

Going Where Not Many Have Gone Before: The Boundary-Breaking Mission of Philip the Evangelist

If I may be allowed one Star Trek reference here (and one more later), the main mission of the Starship *Enterprise* (as everyone knows) is to boldly go where no one has gone before—to cross boundaries of time and space, to explore new worlds and encounter new peoples. And the “prime directive” within that mission is to treat new creatures with respect and not to interfere with their way of life (unless they directly attack you—and then it’s phasers full-blast).

This mission is both like and unlike the mission the risen Jesus Christ assigned the twelve apostles (minus Judas) just before ascending into heaven in Acts 1:8: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This is no outer space travel to meet exotic extraterrestrials, but a boundary-breaking venture all the same to every race and culture, every person far and near in this world (cf. 2:39). As servants of God who “shows no partiality” (cf. 10:34), Jesus’ followers should treat all peoples with love and respect. But within this embracing spirit, they are not charged (as Kirk and crew) simply to live and let live, not rock any boats. Jesus envisions a “power” mission fueled by the Holy Spirit (1:8) that interferes and makes a difference in people’s lives in accordance with God’s good purpose.

Common readings of Acts’ key missionary moments focus on the struggles and breakthroughs of Peter and Paul—especially Peter’s rooftop vision of the clean and unclean animals, prompting his sharing the gospel in the home of a Roman centurion (10:1–11:18); and Paul’s Damascus road epiphany,

Lectionary Loop

**First Sunday after the Epiphany,
Year C, Acts 8:14-17; Fifth Sunday
of Easter, Year B, Acts 8:26-40**

including Christ's commission "to bring my name before Gentiles" (9:15). These are big moments, to be sure, in Acts 9–11. But just before that, chapter 8 features the pioneering mission of Philip "the evangelist" (cf. 21:8), who gets the jump on Peter and Paul in blazing the missionary trail outside Jerusalem/Judea to the major zones charted in Acts 1:8: first to Samaria (8:4-25) and then to the ends of the earth (represented by an Ethiopian official [8:26-40]).

The Man behind the Mission

Before exploring these ventures, it's useful to know something about the man behind the mission. We first meet Philip as Stephen's number two man in the list of seven Hellenist table-servants (6:5). Like Stephen, Philip naturally moves from such duty to powerful proclamation (8:4-8). In the wake of Saul's persecution campaign that erupts after Stephen's death, Philip flees the hostile environs of Jerusalem for Samaria, where his evangelistic mission commences (8:1-5). Unlike Stephen and James (John's brother; 12:2), Philip survives the assault on Jesus' followers and ultimately settles down in Caesarea with his "four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy" (no wife/mother is mentioned [21:8-9]). Together they host Paul and companions and a visiting Judean prophet named Agabus who predicts Paul's impending arrest in Jerusalem. (We may wonder why Philip's daughters don't talk of this prophetic business [21:10-14; see later session on Agabus].)

Philip's first messianic mission, although targeted outside the current hot zone of Jerusalem to "the city of Samaria" (8:5), does not naturally constitute the wisest move a refugee from Jerusalem might make. In fact, it seems more like going from the frying pan into the fire, given the historic bad blood between Jews and Samaritans over sacred sites (Jerusalem/Mt. Zion vs. Shechem/Mt. Gerizim), messianic hopes, and claims to Israel's promised land and heritage. This sharp intrafaith conflict somewhat resembles historic Protestant-Catholic antipathy in Northern Ireland, not least in its potential for violent reprisals. Witness the plot of Jesus' disciples (rebuked by Jesus!) to incinerate

a Samaritan village with heavenly fire because the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus and companions en route to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-56).

The Mission to Samaria and a Magician

Remarkably, however, Philip doesn't seem fazed by these volatile boundaries between his Jewish people and Samaritans. He plunges into Samaria, "proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Messiah)" and performing wondrous signs of healing and exorcism. And, in turn, the Samaritan "crowds" (not a few here and there) warmly welcome Philip's message, are baptized in Christ's name, and erupt with "great joy" (not violence) (8:6-12). But for all his success, Philip encounters a couple of hitches since boundary crossing is never trouble free. First, at least one Samaritan is not initially thrilled with Philip's visit—Simon Magus, a popular local magician self-styled as "someone great" whom Philip has just outshone on Simon's turf. We will consider Simon Magus's case more fully in the next lesson, but suffice it to say for now that eventually even he accepts Philip's gospel, is baptized, and "constantly" follows the Christian evangelist about town in disciple-like fashion (8:9-13). Jesus Messiah, whom Philip serves, proves to be the true "Power of God" in Samaria.

