
LIFT UP THE LOWLY AND BRING DOWN THE EXALTED: GENDER STUDIES, ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

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Abstract

This essay explores the intersection of gender studies, organizational studies, and Ascension theology in order to offer an interpretation of Acts 8:26–40, the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion, to form a foundation for organizational response to the challenge of gender. Gender is a socially constructed set of practices, roles, and images that is linked to biological sex but moves beyond sex to prescribed value and expected behavior. Phenomena such as notions of the “ideal manager” and the use and the prevalence or reinforcement of organizational narratives, metaphors, and preexistent networks among men or women lead to gendered organizations. The eunuch’s gender will be considered as a third gender, beyond the binary of male/female. The gender of eunuch will be seen, through the social and textual context of the narrative, as a master status, a label status that surpasses other labels pertaining to identity of the eunuch. This gender, like other genders, has advantages and disadvantages in the culture where it is constructed. The narrative provides a foundation for organizations to consider, affirm, and counter some of the advantages *and* disadvantages of gender through rituals or practices such as baptism.

Introduction

The Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8:26–40 is a biblical character with whom to engage the fields of gender studies and organizational leadership. First, I will lay out the relationship of gender studies and organizational leadership in order to show how organizations may become gendered and the challenges organizations thus face in light of such a construct. Throughout this essay, gender is used to capture a

set of practices, roles, and images that are relatively fixed, and distinct from, though often linked to, biological sex.¹ Second, I will examine Acts 8:26–40, utilizing the Ascension as a key hermeneutical event to give insight into the challenges facing organizations in relation to gender. This focus shows how eunuch is a third gender and how this identity is the defining characteristic of the character. The gender of eunuch has advantages and disadvantages that seem to be kept and discarded, respectively, through the ritual of baptism.

Gender Studies and Organizational Leadership

Engaging the disparate fields of gender and organizational studies has opened new possibilities in thinking about systems and structures in organizations. Martin and Collinson note various challenges in merging these two areas. The authors are concerned that such an effort could fragment either field of study, further the effects of a gender bifurcation (most organizational scholars are male, and most gender scholars are female), and encounter the gap between typical North American and European research because of differences in research methodology, academic support, and disparity in the number of available professional conferences in these areas.²

These challenges to merging the two fields encourage Martin and Collinson to advise forming a new discipline that merges the studies from the start: gendered organization studies. This intentionally merged area of study attempts to overcome the perceived disconnections in its initial premise: organizations are gendered, and the impact of gender affects

¹ See Karen Ashcraft, “Gender, Discourse, and Organization: Framing a Shifting Relationship,” in *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, ed. David Grant, Cynthia Hardy, Clifford Oswick, & Linda Lee Putnam (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2004), 275–291.

² See Patricia Y. Martin and David Collinson, “‘Over the Pond and Across the Water’: Developing the Field of ‘Gendered’ Organizations,” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 9(3) (2002).

the organization. It is important to begin by understanding what it means to be a gendered organization.

An organization may be gendered in systemic and structural ways.³ Answers to several questions reveal systemic and structural differences based on gender expectations. First, are work roles between men and women segregated? Are men believed more suited to certain roles simply because they are men? Second, is there a differentiation between sexes regarding emphasis on paid and unpaid labor?⁴ Does the organization, perhaps unknowingly, assume that one gender is more suitable for volunteering? Are the consistent interactions between the powerful people of the same gender? Third, do the hiring or firing processes that are used enforce and reinforce inequality? Any unequal treatment may include differentiation in pay, job descriptions, and ideal images for employees that have developed through the organization's history. An organization may be gendered if it includes substructures such as organizing processes that include decision-making bodies, supervisory power, and physical design of work environments that are more sensitive to one gender. Fourth, does the organization present or accept cultural norms of gender images in its roles? For example, an organization's history may be shared by narratives that capture its identity or narratives that explain its current reality⁵ in a gendered manner.

The effects of gender in the organization do not stem simply from the organization.⁶ Individuals bring gender

³ Joan Acker, "Gendered Organizations and Intersectionality: Problems and Possibilities," *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: An International Journal* 31(3) (2012): 214–224.

⁴ I am using men and women in this case because biological sex is linked to gender, though it is not the sum total. Thus, a female could be in a role that might be better shaped for a gender role that is "typically" masculine.

⁵ See Larry D. Browning, "Organisational Narratives and Organisational Structure," *Journal of Organisational Change Management* 4(3) (1991).

