

“They’re Real People! — Philip”

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Acts 8:4-8

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city. .” [ESV]

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It took a beheading and a stoning to break up and scatter the spiritual Messianic ghetto which had been forming in Jerusalem. James, son of Zebedee, brother of John, and Stephen, a Greek speaking Jew who attended the *Assembly of the Freedmen Synagogue* in Jerusalem, had both met an untimely end — James beheaded, Stephen stoned. This sparked a *pogrom* of persecution spear-headed by a young member of the Sanhedrin — Saul.

It was bad enough, in the view of the Sanhedrin, that the Apostles were accusing them of murder when they crucified Christ, but the preaching about the resurrection of Jesus, and the acceptance of it by the masses, demanded an angry response, even threat of death, for daring to follow this new Messianic Movement. With a heightened sense of self-preservation, the new believers vacated the city.

We first meet Philip at his ordination as a “waiter” [i.e., deacon]. We should not confuse this Philip with the Philip of Bethsaida, who had been a disciple of John the Baptist. [John 1:43-44] This Philip, along with the recently deceased Stephen, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus, was a Greek-speaking Jew set apart by the disciples to serve the tables for the poor, leaving the Apostles (including Philip of Bethsaida) free to continue to preach about the death and resurrection of Jesus. [Acts 6:5-6; 8:1]

It is clear that Philip was much more than merely a “waiter,” however. As part of the great emigration caused by the persecution, Samaria comes to view. Jesus had commanded them to spread the Gospel throughout Judea, *then Samaria*, and from there to the rest of the world. [Acts 1:8.]. Philip returns to the story, but with a new profession — he is now an *evangelist*.

The Samaritans play an evil role in the history of Israel. According to the history recorded in 2 Kings 17 (and by Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 9.277-291), these people were exiled from other lands, particularly a region called Cuthah, sent to Samaria to replace the Israelites who had been exiled elsewhere by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The Assyrian King, Sargon II, recorded this in his annals [See Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 284-285.]. This is also why the Jews called them Cutheans.

According to their own traditions, they are descendants of the tribes of Benjamin and Manasseh who remained in the Samaritan region after the Assyrian destruction. DNA tests of the Samaritans who still exist as a distinct ethnic group today show them to have both Jewish and eastern asian roots. This seems to agree with both stories.

The relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews through history is rather checkered. To call someone a “Samaritan” in the time of Christ was a deep slander. There was good reason for this. When the exiled Jews returned from their 70-year exile in Babylon, they found the Samaritans already firmly entrenched. When they began to rebuild the walls of the city of

Jerusalem, the Samaritans opposed them, both by physical harassment, and by political attacks in Persia. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the whole story. This gave rise to the phrase “Keeping a Sword and a Trowel” — the rebuilders kept both a sword at hand to defend themselves against marauding Samaritans, and a trowel in the other hand to apply the mortar for the masonry. This marks the beginning of the centuries-long hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews.

This resulted in two temples, one in Jerusalem for the Jews, and one in Mount Gerizim for the Samaritans.

To make matters worse, when Antiochus IV Epiphanes began his *pogrom* against the Jews in the 2nd century, the Samaritans signed an alliance with him, and joined him in his attacks upon the temple and Judaism. This sealed the hatred between the two ethnic groups.

The Samaritans are mentioned nine times in the Gospels. It was a Samaritan who played the key role in the parable of the Good Samaritan. [Luke 10:30-37] One of the ten lepers Jesus healed, the one who came back to thank him, was a Samaritan. [Luke 17:16].

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman of Sychar, whom He met at the well, describes the antipathy clearly; the woman asked Him:

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”
[John 4:9 ESV].

John added a parenthetical comment — “(For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” This was obvious!

Jesus sat by Jacob’s Well — the same one which had been dug by Jacob a millennium before. (That well still exists; it’s water still flows and is delicious! You may drink from it today, should you visit Israel.). This setting helps us to understand what Jesus said to her —

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given living water.”
[John 4:10].

Jacob’s well had flowed unceasing for a millennium; it was truly a “living well.” Jesus compared Himself to that ancient well! His “water of life” was eternal, unquenchable!

The result of the encounter was the transformation of the faith of a whole community as they recognized Jesus as the Messiah who had been promised, not only in the Jewish Scriptures, but the Samaritan Scriptures as well.

We learn nothing more about the Samaritans until Philip landed there in his flight for his life from Jerusalem. The “Living Water” Jesus described three years before with the woman of Sychar at Jacob’s well was about to flow in an overflowing rush.

“Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Messiah. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.” [Acts 8:5-6 ESV]

What had happened in Cornelius the Centurion’s house when Peter shared the Gospel there [see Acts 10-11], was now happening among the Samaritans.

“For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.” [Acts 8:7-8 ESV]

Luke’s narrative continues with the introduction of a Shaman named Simon, a practitioner of the dark magic arts. Like all charlatans of his type...

“...he had practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.” [Acts 8:10 ESV]

Simon watched in amazement as the people “believed Philip as he preached the good news

about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and were baptized, both men and women.” [Acts 8:12]

“Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.” [Acts 8:13 ESV]

Things went well until Peter and John came down from Jerusalem. [Note: yes, even though Samaria is northwest of Jerusalem, Jerusalem is on a mountain range, while Samaria is in a valley — you must literally “go down” to Samaria from Jerusalem!]

Even though Philip had baptized the people, they had not received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John “laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.” [Acts 8:17]

Simon, still thinking like a practitioner of cheap, slight-of-hand magic tricks, offered some money in order to buy the secret behind the “magic trick” which resulted in this ecstatic experience. Peter’s condemnation was direct and to the point: “May your silver perish with you...” [Acts 8:20]. [Note: This attempt to purchase a power or position in the church is the source for the word “simony” to this day!]. Simon wisely asked for prayer and forgiveness. [Acts 8:24]

The next time we see Philip in action, he was instructed by an angel to go to the road running from Jerusalem to Gaza to hitch a chariot ride with a passing dignitary from the Nubian court of Queen Candace.

It is here that we first hear Isaiah 53 being applied to Jesus. The eunuch asked Philip “About whom does the prophet say this?” The door was open to share the Gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. [Acts 8:26-39] That eunuch became the founder of what are now the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo [“United”] Christian churches in Ethiopia, now numbering around 48 million members.

Philip continued to preach the Gospel from town to town, from Gaza all the way up the Mediterranean coast to Caesarea. We meet him again in Acts 21:6, still living and working in Caesarea. Paul, on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his last missionary journey, stayed in Philip’s home for several days. He met Philip’s daughters there, too, who were prophetesses. It was there that a prophet named Agabus warned Paul that he would be arrested in Jerusalem.

While Philip disappears from history at this point, his legacy remains in the Orthodox Churches based in each of the towns in which he preached the Gospel. He is remembered on October 11 every year in the churches which originated through his ministry.

For Further Contemplation:

This Ethiopian represented a large class who need to be taught by such missionaries as Philip—men who will hear the voice of God and go where He sends them. There are many who are reading the Scriptures who cannot understand their true import. All over the world men and women are looking wistfully to heaven. Prayers and tears and inquiries go up from souls longing for light, for grace, for the Holy Spirit. Many are on the verge of the kingdom, waiting only to be gathered in... God’s faithful people have always been aggressive missionaries, consecrating their resources to the honor of His name and wisely using their talents in His service... Everyone who has received Christ is called to work for the salvation of his fellow men. [Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 109, 110.]