

The Ethiopian Eunuch

Sometimes isolating part of a story helps you grasp the larger context in which it's situated even though at first glance it seems out of place. Something had caught your eye in this little snippet that sticks with you for some reason or another. Therefore we follow through with it and sooner or later come to realize that what had grabbed our attention has much larger implications. All in all, it's an exciting experience. It can have a deeper impact upon us way beyond what the author had intended, he being a kind of unwitting catalyst. What's important, then, is how we run with this story and use it to make further connections, most of which lay beyond the author's intent.

Thus this little essay attempts (*essayer*: the French verb for try, attempt and from which 'essay' is derived) to unpack a charming little story at the beginning of the church's missionary endeavor which involves the disciple Philip and his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. The larger picture in which it's situated is Chapter Eight of Acts of the Apostles or when Saul had begun his fierce persecution of the fledgling church. All that was whirling about while Philip made the first notable conversion to the new faith with Saul soon to follow. And that turns out to be the biggest conversion story of them all not long after the stoning of Stephen the deacon. However, Saul's conversion does not tie in directly with the incident here; rather, his persecution of the church and conversion serve as two bookends in between which we find Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. This story has a happy conclusion, but we don't know the real ending. That's part of the beauty and mystery, one that can't help but make you speculate what happened upon the eunuch's return to Ethiopia.

The second part of this essay will shift gears from the Ethiopian eunuch's reading of the prophet Isaiah to the relationship Christ and his disciples had with their Jewish heritage. One example of this is evident immediately after Jesus' resurrection, namely, the two disciples walking and arguing as they made their way along the road to Emmaus, that is, fresh after Jesus' crucifixion. While having heard repeatedly Jesus speak of his passion and its foretelling by the Law and the prophets, they missed the boat completely. It was as though they never had paid attention to him. Yet the manner in which they comported themselves en route to Emmaus seems not terribly different from what exists today among Hasidic Jews. That is to say, we find them engaged in a vigorous debate about the recent death of their master. Although we have no information about this discussion (that's great, for it allows us to somehow be eavesdropping upon them), most likely one of them brought up Jesus' frequent rebukes of their inability to comprehend his mission foretold in the scriptures. Hopefully this can be a model for us to imitate by reason of its direct appeal of reading the sacred text in a new yet ancient way. At the same time we are to keep in mind the constant appeals Jesus himself makes to his disciples to search the scriptures in order that they may grasp what he is all about, especially as within the Jewish tradition.

In between the persecution of the minuscule Christian community by Saul and his conversion we find that “those (disciples) who were scattered went about preaching the word” [8.4]. Note the words *diaspeiro* and *dierchomai*, both prefaced with the preposition *dia* (through) signifying a certain thoroughness first of forced dispersal and then taking advantage of this by going about the task of evangelizing. And so the disciples and their associates used the *diaspeiro* as a means to *dierchomai*, having transformed a misfortune into an opportunity. Among this group we have Philip singled out as having gone to Samaria and the story of Simon the magician, all this transpiring while Saul “was ravaging the church” [vs. 3]. A bit later Simon and others with him (including Peter) decided to return to Jerusalem, the epicenter of Saul’s persecution, even though he was off temporarily to Damascus in order to round up Christians. There’s no mention of divine intervention about the disciples returning to Jerusalem. Perhaps they got wind from contacts in the city that they would be safe, albeit momentarily, while Saul was away. Little did they know that his being en route to Damascus was a prelude a conversion that would alter the church forever. So from that point of view or when Saul became Paul and wrote his epistles, any little story about the early church as with the Ethiopian eunuch before his conversion has a certain “primitive” value...one that is pre-Pauline and not colored by an atmosphere which soon came to pervade the church, that is, his epistles.

Interestingly after the disciples returned to Jerusalem (again, no specific mention of the reason why), we have a direct divine intervention by an angel—keeping in mind an angel or *aggelos* means messenger—who bade Philip to go elsewhere, actually the opposite direction of Jerusalem¹. Vs. 26 speaks of this and has a short but telling second sentence which reads “This is a desert road.” Most likely Philip knew it was such with the intimation that he would be safe from any of Saul’s agents who might be in the area even though Saul was far to the north. Also this desert road could have been the chief one connection Israel and therefore Asia with Egypt and the continent of Africa. That means he would encounter a wide variety of people traveling to and from the two continents, a fine opportunity to engage in some evangelization. If he hit it just right, some new converts would travel north as well as east while others would travel south and west, all spreading the Gospel. Actually it was a better place to make contacts than in the capitol of Jerusalem. Thus at some distance from Jerusalem while on that road Philip had a chance to ponder more closely Jesus’ message that applied not just to Jews but to all people.

