

## ‘Neither Male nor Female’: The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40\*

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There is a widespread assumption in Acts’ scholarship that the Ethiopian eunuch is an elite official who reflects Luke’s larger interest in high-status individuals. Such an assumption, however, overlooks the inextricable connection between status, gender and ethnicity in the Greco-Roman world, and how the eunuch’s repeated designation as ‘the eunuch’ would have affected his status in particular. This article thus problematises the depiction of the eunuch as an elite convert by contextualising the eunuch’s identification as both a ‘eunuch’ (εὐνοῦχος) and an ‘Ethiopian’ (Αἰθίοψ). Overall, the eunuch is an ambiguous figure who embodies the boundary-crossing nature of the gospel itself.

**Keywords:** Ethiopian, eunuch, masculinity, gender, ethnicity, Candace

Reading Acts with respect to ancient constructions of masculinity is a current lacuna in Acts’ scholarship. Although masculinity studies proliferate in the field of classics and are being increasingly generated among biblical scholars, those who interpret Acts in light of ancient masculine norms amount to a surprising few.<sup>1</sup> Even more surprising is that the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 – who

\* I thank the following people who read various versions of this article and provided invaluable feedback: Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Ross Wagner, Jacqueline Lapsley, Meredith Riedel, Jason Sturdevant and Kavin Rowe. I also thank my research assistant Lynda Berg for her careful editorial work, as well as the participants of the Book of Acts session at the 2011 SBL in San Francisco, where I presented an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> For a brief summary of masculinity studies in the field of New Testament, see S. D. Moore, ‘O Man, Who Art Thou ... ?’ *Masculinity Studies and New Testament Studies*, *New Testament Masculinities* (ed. S. D. Moore and J. C. Anderson; SemeiaSt 45; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 1–22. For works that treat gender and masculinity in Acts, see esp. M. R. D’Angelo, ‘The ANHP Question in Luke-Acts: Imperial Masculinity and the Deployment of Women in the Early Second Century’, *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (ed. A.-J. Levine with M. Blickenstaff; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 44–69; T. Penner and C. V. Stichele, ‘Gendering Violence: Patterns of Power and Constructs of Masculinity in the Acts of the Apostles’, *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. A.-J. Levine

arguably lacks a potent symbol of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world – remains largely unexamined by those who do attend to gender in Acts.<sup>2</sup> This oversight appears to stem from the widespread assumption that the eunuch, as an official to the queen of Ethiopia, is a personage of great importance who simply reflects Luke’s larger interest in high-status individuals.<sup>3</sup> The eunuch, so the argument goes, is a ‘respectable’ convert who furthers Luke’s larger apologetic purposes of making ‘the Way’ palatable to those of high status.<sup>4</sup>

Such claims concerning the eunuch’s importance and power are in part correct, for the eunuch is a dominant, exemplary character throughout Acts 8.26–40. The eunuch is designated as an ‘official’, or *δυνάστης*, a cognate of other ‘power’ words that permeate Luke’s two volumes.<sup>5</sup> He is someone with access to political power and also wealth since he is in charge of the queen’s entire treasury (v. 27). He is literate since he is reading aloud from Isaiah (vv. 28, 30), and he has a fine command of language, as evidenced by his use of the optative (v. 31). Overall, the eunuch is a well-educated person of import, who poses questions (vv. 31, 34, 36), issues commands (v. 38; cf. v. 31), and initiates

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with M. Blickenstaff; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004) 193–209; C. M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 127–42.

- 2 Of the references noted above, only D’Angelo mentions the Ethiopian eunuch and she does so in passing (‘ANHP Question’, 46–7). For the few works that do attend to gender vis-à-vis the Ethiopian eunuch, see F. S. Spencer, ‘The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Social-Science Analysis’, *BTB* 22 (1992) 155–65; M. B. Kartzow and H. Moxnes, ‘Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)’, *R&T* 17 (2010) 184–204. Sean D. Burke has also written a number of recent pieces on the Ethiopian eunuch with respect to queer theory (‘Early Christian Drag: The Ethiopian Eunuch as a Queering Figure’, *Reading Ideologies: Essays on the Bible and Interpretation in Honor of Mary Ann Tolbert* (ed. T. B. Liew; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011) 288–301; ‘Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch’, *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. T. J. Hornsby and K. Stone; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 175–89; *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013)). While the recent works of Kartzow and Moxnes and Burke discuss the eunuch with respect to gender and ethnicity and independently arrive at a number of similar conclusions, my article primarily provides an in-depth investigation of the primary source material and connects the eunuch’s gender liminality to Luke’s larger narrative and theological aims.
- 3 D’Angelo, for example, comments that the eunuch represents ‘a particularly elite example’ of a ‘right-thinking imperial outsider’ (‘ANHP Question,’ 46–47).
- 4 On the eunuch’s assumed ‘respectability’ among commentators, see e.g. L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 158; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 411–12; cf. R. I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 222.
- 5 E.g. Luke 1.35, 49, 52; 5.17; 21.26; 22.69; 24.49; Acts 8.10; 10.38; 19.11.

his own baptism (vv. 36–9). As an ideal convert who joyfully receives the good news (v. 39), the Ethiopian eunuch appears at a pivotal point in the progression of 'the Way' and signifies the spread of the gospel to 'the end of the earth' (1.8).

Scholarly assumptions concerning the eunuch's high status, however, overlook the inextricable connection between status, gender and ethnicity in the Greco-Roman world and how the eunuch's repeated designation as 'the eunuch' (ὁ εὐνοῦχος) would have affected his status in particular. This article, then, will problematise the widespread depiction of the eunuch as an elite, 'respectable' convert by contextualising the eunuch's identification as both a 'eunuch' (εὐνοῦχος) and an 'Ethiopian' (Αἰθίοψ) within the larger Greco-Roman world.<sup>6</sup> By attending to both gender and ethnicity in Acts 8.26–40, we shall see that the eunuch primarily emerges as a gender-liminal figure who is, to use Philo's turn of phrase, 'neither male nor female' (*Somn.* 2.184). Indeed, with the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, we shall find that Luke is less concerned in showing the respectable reach of the gospel and more concerned in showing that Jesus' ideal followers embody the boundary-crossing nature of the gospel itself.

### 1. 'The Eunuch': Eunuchs in the Greco-Roman World

Luke introduces the eunuch by bestowing him with an unusual amount of narrative detail, saying: 'Behold! An Ethiopian eunuch, an official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury' (8.27).<sup>7</sup> Of these numerous descriptors initially piled on the eunuch, however, his identification as a 'eunuch' (εὐνοῦχος) is the only one to appear again. Indeed, 'the eunuch' (ὁ εὐνοῦχος) is how Luke identifies him throughout the remainder of the story for a total of five times (vv. 27, 34, 36, 38, 39). Luke does not provide us with the eunuch's name, but marks him solely in terms of his lack of physical manhood. Luke's repeated designation of the character as 'the eunuch' suggests that this designation is central and should thus be the guiding principle in our interpretation.

Yet some scholars claim that the eunuch's dominant designation as a 'eunuch' does not imply that he is a castrated male. The term 'eunuch' (εὐνοῦχος) does not necessarily convey the sense of a 'physical eunuch', so the argument goes, but rather a 'court official'.<sup>8</sup> Such arguments are unlikely, however, on four

6 In assessing these respective representations, I circumscribe Luke's early hearers to Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles living in the Roman Empire around the time of the second century CE. For a discussion of Luke's audience and the intersection of Acts (and Luke) with constructions of gender in the ancient world, see B. E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

7 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

8 Commentators sometimes draw this conclusion because the word εὐνοῦχος can denote officials without any reference to their physical state. In the LXX, for example, εὐνοῦχος typically

main fronts. First, Luke immediately follows the descriptor εὐνοῦχος with δυνάστης, or ‘official’, which thus renders a translation of εὐνοῦχος as ‘official’ superfluous.<sup>9</sup> Second, Luke specifies that the eunuch serves a queen (v. 27), and eunuchs who served queens in the ancient world were typically chosen for their service because they were physical eunuchs.<sup>10</sup> Third, Luke’s description of a physical eunuch’s conversion fulfils Jewish scriptural texts that foretell God’s inclusion of physical eunuchs in the eschaton (Isa 56.3–5; Wis 3.13–14).<sup>11</sup> Fourth, the term εὐνοῦχος frequently references physical eunuchs in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>12</sup> Even in instances where authors do not explicitly state that the eunuch is physically castrated, physical castration is not explicitly denied either.<sup>13</sup> Overall, Luke’s repeated use of the term εὐνοῦχος (alongside other elements of his characterisation as we shall see) would have denoted a physical eunuch to his Greek-speaking audience.

