The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Paradigm for Homosexual Inclusion?

Introduction

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-38) highlights the inclusion of a once marginalized group within the new covenant, the role of missionaries and other church leaders, and the Gospel’s movement from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth.” Recently, certain revisionist interpretations guided by the prohomosexual agenda have become more popular and have propagated new arguments for full-homosexual inclusion within the church and its leadership and the positive nature of homosexuality from a biblical standpoint. Various scriptures that prohibit homosexual acts and desires are reinterpreted to give the reader a favorable disposition towards homosexuality. In efforts to further stockpile biblical support for the condition, interpreters utilize Peter’s story of Gentile inclusion within the early church (Acts 10) and the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) to serve as a paradigm for full homosexual inclusion within the church. The church is wrong to exclude homosexuals based upon “biblical” arguments against them when the earliest church included Gentiles within the full fellowship of the new covenant community. Those who advocate homosexual inclusion accuse those who disapprove of the practice as compromising the gospel. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament theologian and scholar, remarks:

In the face of such an exclusionary inclination [exclusion of groups based upon sexual identity] rooted in fear and in inchoate anxiety, a church faithful to the gospel is summoned by the Lord of the church to challenge such exclusion and to practice an inclusiveness that is as broad as humanity and as deep as God's generosity. In the current "battle for the Bible," biblical texts and themes that witness to God's generous inclusiveness are not much known or cited among us: In Isaiah 56, the prophetic poem reflects an argument about inclusion and exclusion. The prophet witnesses to inclusion by

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insisting that foreigners and eunuchs - "others" in an ordered Jewish community - are to be welcomed precisely because the community gathered around God is "for all peoples." Also advocating the paradigmic argument, Rev. Paul C. Evans and Rev. Jonathan Loppnow assert:

The New Covenant accepts even those who had formerly not been acceptable because of their sexual or reproductive status. You do not have to bear children in order to be included in God's family! (Isa. 56:1-5; Matt. 19:12) The Old Covenant was very concerned about such things. Deuteronomy 23:1 would not allow castrated men to be a part of the Old Covenant yet in Acts 8 we are shown that the New Covenant sets that prohibition aside. The Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized, accepted into the New Covenant, while still being a foreigner and a eunuch! God didn't have to change this person in order to love and accept this person fully.

Without a thorough knowledge of what scripture systematically teaches about the issue of homosexuality, this argument becomes a convincing tool in the battle waging within churches and our culture concerning homosexuality. Analogies are a valuable tool for communicating truth. Richard Hays said, “In order to practice New Testament ethics…we will have to formulate imaginative analogies between the stories told in the texts and the story lived out by our community in a very historical setting.” Yet, analogies must be appropriate. The goal of this paper will be to briefly summarize Acts 8:26-38 in hopes of determining the purpose and intentions of the short narrative, ascertain why the eunuch was not allowed within the assembly of the old covenant community, and offer some final comments concerning the argument for homosexual inclusion.

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Acts 8:26-39

Acts 8:26-39 recalls the account of Phillip preaching the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch. An angel of the Lord instructs Phillip (vs. 26) to go south after he leaves Samaria. As he is traveling, he comes across an Ethiopian eunuch who is reading an Isaiah scroll out loud as he travels (vs. 27). Under the direction of the Spirit (vs. 29), Phillip approaches the chariot (vs. 30), asks the eunuch if he understands what he is reading, and the eunuch expresses his inability to do so without an able interpreter (vs. 32). Phillip commences to read the scroll to the eunuch and explains the gospel to the traveler (vv. 32-35). As a result of Phillip’s preaching, the eunuch becomes a believer and seeks baptism (vv. 36-38). After the baptism, the Spirit whisks the church leader away and both part ways joyfully (vs. 39).

Who was the Ethiopian eunuch? The text says that he was Ethiopian (Αἰθιόπων) indicating that he was from the ancient land of Cush which is south of Egypt.5 Because of his ethnic background, it is likely that the Ethiopian was black.6 The account is possibly accenting the gospel’s spread to a new ethnic group.7 The Ethiopian is also described as a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος). The word εὐνοῦχος should be taken to mean a physical eunuch (one who has been castrated) because it is given alongside the designation of the Ethiopian as a δικάστης, the latter

7 This view really depends on whether or not the Ethiopian is a Gentile, a Jew, or something in between.
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usually being translated as “chamberlain,” “court official,” or something similar. He also served under a female ruler which meant he was likely physically emasculated as was common practice in the ancient world. The Ethiopian is also described as a court official of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, and that he serves over all the treasure (ὁς ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γαζῆς). The emphasis is that the gospel is coming to a very important person who is coming from a faraway place for worship. The nature of the worship he would be involved with, the exact ethnic identity (Jewish proselyte, Gentile God-fearer, etc.), and whether or not the eunuch went back to his own country to found the Ethiopian Coptic church are beyond the intentions and limitations of this paper.

