

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:
A STORY OF BLACK LIBERATION AND TRANSGENDER INCLUSION

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By

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The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch found in Acts chapter 8 has had a variety of dismissive and underwhelming readings and interpretations throughout Christian history and especially in the Western theological tradition. This can be seen in stark contrast by comparing a ground-breaking essay by Clarice Martin alongside an excerpt from a New Testament introduction written by Michael Bird and NT Wright. In addition to this comparative analysis, the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch provides a text of liberation and full inclusion of transgender individuals in the life of the church.

In the massive and comprehensive New Testament introduction by Wright and Bird they give a brief synopsis of the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. In only one paragraph they recount it as a meeting between two people, Philip and the Eunuch, wherein Philip preaches to the Eunuch and he believes and is baptized. At that point the two individuals part ways.¹ No further commentary is provided. This is quite a difference to the analysis provided in the essay by Clarice Martin. She makes two opening points about what Luke is doing with the story in reference to the Old Testament. First, that the Eunuch is the fulfillment of the prophetic vision in Isaiah 56:3-7, in that he is a Eunuch being accepted into the story of Israel. Second, that he is a foreigner being accepted into Israel's story, and finally that it is a fulfillment of Psalm 68:31.² Already she has provided valuable context for the importance of what is happening in this story.

Although that context, and much more, is important, the main thesis of the paper is that the Ethiopian Eunuch fulfills the declaration in Acts chapter 1 that the gospel must reach the “ends of the earth.” Martin provides several sources for the evidence that Ethiopia was referred to as “the ends of the earth” in the first century.³ This means that Luke specifically included this story to tell people that the gospel mission had been fulfilled.

¹ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*, Illustrated edition (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 634.

² Clarice Martin, “A CHAMBERLAIN’S JOURNEY AND THE CHALLENGE OF INTERPRETATION FOR LIBERATION,” n.d., 108–9.

³ Martin, “A CHAMBERLAIN’S JOURNEY” 119.

Martin finished her essay by showing that these critical contexts of the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch have been overlooked in modern theology for three reasons. First, that the text itself doesn't seem to emphasize the ethnic identity of the Eunuch. Second, maps and geographical descriptions of the area have overlooked Ethiopia. Finally, the voices of marginalized identities have been proactively squelched so as to not even provide the opportunity for its significance to shine through.⁴

Martin's arguments are convincing and thorough. This is compelling both for her historical references, but also modern explanation for the marginalization of Black voices. Both Wright and Bird could have benefited greatly from a voice such as hers in their New Testament introduction. In many places throughout the book they provide side bars and excursus on various areas of contextual importance. Unfortunately, as much as I have learned from Wright, I also find that he lacks either the will or the propensity to seek out and uplift marginalized voices and their interpretive lenses. In light of Martin's excellent addition to the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch and the Black experience, there is more to be said about its intersection with sexual and gender identity and transgender inclusion in the church.

In Willie James Jennings commentary on Acts he describes the meaning of the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in this way:

“Faith in Jesus of Nazareth does draw us to a new way of life, a shared life that disrupts old patterns of living and breaks open cultural, familial, and tribal alliances and allegiances. This requires a new negotiation within ourselves and with our peoples regarding the shape our lives will take as Christian disciples...God’s love presses us beyond quiet toleration (and certainly beyond lightly concealed revulsion) and toward extravagant appreciation of our creatureliness woven in difference and destined for communion with the divine life.”⁵

⁴ Martin, “A CHAMBERLAIN’S JOURNEY,” 120–21.

⁵ Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Unabridged edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 88–90.

In keeping with Jennings' statement it is my contention that the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch should cause us to open up our lives with full acceptance and affirmation to transgender individuals in the church.

The groundwork for this inclusion of gender non-conforming individuals was laid in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Isaiah 56:3-7 it says

“Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people,” and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”⁶

This prophetic vision of the author of Isaiah looks forward to a time when a “gender-bending”⁷ individual such as a eunuch is incorporated into the story. Robert Alter points out in his commentary that according to Torah eunuchs were not permitted to participate in the temple cult, and that this passage gives them the prophetic vision of continuation in lineage through sabbath observance and participation in a covenant community.⁸ Despite the laws in the Torah, we should be careful not to see this as a story of the more inclusive Christianity incorporating the eunuch over and against a restrictive and exclusionary Judaism. On the contrary, the Eunuch is most likely a Kushite Jew, or at least a “Sub-Saharan African of the first century who believed in the God worshiped in Jerusalem.”⁹ Furthermore, the story shows that the Eunuch was prepared for a message from someone like Philip

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture passages referenced are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue).