Throughout Greek and Roman texts, eunuchs emerge as gender-liminal figures with one foot in the realm of ‘women’ and one foot in the realm of ‘men’. As ‘un-manned’ men, or ‘non-men’, eunuchs embodied all the characteristics

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translates the Hebrew סריס (which does not always explicitly reference castration), and δυνάστης translates סריס in Jer 34.19 (41.19 LXX). The married official Potiphar is also called a εὐνοῦχος in Gen 39.1 (LXX). See e.g. R. Peter-Contesse, ‘Was Potiphar a Eunuch? (Genesis 37.36; 39.1)’, *BT* 47 (1996) 142–6. However, the term εὐνοῦχος also references physical eunuchs in the LXX, both explicitly (Ecclus 20.4; 30.20) and implicitly (4 Kgdms 8.6; 9.32; 20.18; Esther 1.10, 12, 15; 2.3, 14, 15, 4.4, 5; Isa 39.7 (Aq.; Sm.; Th.); Jer 29.2 (36.2 LXX); 41.16 (48.16 LXX)). Furthermore, the LXX calls Potiphar a σπῶδων in Gen 37.36, and later Jewish interpreters understood Potiphar to be a physical eunuch (e.g. Philo, *Ios.* 37, 58–60; *Leg.* 3.236; *Somn.* 2.184; *Ag. Ber.* 86.3.) See H. Tadmor, ‘Was the Biblical *sārīs* a Eunuch?’, *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Z. Zevit, S. Gitin, M. Sokoloff; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 317–25; J. Everhart, ‘Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible’, *Society of Biblical Literature 2002 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) 137–55; Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 19–38.

9 Spencer, for example, makes this point (‘Ethiopian Eunuch’, 156). See also E. Dinkler, ‘Philippus und der ANHP ΑΙΘΙΟΥΨ (Apg 8,26–40)’, *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. E. E. Ellis and E. Grässer; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 85–95, esp. 92.

10 Spencer, ‘Ethiopian Eunuch’, 156. See also Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.33 and the discussion below.

11 Luke’s reliance on Isaiah in particular, as well as his praise of those who cannot procreate, including the eunuch (Acts 8.26–40) and the barren (Luke 23.29), suggests that he has in view scriptural references such as Isa 56.3–5 and Wis 3.13–14. For more on these allusions, see the discussion below.

12 See Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 33–8 and the discussion below.

13 Furthermore, if Luke wanted to clarify that this Ethiopian character was strictly an official, he could have repeated the term δυνάστης throughout. F. S. Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 166–7.

of effeminate men, but they were also portrayed as ambiguous figures who upset the male/female gender binary.<sup>14</sup> The second-century CE satirist Lucian epitomises the perceived ambiguity of eunuchs when he writes that 'a eunuch was neither man nor woman but something composite, hybrid and monstrous, outside of human nature' (*Eunuch.* 6). Because of their liminal status, eunuchs were allowed both in 'private', domestic space with women and in 'public', political space with men, often acting as couriers between these two gendered realms.<sup>15</sup> The ambiguity of eunuchs also manifests itself in depictions of their sexuality. On the one hand, eunuchs were often regarded as lacking libido and were thus in charge of guarding the sexual integrity of women on behalf of men or were in the employ of wealthy women themselves.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, they were also depicted as licentious lovers of both women and men.<sup>17</sup> Some men even feared that eunuchs could penetrate women, since not all forms of castration involved the amputation of the phallus.<sup>18</sup> As effeminate, gender-liminal figures with ambiguous social and sexual roles, eunuchs typically appear on the written page as the most unmanly of men.

Greek and Roman authors believed that eunuchs embodied not only all that was unmanly, but also all that was non-elite and 'foreign'. Within the Roman Empire itself, officials employed drastic means to prevent the creation of such ambiguous men/women. The emperor Domitian, for example, issued a castration ban at the end of the first century CE.<sup>19</sup> Due in part to such prohibitions, many

14 See e.g. Dio Chrysostom, *Invid.* 36; Diogenes Laertius 4.43; Philo, *Spec.* 1.325; *Somn.* 2.184; Josephus, *AJ* 4.290–1; Herodotus 8.105–6; Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 95–121, esp. 107–10.

15 See e.g. Chariton, *Chaer.* 5.9; Esther 1.1 (LXX), 10, 12, 15, 21 (S<sup>1</sup>); 2.3, 14, 15, 21; 4.4, 5; 6.2, 14; 7.9.

16 E.g. Esther 2.3, 14, 15; 4.4, 5; Heliodorus, *Aeth.* 8.6; 9.25; Josephus, *AJ* 15.226; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.33; Terence, *Eun.* 365–70, 575, 650–5.

17 E.g. Apuleius, *Met.* 8.26–30; Dio Chrysostom, *4 Regn.* 35–6; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.20.19–20; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.366–78 (LCL 91, 2004); Lucian, [*Asin.*] 35–8; Martial 3.81, 6.2; Petronius, *Sat.* 23–4; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.33, 36; *Vit. Soph.* 8.489; Eccles 20.4; Terence, *Eun.* 665.

18 Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.366–78 (LCL 91, 2004); Martial 3.81. Of the known procedures for castration, only one involved amputating the penis, with or without the testicles (*castrati*). Other procedures involved tying up the scrotum or crushing the testicles. Latin law distinguished between *castrati* and other types of eunuchs, including those who were eunuchs by birth or 'nature' (*natura spadones*). M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 33. See also J. F. Gardner, 'Sexing a Roman: Imperfect Men in Roman Law', *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (ed. L. Foxhall and J. Salmon; London: Routledge, 1998) 136–52.

19 See e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus 18.4; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.42; Suetonius, *Dom.* 7; Martial 6.2. Castration was repeatedly prohibited in the Roman Empire from the time of Sulla (ca. 138–178 BCE) onwards, and jurists' arguments for penalties against both forced and voluntary castration became increasingly authoritative until they had acquired the force of law by the fifth

eunuchs within the Roman Empire were slaves who were transported from outside the Empire.<sup>20</sup> Self-castration was also condemned, as exemplified by depictions of the self-castrating eunuch priests known as the *galli* who belonged to the cult of the Syrian goddess Cybele. Roman law forbade elite Roman males to become members of the cult, and both Greek and Roman authors describe the *galli* as effeminate, ‘foreign’ followers of the Syrian goddess.<sup>21</sup> These same slurs of foreignness and effeminacy characterise descriptions of the well-known rhetorician Favorinus, a congenital eunuch who was born in Gaul but gained a popular following in the Greek East during the first half of the second century CE. Although Favorinus was one of the few socially prominent eunuchs in the Roman Empire during this time period, his critics lambasted his ‘effeminate’ rhetorical style and status as a eunuch from Gaul.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, some eunuchs in the late Roman Empire did assume high-status positions of political power.<sup>23</sup> As with Favorinus, however, the fact that they were eunuchs seriously undermined their status in the opinion of elite Greco-Roman

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century. The degree to which such bans and legal opinions were enforced, however, is unclear. See Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 32–3.

20 See P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980). See also K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 172–96; D. Schlinkert, ‘Der Hofeunuch in der Spätantike: Ein gefährlicher Außenseiter?’, *Hermes* 122 (1994) 342–59; cf. S. Tougher, ‘In or Out? Origins of Court Eunuchs’, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (ed. S. Tougher; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002) 143–59. On the perceived status of eunuchs as slaves, see also Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 113–15.