The placement of the story in relation to the rest of the book causes much controversy within Acts scholarship. The Acts 1:8 promise that the disciples would be Christ’s witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” seems to presumably entail a geographic spread of the gospel from a central place eventually towards the ends of the earth. Matters are further complicated with the recognition that Ethiopia is considered to be the “ends of the earth.” The gospel ends up going to the ends of the earth to a possible Gentile before Peter’s vision which makes Gentiles clean. The answer to such an interpretive predicament would be an acknowledgement that Acts 1:8 does not necessitate a precise geographical spread. The background of the phrase “ends of the earth” is a direct reference to Isa. 49:6 which, within

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8 Shauf, 764.
9 Ibid., 764.
10 Bock, 341.
11 Witherington, 290.
the book of Isaiah, means God intends salvation to extend or reach all peoples.\textsuperscript{12} Acts 2-9 demonstrates important steps of the gospel’s movement to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria with a foretaste of the future of the unfinished mission continuing after Acts closes with the gospel reaching the eunuch. Instead of viewing Peter’s vision that prompted the reception of Gentiles and Phillip’s preaching to the eunuch as in opposition, it is best if the reader sees the episodes working complementary as God instructs and leads the church on their mission. The book of Acts closes with a mission that has yet to be fully taken to the ends of the earth. However, the Ethiopian eunuch narrative gives a foretaste of a mission that will be completed by God’s agents in the world under his prompting and supervision.

**Eunuch in the OT & NT**

Deuteronomistic literature makes membership in the Israelite community a matter of paramount importance and effectively addresses its own demands and standards to men and women who were assumed to belong within this community of privilege.\textsuperscript{13} Much like other ANE cultures, eunuchs were not allowed in the cultic centers of worship within the Deuteronomistic code (Deut. 23:1 “A man with crushed [Heb. “bruised by crushing”] or severed genitals [Heb. “Cut off with respect to the penis]) may not enter the assembly of the Lord”). There is considerable debate as to whether this meant eunuchs were not allowed within the general assembly or population of Israel or if eunuchs were not allowed within the governing body of Israel. The phrase “assembly of YHWH” occurs in Deuteronomy only in the present chapter. Elsewhere the “assembly” is the whole of Israel gathered at Horeb ([4:10]; 5:22; 9:10; 10:4; 12


18:16) or in the case in Moab (31:30). The “governing body” view would entail that eunuchs were not allowed to be involved within a body that convened to conduct public business such as war, crowning a king, adjudicating legal cases, distributing land, and worship. If the governing assembly of Israel is intended, the ineligibility to serve in this assembly that represented the rule of God to the people politically is similar to the ineligibility of priests with genital or other defects to conduct services representing the people to God religiously (Lev. 21:18-20). Others however see the “assembly of YHWH” as including such governmental bodies as-well-as the general population of Israel. The “assembly of YHWH” in premonarchic Israel consisted of the central sanctuary at the pilgrimage festivals and in times of national crisis, and local assemblies with the structure of Levitical cities (both levels of religio-political structures). Others see the assembly to refer to the formal services of the temple or tabernacle. Regardless of the various views, eunuchs were excluded from some form of assembly within the nation of Israel.

The question necessary to ask is “why were eunuchs prohibited from the assembly?” Possible reasons for the exclusion of eunuchs within the assembly of Israel can be expressed in four categories: the wholeness of the individual is compromised, the sexual potency is diminished negating the blessing of family, the inability to own land, or the castration is associated with pagan rituals of various cultures around Israel. It is likely that eunuch exclusion within the assembly of Israel included more than one reason listed below.