⁶ Dennis K. Mumby and Karen Lee Ashcraft, "Organizational Communication Studies and Gendered Organization: A Response to Martin and Collinson," *Gender, Work, and Organization* 13(1) (2006): 78–79.

understandings and expectations to the organization, as well. Hence, an organization may be gendered as a result of a collection of individuals who assume certain approaches to gender. This dynamic relationship between the individual and the organization may create a gendered presence in the organization that otherwise would not have been present.

An organization may be gendered if it succumbs to a belief in the ideal manager that requires a gender category. The ideal manager is a phenomenon that occurs when a managerial or leadership job that requires no specific biological sex, skews to certain roles, images, and practices that are connected to specific gender identity. For example, the ideal manager might be expected to be available for long and inconvenient hours, to lead rationally and with force, and to be unbridled by other responsibilities. While no biological sex is named, Britton and Logan suggest that this ideal manager most naturally fits with a male-gendered set of characteristics and behaviors.⁷ Thus, the position has become an example of a gendered position. The expectations to be unencumbered are more prevalently associated with a man, whether married or single, as women, whether married or single, are more often considered to be nurturing of space and of people and therefore, dealing with relationships outside of work more frequently. Although these stereotypes do not necessarily apply to all women, especially single women without children, they might still create a gender-restricting dynamic through unspoken expectations. Thus, Britton and Logan suggest that men are more likely than women to be able to conform to the stereotype of the ideal manager. Thus, even efforts to be gender neutral might be unsuccessful without intentional work with stereotypes and generalizations.

Further, an organization might be gendered if existing networks, even inter-organizational or informal, are mainly man-to-man and woman-to-woman. Gendered networking

⁷ Dana M. Britton and Laura Logan, "Gendered Organizations: Progress and Prospects," *Sociology Compass* 2(1) (2008): 108.

may lead to certain roles being filled along gender lines through personal recommendations.

Finally, an organization may be gendered if certain metaphors are noted for roles and compensation according to gender. For example, a woman prison officer may think of herself as a mother or babysitter for the incarcerated persons.⁸ Several quantitative studies show the influence of gender roles in organizations. In two separate studies, both Rasmussen and Manville note the prevalence of women being considered above men as nurturers and care givers.⁹ This is an example of the ideal manager, because no gender is necessary for caring professions, but one gender is more typically considered for the role. Further, as care occupations have increased in workload without a subsequent compensation increase, the organization's structure continues financial inequality.

What these studies conclude is that certain biological sexes have gender advantages when linked with gender expectations in certain roles. For example, Stalp and Winders note the effects of biological sex given the organizational location of men and women in Catholic organizations and their activity in religious activism. Whereas nuns—women—were able to continue religious activism while practicing within their orders, priests—men—faced consistent challenge and, at times, left the priesthood in order to continue with religious activism.¹⁰ In this case, the position that was linked with biological sex showed that certain sexes had gendered advantages for pursuing social justice. While the question may be asked

⁸ Britton and Logan, 110.

⁹ Bente Rasmussen, "Between Endless Needs and Limited Resources: The Gendered Construction of a Greedy Organization," *Gender, Work and Organization* 11(5) (2004): 506–25; Julie Manville, "The Gendered Organization of an Australian Anglican Parish," *Sociology of Religion* 58(1) (1997): 25–38.

¹⁰ Marybeth Stalp and Bill Winders, "Power in the Margins: Gendered Organizational Effects on Religious Activism," *Review of Religious Research* 42(1) (2000): 41–60.

whether the activity was simply localized because those in power ignored the women's activities, this example is one about growing gender advantage for the nondominant sex because, though perhaps location-dependent, advantages are seen increasingly in multiple contexts. Fletcher, in a conceptual essay, notes that some new models of leadership, such as "growing people," offer a female advantage as leadership becomes gendered.¹¹

How might these considerations of gender and organization be of benefit for religious leadership? In the face of Martin and Collison's challenge to begin a new field of gendered organization studies, Mumby and Ashcraft point out that a field already merges gender studies and organization studies: organizational communication.¹² Specifically, narratives can be examined with gender in mind to explore their implications for organizations.

