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An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53

8: 26-40

34 AD

An Ethiopian asks about Isaiah 53 DIG: Why does the eunuch visit Jerusalem? The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53. In what does Yeshua fit the picture of the One described there? If you were Philip using Isaiah 53, what would you emphasize about the gospel? How did God pave the way for his message? What is the relationship between divine preparation and human initiative in this account? What is the significance of this story for the Messianic Community being persecuted in Yerushalayim? So far, what has been the effect of Stephen's death upon Philip? Upon the Messianic Community as a whole? What is the Isaiah Avenue?

REFLECT: For the way God sets up opportunities to witness (2:5-14, 3:6-16, 8:26-40), how does that free you from fears in evangelism? What do these stories show about the context in which evangelism is to happen? Deep down, do you think successful CEO's really need the gospel as much as poor beggars (3:2)? Why or why not? Would you know the Bible well enough to speak to the eunuch's questions? How can you grow in your faith so you will be prepared for surprise opportunities?

Philip figures in a second story, which is again concerned with the missionary expansion of the Church. The story is included here both because it is about **Philip** and because it forms part of the gradual, but inexorable progress in **Acts** from the Jewish beginnings of the Messianic community in **Jerusalem** to the Gentile growth of the Church **to the end of the earth (1:8)**. Not only that, but this story also includes those who were excluded from the full rights of Judaism. The way in which the story is told bears some resemblance to another account in which a **Stranger** joined two travelers and opened up the Scriptures to them, took part in a sacramental act, and then suddenly disappeared from view (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click [Mh](#) - On the Road to Emmaus**).¹⁷⁷

After **Peter** and **John** had **returned to Jerusalem (8:25)**, **Philip** received a new commission. The story is set in motion by an **angelic** command to **Philip** which took **him** away from the scene of successful evangelism (see **[Ba](#) - Simon the Sorcerer**), and led **him**

to a place that didn't seem that promising. **Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip**, saying: **Get up, and go south at noon** (Greek: *mesembrian* because *the sun lies directly south at noon*) **on the road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza**. There were two roads from **Jerusalem** to Gaza, and **the Spirit** commanded **Philip** to take the one that was seldom used. **So he got up and went**. He did not struggle with the somewhat crazy notion to **go down** a hot, **desert road at noon**. Immediately obeying, however, **he saw an Ethiopian eunuch - an official who was responsible for all the treasure of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians (8:26-27a)**. **Ethiopia**, south of Egypt, is the biblical **Cush (Second Samuel 18:21-32; Jeremiah 46:9)**, its populace being identified with the sons of Ham, through his first son **Cush**. According to the Bible, **King Solomon** developed a widespread commercial network through Egypt and Cilicia to **Sheva** (southern Arabia) by way of the newly-constructed port of **Ezion -Geber on the Red Sea (First Kings 9:26-28, 10:1-13)**. **Josephus identified the Queen of Sheva as the Queen of Ethiopia** (see the commentary on **the Life of Solomon Bu - Solomon and the Queen of Sheva**).¹⁷⁸ This remote, but advanced culture was the object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and Romans who considered it **the end of the earth**. In other words, **the eunuch** had traveled no small distance and was an official of no small kingdom.¹⁷⁹

The Ethiopian eunuch was a court official responsible for all the treasure of Candace: The word court **official** in Greek is *dunastes* and this is where we get the word dynasty. In **Luke 1:52** it is used of **rulers**. In **First Timothy 6:15** the same word is used of **God**. The fact that this word is used of **him** means that **he** had a very high and influential position in the government. In modern terms, **he** was the Minister of Finance in **Ethiopia**, one of the highest positions in their government. So **his** influence in **Ethiopia** would have been great.

Candace, queen of the Ethiopians: This was not a proper name, but like Cesar, Pharaoh and Abimelech, an official title. Because the **Ethiopian** Kingdom was a matriarchy, the king of **Ethiopia** was considered a child of the sun and therefore too sacred to perform any of the human functions of royalty. Therefore, **the queen** mother performed all of the royal duties and **she** always had the title of **Candace**, and the real power behind the throne.