21 Apuleius, *Met.* 8.24–30; 9.8–10; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.19.1–5; Justinian, *Digest* 48.8.4–6; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.511–16; Lucian, [*Asin.*] 35–8. See also Catullus 63; Lucian, *Syr. d.* 27 and *passim*; Lucretius 2.581–660; Ovid, *Fast.* 4.179–372; *Met.* 10.99–105; M. Beard, ‘The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the “Great Mother” in Imperial Rome’, *Shamanism, History and the State* (ed. N. Thomas and C. Humphrey; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 164–90; S. Hales, ‘Looking for Eunuchs: The *galli* and Attis in Roman Art’, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (ed. S. Tougher; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002) 87–102; L. E. Roller, ‘The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest’, *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (ed. M. Wyke; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 118–35.

22 Philostratus says the following about Favorinus: ‘there were these three paradoxes in his life: though he was a Gaul he led the life of a Hellene; a eunuch, he had been tried for adultery; he had quarrelled with an emperor [Hadrian] and was still alive’ (*Vit. soph.* 8.489). See esp. Lucian, *Demon.* 12–13; Polemo, *Physiogn.* (Leiden) A20; Anon. Lat., *Physiogn.* 40; M. W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) esp. 21–54. (Citations to physiognomical texts are from S. Swain, ed., *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon’s Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).)

23 To trace the rise of eunuchs to political power in the Roman Empire, see W. Stevenson, ‘The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity’, *JHSex* 5 (1995) 495–511. See also Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene*, 130–80; Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 61–9.

authors. Such eunuchs were ‘unmanly upstarts’ who displaced their own political power and who were the very definition of what was not manly and not Roman.<sup>24</sup> What is more, eunuchs did not begin to rise to positions of political authority in the Roman Empire until the third century, well after Luke finished his two-volume work.<sup>25</sup> Prior to this, eunuchs were part of the emperor’s inner court but they were predominantly slaves who functioned more as concubines and minor administrative officials.<sup>26</sup> Of course eunuchs had long held positions of political power in ancient Eastern kingdoms such as Persia.<sup>27</sup> According to Greek and Roman authors, however, such appointments typified the ‘effeminacy’ of these Eastern kingdoms and were not fitting for the Roman Empire itself.<sup>28</sup>

Elite Jewish authors roughly contemporaneous with Luke likewise portray eunuchs as effeminate, gender-bending figures. The philosopher Philo writes that eunuchs are ‘neither male nor female’ (οὐτ’ ἄρρεν οὔτε θῆλυ, *Somn.* 2.184). He elsewhere maintains that the law excludes from the sacred assembly ‘those whose generative organs are crushed or cut off, who ... refashion the masculine (ἄρρενα) type into a feminine form (θηλύμορφον)’ (*Spec.* 1.325).<sup>29</sup> The historian Josephus likewise urges his audience to drive off ‘those who have deprived themselves of their manhood (ἄρρεν)’ because ‘their soul has become effeminate (τεθηλυσμένης)’ (*AJ* 4.290–1).

Josephus and Philo reflect the gendered rhetoric of their contemporaries with such statements, but they base their arguments on Jewish scripture, which likewise points to the boundary-blurring nature of eunuchs.<sup>30</sup> In Lev 21.17–23, men of priestly lineage who had physical blemishes or ‘imperfections’ could not approach ‘the Lord’s’ altar, including the blind, the lame, the mutilated and the

24 See esp. Dio Cassius 78.17; Ammianus Marcellinus 18.4; Claudius Mamertinus, *Julian* 19; Claudian, *Against Eutropius*, *passim*.

25 Around the year 214 CE, Sempronius Rufus became the first eunuch appointed to a high-ranking political position within the Roman Empire. See Dio Cassius 78.17; Stevenson, ‘Rise of Eunuchs’, esp. 506.

26 See e.g. Pliny, *Nat.* 7.39.129; Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene*, 121–9.

27 See L. Llewellyn-Jones, ‘Eunuchs and the Royal Harem in Achaemenid Persia (559–331 BC)’, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (ed. S. Tougher; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002), 19–49; Tougher, ‘In or Out?’, 143–59; P. O. Scholz, *Eunuchs and Castrati: A Cultural History* (trans. J. A. Broadwin and S. L. Frisch; Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001) esp. 31–123.

28 The Greek novelist Chariton, for example, describes the eunuch Artaxates, who is the most trusted servant of the Persian King Artaxerxes, as ‘thinking like a eunuch, a slave, a barbarian. He did not know the spirit of a wellborn Greek ...’ (*Chaer.* 6.4; translation from B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)) See also e.g. Dio Chrysostom, *Regn. tyr.* 5–6; Herodotus 8.105; Caesar, *Bell. civ.* 3.108, 112; Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.31.

29 See also *Deus*, 111; *Ebr.* 210–13; *Ios.* 37; 58–60; *Leg.* 3.236; *Migr.* 69.4; *Spec.* 3.40–2; R. Abusch, ‘Eunuchs and Gender Transformation: Philo’s Exegesis of the Joseph Narrative’, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (ed. S. Tougher; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002) 103–21.

30 See also *m. Yebam.* 8.1–2, 4–6.

eunuch ('a man with ... crushed testicles', 21.20; cf. 22.24). Deut 23.1 widens this view to prohibit all eunuchs from public worship: 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.' As living violations of Israelite purity codes, eunuchs were considered ritually unclean because they mixed boundaries and their genitals did not meet the standards of bodily wholeness. Eunuchs were neither male nor female and so did not have a distinctive place on the purity map of the social body.<sup>31</sup>

While Luke's Jewish contemporaries largely rely on Pentateuchal prohibitions against eunuchs, Jewish scriptural texts elsewhere depict eunuchs as included outsiders. In the prophet Jeremiah, the Ethiopian eunuch Ebedmelech rescues Jeremiah, acting on behalf of the king of Judah, and is later spared by God for this act (38.7-13; 39.15-18).<sup>32</sup> The author of the Wisdom of Solomon looks ahead to the eschaton and blesses those who are childless, both the barren woman and the law-abiding eunuch (3.13-14).<sup>33</sup> Isaiah also envisions a coming day when the covenant will be extended to the outcasts of Israel, including the foreigner and the eunuch (56.3-8). Although legal texts from Leviticus and Deuteronomy were more influential for authors such as Josephus and Philo, other scriptural texts depict eunuchs as mediators between Israelites and foreign powers and as included members of God's salvific covenant.

When we return to the eunuch of Acts 8 with these ancient representations in view, we find that Luke's portrayal of the Ethiopian eunuch sits uneasily alongside many of his contemporaries' own portrayals of eunuchs. When the eunuch asks Philip, 'What is to hinder me from being baptised?' (v. 37), Philip could have justifiably responded: 'The fact that you are a eunuch.' There is scriptural precedent for such a response, not to mention prevalent characterisations of eunuchs as unmanly, gender-liminal figures. Philip, however, says nothing of the sort (indeed, he says nothing at all!).<sup>34</sup> Instead, Luke presents the eunuch as an

31 Spencer, 'Ethiopian Eunuch', 159. See also D. Boyarin, who argues that Jewish authors were more concerned about gender hybridity (or the mixing of 'God-given' male and female categories) than their Greco-Roman counterparts ('Are There Any Jews in "The History of Sexuality"?', *JHSex* 5 (1995) 333-55, esp. 340-5).

32 Note, however, that the term εὐνοῦχος only appears in some recensions of the LXX's account of Ebedmelech (Jer 45.7-13; 46.15-18 (LXX)). Note also that eunuchs frequently serve foreign rulers or act as mediators between Israel and foreign peoples in scriptural texts. See Gen 37.36; 39.1; 40.2, 7; 4 Kgdms 8.6; 9.32; 20.18; Neh 1.11 (B S<sup>2</sup>); Esther 1.1 (LXX), 10, 12, 15, 21 (S<sup>1</sup>); 2.3, 14, 15, 21; 4.4, 5; 6.2, 14; 7.9; Isa 39.7 (Aq.; Sm.; Th.); Dan 1.3-21; Jdt 12.10-13.10; 14.11-19.

