

## A Parallel Case of Two Conversion Stories:

### A Narrative Criticism of Acts 8:5-40

*Abstract:* In this narrative analysis of the two conversion stories in Acts 8:5-40, I argue that the Ethiopian eunuch is portrayed as being liberated from his spiritual marginal status, whereas Simon the Great still struggles to liberate himself from his magical worldview and practices. There is evidence for this in the characterization of these two characters. Details about Simon the Great become increasingly ambiguous: He converts to the faith, but when he sees the apostles impart the Spirit through the laying on of hands, he offers to pay for the authority to impart the Spirit, which leads to a harsh rebuke from Peter. The story ends abruptly, and Simon is never mentioned again. Details about the Ethiopian eunuch, on the other hand, are increasingly positive: He travels home from Jerusalem, reads the Scripture, encounters Philip, asks for an explanation about the suffering servant, and requests baptism. He continues his journey home, rejoicing.

*Key Words:* Conversion ▪ Characterization ▪ Philip ▪ Simon the Great ▪ Magic ▪ Ethiopian ▪ Eunuch

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The death of Stephen and the subsequent persecution against the church at Jerusalem resulted in the scattering of the disciples and the beginning of new mission fields outside of Jerusalem's boundaries. Acts 8:1-3 details Paul's fierce harassment and execution of the followers of Jesus: consenting to Stephen's death, entering house after house and dragging off men and women, and committing them to prison.<sup>1</sup> These adverse circumstances, however, did not impede the disciples' fervent drive to preach the good news about the resurrection of Jesus Christ (8:4-5, 12) and the kingdom of God (8:12) wherever they went. Philip, one of the seven deacons chosen to oversee the distribution of relief to the widows and other poor (6:5), and not an apostle, was among those driven from Jerusalem and was the pioneer in these new missionary endeavors. In Acts 8:5-40, Luke narrates Phillip's missionary work in bringing the gospel from the center of Judaism to those on the periphery of Judaism (i.e., Samaritans and an Ethiopian) and inviting non-Israelite citizens into the kingdom of God. Rather than eradicating the Jesus-movement, the persecution had the opposite effect of what it was intended to achieve: It led to a widened preaching of the

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<sup>1</sup> This description is consistent with Paul's later testimony in Galatians 1:13 in which he describes his former life as a fervent Jew—"persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." See also Acts 22:4-5; 26:10-11; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:22-23; Phil 3:5-6; 1 Tim 1:13. The imperfect tense of the verb ἐλυμαίνετο highlights Paul's (Saul's) ongoing persecution of the church.

word (5:42) and the fulfilment of Jesus' post resurrection commission (Acts 1:8; cf. Matt 28:18-20).<sup>2</sup>

In the narrative analysis of Acts 8:5-40 that follows, I will argue that the narrator is paralleling the two stories of conversion that of Simon the Great (Acts 8:9-24) and that of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). The characterization of the two figures and the movement of the plot suggest that the Ethiopian eunuch is portrayed as being liberated from his spiritual marginal status within Judaism, whereas Simon is being characterized as one struggling to free himself from his magical worldview and practices. Details about Simon grow increasingly ambiguous, while those for the Ethiopian eunuch are increasingly positive. To demonstrate the thesis, I will independently analyze the conversion stories of Simon and the Ethiopian eunuch, with particular attention to characterization and the development of the plot. I then will compare and contrast the two characters with particular attention to their salient differences. I will begin with the establishment of the boundaries and the organizational structure of the studied narrative, Acts 8:5-40.

### **Boundaries of the Narrative**

At first glance, Acts 8:5-40 can be seen as two independent units—Philip's evangelization in Samaria (8:5-25) and Philip's evangelization somewhere in Judea (8:26-40). The two stories are extraordinarily different in many aspects, e.g., the first takes place in Samaria, whereas the second takes place somewhere to the southwest of Jerusalem. The first deals with the conversion of Samaria, whereas the second recounts the conversion of an individual. The first portrays Philip performing many signs and wonders, whereas in the second, Philip is passive and does not perform any miracles.