He had traveled to Jerusalem to worship (Greek: *proskuneo*, meaning to kiss the face, or to worship) **and was now returning (8:27b)**. **He** was concerned enough about **his** spiritual life that **he** traveled at least sixty days to **Jerusalem** to worship **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**, but **his** heart was still not satisfied. This **Ethiopian** represents many people today who are religious, read the Scriptures, and seek the truth, yet do not have saving faith in **Yeshua Messiah**. They are sincere, but they are sincerely lost.

They need someone to show them the way.¹⁸⁰

He was sitting in his ox-drawn wagon, he was reading the prophet Isaiah out loud (8:28). This was and is a common practice in the Near East, even when they do it for their own instruction, without any intention of being overheard by others. They swing the head, and even the entire upper body, from side to side as they read, and utter words with a tone that comes nearer to singing than to our unimpassioned mode of reading.¹⁸¹ Apart from the **Ruach's** orchestration of events, this meeting would have never taken place at all. Once again this emphasizes the sovereign work of **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** in salvation.

He was a eunuch: How **he** came into contact with Judaism is not told. The term **eunuch** normally indicates *a person who has been castrated*; such people were forbidden entry to the Temple according to the Torah of Moses (**Deuteronomy 23:1**). That meant that **he** could never be a full proselyte. **There were three levels of Gentile relationship to Judaism.**

The first level were God-fearers: These were Gentiles who became convinced that **ADONAI** was the only true **God**, they abandoned their paganism and idolatry, but they did not choose to become a proselyte in any form, and hence there was no adoption of Jewish customs or practices (see **Be - The Centurion's Vision**). **The second level were Proselytes at the Gate:** The Gate was **the middle wall of separation (Ephesians 2:14)** in the Temple compound that Gentiles were not allowed to go beyond under penalty of death (see below). **They were to follow the "seven laws of the sons of Noah."** **These were (1) do establish laws, (2) do not curse God, (3) do not practice idolatry, (4) do not engage in illicit sexuality, (5) do not participate in bloodshed, (6) do not rob, and (7) do not eat the flesh of a living animal (Sanhedrin 56a; Toseta Zarah 8:4; and Genesis Rabbah 34:8).**

This was a Gentile who adopted many Jewish practices like celebrating Shabbat and the feasts of Isra'el, but did not become a full proselyte. Most of these were men because this level didn't require circumcision. **And the third level were Proselytes of the Covenant:** They entered the Covenant of Sinai as a full **Jew**, so to speak. Most of these were women because this level required circumcision.¹⁸²

So because **the Ethiopian eunuch** had been castrated, **he** did the best **he** could and became a **Proselyte of the Gate**. And that meant that **he** had adopted many of the practices of Judaism, in fact, **he** did everything a proselyte would have done except for circumcision. Despite **his** power and prestige, however, **the Ethiopian** had a vast emptiness in **his** soul. **He** had **traveled to Yerushalayim to worship** on the occasion of

one of the three travel festivals of either Sukkot (Booths), Pesach (Passover), or Shavu'ot (Weeks), and was on **his** journey home, passing the time by reading from his Greek translation of the TaNaKh.¹⁸³ This was not a state visit, **he** came to worship **ADONAI**. **He** was hungry for **God's Word**. It was this **man** that **Philip** was to meet on a lonely **desert road**. **The eunuch** is a classic example of the one who lived up to the light **he** had. Then **God** gave **him** the full revelation of **Yeshua Messiah** through **Philip's** ministry.