A second difficulty Philip faces surrounds imparting the Holy Spirit to his Samaritan converts. Curiously, they do not receive the Spirit when they believe and are baptized (as we would expect from 2:38) by Philip, but only when Jerusalem apostles Peter and John later pray for and lay their hands upon them (8:14-17). This is not a slap against Philip, however, who otherwise appears as a Spirit-filled and Spirit-guided witness to Christ (6:3, 5; 8:29, 39). The purpose of bringing Peter and John into the picture has more to do with affirming the Spirit-fused fellowship of Jerusalemite and Samaritan believers in God's messianic community than with denigrating Philip's evangelistic work. As John's proclamation and water baptism prepared the way for Jesus' Spirit-baptizing mission (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5), so Philip's work paves the way for Peter and John's Samaritan outreach.

Reflections Samaritans

1. To gain a fuller sense of Samaritan-Jewish tensions in the first century, see Luke 9:51-56; 10:25-37; 17:11-19; John 4:1-42.
2. I suggested Protestant-Catholic rifts in Northern Ireland as analogous to Samaritan-Jewish conflicts in first-century Palestine. Can you think of other analogies of intensely hostile relations between geographically proximate groups with common, yet also divergent, religious heritages?

The Mission to the “Ends of the Earth” and a Eunuch

Following his mission to bustling Samaria, Philip is directed by the Spirit to an unspecified spot along a “wilderness road” running southwesterly from Jerusalem to Gaza—not the most propitious site for evangelistic ministry. In this remote outpost, however, Philip soon encounters a traveler—but hardly your average Middle Eastern desert nomad. This man is traveling in style—by chariot (Philip having run to meet it!)—heading back from a visit in Jerusalem to Ethiopia, where he serves as Queen Candace’s chief finance minister. What could he and Philip possibly have in common? As it turns out, the man “happens” to be reading an Isaiah scroll and pondering its meaning when Philip arrives on the scene (8:26-31). Philip happily hops into the chariot to interpret one particularly intriguing text from Isaiah 53 about a humiliated servant of God led like a helpless “lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . like a sheep that before its shearers is silent” with limited prospects for “generation” (Greek: *genea*) or “descendants” (Isa 53:7-8; see also Acts 8:32-33). Philip seizes the opportunity to proclaim “the good news of Jesus” (Acts 8:35) from this text, presumably identifying Isaiah’s mistreated servant with the crucified Jesus—but now exalted by God and opening the way for a new “generation” of God’s family.

But why should a well-heeled Ethiopian treasurer care about such a Jewish figure? For one thing, although he was a Gentile, he worshiped the God of Israel (that was the purpose of his trek to Jerusalem). More important, however, amid his wealth and political status, he had a marked physical disability as a eunuch with no possibility of descendants. This condition did not hurt his position at court (indeed, it helped him in the service of a female ruler), but it would have brought a general stigma of shame and particular exclusion from Israel’s covenant people according to Deut 23:1. Doubtless he gravitates to the more hopeful prospects of Isaiah’s later chapters, which suggest God’s favoring a shamed, “shorn” servant with questionable hopes of “generation” (see Isa 53:7-8) and

acceptance of both foreigners and eunuchs in God's "house of prayer for all peoples" (see Isa 56:3-8). As Philip arrives and announces Jesus' fulfillment of Isaiah's inclusive vision, the Ethiopian eunuch grasps the moment and petitions Philip for baptism in a pool of water that just "happens" to appear (in the desert!) (Acts 8:36).

Philip promptly goes "down into the water" with the eunuch and baptizes him as an act of solidarity with this ethnic (Ethiopian) and sexual (eunuch) outsider (8:38). The eunuch finds a heritage and legacy among Christ's "generation" of God's people. However, when he and Philip emerge from this water in the wilderness—an apt site (reminiscent of John the Baptist's location) for boundary crossing—the Spirit suddenly "snatched Philip away" from the scene (8:39). Unlike with the Samaritans, this is more of an isolated "hit and run" mission. The church is not quite ready for an extended mission to Ethiopia (much less to sexual "foreigners"). But the wheels have been set in motion. The eunuch proceeds "on his way rejoicing," returning to his Ethiopian homeland—which "happens" to be known in the ancient Greco-Roman world as the earth's outer limits or "ends of the earth"—where he presumably testifies about his dramatic spiritual experience in the desert. As for Philip the evangelist, he "finds himself" up the coast in Azotus and continues preaching on the way to Caesarea, where he settles down with his four daughters (8:40; cf. 21:8-9), perhaps resting and recuperating after his whirlwind travels.

Sources

See F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); F. Scott Spencer, "The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Social-Science Analysis," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1992): 155-65; Christopher Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist: Configurations of a Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

Study Bible

See background on Samaria and Ethiopia in *NISB*, 1971-72.

Reflections

Outcasts and "Others"

1. By any account, the Ethiopian eunuch is a strange, even exotic character remote from our society. But who are our ethnic and sexual outsiders today, and how do we treat them?
2. What does Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch teach us about dealing with ethnic and sexual outsiders?