The verse about this road is somewhat ambiguous, deliberately so, for the angel bides Philip just to go down to it, not necessarily to travel upon it. Chances are once he found a spot with a good view in both directions or close to some roadside lodging where travelers might stop to refresh themselves, an oasis, for example. There Philip could have gotten word about the Ethiopian eunuch’s identity and even his travel plans, he having “come to

¹ The Greek text reads literally “at noon,” *mesembria*. Some dictionaries say this word can be taken as noon or “parts towards noon” implying that the sun includes southward in that direction in the afternoon.

Jerusalem to worship” [vs. 8] which doesn’t necessarily exclude official business by order of Candace². After all, he was “in charge of all her treasure” [also vs. 8]. So if Philip could influence a high ranking non-Israelite official, he would have succeeded tremendously. Surely the fact that this man had access to an unlimited amount of money passed his mind as well. The Ethiopian was a mid-level official. That means he was high enough in the governmental ranks to influence others. Since the eunuch was going to submit a report directly to Candace upon returning home, he could put in a good word about this new sect that had originated in Israel. Not only that, perhaps the queen might help finance it. Philip himself might be invited to Ethiopia which is even further away from the grasp of Saul. Ethiopia would be a fine place of refuge should Saul succeed in wiping out the entire Christian community.

Perhaps the eunuch came from an established Jewish community in Ethiopia, hence the reason for a visit to Jerusalem and obviously the temple. It even could have been for celebration of the Passover or some other important Jewish feast. We never learn his identity which is just fine...otherwise it would detract from the sense of mystery as well as the exotic nature of far-off Ethiopia. Candace herself could have been Jewish or a convert who, unlike the queen of Sheba³, couldn’t make it to Jerusalem either by choice or otherwise. Thus she requested her chief eunuch to stand in for her. Because we get word of his encounter with Philip not long after Pentecost, it could be that the eunuch was in Jerusalem for that feast. Backing up even further, we have Passover, the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, though that might be stretching it. Regardless, Jerusalem was still abuzz about the recent events surrounding Jesus Christ and his disciples, that they claimed he had risen from the dead. For this reason his early followers were at odds with the Jewish authorities. All and all a volatile mix with the Roman authorities thrown in. While it was next to impossible for the eunuch not to have gotten wind of this, little did he realize that what he saw from the corner of his eye was soon to play a role in his conversion.

On the return trip the eunuch was reading an excerpt from the prophet Isaiah which Acts singles out as "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth" [Is 53.7-8].⁴ This excerpt comes from the larger context of the so-called fourth servant song. In fact, by this time on his

2 Candace supposedly is a general name for queens and queen mothers of Ethiopia, not necessarily a specific person.

3 Her story is found in First Kings Chapter Ten.

4 The **RSV** version reads: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?” The Greek or Septuagint (the one the eunuch was using) runs as: "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth.”

southward journey the eunuch may have read more of Isaiah. He may have not had the opportunity to go through the entire book since leaving Jerusalem but by certainly a good chunk of it, including his trip to Jerusalem and during intervals of free time coupled with visits to the temple. And it is at the temple that most likely the eunuch encountered a band of Christians proclaiming their message. At the instant when Philip encountered him he may even have been re-reading the two verses at hand over and over, *lectio divina*-like. By the way, reading in a chariot, either by a scroll or tablet, was no mean feat because of the continuous bouncing. Yet the Ethiopian was used to it as an experienced traveler.