33 In addition to his story of the eunuch in Acts 8, Luke also blesses barren women, when Jesus says in Luke 23.29, 'For behold, the days are coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!"'

34 Later witnesses, presumably uncomfortable with Philip's silence and the eunuch's lack of a profession of faith, provide both Philip and the eunuch with additional lines at this juncture. See especially the Western text (D-Text), which provides Philip with more agency throughout the passage.

included member of 'the Way', signalling the eschatological in-breaking of God's action in the world (Isa 56.3–5; Wis 3.13–14). Yet while Luke evokes Jewish scriptural texts that foretell God's inclusion of the foreigner and eunuch, for many of Luke's hearers pervasive depictions of eunuchs as ambiguous, unmanly men would not be far from view.<sup>35</sup> But before exploring the Ethiopian eunuch's intersection with these larger representations of eunuchs more closely, let us first turn to the eunuch's identification as an Ethiopian.

## 2. 'An Ethiopian': Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman World

Although the eunuch's designation as a 'eunuch' dominates his description, Luke also specifies that he is an 'Ethiopian' (Αἰθίοψ) who serves the 'queen of the Ethiopians' (βασιλίσσης Αἰθιόπων, 8.27). The eunuch, we are told, is an Ethiopian official who has journeyed to Jerusalem to worship and is now returning to Ethiopia (vv. 26–8). The eunuch's journey accounts for his presence on the 'way' (ὁδός, vv. 26, 36), and, after his conversion, he continues on 'his way' (ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ, v. 39) back to Ethiopia, where he will presumably share the good news. Although scholarship has typically overlooked the gendered significance of his ethnicity, Luke's identification of the eunuch as an Ethiopian inextricably intersects with his depiction as a eunuch.<sup>36</sup> Gender and ethnicity cannot be separated and both serve to depict the eunuch as neither male nor female.

35 Early Christian authors themselves were familiar with such depictions since they often reflect the gendered rhetoric of their contemporaries concerning eunuchs. Even though the only two references to eunuchs in the New Testament are positive (Matt 19.12; Acts 8.26–40), the early Christian elite provided an ambivalent portrait of eunuchs, at times praising their so-called celibacy and at times impugning their unmanliness. For more on this phenomenon, see Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, esp. 245–82.

36 With respect to his ethnicity, the history of scholarship has typically focused on whether the eunuch is a Jew or a Gentile. For a recent survey of this literature, see S. Shauf, 'Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and Narrative Context in Acts 8:26–40', *CBQ* 71 (2009) 762–75. Studies that focus on the eunuch's Ethiopian identity include C. J. Martin, 'A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation', *Semeia* 47 (1989) 105–35; A. Smith, "'Do You Understand What You Are Reading?" A Literary Critical Reading of the Ethiopian (Kushite) Episode (Acts 8:26–40)', *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22 (1994) 48–70, esp. 63–70; reprinted as 'A Second Step in African Biblical Interpretation: A Generic Reading Analysis of Acts 8:26–40', *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert; 2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.213–28; D. T. Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006) 89–92. These studies rely largely on Frank M. Snowden's influential, yet now dated, *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). For a more nuanced approach, see G. L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002) 109–15.

Luke's identification of the eunuch as an Ethiopian brings his gender liminality into sharper focus because Greco-Roman authors viewed Ethiopia itself as a liminal nation vis-à-vis the Mediterranean world and the larger Roman Empire. Among some thinkers, Ethiopia was the threshold to an entirely undiscovered world, and among Romans in particular, Ethiopia remained a nation on the border of the Empire.<sup>37</sup> For both Greeks and Romans, Ethiopia signified a place below Egypt with undefined borders that would approximate modern-day Sudan. Indeed, Greco-Roman authors refer to Ethiopia, along with Egypt, as a place 'down south' that marked the boundaries of the 'inhabited world' (οἰκουμένη or *orbis terrarum*).<sup>38</sup> Such nations were 'the ends of the earth' or the 'margins' of the so-called 'civilised' world that brought their own nation – understood as the 'centre' of the world – into sharper definition.<sup>39</sup> For example, the Greek geographer Strabo, writing during the early first century CE, categorises Ethiopians, alongside other 'barbarians', as a people who are 'defective and inferior to the temperate part [i.e. to Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples]' due to their geographical location on the 'extremities of the inhabited world' (17.2.1). 'Ethiopian' (Αἰθίοψ) literally meant 'burnt face' and denoted a person with dark skin who was somatically different from the majority of people living in the Roman Empire.<sup>40</sup> Among those writing in the Greco-Roman world, Ethiopians represent the consummate outsider: that is, the non-Roman, the non-Greek, and even the non-Jew.

When it comes to Ethiopians and other 'distant' peoples, Greco-Roman authors tend to either demonise or idealise those who live in 'far-away' lands.<sup>41</sup> The idealising tradition goes back to Homer and identifies Ethiopians as members of a utopian world who have attributes typically ascribed to all utopian peoples, including innocence, love of freedom, military prowess, wealth, wisdom, longevity, attractiveness, semi-divine tallness of stature and

37 On the belief that Ethiopia was the gateway to an entirely other 'inhabited world' populated by people known as Antipodes, see J. S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) esp. 128–40, 149–56. On Ethiopia signifying a place that lay tantalisingly beyond Rome's grasp yet also within reach, see *ibid.*, esp. 149–56. On Rome's border skirmishes and expeditions into Ethiopia, see *Res gestae divi Aug.* 26; Dio Cassius 54.5.4–6; Pliny, *Nat.* 6.35.181–2; 12.8.19; Seneca, *Nat.* 6.8.3–4; Strabo 17.1.54.

38 On the usage of the terms οἰκουμένη and *orbis terrarum*, see C. Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (trans. H. Leclerc; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) 29–56; Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, 37–8; O. Michel, 'οἰκουμένη', *TDNT* v.157–9.

39 On this tendency, see Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, esp. 29–51; Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, esp. 45–60.

40 See Diodorus Siculus 3.8.1–3; Pliny, *Nat.* 2.80.189–90; Strabo 15.1.24; Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, esp. 39–41; L. A. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (London: Routledge, 1989) 104–9.

41 See Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, esp. 1–13, 29–51; Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, esp. 86–156.

piety.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Greek and Roman authors also identify Ethiopians as an uncivilised, 'barbaric' and at times monstrous people.<sup>43</sup> Even texts that idealise Ethiopians, such as the *circa* third-century Greek romance novels the *Ethiopian Story* and the *Alexander Romance*, primarily idealise members of Ethiopian royalty and not the majority of the 'barbaric' population.<sup>44</sup> They also reflect wider assumptions concerning the negative colour symbolism of dark skin, and situate Ethiopia's political might as a feature of the distant past.<sup>45</sup>

Because of their status as 'distant' people beyond the borders of the 'civilised' world, Greco-Roman authors also depicted Ethiopians as people who transgressed gender norms. Greek and Roman authors often portrayed 'barbarians' in general as gender transgressors, typically expressed in terms of male effeminacy or female masculinity.<sup>46</sup> Material culture also frequently feminised foreign nations, as when reliefs from the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias depict the emperor Claudius as a muscular soldier and the nations defeated by Rome (including Ethiopia) as vanquished women.<sup>47</sup> Ethiopians in particular were often associated with the 'womanish' traits of cowardice, promiscuity, and the love of pleasure. Physiognomical works link Ethiopian somatic features to such 'female' moral failings, and both literary and material culture represent Ethiopians as prostitutes and hypersexual figures.<sup>48</sup>

42 Homer depicts the gods visiting the Ethiopians (*Il.* 1.423–4; 23.205–7; *Od.* 5.282–7). See also Diodorus Siculus 1.97.8–9; 3.2.1–10.6; Helioidorus, *Aeth.* 4.8, 12, 13; 8.1, 11; 9.1, 22–7; 10.1–41; Herodotus 3.17–25; Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.33.3–4; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.1–4; Pliny, *Nat.* 2.80.189; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, 3.18–23; Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 32; Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, esp. 45–60; Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, esp. 88–93.