Acts 8:5-40 is a thought unit held together by its chief character, Philip, who is portrayed as one who introduces the faith to people outside of Jerusalem, the focus on the Spirit as divine providence in the mission, and the idea of evangelizing. Furthermore, verse 4 serves as a transition from the "scattering" of Jesus' followers because of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem to Philip's mission in Judea and Samaria. The phrase *men oun*, "now" or "so then," is Luke's characteristic way of indicating a change of scene in the narrative (cf. 1:6, 18; 5:41; 8:25; 9:31; 11:19; 12:55).<sup>3</sup>

Taken as a whole, the unit illustrates the fulfilment of Jesus' programmatic prophecy in Acts 1:8. The result of evangelization is that all sorts of people responded to the good news,

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 320.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 282.

which shows both stories contain themes that mirror each other. The joy experienced by the people in the city in 8:8 is parallel to the Ethiopian's joy as he goes on his way in 8:39. In 8:25, Peter and John's preaching mission on their return to Jerusalem resembles Philip's continuation of his preaching mission in Caesarea (8:40).<sup>4</sup> These two conversion stories are part of the much larger body of conversion accounts in Acts (8:4-11:18).

### **Organizational Structure of the Narrative**

The two stories in Acts 8:5-40 are linked together by the chief character, Philip. The first story has two scenes, the first of which, 8:5-13, has Philip as the central Christian character, whereas in scene two, 8:14-26, Peter and John take the center stage. In both scenes, Simon plays a key role. The second story has three scenes: depiction of events leading to the dialogue between Philip and the eunuch (8:26-30b), the dialogue between Philip and the eunuch (8:30c-35), and the results of the dialogue (8:36-40). Implicit in this condensed narrative is the eunuch's positive response to Philip's proclamation.

Both characters, Simon and the Ethiopian eunuch, represent the people who live on the fringes of Judaism. Simon, the one who practiced magic, converts for reasons unclear to the reader. Though he embraces the gospel and is baptized like the rest of the Samaritans, he still struggles to be truly free from his former practices and beliefs. He becomes obsessed with spiritual gifts at work in Philip and the apostles. The climax of the story lies in Simon's request to buy from the apostle the power to impart the Spirit. In contrast, the Ethiopian eunuch is portrayed as someone who finds fulfillment in his spiritual quest. The story reaches its climax when the Ethiopian eunuch asks for assistance with the interpretation of scripture which leads to his request to be baptized. Through baptism, he no longer is an outcast in the kingdom of God as a eunuch. After his baptism, he returns home rejoicing.

The *quinary scheme* of the narrative will help the reader see the movement of the narrative's plot. Divided into five successive movements, the *quinary scheme* is comprised of the *initial situation*, *complication*, *transformation*, *denouement*, and *final situation*. The *initial situation* provides the reader with the basic background information to understand the situation in the narrative. The *complication* introduces the conflict or crisis, and the *transformation* is the climax of the story, the turning point of the plot. The *denouement* then states the resolution of the tension indicated, and the *final situation* details the reaction(s) of the characters involved or the recognition of the new state.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, and Marcel Durrer, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (London: SCM, 1999), 40-46.

<b>Simon the Great (8:5-25)</b>	<b>The Quinary Scheme</b>	<b>The Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40)</b>
<b>8:5-13</b> Philip's arrival and the introduction of Simon.	<b>Initial Situation</b>	<b>8:26-28</b> Philip's arrival and the introduction of the Ethiopian eunuch.
<b>8:14-17</b> Simon follows Philip and becomes mystified with the spiritual gifts in Philip and the apostles.	<b>Complication</b>	<b>8:29-33</b> The Ethiopian eunuch reads the book of Isaiah but does not understand it. A dialogue takes place between the eunuch and Philip.
<b>8:18-19</b> Simon offers to buy the spiritual gift from the two apostles.	<b>Transformation</b>	<b>8:34-38</b> The eunuch asks Philip to explain the meaning of the Isaiah passage. Philip explains the meaning of the text, and the Ethiopian eunuch requests baptism.
<b>8:20-23</b> Peter rebukes Simon for his intention and invites him to repent.	<b>Denouement</b>	<b>8:39</b> Both Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch enter the water for baptism. Philip is snatched away. The Ethiopian eunuch leaves rejoicing
<b>8:24-26</b> Simon asks for prayer.	<b>Final Situation</b>	<b>8:40</b> Philip is in Azotus and goes about proclaiming the good news to all the towns.

The *transformation* directs the reader's attention to the centrality and importance of Simon's attempt to buy the spiritual gift from the apostolic representatives (8:18-19) and of the Ethiopian eunuch's question about the identity of the innocent, silent suffering servant in Isaiah (8:34-38).