The Greek verb for reading (as with regard to the Isaiah verses at hand) is *anagignosko* which also means to distinguish between, to recognize, to know accurately. The verbal root is *gignosko* (to know) prefaced with the preposition *ana* which can mean on, upon or upward. In sum, *ana* gives *gignosko* a reflexive action as we find with reading. Philip was on the side of the road watching the fairly heavy traffic as it moved both north and south. Surely the chariot caught Philip's attention though he might have had hesitation of approaching it because someone important was on board who would thrust him aside if he decided to approach it. In fact, this chariot⁵ may have been enclosed, giving the passenger (at maximum, only two could be in there) some privacy not unlike a much larger litter. Philip saw plenty of these shuttling well-to-do people north and south along with retinues of servants. One caught the Holy Spirit's attention (after all, the Spirit could see inside the chariot) and said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." The verb for "join" is *kollao*, to glue!⁶ That is to say, Philip is to glue himself to the chariot which means he'll be unable to un-stick himself, being there permanently or as long as the Holy Spirit wishes. There's no hesitation on Philip's part, sitting on the roadside ready to spring into action. So at the Spirit's prompting he leaped at the chariot in an attempt to glue himself to it, that's how determined he was. Furthermore, the driver had no intention of stopping for someone on the roadside...either for a beggar or robber whose companions might be hiding behind a nearby rock.

Apparently while making this mad-dash leap, counting on the driver to be too preoccupied with steadying the chariot, Philip could hear someone inside reading aloud which was a common practice before the invention of books. In this particular circumstance reading aloud was helpful to counter the constant swaying of the chariot, a way to keep one's eyes fixed upon the text, no mean feat. The eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Perhaps the driver of the chariot was his personal chauffeur, if you will, and was familiar with his master reading from the Hebrew scriptures. After all, they were returning from Jerusalem on a pilgrimage combined with business. In that short but dangerous instance

⁵ *Harma* is the word for chariot which generally applies to one used in battle, that is, with two wheels. However, the one at hand could be modified slightly to convey at least a driver and the passenger. It would have been quite difficult for the passenger to stabilize himself, let alone read and reading meant either a scroll or tablet.

⁶ Cf. Acts 5.13: "None of the rest dared join (*kollao*) them."

between running up to the chariot and “gluing” on to it, Philip’s mission came into perfect clarity. It all hit upon him in a fraction of a second when he heard the words of Isaiah...most likely in the Greek Septuagint.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch was so engrossed in the text that Philip’s sudden appearance—his gluing onto the chariot—didn’t phase him at all. In fact, he was half-expecting someone like this to appear which means there was no need for each man to introduce himself. Getting down to the business of interpreting the text was tantamount. At once the eunuch ordered his driver to pull over to the side so he and Philip could exchange words without being bounced around. The verb “understand” is *gignosko* used along with “reading” which, as noted above, is *anagignosko*. In other words, Philip said, “Do you *gignosko* what you are *ana-gignosko*?” As a further demonstration that both men are in earnest and don’t care about anything else, the eunuch responds to Philip’s question “How can I unless some one guides me?” The verb for “guide” is *hodegeo* or to lead (*ago*) on the way (*hodos*) and *hodos* which often is used in the Gospel for following Jesus Christ (‘I am the *hodos*, the truth and the life,’ Jn 14.6) as in Acts 9.2: “so that if he (Saul) found any belonging to the *Hodos*, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” So without knowing it, we may say that the Ethiopian eunuch had been looking for this *hodos* all along. Actually his being borne to and from Jerusalem in his chariot was a preparation to be on the *Hodos*.

The eunuch found himself in a paradox. Physically speaking, he was on a *hodos*, that is, en route home from Jerusalem. At the same time he was in a quandary by reason of not being able to comprehend the *hodos* laid out by the two verses from Isaiah (53.7-8). Now that Philip was present, he can listen to him read the verses again and see if this stranger could clear up his inability to grasp the text. Obviously the eunuch had been pondering over the larger context of Chapter Fifty-Three but got held up on these two verses. As noted above, he had been in Jerusalem not long after the death and resurrection of Jesus and certainly must have gotten wind of this which the budding Christian community was boldly proclaiming. In other words, the air was filled with what these people were saying which on one hand was tied into Judaism yet seemed to offer something new. That means the Ethiopian eunuch had to been influenced either directly with Christians or indirectly by reports about them. He was bothered over a connection between this servant song in Isaiah and facts he heard about how Jesus had suffered at the hands of the local authorities. What would it mean if the connection were true? He didn’t stay around Jerusalem long enough to find out but had to hasten back home. Once there he gave a report to the Ethiopian queen and her court about this religious tumult, not excluding Saul’s persecution.

It seems the words from Isaiah concur with what he had just heard about Jesus Christ. The text speaks of this “sheep” being led forcefully to his death which—and this must have been at the source of the eunuch being troubled—by those Jews with whom he had been dealing for many years both officially and as a pilgrim, the motive for this recent trip to Jerusalem.

