

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Forty-Second Week - Fourth Day

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

"Now an angel of Yahweh spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot.' So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. . . . Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:26-31, 35).

The objective of this mission does not seem to have been disclosed to Philip, but he immediately departed knowing that further light would be given him when needed. On his way to the place indicated, or on arriving there, his attention was caught by a traveling chariot in which sat a person reading as he rode. The dress and equipage of this traveler indicated that he was a man of high rank and distinction. He was, in fact, no other than a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace.

We need not understand with the artists that this great lord was a negro. Ethiopia was a term vaguely applied to any countries beyond the range of Southern Egypt and Africa, and even to Southern Arabia. Here we know that it designates the kingdom of Meroe in Upper Egypt, which Pliny informs us was governed by queens who all bore the name of Candace as a title of office. This points both to the locality from which this great officer had come and to which he was returning. He was probably not a native Ethiopian but simply a resident there; and if so, he was "a proselyte of righteousness" to the Jewish faith--easily accounted for by the fact that many Jews spread themselves from Egypt southward into Meroe and beyond, in which quarter Judaism had made considerable progress.

This fact may even suggest the probability that this man was of Jewish descent, for Jews often rose to high distinction in foreign courts because of their special aptitude in money affairs. What strengthens this probability is that the eunuch appears to have been reading the Scripture in Hebrew. This is a qualification not possessed by foreign converts to Judaism. Now he

might, indeed, have been reading the Scriptures in the Greek translation then current, and it is not altogether certain that he did not. But when it is said, "The *place* of the Scripture which he read," there seems in the original to be an allusion to a division of the Old Testament for public reading, which had been introduced into the Hebrew copies but not into the Greek translation. Now assuming he was a Jew, was he also a true eunuch? We know that persons who really were could not enter into the congregation of the Lord (Deut. 23:1). And since this man had been at Jerusalem to worship, probably at one of the great festivals, the term is doubtless to be understood in its acquired sense (frequent in Scripture), in which it designates any great officer of state. Therefore, the probabilities seem to be that this "man of Ethiopia" was a descendant of Abraham, who had risen to high employment in Meroe, and who on this occasion had indulged his pious zeal in the rare satisfaction of a pilgrimage to the holy city at one of the seasons of high festival.

Philip could see that the traveler was reading, but he was not near enough to hear what he read. A divine impulse directed him to draw nearer to the chariot, and then he heard that it was the passage respecting the sufferings of Christ in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah that he was reading. Today we seldom read aloud to ourselves, and some commentators have imagined that there was a person in the chariot reading to the Ethiopian eunuch. But the text expressly and repeatedly states that he himself was reading, and this is quite in accordance with the existing habits of the Orientals when reading privately for their own edification.¹ Philip then asked him if he understood what he was reading. Impressed no doubt by the earnestness of tone and manner with which Philip put the question, he answered with a real interest and touching simplicity, giving us the most favorable impression of his character: "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*"

Perceiving from Philip's responsive look to this candid confession, he begged Philip to come up into the chariot and sit with him. The treasurer then hastened to point out the passage that most perplexed him, which indeed was the one Philip had heard him read: "*He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.*" The eunuch then asked him, "*of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?*" Then Philip proceeded to explain it. He showed him that it was a prophecy concerning the Messiah whom the Jews had for so long expected, and that it applied exactly to Jesus of Nazareth, who in the days of his humiliation was grievously afflicted but was eminently meek and patient under all. But Philip didn't stop there; he continued to tell him of Christ crucified.

¹ Mr. Jowett well describes this in his *Christian Researches*: "They usually go on reading aloud, with a kind of singing voice, moving their heads and bodies in tune and making a monotonous cadence at regular intervals--thus giving emphasis, although not such emphasis as would please an English ear. Very often they seem to read without perceiving the sense; and to be pleased with themselves, because they can go through the mechanical act of reading in any way."

As the mystery of man's redemption gradually opened to the astonished view of the eunuch, his heart filled with holy rapture and gratitude, and he longed to enroll himself under the banner of that King whose realm is not of this world. From Philip's discourse he had gathered that this was to be accomplished by the sign of baptism. When, therefore, a stream of water was reached as they rode along, he cried out with eagerness, "*See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?*" And Philip answered, "*If you believe with all your heart, you may.*" Hearing this, the eunuch declared, "*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*"-- not only that Jesus was the Messiah, but that He was the Son of God and as such able to pardon sin.

Being satisfied with this avowal, the chariot was stopped and Philip and the eunuch went down to the water where the evangelist baptized his illustrious convert; and no sooner was the rite accomplished than the baptizer miraculously disappeared. The eunuch saw him no more, but this disappearance strengthened his faith. Instead of attempting to search for Philip, he perceived it was the will of God that they should be separated. Therefore he climbed into his chariot and "went on his way rejoicing"--rejoicing in the great light of salvation that had shone in upon his darkness, and rejoicing in that sweet tranquility of mind that comes from an increased knowledge of the gospel of Christ.

The conversion of a man of the eunuch's high standing was probably attended by some signal results in the country to which he returned; and although history has left no record of such results, the great day of disclosures will doubtless make them known.