Eisenberg, Goodall, and Trethewey take up this approach of organization communication, examining communication, gender, and organization in light of frames.¹³ Frames are constructed viewpoints that create the possibility of observing, but that also entail certain challenges for observing. One frame they provide is the gendered narrative. This narrative includes such considerations as what stories are told about organizations within its culture that engenders the organization. For example, think about several war movies. Which gender is typically highlighted? Novels and movies are examples of gender narratives that may help organizations to explore gender difference in expectations of leadership through social knowledge. Gender narratives provide the opportunity

¹¹ Joyce Fletcher, "The Paradox of Postheroic Leadership: An Essay on Gender, Power, and Transformational Change," *The Leadership Quarterly* 15 (2004): 647–61.

¹² Mumby and Ashcraft, 68.

¹³ See Eric Eisenberg, H. L. Goodall, and Angela Trethewey, *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint*, chapter 6.

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/orgcomm6e/default.asp?s=&n=&i=&v=&rau=0> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

to examine religious communication *as communication* for gender and organization reflection. Thus, one may examine biblical narratives as communication acts with organizational implications in light of gender. In what follows, the narrative of Acts 8:26–40 is explored ideologically as a narrative on gender. This passage might not offer many specific, concrete practices for current organizations, but it offers a foundation and an approach to formulate practices that address the challenge of gender.

Ideological Texture

Ideological texture is the language of a text, its typical interpretation, and the overall brunt of the text creating alliances or conflicts between groups.¹⁴ For example, a speaker at a local Rotary club recently shared his experience at being surprised by leadership in a minority group. Through the speaker's experience of working with First Nation peoples across Canada, the speaker felt surprised to discover many high-quality people and excellent leadership. The speaker posed insightful, rhetorical questions to the group of mostly Caucasian males that were intended to jar the audience: *Why* was I surprised? *Why* would I have expected anything different? The texts experienced by the speaker, which surpass written texts to include multiple forms of media, led to a certain set of expectations, and even stereotypes, before there was firsthand experience.

The speaker's surprise at the presence of quality leaders only uncovers half the challenge of ideology. It is not simply the speaker who had an ideology. So, too, did the leaders he encountered. Ideology helped to limit perspective and also produce leaders with limited perspective. With that in mind, we may ask, What surprises might the leaders who surprised the speaker have experienced themselves? This question centers on ideology. Ideologies are often unknown to their holders and remain uncovered. The same is true when the

¹⁴ See Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 193.

holders of ideologies are writers, interpreters, and uncritical readers of texts. Ideology, both in the writing and interpreting of texts, often serves one given people over another. “Every text has a politics.”¹⁵

In the face of this dynamic, one may examine a text’s ideological texture. There are multiple reasons to do so. Ideological criticism serves to unmask potential injustice, power plays, and incomplete self-interpretations within the text. However, texts may not simply *contain* ideologies, but may *reveal* ideologies. Various biblical hermeneutical traditions such as black, feminist, and evangelical all have such ideologies within the texture of their interpretations and help expose (and cover) ideologies within other scrutinized texts.

Consider the ideological texture of Acts 8:26–40. The theological and ideological texture of this passage may be scrutinized in just such a way to discern its implications for gender and religious leadership. In the following section, we will see how the Ascension of Jesus forms the key divine act by which the theological texture of Acts 8:26–40 is analyzed and through which ideologies surrounding advantages and disadvantages of a gender are challenged, especially through baptism.

Ideological Texture of Acts

Authorial Ideologies

Acts begins with a revelation of the author’s own commitments: the ascended Jesus, now King of the universe, has given the Holy Spirit, who has empowered Jesus’ disciples for witnessing that extends through Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:1–8).¹⁶ Not only is the Ascension and enthronement of Jesus an event, but the author of Luke-Acts uses the event as a hinge to

¹⁵ Robbins, 192.

¹⁶ See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: The Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), for a full development of the Ascension and its implication for mission and hermeneutics.

culminate the Gospel of Luke and to initiate the book of Acts. This dual use means that the Ascension is both event and heuristic: an event that recounts the story of Jesus (Luke) and accounts for the stories that follow it (Acts).¹⁷ Do not miss how important it is that the Ascension closes the gospel and initiates Acts. Jesus is now risen and glorified, and the position from which he will come is now established.¹⁸ The author of Acts, then, is committed to the historicity of the Ascension and its theological implications for the ongoing mission of the church. These implications include expected signs and wonders, fruitful ministry, and faithfulness in light of persecution as Acts is a continuation of all that Jesus *began* to do and teach (Acts 1:1). The Ascension grounds the disciples' ministry as Jesus' ongoing activity, if mediated by the Holy Spirit whose coming is foretold and expected.¹⁹ Thus, we approach an interpretation of Acts 8:26–40 sensitive to the Ascension as a hermeneutical key.