Isaiah's two verses thus would put the Jewish authorities in bad light and the leader of the not yet officially designated Christians as a victim of their religious intolerance. In other words, the eunuch's religious world view was on the verge of being overturned. As soon as Philip heard about the eunuch's dilemma, it offered him to clear up confusion about Isaiah's words as applicable to Jesus Christ. It was more or less the same dilemma Philip encountered early on with the early Christian community. He sympathized with the Ethiopian and wanted to resolve his doubt, knowing that the two shared the same experience. In other words, we have here the perfect set-up for a conversion.

So when Philip hops up into the chariot at the eunuch's invitation...glues himself to it...he now repeats the two verses from Isaiah. The Hebrew and Greek (at least the Acts version) vary somewhat although chances the eunuch was reading the Greek Septuagint translation. For example, the Hebrew "and as for his generation, who considered?" differs from the Greek single sentence (question), "Who can describe his generation?" In other words, what is the source...lineage...of this mysterious person who suffered injustice? So the Ethiopian desired more than anything to know about this unidentified man. Of course, Isaiah doesn't stop there but continues with the suffering servant's vindication not just for himself but for Israel.

The eunuch asks Philip of whom Isaiah is speaking, either of himself or someone else. What's interesting is that the eunuch believes the identity of the man in question has something to do with the here and now. It isn't a matter of historical interest even though the man had been dead a couple of centuries. So at the heart of the matter is that this man's death might prefigure someone who is yet to come or recently has come. In fact, he may even be alive. Such was the message of the Christians. And the eunuch was leaning toward the latter due to what he recently heard about Jesus in Jerusalem. If it were otherwise, quickly he would have passed over the two verses without being disturbed. At this point Philip chimes in not as a know-it-all but as someone guided by the Spirit. Surely the eunuch, by reason of his piety, could tell that Philip was sincere. At any moment he could toss this unwanted intruder out onto the road. Phillip's genuineness is indicated by the words "Then Philip opened his mouth" which can be taken literally and then allowing what's inside to come out on its own minus personal interference. He is a new disciple, of course, having received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and must have used the occasion to see if he were worthy of his calling.

So we have Philip's mouth opened after which "beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." Philip repeated the same two verses from Isaiah, assessing the predicament straight away. *Euaggelizo* is the familiar verb for speaking about the good news which triggered recent memories the eunuch had about it while in Jerusalem when he got wind, albeit indirectly, of Jesus and his followers. *Euaggelizo* is the second time we find it in Acts, the first in a general sense: "And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" [5.42]. After all, Philip had the privilege

of being a disciple of Jesus whose words about his mission came into perspective at Pentecost. Obviously the “beginning” Philip embarked upon (*archo* is suggestive of first in a series where all the elements slam together in a certain order) was intended to take care of the Ethiopian’s most immediate concern, the identity of the person about whom Isaiah had written. Yes, what he had picked up about Jesus while in Jerusalem was true. Now everything fits together seamlessly. Philip proceeded to give an account of his days living with Jesus, words about his mission and identity to flesh out his identity. We don’t know how long the conversation lasted, but that is secondary. Now the eunuch could continue on his own with Isaiah and see how his words related to Jesus. That would be a take-off point for reading other books of the Hebrew scriptures.

Yet the story isn’t finished. Somewhere as the chariot rumbled southward to Ethiopia Philip spoke about baptism which Peter mentions first in Acts: “Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” [2.38]. He sounds pretty much like John the Baptist, a figure the Ethiopian may have heard about as well. Now the eunuch took the initiative, “What is to prevent my being baptized?” Philip doesn’t give an answer because there was nothing to prevent this from happening here and now. Although we have not precise ritual, the formula for baptism must have followed the command of Jesus in Mt 28.19: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Within the cramped space of a chariot these two men had undergone a profound transformation. The driver couldn't help but get tidbits of their conversation so perhaps he too was baptized shortly after his master. Indeed, it would be impossible for the Ethiopian to contain his joy as he rode along with him.