⁷ Clark M Williamson, “The Ethiopian Eunuch: Dealing With A Gender-Bender,” *Encounter* 73, no. 3 (2013): 54–56.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 1st edition (New York ; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

⁹ Memhert Ts’gye Rachel T Leslie, “The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch: ‘Look, Here Is Water. What Hinders Me From Being Baptized?’ (Acts 8:36 OSB),” *Black Theology* 18, no. 2 (May 2020): 160.

with word of a Messiah. The Eunuch was reading Isaiah, returning from worship in Jerusalem, and believed and was baptized the same day without hesitation. Only someone familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures would be so ready. For the Eunuch this would have been good news of the faithfulness of God.¹⁰ Philip realizes this as well and acts in obedience to the Spirit's calling by not giving any restriction when the Eunuch asks "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" If his status as an Ethiopian or as a eunuch was a problem for Philip, or Jesus, or the church at the time, then surely the text could have included some sort of explanation in that regard.¹¹

While the "gender-bending" aspects of the Eunuch are certainly represented in his castration and life outside of gender norms, his ethnicity would also have played a part. Greco-Roman society viewed Ethiopia and places like it as outside, or on the edge of, the "civilized" world. As such these "barbarians" were often depicted in a derogatory sense as outside gender norms, "expressed in terms of male effeminacy or female masculinity." This was evident in reliefs from that time which would depict defeated enemies of foreign nations as "vanquished women." Although this was the sentiment more broadly, "Ethiopians in particular were often associated with the 'womanish' traits of cowardice, promiscuity, and the love of pleasure. Physiognomical works link Ethiopian somatic features to such 'female' moral failings, and both literary and material culture represent Ethiopians as prostitutes and hypersexual figures."¹² The intersection of the Eunuch's gender identity and ethnicity remains a factor to this day in the advancement of transgender (and LGBTQ+ more broadly) acceptance in the church.

In the present environment on the continent of Africa, homosexuality remains a social taboo much more than in Western locations. In this light some in the church point to LGBTQ+ affirmation as a Western import and another example of colonialism. Kapya John Kaoma

¹⁰ Williamson, "Gender-Bender," 53–54.

¹¹ Williamson, "Gender-Bender," 55–56.

¹² Brittany E Wilson, "Neither Male nor Female?: The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40," *New Testament Studies* 60, no. 3 (July 2014): 413.

problematises this perspective in his 2015 essay for the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. He points out that homosexuality had acceptance in Africa prior to any colonization efforts, and that it was the colonization of Africa that popularized taboos of the LGBTQ+ community. Historian and anthropologist Marc Epprecht provides compelling evidence that it was Europeans who observed that Africans “expressed no strong shame or guilt about it.” Fear concerning the LGBTQ+ community grew as a result of sermons and teachings by European missionaries. Today that is now assumed to be the historical view in Africa, when it is in fact the opposite. Further historical evidence for LGBTQ+ acceptance is shown in the Zande of the Central Africa Republic who treated same-sex relationships equal to straight relationships; in Nigeria where homosexuals lived freely until the 1970s; and in the Shona who to this day allow same-sex marriages in some cases.¹³

Kaoma conducted a study between 2008-2012 on the LGBTQ+ community and the church in Africa. His findings show that most LGBTQ+ individuals in Africa are Christians. This is in spite of their being outcast from their communities in many cases. Most have gone on to find affirming spaces in some urban areas, or choose to live a life of an “individualized” Christianity apart from a community. Kaoma has also initiated and taken part in conferences and meetings that begin with a lot of hostility but by the end find everyone breaking bread together and moving forward.¹⁴

Another aspect of LGBTQ+ life in Africa is syncretism in Christianity with traditional African spiritual beliefs. In some cases LGBTQ+ persons are being accepted by Christian communities because they view the person as inhabiting a “male” or “female” spirit. Kaoma tells the story of Melissa who was raised in a devout Catholic family that now accepts her queerness on the basis of their beliefs on spirits. They are not seeking to remove that spirit, but just assume that is

¹³ Kanya Kaoma, “Beyond Adam and Eve: Jesus, Sexual Minorities and Sexual Politics in the Church in Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 153 (November 2015): 9–10.

¹⁴ Kaoma, “Beyond Adam and Eve,” 12.

what “makes her queer.” While not an ideal solution, it is a welcome reprieve for people like Melissa in these environments.¹⁵

The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch is overflowing with meaning for the church. As we observed with the comparisons of academic texts, it has often been sidelined or overlooked. This story provides evidence for the faithfulness of God in the inclusion of foreigners to the kingdom. It also intersects with the oppression of Black and LGBTQ+ communities, showing that God welcomes them regardless of their ethnicity or sexual and gender identity. This welcoming was in place long before the colonization of Africa and the Americas with European fears of the variation of sexual identity, gender fluidity, and race. This trajectory of inclusion will move forward regardless of the pushback against it, and just like Philip was led by the Spirit to speak to the Eunuch, and Peter was led by the Spirit to cast aside ethnic boundary markers, we will be led by the Spirit to welcome the beautiful diversity of sexual and gender identity in the human experience.

¹⁵ Kaoma, “Beyond Adam and Eve,” 14–15.

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