Gender and Ideology from Acts 8:26–40

In this narrative, the reader is first initiated to the work of Jesus: an angel of the Lord appeals to Philip (8:26). This is Philip the Evangelist, or Philip of the Seven (Acts 21:8–9). Philip was set aside by the Twelve to help care for the Grecian widows in order that the Twelve may continue their ministry of prayer and the word. After the apostles (the original twelve disciples, minus Judas) are scattered from Jerusalem (8:1), Philip began preaching through Samaria (8:5), and the result is conversion and baptism. This conversion prompts the apostles in Jerusalem to send Peter and John to pray for the Samaritans to receive the Holy

¹⁷ Farrow, 17.

¹⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 194.

¹⁹ Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Acts, Introduction to the Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, vol. X (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2002), 43.

Spirit (8:15). Yet, the reader notices that God uses the work of Philip to accomplish these ends, even though Philip had been set aside for service other than the ministry of the word. The story of Philip being set alongside the story of Stephen, another who was set aside for service to the Grecian widows, but whom God ordained to minister in other ways, confirms the unexpected work of God in Philip's ministry.

The story reveals the importance of the Ascension for its understanding. The encounter with the eunuch begins by Philip asking a question: Do you understand what you are reading? (8:30), and then Philip finishes with explicit witness of Jesus (8:35). The story finishes with Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch and then being transported by the Spirit of the Lord (8:39) to continue his witness of Jesus. Yet, while Jesus is certainly central in the narrative, his activity is always mediated: an angel of the Lord speaks to Philip; the Spirit gives further instructions to Philip; the Spirit of the Lord (8:39) transports Philip to a new location. Jesus is absent physically, yet his mission progresses and expands. This narrative also has important implications for the consideration of gender, which shall be seen below.

Consider that the structure of the passage reveals a chiasm. While Wall has a similar chiasm to the one presented here, Wall's chiasm draws its center around the question of to whom the prophet is referring (8:34).²⁰ The following chiasm, instead, reveals that the reader's attention is drawn to the connection between Jesus and the eunuch.

- A.** Philip goes south at the direction of the angel of the Lord (v. 26)
- B.** Philip meets the eunuch (v. 27)
- C.** The eunuch is in the chariot, and Philip approaches the chariot (vv. 28–29)
- D.** Philip asks the eunuch a question (v. 30)

²⁰ Wall, 142.

- E.** Eunuch cannot understand Scripture
(vv. 31–32)
- F.** Passage of Scripture from Isaiah
(vv. 32–33)
- E.¹** Eunuch asks for Philip’s
interpretation (v. 34)
- D.¹** Philip answers the eunuch’s question
(v. 35)
- C.¹** The eunuch stops the chariot, and Philip and
eunuch descend the chariot for baptism
(v. 38)
- B.¹** Philip departs and is no longer seen by the
eunuch (v. 39)
- A.¹** Philip appears in Azotus (v. 40)

The identity of the Ethiopian eunuch uncovers the texture of Acts more clearly. The text of Acts itself lets us know several pieces of information regarding the identity of the eunuch. First, the location is important. The text makes explicit that the characters meet on the road (8:26). Second, we understand the eunuch has come from Jerusalem, where he has been worshipping (8:27). Third, the text explicitly mentions several factors in quick succession: the character is a eunuch, Ethiopian, an important official, works with the treasury, and serves the queen of the Ethiopians (8:27). As would be expected, but made explicit, the character is able to read—even read aloud (8:30). Clarice Martin makes much work of the identifying features of the character. The racial identity of a person who is black is key for the identity that the text is conveying. The individual is en route, a foreigner, powerful, and racially distinct from Philip.²¹

²¹ Clarice J. Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation,” *Semeia* 47, ed. Sheila Briggs, Katie Geneva Cannon, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Kwok Pui Lan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), 122.

Race, Sexuality, or Gender?