### **Simon the Great (8:5-25)**

In Acts 8:5-25, the reader is told that Philip went to Samaria and preached about the Christ (v.5) and the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> There Philip encounters a certain Simon who is the resident of the region, who practices magic, who calls himself "great" and draws the attention of

<sup>6</sup> The exact geographical location of Philip's activity is unknown. Justin Martyr suggests Gitta as the home of Simon Magus (*I Apol.* 26.2). Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch consider Sebaste, the city built by Herod the Great, as the setting. See Malina and Pilch, *Acts*, 62. While it is difficult to ascertain the precise locale of the setting, Bruce and Bock think Shechem is the likely setting for Philip's mission. See F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 216; Bock, *Acts*, 325. For discussion on the Samaritan-Jewish relations, see Keener, *Acts*, 2:1488-94.

Scholars have argued that Luke had employed one or more sources in the construction of the narrative. For discussion on the strands of tradition and composition in the account of the mission to Samaria in Acts 8:5-25, see Patrick L. Dickerson, "The Sources of the Account of the Mission to Samaria in Acts 8:5-25," *NovT* 39.3 (1997): 210-34. In this article, Dickerson argues that Luke possibly joined three sources: 1) the story of Philip evangelizing and converting the Samaritans and Simon (8:5-13); 2) the story of Peter and John imparting the Spirit on those who had been baptized (8:14-17); and 3) the story of Peter defeating Simon (8:18-24).

the people through his magic arts.<sup>7</sup> The verbal form, *proupērchen ... mageuōn* (“had been... practicing magic;” imperfect plus active participle), emphasizes Simon’s continuing practice of magic in the region. Further, the people— “small to great”—listen to him and exalt him as the manifestation of a divine supernatural being, “the Great Power of God.” Simon’s claim of being “god” prepares the reader for his fall in later verses. Philip, in contrast, preaches the good news and leads others to Christ, not to himself. The narrator also describes the Samaritans, regardless of their social standing, as having listened to and been mesmerized by Simon’s magical feats for a long time before Philip’s arrival to Samaria (8:11).

Philip’s arrival marks the turning point in Simon’s fortune and career—people start paying heed to Philip’s preaching and the signs he performed, Simon included. Simon’s magic practice comes to a halt because the real power of God working through Philip is divinely superior. The embedded details suggest a competition between the two prominent figures for the same audience. Philip and Simon are both active in a Samaritan region (or city). Both perform wonders (8:6, 11, 13) and draw crowds (8:6-7, 9-10). People “heeded” them (8:6, 10-11) and were amazed at their great powers (8:9, 11, 13).<sup>8</sup> Philip is in Simon’s territory, a territory in which Simon is well known and successful. Philip preaches the message of Christ and the reign of God (vv. 5, 12), whereas Simon claims to be great and proclaimed himself to be great (v. 9). Their activities include great acts of power (8:6-7, 13). People in the city are amazed and attentive to both men (8:6-12). But in the end, Philip’s preaching and wonder-working ministry trump the pagan magic practiced by Simon, who sees Philip’s acts and power, comes to the faith and is baptized, and then becomes inseparable from Philip (8:13). Spencer summarizes the competition between the two as follows: “[Luke’s] juxtaposition of Philip’s and Simon’s Samaritan exploits demonstrates not merely that both figures worked miracles and attracted multitudes, but also that both vied for the devotion of the same Samaritan throng and that Philip emerged

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<sup>7</sup> Luke does not mention the specific activities of Simon behind this ambiguous participle *mageuōn*, “practicing magic.” Haar explains that the practices commonly associated with the *magoi* (“magicians”) in antiquity were divination and forecasting the future, as well as distinctive teachings and lifestyle. See Stephen Haar, *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 193. For discussion on magic and magicians in antiquity, see Keener, *Acts*, 2:1500-08. Luke reports several encounters between the gospel and magic in Acts: Philip’s conversion of Simon the magician (8:5-25), Paul’s encounter with Bar-Jesus/Elymas on the island of Cyprus (13:4-12), the Philippian girl possessed by a divinatory pythoness spirit (16:16-24), the Sceva’s seven sons (19:13-16), and the burning of books related to magic at Ephesus (19:19). See Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary* (Louisville: WJK, 2016), 181; Keener, *Acts*, 2:1499.