43 See e.g. Diodorus Siculus 3.8.1–3; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.25; Pliny, *Nat.* 2.80.189–90; 5.8.43–6; 6.35.1–197; Strabo 17.2.1–3. See also Juvenal, *Sat.* 2.23; Petronius, *Sat.* 102; Plutarch, *Mor.* 12E; Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 32, 35–8; Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, esp. 94–113.

44 Helioidorus, *Aeth.* 8.1–10.41; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, 3.18–23.

45 In Pseudo-Callisthenes's *Alexander Romance*, the Candace writes the following to Alexander: 'Do not think the worse of us for the colour of our skin. We are purer in soul than the whitest of your people' (3.18). In Helioidorus's *Ethiopian Story*, the beautiful Greek protagonist is described as having 'skin of gleaming white' in contrast to her royal Ethiopian parents (esp. 4.8; 10.14–15; translation from Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*) Both novels are also set in the distant past around the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. On the negative colour symbolism of dark skin among Greco-Roman authors, see Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 29–51; Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, esp. 110–13.

46 See e.g. Diodorus Siculus 1.27.1–2; 2.21–3, 44–6; 3.52–5; 5.32.1–7; Hippocrates, *Aer.* 17–22; Herodotus 1.105; 2.35; 8.104–6; Strabo 3.4.18; 4.4.3, 6; 11.5.1–4, 11.8, 14.16; D. C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) esp. 103–8. See also E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

47 See Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 26–118, esp. 45–8; I. Ferris, *Enemies of Rome: Barbarians through Roman Eyes* (London: Sutton, 2000) esp. 55–60, 165–8.

48 For physiognomical accounts of the relationship between Ethiopians' outer somatic traits and their inner morality, see Adamantius, *Physiogn.* B31; Anon. Lat., *Physiogn.* 79; Aristotle,

Ethiopians also typically appear in Greco-Roman texts and material culture as slaves, the very antithesis of elite, 'manly' men. Even though the majority of slaves within the Roman Empire were not in fact Ethiopian, the prevalent depictions of dark-skinned slaves symbolised Roman control over the 'exotic' and coincided with the perceived gender transgression of Ethiopians themselves.<sup>49</sup>

To no surprise, Greek and Roman authors also maintained that female rule was a further sign of the effeminacy of 'other' nations. Greek and Roman authors often depicted 'foreign' queens in a negative light, ascribing women political authority in proportion to the perceived barbarity of the nation.<sup>50</sup> Since such women assumed a position of power typically held by men, they were often portrayed as 'manly' women who went beyond the bounds of proper female comportment. The Egyptian queen Cleopatra VII, for example, was classified by her enemies as the 'courtesan queen' (*meretrix regina*) and held responsible for 'feminising' Mark Antony.<sup>51</sup> Like Cleopatra, the queens of Ethiopia (who were known by the title 'Candace') were also depicted as wealthy women who donned the masculine role of political and military rule.<sup>52</sup> The *Alexander Romance* emphasises the beauty, wealth and wisdom of 'Queen Candace', but she also outsmarts Alexander the Great, who falls under 'the power of a single woman' (3.22). Strabo states the Candaces' gender transgression more explicitly when he describes one of the Candaces as 'a masculine sort of woman (ἀνδρική τις γυνή) with blindness in one eye' (17.1.54). Not only does the Candace transgress gender norms by being a 'manly woman', according to Strabo, but her body transgresses corporeal

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[*Physiogn.*] 6 (812a); Polemo, *Physiogn.* (Leiden) B33; M. C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke-Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006; repr. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011) 123–41. For representations of Ethiopians as prostitutes and other sexualised figures, see Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, esp. 38; J. Clarke, 'Hypersexual Black Men in Roman Baths: Ideal Somatotypes and Apotropaic Magic', *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy* (ed. N. B. Kampen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 184–98; Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, esp. 161.

49 See M. M. George, 'Race, Racism, and Status: Images of Black Slaves in the Roman Empire', *Frogs Around the Pond: Syllecta Classica* 14 (2003) 161–85.

50 M. Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 195–243, esp. 213–14. See also Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 201–10.

51 See esp. Dio Cassius 51.10–15; Horace, *Carm.* 1.37; *Epod.* 9.10–16; Plutarch, *Ant. passim*; *Comp. Demetr. Ant.* 3; Propertius 3.11.29–56; 4.6.57–8; Virgil, *Aen.* 8.685–728; Wyke, *Roman Mistress*, 195–243.

52 On 'Candace' (Κανδάκη in Greek) as a dynastic title, see Bion of Soli, *Aethiopia* 1; Pliny, *Nat.* 6.35.186; L. Török, *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) esp. 213–14, 452, 455–6. (Cf. Dio Cassius 54.5.4–5; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, 3.18–23; Strabo 17.1.54.) On the Candaces' political and military leadership, see the aforementioned citations and Török, *Kingdom of Kush*, 448–87.

norms by being blind in one eye.<sup>53</sup> In the rhetoric of ancient physiognomy, Strabo hints that the Candace's 'deficient' eyesight mirrors her deficient insight as a ruler.

Although not to the same degree, Luke's Jewish contemporaries likewise hint at the marginal, feminised nature of Ethiopia. Philo allegorises the 'darkness' of the Ethiopian as evil (*QG* 2.81) and argues that the word 'Ethiopia' signifies 'lowness' and 'cowardice' in contradistinction to 'manliness' (ἀνδρεία) (*Leg.* 1.68, 85–6).<sup>54</sup> Josephus claims that Rome has conquered the Ethiopians (*BJ* 2.380–3) and includes gendered critiques of foreign female rulers, including Cleopatra VII (*AJ* 15.96–103).<sup>55</sup> Josephus, however, elsewhere idealises Ethiopian royalty in a manner that recalls scriptural accounts of the queen of Sheba (*AJ* 8.165–75; cf. 1 Kings 10.1–13; 2 Chron 9.1–12).<sup>56</sup> Both Josephus and Philo also provide positive accounts of Moses' so-called 'Ethiopian' wife (*Num* 12.1 (LXX)), with Josephus identifying her as an Ethiopian princess (*AJ* 2.251–3) and Philo commenting that 'even as in the eye the part that sees [i.e. the pupil] is black (μέλαν), so the soul's power of vision has been called Ethiopian woman' (*Leg.* 2.67).<sup>57</sup>

Thus while Josephus and Philo reflect the rhetoric of their contemporaries, their references to Ethiopians also derive from references to Ethiopians in Jewish scripture. Overall, Jewish scriptural texts position Jerusalem (or Israel) as the centre of the world and nations such as Ethiopia (or Cush (כּוּשׁ)) on the periphery.<sup>58</sup> Ethiopia frequently appears in conjunction with Egypt as a powerful, wealthy nation and as a foreign, enemy nation that God will ultimately defeat.<sup>59</sup> As with eunuchs, however, Jewish scriptural texts elsewhere depict Ethiopians as included outsiders. Isaiah and Zephaniah pronounce that Ethiopia will

53 On the role sight and blindness play in Greco-Roman constructions of gender, see B. E. Wilson, 'The Blinding of Paul and the Power of God: Masculinity, Sight, and Self-Control in Acts 9', *JBL* 133 (2014) 367–86.

54 Cf. Jer 13.23; D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 46–51.

55 See also Josephus' gendered critique of the Jewish Hasmonean queen Salome Alexandra (e.g., *AJ* 13.417, 430–432).

56 See also E. A. Green, 'The Queen of Sheba: A Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia?', *JBQ* 29 (2001) 151–5; E. Ullendorff, 'Candace (Acts VIII.27) and the Queen of Sheba', *NTS* 2 (1955–6) 53–6.

