

“About Himself or Someone Else?”: Lament and Solidarity in the Narrative of Philip and the Ethiopian*

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Abstract: The narrative of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 centres on the interpretation of a lament concerning the “suffering servant” from Isaiah 53. There are striking parallels with the narrative of the Emmaus Road in Luke 24, in which two individuals are pointed to the Hebrew scriptures in order to establish suffering as a defining characteristic of the Messiah. This paper explores parallels between the two narratives, including the significance of lament and the experience of trauma in the lives of the protagonists (bereavement through crucifixion in Luke 24, castration and marginalization in Acts 8). It applies the psychological concept of posttraumatic growth in both cases. It goes on to argue that in Acts 8 a foreign, damaged, sexually ambiguous, and marginalized individual is able to enter into the ancient Jewish lament, to make it in some sense his own, and to experience solidarity through both this and the close presence of the Apostle Philip, who assists in its interpretation. It suggests that the present-day reader is also invited to do this by the open form of the Ethiopian’s question and the fact that it remains unanswered in the text. This in part accounts for the longevity of texts of lament in the Hebrew Scriptures, and their ready reception in cultures far removed from their original context.

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This paper takes a psychological approach to Acts 8:26-39, a text from the Christian New Testament that is itself a reading of a text from the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 53. It focuses on lament as a psychosocial therapeutic process rather than a literary genre. The application of psychology in biblical studies has a chequered history.^① Nevertheless, I have previously argued that, if used appropriately, psychology has the capacity to illuminate exegesis and enrich interpretation^②, and this paper will attempt to illustrate the point.

I. The Psychosocial Function of Lament

The word lament is most simply defined in English as “to express or feel sorrow for”, but lamenting is both broader in scope and deeper in intensity than this. It is perhaps the most obvious response to loss and is engaged in as both an individual and group exercise; it expresses not only consternation at what or who has been lost, but also a desire for things to be made right.

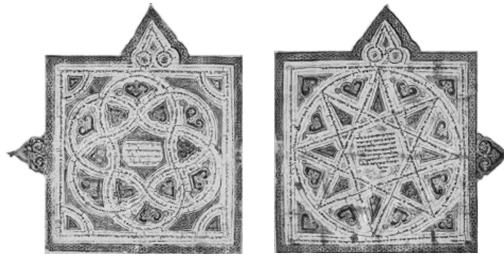
There are several aspects to lament. It is a means of venting emotion. It involves protest, either at the situation itself or at the kind of world order in which such things happen. It can be a form of self-assertion, of refusing to be silenced, and thus an expression of power.

It is also increasingly being seen as a way of making meaning^③, offering a framework within which to process significant existential issues by posing “Why?” questions. It can involve high degrees of creativity, especially where it becomes a more formalized genre within a tradition. It is also intimately associated with narrative, the weaving of events into a story, bearing witness

① See, for example, Wayne Rollins, *Soul and Psyche: The Bible in Psychological Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 62-75.

② Joanna Collicutt, “Bringing the Academic Discipline of Psychology to Bear on the Study of the Bible,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 63 (2012): 1-48.

③ Lewis Hall, M. Elizabeth, Laura Shannonhouse et al., “Religion-Specific Resources for Meaning-Making from Suffering: Defining the Territory,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21 (2018): 77-92.



and speaking truth.^① Often those lamenting are drawn into the story, asking themselves whether they could or should have acted differently, expressing contrition or remorse for the part they may have played (as in Isaiah 53: 3-4).

While lament begins as a spontaneous response to an acute recent tragedy, it can come to be repeated regularly as an intentional ritual to ensure that the event and the people concerned are not forgotten and mistakes not repeated. Communal lament can bind groups together and deepens a sense of collective identity.^② Pathos, in word, gesture, or music, is often invoked to refresh the emotional intensity and lessen the risk of drifting into empty custom. The Hebrew Bible offers many resources for both personal and communal lament, particularly in the Psalms^③, and the book of Lamentations is recited in this way by both Christians and Jews at key points in their liturgical calendars.