The rite of baptism is quick and simple, all summed up in the words “they both went down into the water” and “when they came up out of the water.” In other words, very little time was spent in the water itself. Note that up until now Acts mentions the “Spirit” or “Holy Spirit.” Right after the Ethiopian’s baptism comes the phrase “the Spirit of the Lord” (*Pneuma Kuriou*⁷) which can be taken as the *Pneuma* of Jesus Christ. This same *Pneuma* bade Philip to *kollao*...literally, to glue to...the eunuch in his chariot back in vs. 29. With the same abruptness this *Pneuma* un-glues Philip, if you will, from the eunuch. Not just that but the verb *harpazo* (‘caught up’) represents a separation as violent as *kollao* is as intimate a union. In between *kollao* and *harpazo* we have this strange discussion transpiring in the chariot. Judging by the almost nonchalant attitude of the Ethiopian when Philip “glued” himself to the chariot, it’s easy to pass over the intensity of discussion that transpired. It was more than a dialogue between two people, even a conversion story, if one could put it this way. While this is what actually happened and led, if we may play out the story a bit, to the conversion of the Ethiopian nation to Christianity, emphasis upon the intensity of conversation is the real lesson. At this stage of the early church’s history it’s very Jewish while at the same time very Christian. Here is where the two are still one in the

⁷ *Pneuma Kuriou*: used last in 1.9.

most positive sense before they went their separate ways. Another example will follow shortly, the road to Emmaus incident.

Both men have been riding along in the chariot for some time as they continued their conversation about Isaiah and Jesus. Suddenly the eunuch exclaimed, “See, here is water.” It was after the baptism that Philip experienced this *harpazo*, so quickly that the eunuch “saw him no more.” However, that posed no problem. He had been baptized and at last had gotten resolution about his long-standing dilemma concerning the Isaiah passages. So for him, the two worked hand in hand, baptism and *anagignosko*, the reading or *ana + gignosko* of scripture. As newly baptized, the eunuch could proceed with the rest of Isaiah. Philip recounted how Jesus rebuked him and the other disciples about their minds being closed to see how the scriptures spoke of him. In the fresh light of Pentecost, that was a thing of the past. As for Philip’s *harpazo*, there seems to be a correlation of sorts between it and the eunuch’s approach to *anagignosko*. At first you’d think Philip would hang around a while to shepherd the Ethiopian on his new path. The same holds true with the sudden appearance and disappearance of angels—*aggelos*—messengers whose task was to present the message and leave the scene immediately. During their intense conversation in the chariot both got to know each other on a level few people experience. Philip deemed the eunuch sufficiently trained, if you will, for continuing along the same road...the *hodos* as discussed above...but with a new orientation.

If Philip remained, things might have turned out differently. The eunuch would not be able to develop his *anagignosko* and become, if you will, as theologically literate as must have the case later in life. His baptism complemented this *anagignosko* which means he had become fully equipped to practice the new Christian *Hodos*. The incident of Philip’s *harpazo* can’t help but bring to mind that of the prophet Elijah⁸. It wouldn’t be surprising the eunuch thought of this as well much later on in life. Elijah had been associated with Elisha for some years though the latter doesn’t seem to have a clear idea about their impending separation. During their time together, Elisha learned about prophecy from his master and was deemed worthy to take up his mantle (cf. 2.14). This happened only when “the chariot⁹ of fire and horses separated the two of them” [vs. 11]. Elisha stood there, “and he saw him no more” [vs. 12].

Compare this interaction with the eunuch who “saw him (Philip) no more.” Both words apply as to the sudden departure of both men. Continuing a bit further, note their respective reaction. Elisha “took hold of his own clothes and rent them in two pieces” [vs. 12]. The eunuch “went of his way (*hodos*) rejoicing.” The eunuch had no further need of being informed by Philip. Their discussion, coupled with baptism, sufficed to propel the Ethiopian home with joy. Upon arriving everyone couldn’t help but notice a profound

⁸ 2Kings Chapter Two.

⁹ Obviously this chariot differed from the one belonging to the Ethiopian eunuch, but it’s interesting to simply be aware of a certain parallel.

change in his appearance. From that point on we have no information about what had happened, but at once the eunuch joyously informed his family, friends and finally, the queen herself. As for Philip, he “was found at Azotus” which was in the proximity of Gaza after which he went to Caesarea. This journey in the Spirit (literally) took an instant, perhaps as long as Philip’s conversation with the eunuch. During that timeless moment Philip could reflect upon what had transpired and hoped to use it as a pattern for future conversions¹⁰. After this, Philip passes off the scene completely, and Acts shifts gears to the conversion of Saul.