57 See also Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 26–9.

58 See Ps 71.8–9 (LXX); Ezek 5.5; 38.12; Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 17–25; J. M. Scott, 'Luke's Geographical Horizon', *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf; vol. II of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*; ed. B. W. Winter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 483–544, esp. 492–522. The Greek terms Αἰθίοψ and Αἰθιοπία typically translate the Hebrew כּוּשׁ (and cognates) except in the Table of Nations where the transliteration Χοῦς occurs (Gen 10.6, 7, 8; 1 Chron 1.8, 9, 10).

59 See 2 Kings 19.9 (4 Kgdms 19.9 LXX); 2 Chron 12.3; 14.9–15 (14.8–14 LXX); 16.8; Job 28.19; Ps 68.30–1 (67.31–2 LXX); 71.9 (LXX); Isa 18.1–2, 7; 20.3–6; 37.9; 43.3; 45.14; Jer 46.9 (26.9 LXX); Ezek 30.1–9; 38.4–5; Dan 11.43; Nah 3.9; Hab 3.7; Zeph 2.12. See also Josephus, *AJ* 2.243–53; 8.239–53; 292–4; 10.15–17.

eventually recognise the God of Israel (Isa 18.1–7; 45.14; Zeph 3.9–10), and Jeremiah notes that God spares the Ethiopian eunuch Ebedmelech (Jer 39.15–18).<sup>60</sup> Although Ebedmelech, like other eunuchs in Jewish scripture, hails from a foreign, enemy nation, he bridges the ethnic divide via his mediating role and represents God's inclusion of the faithful outsider, something that the second-century BCE text 4 Baruch expands on in detail.<sup>61</sup>

Once again, Luke's depiction of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 aligns best with Jewish scriptural texts that indicate the inclusion of the outsider among God's people. Furthermore, Luke's portrayal of the Ethiopian eunuch contrasts with many of his coevals' depictions of Ethiopians.<sup>62</sup> The eunuch is not an ignorant 'barbarian' or a libidinous profligate. He is instead an educated official, or 'power' (δυναστικός), and a eunuch, or someone often associated with lacking libido.<sup>63</sup> Luke also depicts the eunuch as an ideal convert since he is already predisposed towards Judaism and eagerly pursues his own baptism.<sup>64</sup> To be sure, the eunuch's positive portrayal does have commonalities with the idealising tradition found in Jewish texts and the wider Greco-Roman world.<sup>65</sup> Yet aside from exemplifying wealth and piety, the eunuch lacks other typical characteristics of utopian peoples.<sup>66</sup> More importantly, the eunuch's status as a eunuch, within an elite Greco-Roman context at least, situates him outside of respectable, 'ideal'

60 See also Isa 56.3–8; 66.18. Cf. Ps 73.14 (LXX); 87.4 (86.4 LXX); Amos 9.7.

61 See Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 60–7.

62 Note that Luke briefly mentions other individuals who are from Africa or who have dark skin, including Simon of Cyrene (Luke 23.26), Simeon who was called Niger (Acts 13.1), and Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13.1). See also Acts 2.10; 18.24–8; 19.1; 21.37–9. However, note that many early Christian interpreters continue their coevals' gendered rhetoric of Ethiopians. See D. Brakke, 'Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-skinned Other, and the Monastic Self', *JHSex* 10 (2001) 501–35; Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, esp. 41–129; Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 41–200.

63 The representation of the eunuch as a figure who lacks libido is consonant with the Lukan emphasis on sexual asceticism elsewhere in his two volumes. See e.g. T. K. Seim, 'Children of the Resurrection: Perspectives on Angelic Asceticism in Luke-Acts', *Asceticism and the New Testament* (ed. L. E. Vaage and V. L. Wimbush; New York: Routledge, 1999) 115–25. On the association of eunuchs with celibacy among later Christian authors, see Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, esp. 245–82. On the description of the Ethiopian eunuch's baptism as the 'defeat of libido', see Arator, *De actibus Apostolorum* 1.672–707.

64 On the eunuch as a representative convert, see B. R. Gaventa, *From Darkness To Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (OBT 20; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 98–107.

65 Many commentators situate the eunuch within the idealising tradition. See e.g. Pervo, *Acts*, 221–2; B. R. Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) 141–3; Smith, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?", esp. 63–70.

66 Luke, for example, does not depict the eunuch as being innocent, tall or militarily powerful. (Although see the note on the eunuch's chariot below.) Luke also does not set Philip's encounter with the eunuch in the distant past or suggest that the eunuch is faithful despite his dark skin. For a discussion of how the eunuch's wealth might have been heard, see below.

norms.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Luke's repetition of the term 'eunuch' (εὐνοῦχος), along with other aspects of the eunuch's characterisation, as we shall now see, problematises the assumption that the eunuch simply aligns with idealised portraits of Ethiopians.

### 3. 'Neither Male Nor Female': The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8

Overall, Luke's portrait of the Ethiopian eunuch fits best with Jewish scriptural accounts that point to the inclusion of the eunuch and the foreigner (e.g. Isa 56.3–8). At the same time, to Luke's audience living within the Mediterranean basin, the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts would have embodied many of the characteristics of an unmanly man. By identifying him as an Ethiopian, Luke situates the eunuch as someone from a marginal nation vis-à-vis the Greco-Roman world. Luke himself appears to think of Ethiopia in these terms with his use of the phrase 'the end of the earth' earlier in Acts 1.8. In this so-called 'roadmap' of Acts, Jesus foretells the outward expansion of the good news from Jerusalem to 'the end of the earth' (ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς), a phrase that frequently references Ethiopia.<sup>68</sup> Throughout Acts, the geographical progression of the gospel unfolds according to Jesus' programmatic statement, and the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion in Acts 8 fulfils (at least in part) Jesus' words that the good news will reach the outermost edges of the earth.<sup>69</sup> With the conversion of a marginal character, Luke demonstrates the geographical progression of 'the Way' to the margins of the earth itself.<sup>70</sup>

Not only does Luke indicate that the eunuch represents the gospel's spread to the edge of the earth, but he locates the eunuch's encounter with Philip on the

67 Even within the idealising tradition, eunuchs are still described in ambivalent terms. In Heliiodorus' *Ethiopian Story*, for example, the eunuch Bagoas acts as an intermediary between the two Greek protagonists and the Persian satrap Oroondates (8.2–3, 12–17), but Bagoas speaks Greek poorly, appears to lack military prowess (since he is easily identified as a eunuch and not a soldier), and is counted among Oroondates's possessions (8.15, 17; 9.25; cf. 8.6; 10.22–3).

68 For variations of this phrase with respect to Ethiopia, see esp. Herodotus 3.25; Homer, *Od.* 1.22–3; Strabo 1.1.6; 17.2.1. In Luke 11.31, Luke describes the 'queen of the South' as coming from 'the ends of the earth' (ἐκ τῶν περάτων τῆς γῆς). In Acts 2.39, Luke also says that God's promise extends to all that are 'far away' (μακράν).

69 For surveys of what 'the end of the earth' in Acts 1.8 may signify in addition to Ethiopia, see B. L. Melbourne, 'Acts 1:8 Re-examined: Is Acts 8 Its Fulfillment?', *JRT* 57–8 (2001–5) 1–18; T. S. Moore, "'To the End of the Earth": The Geographic and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke', *JETS* 40 (1997) 389–99.