17 McConville, 338.
A concern for wholeness and a rejection of that which appeared to mutilate nature and God’s design for creation bars priests from serving within the cultic practices of the tabernacle and temple (Lev. 21:17-20, 22:24). Physical ailments represented detraction from the goodness of nature and highlighted the fact that wholeness or unblemishedness was required of both the sacrifices and the person administering the sacrifice. Eunuchs were seen as “blemished.” Any serious impairment of sexual health represented a separation from the life-giving power of the living God (Exo. 23:26). In this patriarchal culture, the integrity of the body is strongly connected with the integrity of the capacity for fatherhood. Children were seen as a blessing from the Lord (Psa. 127:3-5; Pro. 17:6), barrenness was seen as a curse (Deut. 7:14; Isa. 54:1), and the Abrahamic covenantal promise of blessing all nations was connected with Israel’s reproductive abilities (Gen. 17).

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**Ritualistic Practices**

Castration or emasculation is ritually associated in the context of the worship of other gods. Self-laceration clearly played a part in the worship of others gods (Hos. 7:14; 1 Kgs. 18:28; Jer. 47:5). The exclusion of the eunuchs serves the desire to maintain a natural, healthy patriarchal cultic order through warding off alien nationalizing tendencies. Moabites, Canaanites, Ammonites, Hittites, and other pagan nations were excluded from the assembly to protect the holiness of the people of Israel.

**Land**

In preexilic times, kinship and land were vital factors in membership in the covenant community. A eunuch’s inability to produce or continue a family may have been factors in their exclusion from the assembly.

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19 Clements, 461.


21 McConville, 348.


23 Wright, 348.
The prohibition against eunuchs more than likely extended to those who voluntarily emasculated themselves for pagan, religious rituals. Most eunuchs were emasculated and were not born that way. Discussing the cultures around Israel, John Walton notes:

In certain cases of adultery or sodomy in the Middle Assyrian era, the guilty parties were turned into eunuchs by having their testicles crushed. Hittite texts attest to the presence of eunuchs in the “house of the king,” indicating that eunuchs played a major role in the royal structure of the ancient Near East and the Hittite administration, but they did not serve in the military…In Assyria eunuchs were disqualified from serving as priests, but they served in lower capacities. They could serve as a treasurer of the temple or (rarely) as a temple administrator…Eunuchs were normally made, not born. At an early age a child was castrated or their testicles were crushed. Captives from war or persons given in tribute were the main source for eunuchs.  

It is easy to understand why eunuchs were disbarred from the assembly of Israel if it was associated with such pagan practices and held the shameful taboo of military conquest.

Eunuchs are actually mentioned numerous times within the OT. The Septuagint translates as εὐνοῦχος 31 times. However, the word for eunuch actually carries with it the idea of court official instead of one who emasculates himself in many instances where it is used (Est. 2:3,14-15; Dan. 1:3; Jer. 38:7). This emendation leads readers to suspect that the LXX abides by the regulation of Deut 23:1 which excludes those who are mutilated from the cultus. Jeremiah 34:19 includes eunuchs within the group of people that the Babylonians would come to carry away into exile highlighting the fact that eunuchs (nonemasculated ones) may have served within the court of the king. Eunuchs mentioned in passages associated with exile, shame, and judgment


25 Schneider, 766.

26 Ibid., 766.
are people who would be emasculated by their foreign captors (2 Kgs. 20:18; Isa. 39:7). It would make little sense for their to be widespread shame associated with eunuchs (officials) who served in foreign courts (Joseph and Daniel were “officials” in foreign courts).

In Isa. 56, the author prophetically pronounces that it is obedience and not ethnic birthright that secures a place within God’s eschatological community. The promise applies to the foreigner who bemoans his state (“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”) as-well-as the eunuch (“Behold, I am a dry tree”). The prophet now explains why these two groups of people who have been accustomed to think of themselves as outcasts need no longer do so. The eunuch will one day be included in the people of God. The eunuchs will have a name “better than sons and daughters” that will never be cut off (vs. 5). However, it is highly significant that in vs. 4 acceptance of the eunuch is conditioned on three things: keeping the Sabbath, choosing the things that please God, and holding fast to the covenant. What about the prohibitions within the Deuteronomic code? John H. Oswalt comments:

What is the point of this law in the first place? Is it that the condition of emasculation is …intrinsically evil? Hardly. With respect to the eunuch, the purpose of the prohibition is clearly to teach the goodness of nature as we find it in creation. Sexuality is a good part of God’s creation, and while we are not to worship it, neither are we to condone its destruction. When one understands and incorporates that point into one’s thinking, one should not use the law to crush people under its weight.

Furthermore, it could be pointed out that the context of the passage is eschatological and would not flatly contradict the OT commandment. There is coming a day under a new covenant when those who are eunuchs will be accepted into the community of God. The Ethiopian eunuch in


29 Oswalt, 458.
Acts 8:26-38 would be an express example of the fulfillment of this OT promise. He is both a foreigner and a eunuch.