These somewhat belabored remarks about the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip form a pattern of sorts, the laying out of a way...a *hodos*...of relating to the tradition of both the Old and New Testaments. For another example pointing in this direction, namely, that vigorous discussion between the two in the chariot, consider the famous road to Emmaus incident. “While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them...What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk” [Lk 24 15 & 16]? The verbs for “talking and discussing together” are *homileo* and *suzeteo*. The first primarily means to be in the company of and secondarily to hold a conversation though, of course, both work hand-in-hand. The second connotes a seeking which is done together, *su-* representative of the preposition *sun* or *sum* prefaced to the verb. The same could be applied easily to the Ethiopian and Philip in the chariot. The only difference is the means of getting around. Though there are several historical locations of Emmaus, one of the “more authentic” is midway between Jerusalem and what’s now Tel Aviv. Some people have doubts if this could in actuality be the place because of the distance involved because it's more than a day's walk from the capitol. No problem there. When you have two or more Jews vigorously engaged in *homileo* and *suzeteo*, more distance could be covered than under normal circumstances. Some exaggeration, perhaps, but to make a point of the intensity involved, an intensity that shows no sign of slacking over time.

So while this *homileo* and *suzeteo* is going full tilt, Jesus pulls in gently, if you will, not unlike a vehicle entering a highway from an on-ramp. That’s the idea behind *sumeporeuomai* or “drew near” which, like *suzeteo*, has the preposition *sun* (*sum*, with) prefaced to the main verb. The disciples weren’t disposed to see Jesus or anyone else for that matter unless he intervened which he did, not as politely as we’d expect. Of course, their discussion was centered around the recent death of Jesus. Although broken-hearted, they must have been trying to recall those instances when Jesus spoke about his death and other activities as fulfilling scripture. To do this was, if you will, in the very DNA as being Jews. He had said this over and over so much that if the disciples had forgotten anything else Jesus said, they would remember those words. After all, it’s natural for Jews to argue over such matters even if they weren’t educated as the disciples. To consider them as not

¹⁰ It seemed that from early on Philip had keen insight. For example, Nathaniel asked him somewhat sarcastically, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip’s response was not to counter with an argument but simply to say “Come and see” [Jn 1.49]

worthy of such argumentation would be demeaning.

“What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” Truly loaded words in the context. Once Jesus pulls in, as it were, and runs parallel with the two, again being unnoticed, he waits for an opportunity to ask a question. It’s harder than you think because the *homileo* and *suzeteo* is so thick that Jesus had to be attentive to their goings-on before making the incision. But before that, Jesus took some delight, even humorously so, at what the disciples were so earnestly discussing. It was an education for him, to be sure, not a disappointment. He knew from the start that they wouldn’t be able to grasp his words about fulfilling scripture unless something ultra-dramatic were to happen, and that event would lay in the future...in other words, Pentecost. At least he was pleased with their heart-felt concern and loyalty even though most fled from Calvary. But *homileo* and *suzeteo* is so endemic to their identity that Jesus was thrilled they haven’t let it go. It showed promise for future evangelization.

Now comes the intervention which had to take place at precisely the right time and done so instantly: “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” Because it’s inserted so carefully and painlessly without the two disciples taking notice of the speaker, it deserves picking apart. The noun “conversation” interestingly is rendered as *tines hoi logoi* or “what words” and without a doubt, the air was filled with *logoi*. The verb “are holding” is *antiballo* which translates literally as throw (*ballo*) in return (*anti-*). This word captures perfectly the *homileo* and *suzeteo* among them which, of course, applies to the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip. *Antiballo* is a rather vigorous tossing back and forth which keeps up until one man, if you will, drops the ball. This earnestness, as intense as it is, is intensified by the preposition *pros*, “with each other.” *Pros* is indicative of a direction toward-which. As soon as one disciples receives a *logos*, at once he tosses (*anti-ballo*) it back (*pros*) to another disciple, and so round and round go the *logoi*. Thus the conversation (and that’s putting it mildly) goes *pros->pros->pros->* ad infinitum.

All this is taking place...obviously...on the road to Emmaus. The verb for “as you walk” is *peripateo* which consists of the verbal root *pateo*. It connotes a treading or trample on—a vigorous walk reflective of the equally vigorous *homileo* and *suzeto*—prefaced with the preposition *peri* or “around.” While the disciples (there were only two of them) were literally walking or better, treading around, they formed such a tight-knit conversation that virtually nothing from the outside could penetrate it. That’s why Jesus had to be both discreet and quick to interrupt the two men. Taking this focus on prepositions a bit further, we could say that the two were *anti-ballo* (with *pros*) while *peri-pateo*. In other words, they went fiercely back and forth, *anti* and *pros* being somewhat similar, their use together as intensifying the action. And this occurs within a context of *peri-pateo* or of walking round in a circle.