70 Luke also indicates that Ethiopia is 'down south' since Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch on a road 'towards the south' (κατὰ μεσημβρίαν) that 'goes down' (καταβαίνουσαν) from Jerusalem to Gaza. Burke, however, is correct in noting the ambiguity of the phrase κατὰ μεσημβρίαν since it can also be translated as 'at noon' (e.g. 'Queering Early Christian Discourse', 183). See e.g. Deut 28.28–9; Isa 59.10; Acts 22.6; cf. Dan 8.4, 9.

edge of ‘civilisation’. At the outset of the story, Philip is unexpectedly commanded to get up and go to the ‘road, or way’ (ὁδόν), that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza’ (8.26). The road itself is designated as ἔρημος, meaning ‘wilderness,’ ‘desert’ or ‘deserted’ (v. 26).<sup>71</sup> This wilderness is in the middle of nowhere and between two definite points, Jerusalem and Gaza. The eunuch himself is also between two definite points in terms of his overall journey since he has just left Jerusalem and is returning home to Ethiopia (vv. 27–8). In terms of their setting, the eunuch and Philip are spatially ‘betwixt and between’: they are neither here nor there, but on a deserted road in the middle of the wilderness. As the ultimate boundary-crosser, the eunuch is from a nation that lies on the borders of the ‘civilised’ world and greets Philip on the borders of ‘civilisation’ itself.

Luke’s emphasis on the eunuch’s Ethiopian identity also associates the eunuch with a nation considered effeminate by many within the Roman Empire. Effeminate nations, so write elite Greek and Roman authors, correspondingly have effeminate officials, often in the form of eunuchs.<sup>72</sup> Effeminate nations also have female rulers, so the argument goes, and Luke specifically notes that the eunuch serves – not a king – but a ‘queen’ (βασίλισσης, v. 27). Luke specifies that this queen is ‘Candace, queen of the Ethiopians’ (v. 27), and this usage of the term ‘Candace’ (Κανδάκη) recalls that Ethiopia has a long history of female rulers.<sup>73</sup> What is more, the eunuch is not a member of the Candace’s royal family, but a court official who is subordinate to the Candace. The eunuch is not royalty himself, but oversees the wealth of ‘her treasury’ (γάζης αὐτῆς), not his own (v. 27). To many of Luke’s hearers, then, the eunuch is in a state of subordination to a woman, and a ‘manly woman’ at that.

The eunuch’s association with wealth also suggests his ‘unmanliness’ since elite authors frequently connected effeminacy with both extravagance and ‘distant’ nations. In his characterisation of the eunuch, Luke enumerates various details of the eunuch’s luxurious lifestyle. The eunuch is in charge of the queen’s ‘entire treasury’ (πάσης τῆς γάζης, v. 27), and he travels by means of a ‘chariot’ (ἄρμα), a detail that Luke mentions three times (vv. 28, 29, 38). The eunuch is thus associated with a vast amount of wealth and a means of

71 For this usage of ἔρημος elsewhere in Acts, see 7.36, 38, 42, 44; 13.18; 21.38. Note also that Herodotus uses the word ἔρημος to denote the ‘empty space’ that characterises distant worlds (Herodotus 3.98; 4.17; 4.185; 5.9; Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, 35–6).

72 See also Pervo, *Acts*, 224.

73 Although the term Κανδάκη most likely functioned as a dynastic title, Luke appears to apply the term as a proper name in v. 27. Regardless, Κανδάκη often appears as either a title or a proper name in conjunction with a variety of Ethiopian queens. See Bion of Soli, *Aethiopica* 1; Pliny, *Nat.* 6.35.186; Dio Cassius 54.5.4–5; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, 3.18–23; Strabo 17.1.54. For a comprehensive history of the ancient kingdom of Cush and the tradition of female succession, see Török, *Kingdom of Kush*, esp. 234–41, 255–62, 448–87.

transportation typically reserved for people with wealth.<sup>74</sup> The eunuch's chariot also appears to be quite spacious since it holds at least three people. Philip and the eunuch are both able to sit in the chariot, and Luke indicates that it holds a driver as well since the eunuch commands the chariot to stop in v. 38. Finally, the eunuch is reading from a copy of the scroll of Isaiah, an item that would have been expensive to commission and produce in the ancient world.<sup>75</sup> In sum, the eunuch is in charge of a vast treasure, reading from an expensive scroll, and traveling with a driver (and perhaps other unnamed attendants) by means of a spacious chariot. In Acts 8, Luke associates the Ethiopian eunuch with numerous signs of wealth and luxury, and Greco-Roman authors often characterised distant 'barbarians' as effeminate with a 'womanish' penchant for decadent excess. Luke himself critiques wealth and luxury elsewhere in his two volumes, but Luke's details of luxury with respect to the eunuch in Acts 8 hold no rebuke.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to Simon Magus, who tries to buy the Holy Spirit in the passage directly beforehand (8.9–25), the eunuch's wealth does not earn him condemnation or obstruct him from the gospel. Instead, his luxury is what a Greek-speaking audience would expect of a 'foreign' eunuch. The eunuch's access to wealth and a lavish lifestyle would have completed the picture of an effeminate man.

This connection between luxury and effeminacy is evident earlier in Luke's narrative when Jesus asks a crowd of people in the wilderness, 'But what did you come out to see? A person clothed in soft (μαλακοῖς) robes? Behold! Those in expensive clothing and living in luxury are in palaces' (Luke 7.25; cf. Matt 11.8). Here Luke applies the word μαλακός, which denotes both 'softness' and 'effeminacy' in the ancient world, to convey a sense of opulent luxury.<sup>77</sup>

74 Plutarch also associates eunuchs with vast wealth when he claims that it was the general practice to have eunuchs for 'treasurers' (γαζοφύλακας) around the time of Alexander the Great (*Demetr.* 25.5). On the association of chariots with wealth, see e.g. Gen 41.42–3; 46.29; Dio Chrysostom, *1 Serv. lib.* 20; Josephus, *AJ* 2.90. In addition to signifying wealth, however, the eunuch's chariot may also allude to Ethiopia's association with military might since the term ἄρμα ('chariot') can reference a war chariot (e.g. Exod 14.23, 26, 28; 15.19; 2 Chron 12.3; 14.8 (LXX); Jer 26.9 (LXX); Josephus, *AJ* 2.324; Rev 9.9; *1 Clem.* 51.5). Indeed, one of the Candaces participated in the above-mentioned border skirmishes with Rome (e.g. Dio Cassius 54.5.4–6; Strabo 17.1.54). Thus while the eunuch himself is not depicted as being militarily powerful, aspects of his characterisation allude to Ethiopia's (so-called past) military might. Cf. Smith, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?", esp. 65–70.

75 See E. J. Kenney, 'Books and Readers in the Roman World', *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. II. *Latin Literature* (ed. E. J. Kenney; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3–32, esp. 15–22. The eunuch's ability to read and speak well may also point to a privileged, luxurious lifestyle.

76 On Luke's critique of wealth and luxury, see esp. Luke 6.24; 7.24–35; 12.13–21; 16.19–31; 18.18–30; 21.1–4; Acts 4.32–5.11; 8.18–24.

77 On the association of μαλακός and its cognates with softness, luxury and effeminacy, see esp. Aristotle, [*Physiogn.*] 3 (808a); Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 12.536C, 543B; Chariton, *Chaer.* 1.4; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 7.2.4; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.6.9; 4.1.25; Josephus, *AJ*

This term signals effeminacy elsewhere in the New Testament itself (1 Cor 6.9), appearing in a vice list alongside *μοικοί* ('adultery') and the notoriously difficult to translate *ἀρσενοκοῖται* ('male penetrators').<sup>78</sup> In Luke 7, Jesus says that luxurious, 'soft' people live in 'palaces' (*βασιλείαις*), and in Acts 8 the eunuch himself is returning to the 'queen' (*βασίλισσα*) he serves. Yet once again, there is no hint of condemnation towards the eunuch and his wealth in Acts 8. Because of this, many commentators assume that the eunuch's wealth points to his elite status as a respectable person of great import.<sup>79</sup> But to a Greco-Roman audience, it is more likely that the eunuch's lavish wealth would have contributed to his 'disreputable' status as a gender-liminal, 'unmanly' man.