As noted above, the Ethiopian eunuch has several identifying characteristics. Why should the eunuch be a main consideration? Gender studies often consider race and class as typically interconnected with gender.²² In Acts 8:26–40, race, sexuality, gender, and office have been considered. Martin makes use of the social and cultural intertexture to reveal the depth of meaning for the eunuch's race. Being Ethiopian was key to the mental and spiritual image garnered by non-black ancient people, including “wooly hair, black skin, puffy lips,” even moral danger and negative character.²³

Curiously, though, Martin's engagement with the eunuch as a *eunuch* is not prevalent. Martin mentions the eunuch exclusion from Israel's covenant, which will be discussed below, but does not engage deeply this aspect of the character's identity. It is possible, and only possible, that Martin's text suffers its own ideology at this point as Martin's gender (female) may discard, or at least not focus on, the eunuch's gender as a noteworthy issue while highlighting the eunuch's race. Indeed, readers and interpreters alike must be aware that “every interpreter reflects presuppositions, interests, commitments, desires, privileges, and constraints” that are part of complex webs of relationships of power and history.²⁴

Others consider the eunuch in terms of sexuality. Kartzow and Moxnes believe that feminist, gay, and lesbian hermeneutical communities seek characters from biblical narratives with whom they may identify and who may help them achieve status as participants in religious communities. They suggest that the eunuch may be such a character.²⁵ However, on this point, Kartzow and Moxnes have

²² See Acker, “Gendered Organizations and Intersectionality,” 220.

²³ Martin, 111.

²⁴ Robbins, 215.

²⁵ Marianne B. Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes, “Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender, and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40),” *Religion & Theology* 17 (2010): 184–204.

succumbed to the same flaw as the perception of the ideal manager. Just as the ideal manager is a gendered position of employment that is not necessarily linked to sex, Kartzow and Moxnes utilize the character as an ideal character for sexuality when no sense of sexuality is given in the text. To emphasize sexuality in the text because of gender is to oversimplify the eunuch's identity.

Yet, Kartzow and Moxnes wish to maintain the complexity of the Ethiopian character. Kartzow and Moxnes are correct to cite the phenomenon of intersectionality as a key hermeneutical category for this narrative. They believe the location of the narrative—a road—affirms that intersectionality is at work. Intersectionality suggests that “various categories work together and mutually construct each other.”²⁶ Each person is part of more than one category. Specifically in the text of the Ethiopian eunuch, the character cannot be understood simply as Ethiopian, but as an Ethiopian-eunuch-official-worshiper. Yet, while Kartzow and Moxnes believe that being a eunuch is a key cultural texture of the passage, in part because a eunuch was difficult to categorize,²⁷ Kartzow and Moxnes do not take seriously enough the status as a eunuch. While Kartzow and Moxnes affirm that later Christian interpreters emphasized that the eunuch was a man (and had been made a eunuch), the text's emphasis on the character being a eunuch is not to be missed. This is because gender is not strictly sex. There is something that identifies and sets aside the character because he is a eunuch and not male or female.

Eunuch is best understood not just as one aspect of the character, but as a master status. Master status is not about the character, but rather it is about the identity marker that rules the other identifying characteristics. It means that eunuch is a status that “overshadows all other labels and

²⁶ Kartzow and Moxnes, 194.

²⁷ Kartzow and Moxnes, 194.

most poignantly defines his identity.”²⁸ The prevalence of the identity as eunuch is seen in several ways, which leads to the interpretation that it is a master status for this character. First, the term *eunuch* appears as an identifying characteristic four times (verses 34, 36, 38, 39) after the initial description in verse 27. Second, while some argue that *eunuch* may simply indicate an official in this passage, this use would be redundant in verse 27 where the terms *eunouchos* and *dunastes* are both used. *Eunuch* adds nothing to the description of the person if it only means “official.” Instead, it adds unique characteristics to the character. Finally, the centrality of Isaiah 53 to the passage and its important notation that the suffering servant is without descendants (Is. 53:8) combines to suggest that the character in Acts 8 is a eunuch, beyond simply an official. The eunuch can identify with the suffering servant, and vice versa, because neither of them will have descendants.

Considering the eunuch as a master status and the classification difficulties of the eunuch cited by Kartzow and Moxnes suggest that *eunuch* is best understood as a third gender. One contemporary study bears this assertion out as well. Males who have undergone androgen deprivation therapy, or chemical castration, report not feeling manly and not experiencing themselves as women.²⁹ Without a specific gender with which to identify, psychological and social trauma occur. With these biological, psychological, and social challenges, Wassersug, McKenna, and Lieberman suggest that eunuch itself be considered a gender. This suggestion, for our purposes, is not ideologically naïve. Eunuchs, though often, but not exclusively, made so through violence and without consideration of their own will, could be both victims and victimizers. Eunuchs, given

²⁸ F. Scott Spencer, “The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Social-Science Perspective,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 22(4) (1992): 155. What follows in this line of argumentation is owed to Spencer.