<sup>8</sup> For comparisons between these two figures, see F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: Study of Roles and Relations*, JNSTSup 67 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 88; V. J. Samkutty, *The Samaritan Mission in Acts* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 161.

as the undisputed champion.”<sup>9</sup> Keener has conveniently outlined the similarities between these characters in the following chart, based on Spencer:<sup>10</sup>

<b>Simon the Sorcerer</b>	<b>Philip the Evangelist</b>
Works wonders (8:11)	Works wonders (8:6, 13)
Proclaims himself (8:9)	Proclaims Christ (8:5, 12)
Draws crowds (8:9-10)	Draws crowds (8-6-7)
“Heeded” (8:10-11)	“Heeded” (8:6)
Simon is “great power” (8:10)	Philip performs “great powers” (8:13)
Simon “amazes” Samaritans with his claims and magic (8:9:11)	Philip’s miracles “amaze” the Samaritans (8:13)

By giving Simon a name and by highlighting Simon’s success and reputation, the narrator illustrates Philip’s success in his Samaritan mission and the superiority of Christian power over magic.<sup>11</sup> The one who once mystified the people with magical arts now is amazed by Philip’s power of healing and exorcism. The narrative emphasizes that Philip’s mission of preaching and healing is similar to the mission of Jesus and the apostles. Philip is doing what they did but in a new mission field and with a new ethnic group. In light of Philip’s success, Simon surprisingly neither defends his reputation nor challenges Philip’s.

What would Simon do now that his magical feats no longer are effective, and that his supporters now are flocking to Philip to hear his message and witness his miraculous signs? We see that he becomes a disciple of Jesus through belief in Philip’s message, baptism, and through following Philip everywhere (8:13). The narrator does not mention that Simon, and the Samaritans, were catechized prior to their baptism. There is nothing in 8:13 to suggest that Simon was less sincere than the other Samaritans when he embraced the gospel.<sup>12</sup> His obsession with Philip’s mighty works, however, raises questions about his motivation for conversion. As Bock correctly points out: “Is the attachment Simon has to

<sup>9</sup> Spencer, *Philip*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1499; cf. Spencer, *Philip*, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 64.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 405.

Philip a sincere attachment to the gift of God or a quest to enhance his personal power?”<sup>13</sup> Does Simon intend to buy the Spirit to “develop his divinatory and therapeutic practices for his own exclusive profit”?<sup>14</sup> The imperfect indicative verb *existato*, “he was amazed,” in verse 13 indicates Simon’s ongoing infatuation with Philip’s exorcisms (signs) and physical healings (wonders).

The plot thickens and the characterization of Simon intensifies with the arrival of the apostle representatives from Jerusalem: Peter and John.<sup>15</sup> The apostles’ presence adds ambiguity to the story, for the purpose of their visit is not clearly spelled out.<sup>16</sup> What transpires in this encounter gives the reader more reasons to question Simon’s commitment and ulterior motive. Acts 8:18-19 reveals that Simon has not been liberated from his magical past. When Simon sees the technique and the office involved in granting the Spirit through the laying on of hands, he becomes deluded and thinks that he can buy it for himself with silver in order to add to his magical repertoire. Whether this is for his advancement or for the good of others, the narrator does not say, but clearly Simon views the Spirit as a commodity that can be purchased.<sup>17</sup> His offering to pay for the right to distribute the Spirit suggests Simon’s “lack of understanding about the gospel and the promise of the Spirit.”<sup>18</sup>

Though Simon is said to practice magic, the text does not indicate that he made a living from his magical arts.<sup>19</sup> The desire to purchase the Spirit could point to Simon’s act of self-gain and self-aggrandizement; that is, to once again capture the attention of the people with a newly acquired power. Such an offer to purchase evokes a harsh rebuke from Peter: “May your silver perish with you. You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God” (v.21).<sup>20</sup> I. Howard Marshall equates Peter’s rebuke to excommunication from

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<sup>13</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 329.

<sup>14</sup> Derrett, “Simon Magus,” 52-68. Cited in Samkuttu, *Samaritan Mission*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Peter and John typically function as apostolic representatives in Luke-Acts, e.g., Luke 22:8; Acts 3:1, 3-4, 11; 4:13, 19, cf. 1:13. See Holladay, *Acts*, 185.

<sup>16</sup> The delay between baptism and reception of the Spirit points to the exclusive authority of the Apostles to impart the Spirit. Some others note that the arrival of the apostolic representatives signals the ratification of the Samaritan mission by the Jerusalem church/apostles. For Holladay, Philip’s evangelistic proclamation is Philip’s own initiative, not the result of apostolic commissioning. See Holladay, *Acts*, 179. Some scholars suggest that the apostles’ real intention was to maintain authority over the new mission. See Ehrhardt, *Acts*, 45-46.

<sup>17</sup> Tannehill suggests that Simon must have a significant amount of money in order to make this offer. See Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 107.

<sup>18</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 332-33.

<sup>19</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 206.