Lament is less prominent as a literary genre in the Christian New Testament, but its psychological building blocks are widespread, for example in Jesus' response to the rejection of his message in Galilee and Jerusalem and in the passion narratives. These provided resources for personal and communal devotion which became elaborated in medieval and early modern western Christianity around motifs such as "The Man of Sorrows" and the Pietà. These forms of devotion allowed believers to connect their personal griefs with a bigger tradition of lament in a way that both validated and gave deeper meaning to their experience.

II. The Text: Acts 8: 26-39

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge

^① Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2008), 51.

^② Jennifer Cole, "Painful Memories: Ritual and the Transformation of Community Trauma," *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry* 28 (2004): 87-105.

^③ Jennifer Brown and Joanna Collicutt, "Psalms 90, 91 and 92 as a Means of Coping with Trauma and Adversity," *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture* 25 (2022): 276-287.

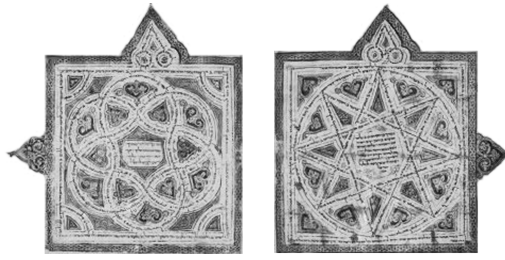
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of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” 34 The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” [37] 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (English New Revised Standard Version)

This passage has sometimes been paired with the account of the journey to Emmaus in Chapter 24 of Luke’s Gospel. As is typical for Luke, both narratives are set in the context of a journey, or more specifically “on the road” (*hodos*), a term Luke uses no less than nine times in Acts to refer to the Christian faith. On both the roads to Emmaus and Gaza we find people in perplexity who are helped by a mysterious individual who interprets the Hebrew Bible to them. In the Emmaus narrative this is the whole sweep of scripture beginning with Moses and the Prophets but also extending to the Psalms (Luke 24: 27, 44); on the Gaza Road it is the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. Both narratives involve marginal people: “some women” and a pair of disciples outside the inner circle of the Twelve in Luke 24, a gentile eunuch (of



which more below) in Acts 8. Both describe an affective response of “burning hearts” (Luke 24: 32) and “rejoicing” (Acts 8: 29), which are said to occur on the road. Later Christian interpreters have noted that both narratives culminate in a sacrament: the Eucharist (or proto-eucharist) at Emmaus, baptism on the road to Gaza. For the purposes of this paper, it is perhaps most important to note that both are also concerned with lament.

In an earlier publication I offered a psychological reading of the Emmaus Road narrative, presenting it as an instance of the psychological concept of “posttraumatic growth”.^① This is a relatively recent concept in psychology, though embedded in many of the wisdom traditions of world religions. It describes the phenomenon whereby an individual or community experience benefits as well as costs in the aftermath of trauma and suffering. The term “posttraumatic growth” (obviously modelled on “posttraumatic stress”) was introduced by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in a book entitled *Trauma and Transformation* published in 1995.^② They argue that transformation is key to distinguishing this process from both defensive denial and resilient coping. Instead, in posttraumatic growth a transformative positive change is said to occur so that there is an advance beyond the pre-traumatic state. This change involves emotional engagement with the trauma and its effects and therefore may be accompanied by a degree of psychological distress, but this distress is seen as healthy rather than pathological. Based on empirical studies of trauma survivors, growth has been identified as falling under the broad categories of increased appreciation of life; deepening of relationships with those going through the same thing or who have been there to help; the discovery of unexpected personal strengths; the opening up of unforeseen life

^① Joanna Collicutt, “Posttraumatic Growth and the Origins of Early Christianity,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 9 (2006): 291-306.

^② Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995). See also Richard Tedeschi, Jane Shakespeare-Finch, Kanako Taku et al., *Posttraumatic Growth: Theory, Research, and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

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options; and spiritual development.^①

Central to the process is the reconstitution of cognitive schemas (working models of the world) which are understood to have been shattered by the traumatic experience.^② The initial response to trauma includes unmanageable distress, incomprehension, and ineffective action. There is then likely to be a period of questioning of previous assumptions about the world, reflecting an attempt to mend broken schemas. This can be a helpful process, especially if supported by other people or resources (for example books offering practical wisdom), and the weaving of events into a narrative appears to be a particularly powerful way of re-establishing order.^③ But Tedeschi and Calhoun argue that more than mending is required if robust meaning is to be made and growth is to occur; the organisation of the schemas needs to be radically transformed so that their building-blocks are reconstituted in a more sophisticated form that does better justice to the events. This reorganisation of the mental landscape is a form of wisdom that is then carried forward by the individual or community into a healthy engagement with the world.