In all the TaNaKh, **Isaiah** holds the greatest hope for **the eunuch** in **his** picture of **God's** ideal future, a future that promises a monument in **God's** house, a name **better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that will not be cut off (Isaiah 56:3-8)**. Little did **the eunuch** know that **he** was about to experience the fulfillment of those promises. And little did **Philip** know **his** own role in their fulfillment. **Philip** was probably still wondering why **God** had sent **him** to this lonely place, and perhaps **he** was a bit bemused by the strange spectacle of **the ox-drawn wagon** in front of **him** (plodding along at not much more than a walking pace), with its exotic passenger and **his** entourage following behind. Then suddenly, for the second time in the story, **Philip** received a divine command. Now, **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** said to **Philip**, "Go, and catch up with this wagon" (8:29).¹⁸⁴ **The rabbis taught that when God speaks in heaven, "the daughter of His voice" the bat-kol, or an echo, is heard on earth. After the last of the prophets, it was considered that God provided the bat-kol to continue to give guidance to the people (Tractate Yoma 9b).**

Although **the eunuch's** entourage must have been impressive, **Philip** was not intimidated. Instantly complying with **the voice of the bat-kol**, **Philip ran up** to the slow-moving **wagon** and began to trot alongside. There, **he** heard **the Ethiopian reading the prophet Isaiah**. Because **he** was a **man** of position, **he** would have had a driver handling **the ox-drawn wagon**. Therefore, **he** would have had the time to read. Not only that, but by the providence of **God**, this **man** was reading from one of the key Messianic prophecies pointing to **Yeshua (Isaiah 52:11 to 53:12)**. At that moment, **Philip** probably knew that **ADONAI** had given **him** an open door, a prepared heart.

When **Philip** heard **the eunuch** reading out loud it provided an opening and **he** said: **Do you understand what you are reading (8:30)?** **Philip** wasn't asking if **the eunuch** understood the words **he** was **reading**. What **he** really wanted to know was, "Do you know who the passage is speaking about?" It was good for **the Ethiopian** to be reading **Isaiah**, but unless **understanding** was brought to **him**, there would be no benefit from **his reading**. The book of **Acts** has already referred to **Yeshua** four times as **the Servant of God (3:13 and 26, 4:27 and 30)**. Modern Jewish interpretation understands this **servant** to

be **the people of Isra'el** (see the commentary on [Isaiah 42](#) - **The Death of the Suffering Servant**), not **the Messiah**.

*Philip's experience ought to encourage us in our own personal witness for **the Lord**. To begin with, **ADONAI** directed **Philip** to the right person at the right time. You and I are not likely to have **an angel** instruct us, but we can know the guidance of **the Holy Spirit** in our witnessing if we are walking in **the Spirit** and praying for **God's** direction.*¹⁸⁵

God had already prepared **the man's** heart to receive **Philip's** message. Then **the Ethiopian** responded, "**How can I,**" he said, "**unless someone guides me?**" **He** realized that **he** needed someone to interpret the passage. **The evangelist's** heart must have been rejoicing in the confidence that **YHVH** had so prepared this **eunuch**. **He** had a seeking, humble and teachable spirit. But the passage was **Isaiah 53:7b-8**, and it puzzled **the eunuch**. So, **he invited Philip to come up and sit with him (8:31)**.



As the Minister of Finance in **Ethiopia**, **he** was more than likely able to speak Greek, the international language of the day. **Now the passage of Scripture that he was reading from the Septuagint (LXX) was this:**

"He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
and as a lamb before its shearers is silent,
so He opens not His Mouth.
In His humiliation justice was denied Him.
Who shall recount His generation?

That is, since **Yeshua** died a physical death, **He** will have no physical descendants. This is a lament. But the lament proves to be unwarranted in **Yeshua's** case, because **He** is raised from the dead, and in **Him** are many **spiritual children**, as **Isaiah** would say a few verses

later: **He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the will of Adonai will succeed by His hand (Isaiah 53:10b LXX).** God does the unexpected, providing descendants for **the One** who died with neither wife nor children. **For His life was taken away from the earth” (8:32-33).**

The eunuch replied to Philip, “Please tell me, who is the prophet talking about - himself or someone else.” His confusion is understandable, since contemporary Jewish thought was divided on the interpretation. **Isaiah** did not meet the requirements of the passage, even though **he** was **a servant of God.** **Then Philip,** who was not slow to give an answer, **opened his mouth.** The phrase “to open one’s mouth,” is used when something of great significance is to follow. Here, then, is the climax of the conversation. **Philip** developed some common ground with **the Ethiopian** by talking about **Isaiah**, but made **his** way to proclaiming **the Good News about Yeshua (8:34-35).** Clearly, **his** first step was to show that **Messiah** was **the One** who fulfilled **Isaiah’s** prophecy. A description of the general character of **Yeshua**, and the way **He** suffered unjustly and was condemned to death, would prove the point.