“And they stood still looking sad.” Such was the response to Jesus’ question. All the intense

action presented as *homileo*, *suzeteo*, *antiballo* along with the prepositions, etc., grind to a sudden halt (*histemi*, ‘stood still’¹¹) with a silence so intense that it could be cut with a knife. *Skuthropos* characterizes the discussion or perhaps better, the disciples became *skuthropos* upon being stopped so abruptly, this adjective connoting gloominess and hence darkness.

From this point Cleopas takes the initiative asking Jesus almost indignantly, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” Quickly Cleopas assesses the question posed by Jesus and insults him indirectly with the word “visitor” or *paroikos* which consists of the root *oikos* (house) prefaced with the preposition *para* (beside)...literally as beside the house meaning not within in and therefore not part of the family. Jesus responds somewhat casually, “What things?” Although this must have annoyed the two disciples, immediately they launched into a kind of tirade about what had happened, not even allowing Jesus to get a word in edge-wise. Rightly after they finished, each trying to outdo the other, they must have felt some relief getting their story off their chests. Jesus continues with “O foolish me and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” At this point their suspicion must have been aroused, for these were very familiar words while they have been with Jesus. The two adjectives here are “foolish and slow” or *anoetos* and *bradus*, literally without understanding and sluggish. Both are in reference to the disciples’ inability to comprehend what the prophets said of Jesus, words he will echo later with “These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law...the Torah...of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Both parallel Jesus’ similar words just before entering Jerusalem to be put to death: “everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished” [18.31].

So the idea here is that the disciples failed to comprehend what Jesus spoke of himself in relation to the three major parts of Judaism: Torah, Psalter and Prophets. That means they had failed miserably in seeing how all three pointed to Jesus Christ. If there is any “proof” for the Holy Spirit, their intense blindness is it. The disciples couldn't make sense of all this, even with the help of Jesus before or after his resurrection. In other words, we're dealing with an obtuseness so dense something “spiritual” needs to intervene, hence the need for Pentecost.

So let's say at some future point the Ethiopian eunuch reads about the road to Emmaus incident. He would have smiled sympathetically and like Philip, wished he were present to have run up to the two men, Isaiah in hand, and expound how it related to Jesus. In fact, he may be doing something not unlike it now, attempting to convert his fellow Ethiopians. The eunuch sees two frightened men much like he had been so recently which impels him to shed light on the suffering servant. The major difference is that he didn't know Jesus but would have recognized him on the road at once. In other words, he would have been a source of embarrassment to the disciples' ignorance. Such might have been the Ethiopian's mission

¹¹ *Histemi* is the simple verb to stand (not still).

that goes unrecorded, and for this very reason fills us with a sense of mystery. He had become very much like an *aggelos* mentioned above. It is the nature of a messenger to deposit what had been entrusted to him faithfully and leave the scene at once. Those with whom he communicated were in time able to share his that *anagignosko* or reading the scriptures and having the ability interpret them correctly by reason of baptism. Thus *anagignosko* and baptism are part and parcel of the same gift.

St. John's Gospel concludes with what seems an exaggeration: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books¹² that would be written." Such a statement is to be taken in light of reading Torah, if you will, which is a different way of doing *lectio divina*. Thankfully after his resurrection Jesus mentions Torah, prophets and psalms—the whole corpus of Judaism—for by this he offers an infinite amount of room and ability to discover new aspects about him that otherwise wouldn't be available. Such endless interpretation—and keep in mind this doing Torah as what they might do in a yeshiva—gets off the ground, so to speak, with the Emmaus incident, amplified by the Ethiopian eunuch's experience. It may be compared with the women who first witnessed Jesus' resurrection. Awesome as that was, in a way is secondary to Emmaus. Jesus rose and appeared to the women, pretty much a cut-and-dry event. But with Emmaus, he re-introduces the threefold Torah, prophets and psalter which will offer that infinite interpretation of his life and mission. In other words, it is far more than a cut-and-dry event.

+

12 Books here equal scrolls, so they take up much more room.