<sup>20</sup> James D.G. Dunn observes that this rebuke echoes the rebukes found in Deut. 12:12 and 14:27, 29. See Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 112.

the church.<sup>21</sup> James D.G. Dunn voices skepticism over the genuineness of Simon's inner conviction of faith, arguing that Simon's response to the faith parallels that of the Samaritans who converted without serious discernment. He states, "The Samaritans' acceptance of baptism was prompted more by the herd-instinct of a popular mass movement (*homothymadon*, "with one accord;" v.6) than by the self- and world-denying commitment which usually characterized Christian baptism in the early years."<sup>22</sup> Peter's invitation to repentance gives Simon the opportunity to straighten out his heart before God and to work on his misunderstanding of the nature of God's gift. In making a link between Peter and Simon, the narrator differentiates the power that comes from magic and the power that comes from the Spirit.

The denunciation of Simon also prompts the reader to question whether Simon is being portrayed as an apostate, such as Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1-11. While this portrayal is not specified in the narrative, there is a hint of excommunication in 8:20: "You have no part or share in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."<sup>23</sup> Peter's denunciation of Simon, as Hans Conzelmann observes, depicts the powerlessness of the magician before the genuine power of the ones who bear the Spirit.<sup>24</sup> Peter's invitation to Simon to repent and pray to God leaves the question unsolved. The intention of Simon's final request to Peter and John leaves room for interpretation. Though the text does not indicate whether the request was genuine or simply to avoid the curse, it shows Simon's deference and even fear (v.24). It is worth noting that Simon's response is in the plural, *deēthēte hymeis* ("you pray"). In this light, the request is addressed to both Peter and John. Simon's answer seems to indicate repentance, for there is no further condemnation of him. The request also does not rule out the possibility that he prayed for himself. Luke also does not indicate Peter's response to Simon's plea that Peter's curse not come upon him (v.24). What happens to Simon? Luke leaves the Simon story open-ended, leaving the reader to wonder whether Simon repented and whether the apostles acceded to Simon's plea and prayed for him.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 159; Bock, *Acts*, 333.

<sup>22</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 64-5. Dunn's argument is challenged by others who point out that there is no textual evidence to suggest that the Samaritans' belief was shallow or ingenuine. Harr, for example, states: "In fact there is clear linguistic and contextual evidence in Luke's narrative that Simon's faith was not defective. Luke gives no indication at this point that Simon's faith was any less sincere than the other Samaritan converts." See Haar, *Simon Magus*, 180. See also Bruce, *Acts*, 220; C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 409.

<sup>23</sup> F. Scott Spencer, *Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 89.

<sup>24</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Gerd Lüdemann interprets the apostles' silence as indicative of the fact that curse has been lifted. The fact that Peter calls on Simon to repent and to "pray to the Lord" (8:22) offers a way out that was not offered to Judas or



He remains an ambivalent figure. The narrative ends abruptly, and Simon Magus is never again mentioned.

### **The Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40)**

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 begins with the angel of the Lord, who acts as the mission director, instructing Philip: “Get up and go south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”<sup>26</sup> There, Philip encounters an unnamed Ethiopian heading home after being in Jerusalem (v.27). The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian takes place in the heat of the noonday, in the wilderness, and somewhere in the southwest of Judea. The term *mesēmbrian* (“midday,” “noon,” “the south”) is interpreted in various ways. Many scholars prefer “noon” because of the lexical evidence for the use of the term in the LXX mostly refers to “noon.”<sup>27</sup> Other scholars, however, prefer “the south” because it fits the description of the road “from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Further, the midday heat would make traveling difficult, even dangerous. The description of the wilderness in the text is symbolic of the experiences of the people of God with divine contact and care as described in Exodus.

The official is identified as Ethiopian, which indicates that he is from the regions south of Egypt and has dark skin.<sup>28</sup> A number of biblical passages give a certain revered picture of Ethiopians as wealthy, wise, pious, and mighty people. Bordering Egypt to the south, Ethiopia was a remote and distant land (Zech 29:10; Esth 1:1; 8:9), renowned for its wealth (Job 38:19; Isa. 45:14), and its military prowess (2 Kgs 19:9; 2 Chr 14:9-13; Isa 37:9; Jer 46:9).<sup>29</sup> Ethiopia represented the southernmost point of the world for Greco-Roman civilization—indeed being at the proverbial “end of the earth.”<sup>30</sup>

The narrator refers five times to the Ethiopian as “the eunuch,” *ho eunouchos*. By emphasizing the Ethiopian as *ho eunouchos*, the narrator is highlighting the eunuch’s

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Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. See Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles: What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 118.