The fact that **Isaiah 53:7-8** was not the whole story, but just the starting place. **Now as they were going down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch** said: **Look, water! What’s to prevent me from being immersed (8:36)?** Obviously, **Philip** must have spoken to **him** of **Peter’s** speech regarding the appropriate response to **the Good News, “Repent. Let each of you be immersed in the name of Messiah Yeshua because of the removal of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Ruach ha-Kodesh (2:38).** In the same way, it can be assumed that **the eunuch** must have given **Philip** his profession of faith in **Yeshua Messiah.**¹⁸⁶ So **the eunuch ordered the wagon to stop** so **he** could make a public confession. **Philip** agreed and **they both got down into the water and Philip immersed him (8:38).** **Immersion** is the public confession of an inward conviction. So **the eunuch** not only confessed **his** faith personally to **Philip** but openly in front of **his** entire caravan.

*But the lack of any clear mention of **the eunuch’s** profession of faith led some early scribe to “improve” on the story by adding this verse. “Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you man,’ **the eunuch** answered, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’ (8:37).” The oldest and most reliable manuscripts, however, do not include this verse so neither do I.*

When they came up out of the midst of the water, the Ruach Adonai snatched (Greek: *harpazo*, meaning *caught up, to be taken away suddenly and miraculously*) **Philip**

away. This is the same word that Paul used when describing the rapture of the Church: **After that, we who are still alive and are left will be snatched up** (Greek: the root word is *harpazo*, meaning *caught up*) **together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (First Thessalonians 4:17), and the eunuch saw him no more.** By performing this startling miracle **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** confirmed to the entire caravan that **Philip** was indeed **His** spokesman. As **for the eunuch, he went on his way, rejoicing in the joy of the Lord (8:39).** **The joy of the Ethiopian,** even after **Philip's** abrupt departure, showed that **his** faith was firmly rooted in **God**, not in **Philip**. **Luke** does not give us the subsequent history of **the Ethiopian eunuch**, but according to Church Father Irenaeus, **he** became a missionary to **the Ethiopians** and perhaps established the first church on the continent of Africa.¹⁸⁷

But Philip found himself at Azotus (the new Greek name for Ashdod), some twenty miles north of **Gaza**. **Philip** continued doing the work of **an evangelist as he passed through, he kept proclaiming the Good News to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (8:40).** There, **he** married and settled down **(21:8-9).** As a result, **Caesarea** became the new center of Hellenistic Judean believers. It may have been due to **Philip's** preaching in this area that churches were established in **Lydda** and **Joppa** (see **Bd - Signs and Miracles Follow Peter**). **Caesarea** continued to be a haven for Hellenistic Jewish believers until 66 AD when, as a result of the Jewish revolt, the leaders of the Messianic congregation in **Caesarea** immigrated out of the country to the province of Asia, or present-day Turkey.¹⁸⁸

In October 1857, J. Hudson Taylor began to minister in Ningpo, China, and he led a Mr. Nyi to Christ. The man was overjoyed and wanted to share his faith with others. "How long have you had **the Good News** in England?" Mr. Nyi asked Hudson Taylor one day. Taylor acknowledged that England had known **the gospel** for centuries. "My father died seeking the truth," said Mr. Nyi. "Why didn't you come sooner?" Taylor had no answer for this penetrating question. How long have you known **the gospel**? How far have you shared **it** personally?¹⁸⁹

The God of Isra'el desires to provide people with **His** rest and peace through an eternal relationship with **Himself**. The following five principles, taken from the prophet **Isaiah**, help us to recognize how we can have that relationship. Just as believers have often used a series of verses from **Romans** called "the Romans Road," messianic believers, witnessing to Jews, can use a different series of verses from **Isaiah** called "the **Isaiah** Avenue."