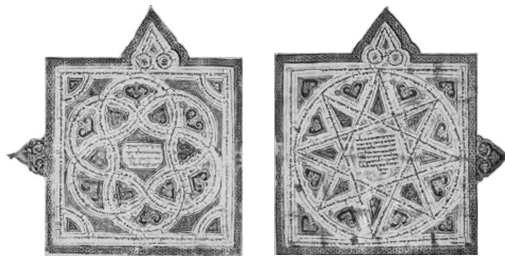
In my earlier paper I argued that something like this is happening when Jesus takes the Hebrew Scriptures—the basis of existing assumptions about the world for the pair on the Emmaus Road but which have been shattered by his violent death—and begins a process of transforming the assumptions by drawing out the idea that it was “...necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory...” (Luke 24:26) This process of transforming the reception of texts from the Hebrew Bible so that they were not only reconciled with the death and suffering of Jesus, but enabled to infuse these with meaning, is seen across the New Testament as a whole.^④ One

① Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, “The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9 (1996): 455-471; Richard Tedeschi, Arnie Cann, Kanako Taku et al., “The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: A Revision Integrating Existential and Spiritual Change,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 30 (2017): 11-18.

② Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering*, 78. See also Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

③ Michelle Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

④ Joanna Collicutt, “Posttraumatic Growth and the Origins of Early Christianity,” 300-303.



passage in which this is evident is the story of Philip and the Ethiopian which, rather than referring vaguely to the whole of scripture, focuses on and quotes a specific text.

III. The Text within the Text: Isaiah 53: 7b-8a

The text quoted in Acts 8: 32-33 is reproduced verbatim from the Greek Old Testament. It is a brief extract, and in the original it continues, “Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.” This offers a potential theological interpretation, but Luke chooses not to include it, either because he leaves it as an allusion for those of his audience familiar with Isaiah or because he rejects the penal substitutionary interpretation (he does something similar in Chapter 4 of his Gospel in quoting Isaiah 61: 1-2a). Alternatively, some commentators^① have suggested that the quote ends with the phrase “taken away from the earth” as a way of denoting Jesus’ resurrection (cf. Luke 24: 46) or his ascension.

The text forms part of what is sometimes referred to as the fourth “servant song” in deuterio-Isaiah (42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13-53: 12), though there is disagreement among scholars as to whether these passages can in fact be treated together.^② Clearly, in their original context these did not refer to Jesus. However, scholarship is divided as to the identity of the original “servant”. The passages could be autobiographical, referring to the writer himself or perhaps another prophet known to the writer and his community. Michael Goulder has made a strong case for identifying him with the sixth century BCE King Jehoiachin who was deported (“taken away from the land”) in 597 in the first wave of Babylonian exiles.^③ As deuterio-Isaiah is usually thought to have been written towards the end of the exilic period sixty or so years later, this would necessitate either an earlier dating or suggest that the

^① For example, Hans Conzelmann, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987), 68.

^② Darrell Hannah, “Isaiah within Judaism of the Second Temple Period,” in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, eds. Steve Moyise and Maarten Menken (London T. & T. Clark, 2005), 27-28.

^③ Michael Goulder, “Behold My Servant Jehoiachin,” *Vetus Testamentus* 52 (2002): 175-187.

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author is writing retrospectively.

A more cautious and also the most common interpretation (perhaps because the servant is not named) has been that these passages present an individual who stands for the whole of God's people, or more specifically the righteous, rather as the psalmist may speak for the righteous with an individual voice, beginning with the blessed man of Psalm 1.^① This also appears to have been the main interpretation in Second Temple Judaism, where it is repeatedly applied to a righteous group of Jews existing in the oppressive cultural environment of Hellenism (e.g. Wisdom 2-5) or under Roman occupation (e.g. The Habakkuk Commentary from the Qumran scrolls).