²⁹ Richard J. Wassersug, Emma McKenna, and Tucker Lieberman, “Eunuch as a Gender Identity After Castration,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 21(3) (2012): 253–70.

their political power, guarded women as property of men, “orchestrated palace intrigues and coups,” formed and informed secret police, and led military operations.³⁰ *Eunuch* is best understood as a third gender because of the differing experiences of eunuchs and the advantages and disadvantages found in identity. With this affirmation of eunuch as a third gender and as an identifying characteristic of the character, let us continue to explore the character.

Eunuch as Gender Empowered

The identity of the eunuch is an identity of power in this text. As noted earlier, eunuchs were set aside for the purpose of service in government administration.³¹ It is not necessary to affirm that the position is powerful but not the gender, because gender and position are deeply connected. The eunuch’s gender is imbued with power inasmuch as it is ideal for political rule. The Acts 8 text affirms elements of the eunuch’s power. First, the eunuch can read. Second, the eunuch is on the road. While Kartzow and Moxnes do not make significant use of this observation, it reveals power because the eunuch is mobile. The eunuch rides in a chariot. Yet not only is the eunuch mobile, but mobile for, at least in part, the eunuch’s own purpose: the eunuch has traveled to Jerusalem to worship. Third, the eunuch is an official for the queen. Presumably, the eunuch has obtained permission to be released temporarily from the queen’s service to be in Jerusalem to worship. Thus, the eunuch, in connection with this gender, is given multiple privileges. The gender of eunuch has helped to provide the context where the eunuch obtained and exercised these privileges.

Eunuch as Gender Excluded

Yet the eunuch is also a gendered person with disadvantages. Leviticus 20:21 excludes eunuchs from the priesthood. Deuteronomy 23:1 excludes eunuchs from the

³⁰ Wassersug, McKenna, and Lieberman, 264.

³¹ Martin, 105–106.

assembly of God. For the purposes of the Acts 8 passage, Martin notes the intertexture of the Acts passage with Isaiah.³² Isaiah 56:3–7 notes the typical exclusion of foreigners and eunuchs from the covenant but begins to reverse this phenomenon. While Martin emphasizes the exclusion of the foreigner, the typical exclusion and so the anticipated inclusion of the eunuch should not be dismissed. It is a pointer to the phenomenon at work in Acts 8.

Ascension, Baptism, and Gender Reconsideration

In light of this ideological consideration of gender, the text of Acts challenges gender advantage and gender disadvantage. Martin shows how the intertextuality of Acts and Isaiah reveals a theological dimension. Isaiah 53:7–8, which the eunuch is reading, presents the suffering of a leader as the means of sacrificial cleansing for a people. Philip's interpretation of this passage as prophetic of Jesus reveals an interpretation of the death of Jesus. Jesus' death is a sacrificial death for the benefit of the people of Israel. However, the nearby, though not immediate, surrounding text of Isaiah 53 must also be considered. Isaiah 56:3–7 reveals that those previously expelled from the covenant community, specifically the eunuch and the foreigner, will be welcome. The text of Acts reveals an initial form of this inclusion as the eunuch has come from Jerusalem where the eunuch has been worshipping. Yet now the interpretation of the Isaiah 53 passage by Philip reveals a deeper theological text: the death of Jesus has been the means of securing the eunuch's entry into the covenant. The event becomes a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy where foreigners to Israel come to worship Israel's God (Ps. 68:31).

The chiasm thus presents an element of the text's theological texture. Connecting Acts 8 with its intertexture in Isaiah 56:3–7 is not simply the hermeneutical key for Jesus, but, through Jesus, it is also the hermeneutical key for the eunuch. Jesus' identification as the sacrificial sheep who

³² Martin, 109–110.

