



The transgender bookworm

David Hines © 20 May 2018

Intro

The book of Acts has a lot of over-the-top stories about the Christian gospel spreading out to other nations. There's one about Peter dreaming of a Roman Centurion called Cornelius, who just happens to be dreaming about a man called Peter. There's an earthquake that breaks open the prison two apostles have been locked into, but the apostles just stay in jail, singing. About a dozen of these stories altogether.

But the most unusual of them is the **transgender bookworm, in Acts chapter 8 v26-40**). He was riding a chariot across the desert, reading to himself from the book of Isaiah. Which just happens to be the very book in the Bible that welcomes transgender people.

How did all these pieces come together?

For starters, the evangelist Philip was walking along a desert road, he saw a eunuch coming along in a chariot, but how did he know the man in the chariot was a Eunuch? The answer is that eunuchs had a distinctive high pitched voice, like a woman's voice but much more resonant.

The second question is how did Philip hear this loud high-pitched voice? And the answer to that is this man was reading aloud all by himself.

And that solves this third mystery: how did Philip know the eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah ... the answer was the early Christians knew and loved the prophet Isaiah So Philip recognised the book of Isaiah, and could not resist

running up to the chariot to discuss it with another fan of the prophet Isaiah.

There were a lot of Isaiah fans in the first century; it is the most frequent book found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. So there was a nice connection between Philip and this eunuch.

Why a Eunuch?

What was so special about a eunuch in those times?

Well, a eunuch was a man who had been castrated. Most eunuchs were slaves and their owners cut off their sexual organs when they were about nine years old, so they would grow up with no sex drive, so they could be trusted to guard a harem, or to guard a queen, which is what this eunuch did; he was the finance minister for the Queen of Ethiopia.

Being a eunuch also meant these high ranking slaves could be trusted not to have children of their own, so if they rose to high office, as this man had; they would not be able to start a royal family of their own.

Castration was a gruesome fate for a young boy; more than half of them died through loss of blood. Those who went through it faced excruciating pain.

But those who survived could rise to jobs requiring high trust, high strength, high intelligence.

In some Jewish circles, eunuchs were regarded as defective, and shameful, so were not allowed to be accepted as converts to Judaism.

This particular eunuch **was** attracted to the Jewish faith, and that is the main drama of this story. **He liked Judaism, but he would not have been allowed to become a Jew.** These people were referred to as god-fearers. Many of the first Christians were godfearers. In Judaism they were on the fringe ...

However, in the Christian churches they were welcomed as full members, and that's what this story is all about. He was on the

fringe of Judaism, but was about to be welcomed by a friendly Jew called Philip.

This god-fearer was, in fact on his way back to Ethiopia, after a visit to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. So it's ironic, that he was reading this scripture aloud, as leaders used to do in the temple. But as a eunuch, he could not read it aloud in the temple himself.

But he was rich enough to have his own copy of the Isaiah scroll, and he must have enjoyed reading it to himself.

The NRSV commentary on this passage says the author, Luke, who wrote this story, probably knew the book of Isaiah well himself... So he would know those words about Jesus being despised.

And the commentary says, that in chapter 56 of Isaiah, a large part of the chapter (vv 3-8) is looking forward to a day when eunuchs would be welcomed in the temple, and so would people from other races, and they would all join in praising God in the temple.

This is not the **only** mention of eunuchs in the New Testament. Paul sarcastically says to Christians who wanted to be circumcised: why don't you go all the way and make eunuchs of yourselves **So Paul reflects the idea that eunuchs were defective.**

But **Jesus reflects the view that eunuchs were dedicated, trustworthy people:** and says there were some people who had been made eunuchs by others; but there were some who had made **themselves** eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. This is a mystery verse, and it's still debated by Bible scholars whether Jesus meant it literally, or whether he meant someone who had turned down family life, so they could serve the kingdom of God.

Jesus may even have included himself, as someone who had turned down family life for the sake of the kingdom.

[There are several hints of that in the gospels; some scholars reject this saying no Jewish rabbi would see celibacy as an option. But Jesus was not an ordinary rabbi. Some members of the Essene sect did live celibate lives.]