<sup>26</sup> Curt Niccum notes that this is the first time the Spirit speaks in Luke-Acts. See Niccum, “One Ethiopian Eunuch Is Not the End of the World: The Narrative Function of Acts 8:26-40,” in *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam*, vol. 2, eds. Eric F. Mason et al., JSJSup II/53 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 884.

<sup>27</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1546-47.

<sup>28</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 141.

<sup>29</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 88.

<sup>30</sup> Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 107.

marginal status in Judaism and the crossing of new barriers in Acts.<sup>31</sup> Though the narrator does not say whether the eunuch was allowed into the inner courts of the Temple, it would be legitimate for the reader to conjecture that the Ethiopian eunuch would have been prohibited from entering the sacred worship assembly because of his physical defect—an emasculated man was in a permanent state of dishonor and impurity. The Mosaic Law is clear: “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (Deut 23:1).<sup>32</sup> In this light, the reader may conclude that he is not a proselyte but a Gentile.<sup>33</sup> But his possession of an Isaiah scroll, his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and his continuing quest for understanding muddle the classification of his religious status. Though the narrator leaves the religious status of the eunuch vague, the eunuch best fits the category of God-fearer who, although he believed in the God of Israel, did not completely submit to the Law or to circumcision.<sup>34</sup>

James D.G. Dunn rightly points out that as a eunuch, he could not physically procreate or be circumcised and, therefore, could not become a proselyte to carry on the covenant line.<sup>35</sup> The Ethiopian eunuch was like many other foreigners who came to the Temple out of admiration for the faith, even though they were barred from full participation with the congregation in the Temple. He is portrayed as an earnest inquirer and is graciously included in the actions of God.<sup>36</sup> His curiosity and hunger to know the meaning of scripture prepares him for his encounter with Philip and its positive outcome.

As the story gradually unfolds, the narrator’s characterization of the Ethiopian is increasingly positive and he is described in considerable detail—a man of great authority and power, a man of great status and prestige in the Ethiopian government, and he was in charge of the entire treasury of the Candace. That he has in his possession a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and that he is capable of reading the scroll and has the leisure to travel all the way to Jerusalem in a chariot are facts that support the description of him as a man of wealth and prominence. The eunuch’s social class as an official of Queen Candace in

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<sup>31</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1571.

<sup>32</sup> Spencer, *Acts*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> In Acts, Cornelius is also presented as a devout worship of the God of Israel (10:2), yet he clearly is a Gentile. For more explanation on whether the Ethiopian eunuch was a Jew, proselyte, or Gentile, see Scott Shauf, “Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and Narrative Context in Acts 8:26-40,” *CBQ* 71 (4, 2009): 762-75.

<sup>34</sup> Spencer, *Acts*, 91-92.

<sup>35</sup> Dunn, *Acts*, 114.

<sup>36</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2:1593.

charge of her treasury intensifies the impression that he is spiritually hungry and not materially impoverished.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the Ethiopian is on his way back from the worship center in Jerusalem by the road that runs down to Gaza, the “desert route” (8:26). He is reading the fifty-third chapter of the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet describes the suffering of the innocent servant, and he does not understand its meaning. At the instruction of the angel, Philip approaches the eunuch and essentially offers to help the man interpret what he is reading: “Do you understand what you are reading?” (8:30). It is implied that the Ethiopian is reading out loud, and in a language that Philip recognizes. The Ethiopian eunuch responds with a rhetorical question: “How could I, unless someone guides me?” The response opens up the kerygmatic opportunity for Philip to interact with him.

The Ethiopian is portrayed as someone who is eager to be taught and enlightened by Philip from the Jewish scriptures. Though he is a man of power and prominence, he humbly requests Philip to guide him in understanding the text. His eagerness to know the scripture, specifically Isaiah 53, prepares him for the encounter with Philip. Interestingly, he does not ask Philip for a general explanation of the passage but specifically inquires: “I beg you, about whom is the prophet saying this? About himself, or about someone else?” (8:34).

The reader is not told how the passage was interpreted. What is clear is that Philip used it as a starting point to preach the good news about Jesus, or as Michael Talbert puts it, that the reader may imagine that Philip gave the Ethiopian “a Christological interpretation of the prophet Isaiah”<sup>38</sup>—Jesus was the sacrificial lamb about whom Isaiah prophesied. The narrator does not describe further details of the conversation between the two men, but instead immediately moves to the Ethiopian’s request for baptism. The gap in this scene leaves the implication that the Ethiopian eunuch received some instruction about the meaning of baptism and commitment to the risen Christ.