ultimately achieves covenantal entrance for the eunuch provides a comparison with the eunuch: the lamb who was slaughtered achieves covenantal belonging for the one who was physically emasculated. Notice the reconfiguration of Isaiah 53:7–8. Whereas Isaiah 53:8 says, “For he was cut off from the land of the living,” Acts 8:33 says, “For his life was taken from the earth.” Critical to understanding this reconfiguration is that Acts 8:33 uses the same root word as the Ascension narrative in Acts 1:9: *airo*. Thus, in Acts 8:33c, the line “For his life was taken up from the earth” does not continue the theme of injustice as in Isaiah, but now reconfigures the text to be about victory. The Ascension, which is the God-given victory of Jesus through the death of Jesus, does not continue the defeat, but signals victory. With this in mind, the immediately preceding line, “Who can speak of his descendants?” (Acts 8:33b), does not indicate lack of descendants for Jesus, as it does in Isaiah. Rather, the Ascension motif reveals multiple descendants. Jesus is now the King with multiple descendants in his kingdom, most notably in this passage: *the eunuch who is present*. The eunuch finds not just a counterpart to the eunuch’s own story, but a hopeful reversal. *Airo*, used to describe the Ascension of Jesus, also points to why the eunuch perhaps is bewildered by the Isaiah text.³³ The gender of the eunuch, previously instrumental in setting the eunuch outside the covenant, is brought into the community of Jesus through the death of the now ascended Jesus. This inclusion is an important part of the Good News that Philip brings to the eunuch.

As the text unfolds, the power of the eunuch is also reconsidered. The eunuch is described as traveling from Jerusalem where he had gone to worship. The eunuch’s means of transportation, the chariot, is mentioned four times (verses 28, 29, 30, 38). This mode is contrasted with Philip’s means of transportation—his feet (Philip runs to the chariot in verse 30)—but also the Spirit (verse 39). However, the chariot is not mentioned after the baptism, when the

³³ Spencer, 158.

eunuch ordered the chariot stopped (verse 38). This movement ceases multiple aspects of the eunuch's story: the eunuch is no longer traveling; the display of wealth is ceased as the eunuch dismounts the chariot; the service being rendered the eunuch for the eunuch's position of authority is discontinued; the eunuch is no longer returning to the eunuch's home nation in that moment; the eunuch is no longer returning to service of the queen in that moment. By coming under the authority of the ascended Jesus in baptism, the eunuch has set aside the privilege afforded by the socially constructed role, image, and responsibilities given through the eunuch's gender.

Yet, while the Ascension has reworked the privilege of dominant gender role (power) and the disadvantage of gender (covenantal exclusion), in the context of baptism, the gender of the character as a eunuch is reaffirmed twice (Acts 8:38, 39). Post-baptism, the chariot is no longer mentioned, yet the eunuch is said to "go on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). Here the inner texture of Acts begins to uncover an ideological texture. Eleven times after this instance in Acts, the word *way* is used in accordance with the work of God, salvation, the mission of the church, or the Lord. Specifically, *way* is used as a description of followers of Jesus six times (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The inner texture of Acts with the progressive-repetitive use of *way* reveals the journey of the eunuch as a key aspect in the work of Jesus, too. The reaffirmed gender of the eunuch who is on the way shows that gender of the eunuch will be used in the mission of Christ. The text does not say how it will be used—only that the foundation is established through emphasis on the master status as eunuch and that he is on his way.

While the eunuch's identity may have been a source of shame and exclusion, it is now connected with the eunuch's descent from Jesus. In this covenant inclusion, the gender now becomes a symbol of God's power to bring the outsider into covenant. The baptism of the eunuch, then, as it records the eunuch coming "up out of the water" (Acts

8:39) becomes literal and spiritual fulfillment of the *Magnificat* where Mary proclaims, with Ascension language, that God “lifts up the humble” (Luke 1:52a).³⁴ Covenantal belonging to Jesus, established in baptism, means that God has lifted up the eunuch and given him a place with the honored in Christ. Thus, the disadvantages of exclusion with the eunuch gender are overcome in the work of God to establish the eunuch’s place in Christ and the church.

Further, baptism is also an affirmation of God bringing down the exalted (Luke 1:52a). The identity of the eunuch was of key importance earlier in the narrative: an Ethiopian, a eunuch, an official of Candace the Queen, with great power (riding in a chariot with the ability to read). Yet in relation to the baptism, several pieces of identity cease: the eunuch is not mentioned to continue returning to Candace; the chariot is not mentioned; he is not mentioned as being on his way “home” (8:28); the nation of Ethiopia is not mentioned. The absence of these characteristics after the baptism ritual is a sign that God “brings down” the advantages of the eunuch. Thus, baptism performs a double maneuver regarding the eunuch.