The NT mentions eunuchs (ευνόχοι) one time outside of Acts 8 (Matt. 19:12). After Jesus was questioned about divorce and nullified most of the current grounds for divorce within that time, the disciples remarked that “it is better not to marry (Matt. 19:10).” Jesus agreed but noted that not everyone can receive such sayings, but only those to whom it is given. Those to whom the gift of celibacy is given are eunuchs. Jesus lists three causes for those who are eunuchs: those who have been so from birth (birth defect), those who have been made eunuchs by others (castration), and those who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (voluntary celibacy). It is highly unlikely that the third group should be taken literally (voluntary physical emasculation) instead of figuratively (celibates e.g. Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul [1 Cor.7:6-9]).

Paradigmic?

Does the eunuch’s reception of the gospel in Acts 8:26-39 despite the prohibitions within the OT serve as an applicable paradigm for homosexual inclusion within the church today? It is very doubtful for a few reasons as noted below:

1. A meaningful discussion of homosexuality involves a laborious study of sexual ethics as outlined in the canon as a whole. Scripture, from Genesis onward, does not have a positive view of homosexuality (Gen. 1:26; Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 6:1-11). The paradigm assumes that revisionist interpretations that stand in opposition to the

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30 Schneider, 768.
traditional stance of both Judaism and Christianity are right. The fact that one was a
eunuch was never intrinsically immoral or opposed to God’s ethical framework.
Homosexuality does not share that fact. Is it that homosexuality is now no longer
considered to be immoral although it use to be? The analogy is too simplistic and does
not deal with the ethical connotations associated with homosexuality.

2. The analogy does not interact with the reasons why eunuchs were excluded from the
assembly in the first place. Most eunuchs became eunuchs. Are supporters of the analogy
willing to apply it to its farthest degree e.g. people become eunuchs, people become
homosexuals? Those who support the analogy assume people are born eunuchs or born
homosexual.

3. The nature of the exclusion would also add considerable conflict for the analogy. If
exclusion of eunuchs meant that the eunuchs could not serve in the governing bodies
and/or that they could not perform the rituals associated with the tabernacle or temple (as
opposed to being excluded from the general population), in what meaningful sense would
the analogy be comparable? The eunuchs would have a place within Israel all along with
the exception of the cultic practices and government.

4. Isaiah 56:1-8 envisions a time when the eunuchs were to be included within the people of
God. There is no such prophetic promise within the OT, Pseudepigraphal, or Apocryphal
texts concerning homosexuality. Jesus even recognized the existence of eunuchs within
Christian community (Matt. 19:12). Jesus made no such recognition for homosexuals and
was against the practice like most Jewish rabbis of his day (e.g. his frequent use of
πορνεω).
5. Isa. 56:1-8 also requires certain conditions (keeping the Sabbath, choosing the things that please God, and holding fast to the covenant). The statement that Rev. Loppnow and Rev. Evans assert, “God didn't have to change this person in order to love and accept this person fully!” is not true. There were and are requirements for any sinner that comes to God because of Christ’s work (faith and repentance). Jesus repeatedly warned others about sinning: he told the woman caught in adultery to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11) and he told a man who was healed of being blind that “see, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:14) When prostitutes, murderers, and other sinners come to Christ for salvation, there is an explicit command to not be those things any longer! Such people do not inherit the kingdom of heaven (1 John 3:15; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Rev. 22:15).

6. There is also an implicit assumption that the clean/unclean regulations of the Torah are equivalent to the abominations mentioned in the Torah. The early Church recognized that the clean/unclean ceremonial laws of the Torah were recapitulated through Christ’s teachings (Mark 7:19) and his active work within the church (Acts 10). In contrast, no acts listed as abominations (תועבה) within the OT (e.g. homosexual acts, idolatry, burning children as a sacrifice to false gods) are recapitulated or redefined in the NT.

Because of the various reasons listed above, interpreters should not find warrant for making such an analogy. The eunuch in Acts 8:26-38 being included within the new covenant people of God does not warrant full homosexual inclusion into the people of God without some moral stipulations. The story does however emphasize that God wants to save all kinds of people from all kinds of ethnic, sexual, social, and religious backgrounds (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet.
3:9). In consideration of such analogies, Isaiah’s warning of “woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isa. 5:20) is highly relevant.
Bibliography