But whatever interpretation you take, it suggests Jesus didn't see being a eunuch as sign of disgrace, but a sign of dedication.

And this story ends ends with the eunuch politely asking Philip ... is there any reason why I could not be baptised? And Philip says: no reason at all, and he baptises him. Philip then gets magically whisked away, like the prophet Elijah did. And the eunuch goes on his way, rejoicing!

I take that to mean he was rejoicing because he had been accepted as a full member of the church, just like Jesus, who also was seen as a figure of disgrace, because of the way he died. He was despised and rejected, Isaiah said. Well eunuchs were also despised and rejected in some circles.

I think it's A beautiful story when you know the background.

Looking to the churches' later attitude to eunuchs

Looking to the future, the Christian church did not regard celibacy as a sign of disgrace (almost the opposite)

And in 18th century Italy, eunuchs were prized for their voices; the Vatican had a choir of eunuchs, and some poor families had their young boys castrated, so they could look for a career as opera singers, or professional choir members.

When I read this I wondered why the Vatican didn't just have women to sing these high notes. But while eunuchs had the vocal chords of a woman, they also had the resonance and lung-power of a man, and this was prized. A bit like a counter-tenor, maybe.

I would see castration as an awful thing to impose on your son, if he didn't want to be an opera singer!

But it clearly had a positive value for some people.

So I would say, eunuchs were a kind of transgender people made for the service of slave-owners. And they were regarded as second-class citizens in some circles but were honoured and welcomed in others.

And today?

And today, I think we rightly welcome people of all sexual lifestyles, including those who choose hormone treatment or gender change surgery.

This story is almost too good to be true, especially Philip being spirited away by God.

But if this story is fiction – it is still based on fact.

Because the church undoubtedly did welcome people of all races, and all gender differences. So, it is still relevant today.

But there is another historical mystery in this story.

Did people really read the Bible out loud to themselves in the first century? It doesn't seem to make sense. But if they didn't read out loud, this story could not have happened.

This problem is still being debated by historians.

And I support the historians who say, this was a transition period when reading was changing from being a public practice, done in church and other meetings, and a private practice as it is now.

In between there were a few educated rich individuals who had their own copies of the books of the time, and would talk out loud to themselves while they were reading.

Supporting this theory is another unusual Christian leader in the **fourth** century, Bishop Ambrose of Milan.

He was famous for reading the Bible to himself silently, and visitors to his home were surprised by this ... as if he was the first person to do this.

Another Christian leader, St Augustine wrote in his diary that “when Ambrose used to read, his eyes were drawn through the pages, while his heart searched for its meaning. However, his voice and tongue were silent. Often when we were present – we saw him reading in this fashion, silently and never otherwise.”

That seems clear evidence to me, that silent reading was a new development.

Ironically, Ambrose himself had made himself a eunuch, so he could dedicate his life to God.

Changes in technology

This is only one of a series of changes in the technology of reading

There was another big change in the 9th century in China when woodblock printing meant you could print a whole page at a time. You could theoretically have printed a whole book that way, but it was very slow work making the woodblock.

[And the Chinese also invented movable type; but that also was an invention before its time, because Chinese has thousands of characters, so, again, it would have been very difficult to set up a whole page for printing.]

Those problems were solved in Europe in the 15th century, when Gutenberg made movable type, so you could set up a page in few minutes rather than a few days. And like all Europeans, he used the Latin alphabet, which only had about 26 characters, give or take. The Chinese didn't have a small alphabet, so though they invented printing, they couldn't do it economically.

And this suddenly had huge changes, similar to the change that led to people reading the Bible to themselves.

Suddenly

- lay people could afford their own copies of the Bible and that meant
- they could challenge their preachers' interpretation.
- Suddenly lay people could read the prayers in church; because everybody could buy a copy of the prayer book. That was the good news.
- But the bad news was that heretical books became cheaper too.... So it would be ridiculous to read them out loud. Dangerous even:
- You could get arrested or burned at the stake for reading the wrong books. Or reciting the wrong prayers.
- Suddenly criticism and censorship took off as well.
- And it took different forms in different countries, with wars of religion between them.
- **All because it became cheaper to read and write.**

Explosion of technology

And the same explosion of communication technology continued with a vengeance in our time, starting in the 19th century.:

- Telephones, brought us in touch at a distance, and even illiterate people could use them.
- Then radio brought people in touch without wires. But this included people in enemy countries, so spies could pass their information instantaneously.
- And this meant you could get arrested in wartime, for having an international radio and speaking to the enemy.
- Radio also meant you could speak to millions of people at the same time. Someone pointed out that Hitler could not have achieved control as he did without radio.