Sinners Before God

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteousness is like

a filthy garment, and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities carry us away, like the wind (Isaiah 64:6). We may judge ourselves by relative standards, thinking, “I’m as good as the next person,” or, “I’m no worse than the next guy.” Yet, **God** judges each of us by **His** absolute standards of **Himself** and **His** Torah: **You shall be holy, for I, ADONAI your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:2).** By **His** standards, we are all moral failures.

Granted, you may be a nice person, and you may remember to call your mom on Mother’s Day; it’s just that you and “the next person” still fall short of **God’s** high **holy** standards. By the way, every Messianic rabbi or pastor has the same problem. **Psalms 14:3** declares: **There is none that does good, no not one.** We are all born with the fatal disease of **sin** passed down through Adam. So, no one can point fingers or throw stones at anyone else; we all have the same great problem of original **sin**.

Separation From God

Surely the arm of ADONAI is not too short to save, nor His ear to dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God. Your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear (Isaiah 59:1-2). The result of our **sin** nature is a broken relationship with **God**. Now you may pray and even fast, but the Bible is clear: **He will not hear.** It’s as if I stole money from you, and then had the nerve to come to you and ask for a gift! Your response should be, “first let’s deal with the past offense, then I can consider your present or future needs.” **God** wants to bless you, but your **sin** nature separates you from **Him**, and must be dealt with first before **He** can bless you.

Since this separation continues to our death, it becomes a judgment of everlasting separation from **God**. This breaks **God’s** heart. **He** truly loves you and desires you to have everlasting life with **Him**. That’s why the story doesn’t end here, but continues on with **the Good News** for your life.

Salvation In God

We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us turned to our own way. So ADONAI has laid on Him [Messiah] the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). **God** has provided the way of salvation and forgiveness, since we can do nothing, no good deed, to save ourselves. The best fifteen minutes of our lives cannot save us; the greatest accomplishment of our lives cannot save us either. Because of **His** great love, **God** has promised to send **Messiah** to die as the atonement or payment for our **sins**. In the New Covenant, **Messiah Yeshua** states as well: **I give My life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).** This is the

salvation and right relationship that **God** offers freely.

The Savior Is God

For to us a child is born, a son will be given to us, and the government will be upon His shoulder. His Name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and shalom there will be no end - on the throne of David and over His Kingdom - to establish it and uphold it through justice and righteousness from now until forevermore. The zeal of ADONAI-Tzva'ot will accomplish this (Isaiah 9:5-6). Only **God Himself** could provide the perfect sacrifice for **sins**, as **He** alone is perfect. What amazing love and humility that **the Mighty God of Isra'el** would be born, live as **a man**, and die as the perfect payment for our **sins**. **Messiah Yeshua is Adonai, the Lord.**

Eternal Security With God

You keep in perfect peace one whose mind is steadfast on You, because he trusts in You (Isaiah 26:3). Perfect peace (shalom shalom) is found only in God and is accessible only through faith/trust/belief in **Messiah**. Simple acknowledgement of our **sins** and faith in **Messiah Yeshua** as our substitute, our sacrifice, our saving atonement, is the necessary action to a right relationship with **God**. The Bible says: **Abraham believed God, and He credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).** Like **Abraham**, you can have a right relationship with **God** by faith in what **He** alone has provided. Here's a simple prayer that help you:

***Lord**, please forgive me for all my **sins** through **Messiah's** sacrifice on the cross for me. Help me to follow **Yeshua** and honor **You**. Thank **You** for loving me. Amen.¹⁹⁰*

If you have prayed this prayer, see my commentary on **The Life of Christ [Bw](#) - What God Does for Us at the Moment of Faith.**