ONE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH IS NOT THE END OF THE WORLD: THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF ACTS 8:26–40*

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Over the last century appreciation for the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) has increased, although not at the same rate as Ethiopic Enōch. When modern interpreters began viewing the Book of Acts as a collection of roughly chronological vignettes, attention to the eunuch’s conversion centered on its minor contribution to the history of Christianity’s early expansion. As scholars turned to more literary approaches, the pericope’s perceived value rose because its independence from the surrounding narrative marked it as a source. Originally a Hellenistic Christian tale about the first Gentile convert, Luke poorly edited and purposely diluted its content in order to maintain Petrine primacy with the competing Cornelius story, which he favored. With the advent of narrative criticism, interest grew in the story’s contribution to the overall message of Acts. Liberationist readings now have arguably given the passage its greatest prominence to date.

At every stage in this development interpreters have associated the Ethiopian eunuch with Jesus’ statement in Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth.” As a result, even though the story’s stock has appreciated, the verdict about its message has basically remained the same. Luke composed, incorporated, or edited this event to reveal “the

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progress of the mission.”4 Though true to a certain extent, the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch plays a much greater role in Luke’s work—it speaks to “the things fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1) and ties the storyline of Acts to a vision of Israel’s restoration found in Isaiah.5

1. THE NARRATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EUNUCH’S STORY


As if an angel were not enough, the Holy Spirit directly participates in the action. When Philip arrives at the Gaza road the Spirit orders him to catch up to the chariot (8:29). Then, after the eunuch’s baptism, the Spirit suddenly whisks Philip away (8:39–40), the only instance of teleportation in Luke’s opus.7 Interestingly, this is the first time the Spirit speaks in Luke-Acts.8 It will happen only three more times: in the ordination of Paul and Barnabas for mission (13:2), at the end

6 Presumably the two “men” who appear to the disciples immediately after Jesus’ ascension are angels as in Luke 24:43. There is also a possible connection to the Transfiguration in Luke 9:30–31.
7 Contrast this with the troubles Paul faced with spiritual navigation (Acts 16:6–7).
8 Set formulae describe the Spirit speaking through prophets in the past, so Luke 1:70; Acts 1:16; 3:21; 4:25; 13:2; and 28:25.