And further information changes in our time.

- The internet suddenly meant that even ordinary people could speak to the nation. You didn't need to own a radio station. And in china, where marion and I visited a few years ago ... we found our cellphones were jammed by the

government. We could still send emails, but not Facebook messages.

- I remember my own first steps in modern communications, in 1959, when I learned to touch type; I was one of very students who could do that. But now all students can touch type.
- And along with other ministers in the 1960s, I discovered how to use a Gestetner to print out mass copies of my church services; so we stopped using the traditional Methodist church services.
- Suddenly, every minister could print out his own prayer sheet for his or her congregation!
- And every congregation could throw it away when they got back home.

My point is: **All these changes in technology changed the balance of power;** they all made it easier to get your ideas out to other people; and they all threatened other people whose ideas were being challenged.

- I remember being overtaken by technology in 1988 when I bought a word processor, so I could send letters to dozens of people, and edit my sermons without needing to type them out half a dozen times till I got it right.
- But the very first time I used it, I realised it was already out of date. Its screen was too small; you had to spool back line after line to make a change. So I really needed a computer. And I needed access to other people's ideas, not just my own. So I needed the internet
- Cellphones were another major step. It seemed like only a small step at the time Because you could always phone people when you got back home from work.
- But suddenly - just in the last decade or so - cellphones overtook landlines and became our major way of communicating with people. You could contact them at any time or any place.
- But instead of this being incredibly helpful, it became incredibly intrusive, - until
- The next step was texting ... and suddenly we were respecting other people's privacy and this overtook

phoning in the last two years, as our main way of staying in touch. Somebody did I survey, and found that we were doing more texting than calling on our phones.

- Many people criticised cellphones, and still do, saying it's unsociable to have a conversation with someone who is absent, ignoring people who are in the same room as you. But that ignores the isolated person, like the eunuch ... who has very few people who are like him, and wants to be encouraged by distant people, even a prophet who lived before his time. If you are despised and rejected, you may need support from things you read. The cellphone is no more antisocial than a book.
- Rather than say: turn that cellphone off; why not say ... how is your friend Mary doing today? Why not share your message, as Philip did with the Ethiopian eunuch. The book of Isaiah didn't divide them Philip and the Eunuch; it united them.
- I was a very unsociable person till about five years ago, I opened a Facebook account so I could help Marion publicise her dramas and soon I had hundreds of new friends worldwide
- Some of them are inspiring and supportive; others are a nuisance and have to be disciplined ... but all these steps in communications technology have expanded our lives. Sometimes for good, but also for bullying, and commercial exploitation..
- And the latest development ... people wanting stop others using cellphones when they are driving. Which takes us back to this eunuch who was not only driving while he was reading, but was picking up strangers. Chariots, I add were even more dangerous than cars.... And the romans had stopped using them in war several hundreds of years earlier.... Because they were hard to steer, and kept crashing. They kept using them in chariot races, because they were very exciting.
- And they also kept them for ceremonial use for VIPs.

And books are still a piece of technology that we don't explore as much as we could. Suppose you are the only person in your family who likes science, or history, or odd-ball children's

stories ... why not visit your local library And read them on your own, or share them with others.

I got my children's story from the library, and this information about eunuchs from the internet. Why not?

Why restrict your social life to the handful of people in front of you ... when there is a whole world out there wanting to hear us, teach us, entertain us, and listen to us in return?

The early Christians used handwritten scrolls extensively, and handwritten letters ... both new technology.

And because of this their message spread internationally, they made friends across social lines, and kept in contact internationally.

So the Ethiopian eunuch was not a misfit: he was a trend-setter.

We should take a leaf out of his book.