In this scene, besides Philip’s active tutorial in the interpretation of the scripture, the narrator presents Philip as someone who obediently follows the divine directive without any question or complaint. The Ethiopian is consistently presented as an eager recipient of the gospel. He is diligent, deeply religious, and proactive in his search for meaning and faith: he goes to Jerusalem for worship; he reads the Scripture on his way back; he encounters the divinely-directed Philip and asks for assistance in the interpretation of

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<sup>37</sup> Leander E. Keck, ed., *Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 143.

<sup>38</sup> Talbert, *Reading Acts*, 92.

Scripture; he initiates the request for baptism. His diligent, honest, and proactive quest is best summarized in his own statement and question: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (v.36). The phrase employed here is parallel to similar phrases in 10:47 and 11:17. Philip does not explicitly state that there is no impediment, but his act of getting into the water with the Ethiopian eunuch answers the question. The eunuch commands the chariot to stop. They both go down and the eunuch is baptized by a non-apostle.<sup>39</sup> Now that he has experienced reception into God’s kingdom, does he return home as a proclaimer of the gospel? After this narrative, the text says nothing of what becomes of the Ethiopian after his baptism.<sup>40</sup> Whatever is the case, after his baptism, the Ethiopian eunuch continues his journey toward home, rejoicing at his newfound faith (vv.38-39).

### **The Preferred Conversion?**

In both conversion stories, the narrator portrays these two prominent characters—Simon the Great and the Ethiopian eunuch—differently. Both men, as the text indicates, take the initiative to express their desire for access to spiritual resources from the authorized brokers.<sup>41</sup> In Simon’s case, he seeks the power to impart the Spirit (8:19). In the Ethiopian eunuch’s case, he asks for assistance with the interpretation of the Scripture (8:31). What was their motivation for conversion and access to spiritual resources? Was it to enhance their honor-standing within their respective communities: among the citizens of Samaria (Simon), and among the religious people of Israel (the Ethiopian)?<sup>42</sup>

The narrator does not say what were their motivations, but the alert reader notices troubling details about Simon: 1) he makes claims of being someone great; 2) he is preoccupied with spiritual power and thought he could obtain God’s gift with money; 3) he is condemned by the Jerusalem representatives. These details leave the reader more reasons to question Simon’s commitment. His obsession with Philip’s miraculous signs and the apostles’ power to impart the Spirit may point to an ulterior motive for his conversion, to buy his way back to power with a Christian veneer.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps, he envisions economic gains from

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<sup>39</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 345.

<sup>40</sup> Keck, ed., *Acts...I Corinthians*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> Spencer, *Acts*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. Holladay also points out two other differences between the two stories. Philip’s preaching to the Samaritans occurred as the result of severe persecution while his mission into Judea (“from Jerusalem to Gaza”) was divinely prompted. In the Simon the Great story, Philip preaches to many. In the Ethiopian eunuch story, he preaches to one man. See Holladay, *Acts*, 188.

<sup>43</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 278.

the ability to impart the Spirit—a point made by the early church writings.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, having been accustomed to being powerful, he struggles to differentiate divine power from magical power and lapses into old behaviors. Thus, he is still working to liberate himself from his magical worldview, beliefs, and practices that have enslaved him. He sees the Spirit as a commodity that can be sold and purchased. He sees baptism and the reception of the Spirit, “the gift of God” (8:20), not as matters of faith but still as matters of magic.<sup>45</sup>

The Ethiopian eunuch provides an interesting counterpart to the renowned magic that Simon practices. The narrator presents the Ethiopian eunuch as an ideal convert who is diligent, sincere, and proactive in his spiritual quest. From a faraway place, he makes the journey to Jerusalem, not as a tourist but as a worshipper; and on the way home to his country, he reads the Hebrew Scripture. And after having received help with interpretation from Philip, he initiates his baptism. The development of the plot and the characterization of the Ethiopian eunuch invite the reader to identify with his faith and plight.

