip.

Another possibility is that he was raised in an Egyptian Jewish community and later recruited by the Kandake to serve in her kingdom because of his linguistic and management skills. Burstein (2008, 53) observes that “the Kings of Kush needed officials like the appropriately named Great Ambassadors to Rome who were fluent in both Greek and Egyptian to deal both with Roman officials and the priests of the temple of Isis at Philae.” Whatever brought him to Meroe, he could have maintained his Jewish identity by occasionally attending synagogues during official trips into Egypt. This probably included a visit to the great colonnaded synagogue in Alexandria (Philo, *Legat.* 134-137). This synagogue was a tourist site for Jews outside of Egypt and, according to Kerkeslager (1998:121), is “known to have consistently drawn visitors from outside its immediate neighborhood.”

There is another point to consider in relation to the Nubian’s religious status. If he is viewed as a physical eunuch, what was his worship experience in Jerusalem. How might this have occurred in light of the prohibition against the cultic participation of eunuchs (Deuteronomy 23:1)? If his physical impairment prohibited him from worshiping at the temple, at least three possible motivations are possible:

1. He was ignorant of the Jewish law, thus was surprised to find a prohibition against eunuchs entering the temple area. Nevertheless, he was content to remain outside in the Court of Gentiles.
2. He knew eunuchs were barred from worshiping at the temple but came anyway just to be near the sacred temple complex.
3. He disregarded the prohibition about eunuchs entering the temple courts since his physical status could not be detected (cf. Paul and Trophimus in 21:28).

Considering the logistics of long-distance travel in antiquity, why would a eunuch make a roundtrip journey by river and land of almost 6000 kilometres to Jerusalem to worship, knowing his entry into the temple would be denied? Such a pilgrimage was a major investment of time and money. As the Kandake’s minister of finance, the Nubian man had the opportunity to conduct official travel without such usual constraints. To conclude that he was a Jewish man from the Diaspora is a

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<sup>36</sup> See the maps of the Ptolemaic kingdom and the Roman province of Egypt in Wittke et al. (2010, 121, 179). For the map “The Jewish Diaspora in the Ptolemaic period,” see Davies & Finkelstein (1989, 130 fig. 3).



reasonable deduction. Aymer (2023:545) concurs: “This reading fits the larger narrative of the beginning of Acts, a narrative of the ingathering of God’s dispersed people.”<sup>37</sup> While we conclude that the Nubian was a circumcised Jew, Aymer nevertheless believes he was a castrated one. By depicting the Nubian as worshiping in Jerusalem, Luke is signaling that this man was a pious Jew making a pilgrimage, just as Paul and other Jewish pilgrims did in the book of Acts.<sup>38</sup>

### *Name*

A final feature found in the introduction formula is the character’s name.<sup>39</sup> Although Potiphar (Πετεφρης) is named in Genesis, the Nubian official is unnamed in Acts. It is sometimes observed that the Nubian is the only important character in Acts not identified by name. However, the unnamed lame man healed in Jerusalem (3:1–11) gets comparable coverage. How do we account for the Nubian’s incognito status when Simon is named earlier in chapter 8? Several answers are possible. The Nubian official did not give Philip his name, which seems unlikely since other specific personal information is provided. Perhaps he asked Philip not to use his name in the retelling because of political or personal sensitivities if he planned to return to Jerusalem in the future. Or did Luke, sourcing the account from Philip himself while in Caesarea, decide not to include the name? Keener (2013:1543) suggests: “Perhaps Philip, or Luke, could not pronounce the official’s name well enough to record it accurately, if Philip knew or remembered it.” If the official were a Jew from Egypt, he undoubtedly had a Jewish or Greek name. However, he might also have assumed a Nubian name while serving the Kandake. Despite our curiosity regarding this question, the name of the Nubian man is not given.