However, while baptism removes barriers of exclusion and exaltation, the importance of the eunuch gender is not denied as the eunuch is given a role in mission. Even after the other markers are removed, the character is affirmed again as a eunuch (Acts 8:39).³⁵ Why might this be the case? Elsewhere the New Testament argues that various identifying characteristics, including sex, nationality, and social position, are no longer distinguishing features given one’s baptism in Christ—King Jesus (e.g., Gal. 3:27–29). Yet the eunuch is reaffirmed as the eunuch post-baptism. O’Donovan notes that some of the categories distinguished are bad (e.g., slavery) and some are good (e.g., men and women; Jew and Gentile). However, these markers are not

³⁴ Spencer, 158.

³⁵ This is not to say these identities are not important, but it is to recognize the emphasis on *eunuch* since verse 27 as a key master status. This emphasis lets the text be communication as opposed to simple reporting of facts.

to be barriers. The communication, the sharing, that makes community in the church is not stopped by such barriers.³⁶

Perhaps the eunuch's gender remains a characteristic post-baptism in this narrative because this marker facilitates the eunuch's communication of Jesus. It seems likely that the eunuch's experience as a eunuch gives the eunuch hermeneutical insight into Jesus. The eunuch's experience and inclusion in the community of Jesus might remove blind spots that others will have toward Jesus as the slaughtered lamb. It may be the case that in suffering the physical violence of castration at the hands of others for their purposes, the eunuch may understand the lamb who was led silently to the slaughter and suffered humiliation.³⁷ The eunuch's baptism may be seen to have relativized the eunuch's identifying markers of nationality, role, and social power, but to have left in place the eunuch's gender for the sake of those whom he will minister and witness to the kingdom. Likewise, baptism is a practice for Christians that removes identifying markers that may bring division, while raising up those elements of one's story that bring further insight to the story of Jesus for reflection and proper witness, including gender.

Gender and Religious Leadership

The eunuch's connection with Jesus, understood in light of the hermeneutical device of the Ascension and accomplished through the eunuch's baptism into Christ, is evidence of the removal of barriers. The advantages of the eunuch's gender (prestige, power, place) are removed, as are the disadvantages (exclusion). Yet the gender remained for communication of the eunuch's witness and connection with Jesus.

These insights can be applied practically. Organizational leaders should develop rites and rituals that negate gender

³⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, "What Kind of Community Is the Church?" *Ecclesiology* 3(2) (2007): 184.

³⁷ Spencer, 156. The violence and derision involved in castration show its severity in becoming cyclical in the examples Spencer shows.

advantage and disadvantage, while maintaining gender as an integral portion of a person's identity and role. This work may include the sharing of narratives from all genders in similar positions to see what unique experiences and skills are helpful in the shared role. Organizations may develop feedback loops or exercises that help employees see their own experiences, roles, and images in light of gender and subsequent advantages and disadvantages. For example, in a recent professional role when obtaining feedback on organizational practices of financial management, I sought both men and women for their insight, utilizing critical incident technique in semi-structured interviews. The women served as frontline workers, listening to the client feedback regarding financial practices because they were considered more approachable based on the fact that they were women. On the other hand, men in the organization used different language, including *driving* and *results* when discussing their experiences. This difference was due, in part, because the people to whom they were accountable were more likely to be men. (These experiences did not need to break down by biological sex as both sexes could have had traits of the different gender.) I worked to have them reflect from other vantage points outside their own typical roles in order to obtain feedback, as well. I wanted to capitalize on the advantages and highlight the disadvantages of their genders, knowing the positions they occupied were gendered.

Conclusion

The ideological texture of Acts 8:26–40 provides an insightful narrative in the consideration of gender and organizational leadership. The character of the eunuch, understood in light of the Ascension of Jesus and the eunuch's baptism, gives reason to reconsider the privilege and the exclusion of gender and its reappropriation for mission. The narrative of the eunuch provides a foundation that organizations ought to find ways to affirm certain aspects of gender, while disaffirming other aspects.

Affirming gender provides specific insight into roles and responsibilities. Clearly, more research can be conducted that would lead to examples of utilizing aspects of gender while rejecting others. This further research may include what nonreligious rituals would be helpful that may accomplish something analogical to baptism in the narrative or examining examples of organizational narratives that are successful in accessing the insight of gender without accentuating gender advantages or disadvantages.

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