<b>Simon the Magician (8:5-25)</b>	<b>The Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40)</b>
Practitioner of magic arts	The treasurer of Candace
Marvels at Philip’s signs and wonders and requests baptism	Wrestles with the identity of the suffering servant and requests baptism
Continues under Philip’s spiritual mentorship	Guides by Philip to answer the question: “who is the suffering servant
Offers to pay for the authority to impart the Spirit	Requests baptism
Is condemned by the apostles	Continues his journey, rejoicing

The detailed description of the Ethiopian’s physicality is highly significant for the story. Mikeal C. Parsons points out that Luke does not provide physical descriptions of other characters in his works.<sup>46</sup> His physical defect reinforces his position as an outsider of Judaism. As a eunuch, he is physically blemished and thus is barred from full participation in the congregation of Israel and its worship of God (see 3:8, Deut 23:2; Lev 21:17-2). He

<sup>44</sup> Justin *I Apol.* 26:2; 56:1-2; *Dial.* 120:6; Pseudo-Clementine *Hom.* 2.22.3; 2.24.1; Origen *Cels.* 1.57.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer contends that the story of Simon the Great was intended to teach early Christians that the apostles owned the exclusive authority to confer the Spirit and that Christians would need to separate the gift of the Spirit from magical practices. See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 404; J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24),” *ZNW* 73 (1982): 52-68.

<sup>46</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 124.

can visit the Temple like other foreigners and he can be in the outer courts for foreigners, but he can never enter the courts of Israel. Here, a man who cares much about his spiritual life travels hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to worship in the temple but must presumably stand in the outer court or the Court of the gentiles to pray to God.

While the result of his visit is not narrated, his questions— “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (8:31) and “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (8:36)—suggest that he previously has received inadequate assistance in interpreting the scripture, and that he has been “excluded from the very religious community whose resources would illumine his quest.”<sup>47</sup> He came searching but went away empty, not having found fulfillment for his spiritual need. The reader finds no textual evidence in this narrative to support the notion that the Ethiopian eunuch has ever been welcomed into the Temple. In Acts 21:29, the reader learns of the resistance to the idea of allowing non-Jews into the Temple. Through the preaching of Philip and baptism, however, the Ethiopian is invited to participate fully in the worship of God; he no longer is excluded because of his physical defect.

The Ethiopian is presented as an ideal convert because of his desire to know God. In contrast, the narrator simply states that Simon converts with the rest of the crowd because he is amazed at Philip’s healing power and wonder (8:13). The text does not indicate that Simon receives adequate preparation for baptism and commitment to the risen Lord. In contrast, in the story of the Ethiopian, he personally asks for assistance in the interpretation of scripture, and presumably after some lengthy conversations about the suffering servant in Isaiah, he takes the initiative to ask for baptism.

Also salient in the two stories is the role of God’s agents. As proactive as he is in his search for God, the Ethiopian is not the initiator of this encounter. The initiative comes entirely from God’s agents—an angel of the Lord directs Philip to make a trip to a deserted place, where the Spirit speaks to him and directs him to the chariot. Were the events unfolded in the story of the Ethiopian—Philip’s decision to talk to the Ethiopian, the eunuch’s reading from Isaiah, the Ethiopian’s inquisitive and open-mindedness, the sudden appearance of water in the desert—divinely planed? The accumulation of divinely orchestrated events suggests that God wants this foreigner to hear the gospel.

Both stories highlight the involvement of the Spirit. In the story of Simon, the Spirit is portrayed as passive. It is a power given to the Samaritans through the human gesture of the apostles’ laying on of hands (8:17). In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the Spirit is dynamically characterized as a mission-director who instructs Philip to go down from

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<sup>47</sup> Keck, ed. *Acts...I Corinthians*, 142.

Jerusalem to Gaza (8:26), who directs Philip to go to the eunuch (8:29), and who snatches Philip away after the baptism (8:39). The Spirit, in this context, is presented as God's agent who reveals God's plan in empowering the witnesses.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Simon the Great is presented in an increasingly negative and ambiguous way, while the Ethiopian eunuch is presented in an increasingly positive manner. This characterization creates a contrast, and it draws the reader into identifying with the diligence and open-mindedness of the Ethiopian. He represents two groups of outsiders—foreigner and eunuch—in Judaism. Through Philip's witness of the gospel, the fully outcast Ethiopian is invited to participate fully in the worship of God. In the story of Simon, the narrator presents two troubling details: he claims to be someone great and he is obsessed with Philip's and the apostles' divine powers. Through the presentation of these characters, the narrator characterizes the Ethiopian eunuch as an ideal convert who sees baptism and the Spirit as matters of faith, and who has been liberated from his spiritual marginal status within Judaism. Simon, on the other hand, struggles to free himself from the magical forces that have enslaved him. He still sees baptism and the Spirit not as matters of faith but still as matters of magic.

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<sup>48</sup> Ju Hur, *A Dynamic Reading of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 139.