### **Ends of the Earth**

Finally, it is seldom noted that the Nubian official is the only major character in Acts who lived outside the limes of the Roman Empire. Before his ascension Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the gospel “to the end of the earth” (ἕως ἔσχατου τῆς γῆς; 1:8). Some commentators find an initial fulfilment of this text in the Nubian’s conversion. The basis for such a claim is found in Strabo (*Geogr.* 2.5.7) who identified Meroe as “the limit and the beginning of our inhabited world on the south” (πέρας καὶ ἀρχὴν...οἰκουμένης πρὸς μεσημβρίαν). Josephus (*B.J.* 4.203) interestingly describes pilgrimages to Jerusalem as “from the ends of the earth (ἐκ τῶν περάτων τῆς γῆς), land which the Hebrews shall conquer.” Although Jesus’ commission was to preach to lands beyond, Philip never traveled beyond Judea and Samaria.<sup>40</sup> Apart from Acts 8, there is no textual evidence regarding Christianity in Nubia until the fifth century. Then both John of Ephesus and John of Biclar mention the presence of Christianity there. Similarly, the first archaeological evidence for Christianity’s arrival in Nubia dates to the fifth century (Edwards 2001, 89-92). It is questionable whether the Nubian’s conversion qualifies as the fulfillment of the gospel’s expansion to the southern “ends of the earth.” More likely it is a fulfilment of Psalm 68:31 (67:32 LXX): “Ethiopia will extend its hand to God.”

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<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus (*Haer* 4.23.2) describes his spiritual status as one “who had been already instructed by the prophets: he was not ignorant of God the Father, nor of the rules as to the [proper] manner of life, but was merely ignorant of the advent of the Son of God.” Philip, like the apostles, was “collecting the sheep which had perished of the house of Israel”. Irenaeus apparently also thought that the Nubian was Jewish.

<sup>38</sup> This is contrary to the conclusion of Parsons (2008:123) that the Nubian would be viewed by Luke’s auditors “as sexually ambiguous, socially ostracized, and morally evil (greedy and cowardly).”

<sup>39</sup> In 8:9 (cf. 19:24) as well as in the Gospel (Luke 8:41; 10:38; 19:2; 23:50; cf. 1:5; 8:31; 16:20) the introduction of a male or female character is preceded by ὄνομα as well.

<sup>40</sup> It is sometimes claimed that this Philip traveled to Hierapolis in Asia Minor and died there. However, for the conclusion that it was the apostle Philip who was martyred in Hierapolis, see Wilson (2022a, 82-83).



## Conclusion

The account of Philip and the Nubian official in Acts chapter 8 occupies an important place in Luke's narrative. After Philip's successful evangelistic efforts among the Samaritans, he was then directed to travel towards Gaza for a divinely orchestrated meeting. After the spiritually successful encounter, Philip continued to preach the good news up the Mediterranean coast from Azotus to his home in Caesarea (8:40). The African official, after his baptism, continued on his way to Gaza and then home to Nubia. His spiritual state is described as "rejoicing" (χαίρων; 8:39). This is the same emotion used to describe other new believers in Acts (13:48; cf. Luke 19:6). The article has also discussed several significant interpretative issues related to the text. Fresh readings and translations have been proposed throughout to help modern readers better understand the pericope. For Luke's readers the Nubian official serving in the kingdom of Kandake would surely recall the imperial service of other Jewish men such as Daniel, Haniah, Mishael, and Azariah for the Babylonians (Daniel 1:3–19)<sup>41</sup> and Mordecai for the Persians (Esther 8:1–2; 9:4; 10:2–3). The Nubian's conversion is strategically placed after the evangelization of the Samaritans and before Saul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus in chapter 10. He and Saul are the two final important Jewish characters to become followers of Jesus before the narrative turns to the Gentiles with the conversion of Cornelius in chapter 11.

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<sup>41</sup> Aymer (2023:542-543) notes the controversy whether Daniel and these three Jewish men were in fact physical eunuchs (cf. Josephus, A.J. 10.10.1). Miller (1994:59), however, suggests that it is unnecessary to assume that they were literal eunuchs: "Likely it was only those in charge of the king's harems who were made eunuchs."



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