The eunuch's overall gender ambiguity emerges most clearly in Luke's juxtaposition of gendered terms in the eunuch's opening introduction. Although obscured in most English translations, Luke's first descriptor of the eunuch is *άνήρ* (v. 27), the specifically sexed word for 'man' (as opposed to the more general term *άνθρωπος* or 'human being').<sup>80</sup> It is in fact possible to translate the eunuch's initial description as either, 'Behold! An Ethiopian eunuch' or 'Behold! A man, an Ethiopian eunuch' (*ιδού άνήρ Αιθίοψ εύνουχος*, v. 27). On the one hand, Luke's application of the term *άνήρ* should not be pressed too far. Luke elsewhere uses *άνήρ* to denote ethnicity, pairing it with a word of national or local origin, and he frequently introduces characters with either *άνήρ* ('man') or *γυνή* ('woman').<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, Luke's juxtaposition of these terms creates a provocative paradox. Luke couples a gendered term (*άνήρ*) with a character whose gender, for many, would be suspect. To such hearers, the eunuch would not qualify as an *άνήρ*, for a eunuch was a non-man, someone who was neither male nor female. By including the word *άνήρ*, Luke thus juxtaposes two ostensibly contradictory descriptors: the eunuch is a 'man' (*άνήρ*) but also a 'eunuch' (*εύνουχος*), or 'non-man'.<sup>82</sup> What is more,

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5.246; 10.194; *BJ* 7.338; Philo, *Abr.* 133–6; Plutarch, *Mor.* 136B; 748E–771E; C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) esp. 63–97; D. B. Martin, 'Arsenokoitēs and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences', *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 37–50, esp. 43–7.

78 See Martin, 'Arsenokoitēs and Malakos', 37–50.

79 E.g., Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 158. See discussion above.

80 See A. Oepke, 'άνήρ, άνδρίζομαι', *TDNT* 1.360–3.

81 For the former use of *άνήρ*, see e.g. Luke 11.32; Acts 1.11; 2.14, 22; 10.1; 13.16; 17.22. For the latter, see e.g. Luke 13.11; 15.8; 19.2; Acts 3.2; 5.1; 10.1; 13.7; 16.14; 18.24.

82 Jerome, for example, tries to resolve this ambiguity by emphasising the eunuch's designation as a 'man' (*vir*) (*Epist.* 53.5). He elsewhere identifies the Ethiopian eunuch as: 'that eunuch (*spado*) of Queen Candace in the Acts of the Apostles, who on account of the vigour of his faith obtained the name of man (*qui ob robur fidei viri nomen obtinuit*)' (*Jov.* 1.12). Cited in

this man/non-man is a person of power (δυνάστης), yet also subordinate to a foreign queen (βασιλίσσης Αιθιοπών). In short, all of these opening descriptors hold the eunuch's numerous contradictions in tension and blur widely held gender, ethnic and status boundaries in the process.

#### 4. Conclusion: The Ethiopian Eunuch and the Gospel

Overall, the eunuch is a 'betwixt and between', paradoxical figure. He is a 'man' in service to a woman, yet at the same time a 'non-man' who lives between the spheres of men and women. By virtue of being a eunuch, the eunuch sits between the categories of man and woman, as well as Jew and Gentile and elite and 'lowly'. If the eunuch was not in fact a 'eunuch' (εὐνοῦχος), Luke's early auditors would probably conclude that he was a Diaspora Jew. Luke emphasises that Cornelius is the first Gentile convert later in chapter 10, and Jewish scripture speaks of a Jewish 'remnant' in Ethiopia (Isa 11.11–12; cf. Ps 87.4 (86.4 LXX); Zeph 3.10). The eunuch has also journeyed to Jerusalem to worship in the temple, and he is reading from the prophet Isaiah on his own accord. But the eunuch's designation as a castrated male raises the question of whether he could be circumcised and thus fully participate in Judaism. If the eunuch was not a eunuch from Ethiopia serving an Ethiopian queen, Luke's early auditors would probably assume that he was an elite 'insider', a well-educated personage of great importance with access to expensive items such as a chariot and scroll. Yet because he is a eunuch who serves a foreign queen, he would not have been one of the respected elite in Greco-Roman circles. When it comes to constructions of gender, as well as ethnicity and status, the eunuch defies easy categorisation.

The eunuch's defiance of such categories, according to Luke, points to the heart of the boundary-breaking nature of the gospel itself. Throughout Acts, Luke narrates the progression of the gospel across gender, ethnic and status lines, and in Acts 8.26–40 he positions the eunuch as an ideal convert who falls in between all of these categories.<sup>83</sup> Even Acts 8.26–40 itself is at a pivotal point in the narrative by virtue of its liminal posture: the eunuch's conversion sits at the intersection of the acceptance of the gospel by Jews (2.1–8.25) and Gentiles (10.1–11.18) and the subsequent rejection of circumcision as a requirement for

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Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 271, 388. See also Burke, who comments on the juxtaposition of the eunuch's descriptors (e.g. 'Queering Early Christian Discourse', 183–4).

<sup>83</sup> Even though men have a more prominent role in Acts, Luke still demonstrates the inclusion of both men and women among followers of 'the Way' (e.g. Acts 1.14; 2.17–18; 5.1–11, 14; 8.3, 12; 9.2, 32–43; 17.4, 12, 34; 21.5). He also depicts the gospel being proclaimed to Jews and Gentiles (e.g. Acts 9.15; 18.6; 26.17–18) and people of varying social strata (e.g. Acts 4.13; 9.15; 13.7; 14.8–10; 16.14–15; 17.12; 25.23–26.32).

admittance to ‘the Way’ (15.1-35). With the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion in Acts 8.26–40, Luke signals that something new is occurring even as he provides continuity with what has transpired beforehand. As scripture foretold, God includes the eunuch and the foreigner and others of questionable ‘outsider’ status, but God does so in the unexpected form of Jesus, a figure who likewise problematises traditional conceptions of status and power as the humiliated, slaughtered lamb who is silent before his shearer (Acts 8.32–3; cf. Isa 53.7–8).

As F. Scott Spencer remarks, ‘it comes as no surprise that the Jewish-sympathizing Ethiopian eunuch in Acts gravitates to that portion of prophetic scripture which features a pathetic, sheep-like figure, slaughtered and shorn (cut), dead and dumb (weak of voice) – the victim of humiliation’.<sup>84</sup> What does come as a surprise, however, is that Luke associates Jesus so closely with a figure who would have been despised by many of Luke’s contemporaries. The most explicit identification of Jesus as the Isaianic Suffering Servant by a New Testament author appears at the very centre of the eunuch’s story, and Luke puts these words of Isaiah in the mouth of a so-called ‘contemptible’ figure.<sup>85</sup> By emphasising the eunuch’s status as a ‘eunuch’ (εὐνοῦχος), Luke presents a character who falls short of elite Greco-Roman ideals of ‘respectability’ and who instead recalls Jesus’ own transgression of ‘respectable’ norms as the humiliated lamb who suffered and died (Acts 8.32–3).<sup>86</sup>

Because of his primary identification as ‘the eunuch’, the eunuch emerges above all as a gender-liminal character: a liminality that impinges on his overall characterisation. Because he is a eunuch, the eunuch is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither elite nor non-elite. To many of Luke’s hearers, the eunuch would have been regarded as an ‘unmanly man’, who surprisingly embodies ideal faithfulness and pursuit of the gospel. Via his vignette of the eunuch, Luke lifts up a eunuch official, or impotent ‘power’ (δυνάστης), and points to Jesus’ own impotent power as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the slaughtered and shorn lamb who is humiliated and exalted, crucified and risen.

84 Spencer, ‘Ethiopian Eunuch’, 158.

85 For a chiasmic analysis of Acts 8.26–40 in which the Isaiah citation functions as the fulcrum of the chiasm, see Spencer, *Portrait of Philip in Acts*, 131–5. For allusions to the Lukan Jesus as the Isaianic Suffering Servant, see Luke 22.37; 23.9 (cf. Acts 8.32). For the Lukan Jesus’ identification as God’s ‘servant’ (παῖς), see Acts 3.13, 26; 4.27, 30.

86 For a discussion of Jesus’ transgression of ancient gender norms in particular, see Wilson, *Unmanly Men* (forthcoming).