

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 8:28-35

As we finished verse 27 Luke told us the Ethiopian Official was sitting in his chariot or covered wagon and reading the scroll of Isaiah out loud.

I shared with you that in the ancient world, almost everyone who could read did it aloud. Very few readers did it silently. That's because reading ancient manuscripts almost always required the reader to spell out the words.

The primary reason for this was the difficulty of deciphering sentences since there were no spaces between the words and no punctuation marks.

In the case of the Ethiopian official, he was very likely reading a copy of Isaiah in Greek since that was the common first-century language in Egypt. That should give you an idea of the impact of Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt.

Let's read verses 29-32

“The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and

stay near it.” 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. 31 “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

The first thing I want us to notice here is that the Holy Spirit spoke to Philip and told him, “Go to that chariot and stay near it”. We are not told how Philip heard those instructions. Was it an audible voice or did the Spirit speak within Philip’s mind? Either way, Philip had obviously learned to hear the Spirit’s voice. Have we?

We should not miss the fact that it took both faith and obedience on Philip’s part to do what the Spirit was saying. As Albert Barnes puts it,

“A thousand difficulties might have been started in the mind of Philip if he had reflected a little. The eunuch was a stranger; he had the appearance of a man of rank; he was engaged in reading; he might be indisposed to be interrupted or to converse, etc. But Philip obeyed without any hesitation the instructions of the Spirit, and “ran” to him.” – Albert Barnes

Biblical texts always have a combination of stated and unstated information. Notice in verse 30 that Luke says Philip ran up to the chariot". What does that tell us? The chariot the Ethiopian Official was riding in was in motion. Philip had to run alongside it to hear what the official was reading.

As Philip ran next to the chariot, he could hear the official reading the scroll of Isaiah. Philip had to shout his question to the official to be heard above the noise of the chariot wheels and the official's own voice reading the scroll.

Philip's question might seem a little confusing. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Philip is not asking the official if he understands the Greek words he is spelling out. Philip's question is much deeper than all that. Let me explain why:

Even though the Ethiopian official had traveled to Jerusalem, understood Judaism, and worshiped the Jewish God, he still didn't understand the Jewish Scriptures. As one commentator put it, "He was separated from Isaiah by language ... [as well as] time and culture."

This will be evident by the official's question in verse 34: "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

Even today, most Jews today skip over Isaiah 53. They either don't understand the purpose of the "Suffering Servant" or do not want to associate it with Jesus.

Jewish scholars do, indeed, have a long literary heritage of interpretations and arguments about Scripture. They try to use these to figure out what the Old Testament means, but they are lacking a key assistance.

That was the Ethiopian official's problem as well. Yes, he had the Greek translation of Isaiah 53. No, he did not understand what he was reading. He made it clear to Philip that he would need someone's assistance to understand the context of what he was reading.

Hidden in those words in another Jewish aspect of the Law. The thought was that only the priests – and later the rabbis (teachers of the Law) could correctly translate the Old Testament scriptures.

As such, to study the Torah one needed a guide. In that sense, the Ethiopian official fell right in line

with what he had been taught.

I told you that he was lacking a key assistance. Jesus promised his disciples that they would have someone who could bridge that gap. In John 16:13-14 he said,

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.” – John 16:13-14

In the case of the African official, the Holy Spirit sent Philip to clarify what he was reading.

Let's return to verse 31, where the official says, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

We can't help but see the Spirit's orchestration of these events. An African Official riding along in his chariot with the scroll of Isaiah 53 spread out on his lap and Philip is sitting beside him listening to the passage being read:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was

deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” – vv. 32-33

Isaiah 53 is often referred to as the story of the "Suffering Servant." In verses 1-7 it describes the Servant as a root growing from the dry ground, without any noble features, despised and rejected—seemingly by God. It says the Servant was pierced and crushed and took on sins but didn't defend Himself.

Now it's interesting that there isn't any evidence that first-century Jews expected the arrival of this "Suffering Servant". Quite the opposite was true. They expected a triumphant Messiah to come and restore both Israel's fortunes and its place on the world stage. They anticipated a new golden age like they experienced during Solomon's reign.

That's evident even in the disciples' question to Jesus just before he ascended to the Father. They asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" – Acts 1:6

It was Jesus who first applied the "Suffering Servant" passage from Isaiah 53 to himself. This is evident in passages like Mark 10:45 where he said, "the Son of man ... came not to be served

but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

For first-century Jews it was natural to link the oracle opening with “Behold my Servant” in Isa. 42:1 with that opening with similar words in Isa. 52:1. Let’s look at them, briefly:

- Isaiah 42:1: “Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, who pleases me. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations.”
- Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns!”

If we just read those passages, it would appear that the One who was coming would be bringing restoration to Israel. No wonder there is scant evidence that anyone before the time of Jesus had identified the Isaianic Servant with the Davidic Messiah.

For first-century scribes and teachers of the Law, there was no connection between the Isaiah 42 and 52 Davidic Messiah with the Isaiah 53 “Suffering Servant”.

That all changed with the first-century Messianic Jews. They read Isaiah 53 in a totally different light. They understood Jesus' death and resurrection in the terms of the "Suffering Servant" who was raised from death by Yahweh.

In light of this, when the Ethiopian Eunuch asked who the prophet was talking about, in verse 35 Luke tells us, "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus."

As Professor Howard Marshall has observed, "The way in which the story is told bears some structural resemblances to another story in which a Stranger joined two travelers and opened up the Scriptures to them, took part in a sacramental act, and then disappeared from view (Lk. 24:13–35).

Philip began with Isaiah 53 and explained that Jesus was the Suffering Servant. He no doubt used the common format of evangelism in the early church to Jews: he explained how Jesus of Nazareth fit into the Jewish Scripture.

This was the same pattern Peter used on the day of Pentecost when thousands of Jews flooded Jerusalem for the feast and discovered 120 Galileans speaking in their own languages.

It's the same pattern Paul will use. In each town he goes to, he starts either with the synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:14–49), or another place where Jews meet (Acts 16:13). He will preach and teach how Jesus fit the Old Testament Messianic prophecies.

The last two lines the Ethiopian was reading are a little harder to interpret. Modern translations like the NIV record them as, "Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The original text reads more like this: "...And his generation, who considers?" It means that the people of Jesus' time and place didn't care that He was wrongly convicted, tortured, and executed. This is clearly seen by how easily the priests convinced the people to demand Jesus' death."

As I round out this section, let me make this note: It is remarkable that, of all the passages the Ethiopian Official could have been reading in his chariot, that it was Isaiah 53. Do you think it was a coincidence?

And there was Philip, straight from a red-hot revival in Samaria, positioned to share the gospel with this high-ranking official. Consider the fact that Philip was versed enough that he

could pick up with that passage and direct the official to Christ.

As John Stott puts it:

“At a time when not one line of any New Testament document had been written, what scripture could any evangelist have used more fittingly as a starting point for presenting the story of Jesus to one who did not know him?” – John Stott

Philip had the awesome opportunity to share that it was Jesus alone who fulfilled the Isaiah 53 prophecy of the Suffering Servant offering up his life as a sacrifice for sin and justifying humans by bearing their iniquities.