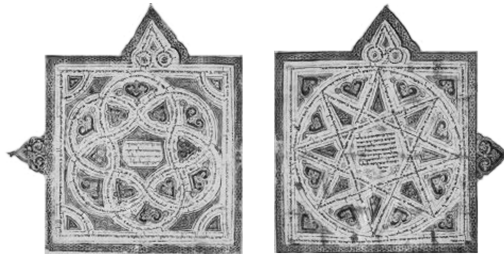
Nevertheless, there are also eschatological messianic interpretations from this period (e.g. 1 Enoch: 62-63). This existing tradition, together with the sufferings of the mysterious servant figure (in Greek *pais* or *doulos*) documented in Isaiah 50-53, make these passages a potential resource for reflecting on the significance of Jesus to whom the term *doulos* is applied in Philippians 2: 7. While this does indeed seem to have happened in the early church^②, the systematic application of Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12 to Jesus barely features in the New Testament (in contrast, for example, to Psalm 22 and 110) beyond passing references in the context of Jesus' healing ministry (Matthew 8: 17); his ignominious fate faced with passive silence (Matthew 27: 57-60; Luke 22: 37; 1 Peter 2: 22) and the continuing rejection of his message by mainstream Judaism (John 12: 36; Romans 10: 16). The pivotal nature of the text in Acts 8: 26-39 is therefore something of an exception in this respect and, unlike the references cited above, it is not explicitly identified with Jesus. Instead the identity of the servant is presented as a question posed by the Ethiopian.

IV. The Ethiopian

Like the servant figure in deuteron-Isaiah, the Ethiopian may be representative of a group of people. His story is placed between the conversion

① Darrell Hannah, "Isaiah within Judaism of the Second Temple Period," 29.

② William Bellinger and William Farmer, *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998).



of Diaspora Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and that of the gentile Cornelius and his family in Acts 10. He stands in a trajectory outwards from Palestinian Jews, through Diaspora Jews and Samaritans to gentiles. This is presented by Luke as an outward movement of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8 Philip is preaching in Samaria when a divine messenger (who stands for the Spirit^①) commands him to travel southwards along a deserted road (not an obvious strategic move) and at the end of his encounter it is the Spirit who snatches Philip away and returns him to the north.

The Ethiopian is returning from worshipping in Jerusalem and is reading a Jewish sacred text. This supports the argument that he is a Diaspora Jew or Jewish proselyte.^② Because his conversion happens after the Samaritans and before the gentiles it can be inferred that his status is intermediate, perhaps because of his geographically distant provenance, African heritage, and or his sexually ambiguous identity. He is presented as a very senior royal official. The name of his queen is generic and her kingdom may have been in the Kushite empire (modern day southern Egypt/northern Sudan). He is also a eunuch (*eunouchos*).

Eunuchs (castrated males) were fairly common in Graeco-Roman society and prized as members of the more socially exalted households, an attitude that dates back to the Persian empire.^③ They were valued and trusted as officials because their anomalous status made them less likely to form alliances with others and more dependent on their masters; they were incapable of fathering offspring who might form rival dynasties; they could safely be allowed to enter female spaces; they were less physically strong and aggressive than intact males. Castration took place before puberty, usually by ligation of the scrotum or crushing the testicles. Male secondary sexual characteristics would then not develop. In addition, eunuchs would be vulnerable to hormonally related health problems including osteoporosis. While valued as slaves, they appear to have been largely ostracised as people, being at the same

① Hans Conzelmann, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 68.

② Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 410.

③ Plutarch, *Life of Demetr*, 25.900.

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time envied for their often senior positions and despised for their physical weakness and gender ambiguity.^① In terms of Mary Douglas' anthropological analysis of the Levitical and Deuteronomic purity laws, eunuchs were inherently unholy for two reasons: they were physically incomplete, and their gender ambiguity constituted a breach of category boundaries.^②

Douglas observes that the abominations catalogued in Leviticus concern systems of categorization and pay special attention to the delineation of boundaries. Blurred boundaries, whether of the physical limits of the human body or the distinction between different types of creature are seen to threaten the integrity of the created order in general and God's people in particular:

...holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes shall not be confused... Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore requires correct definition, discrimination and order.^③

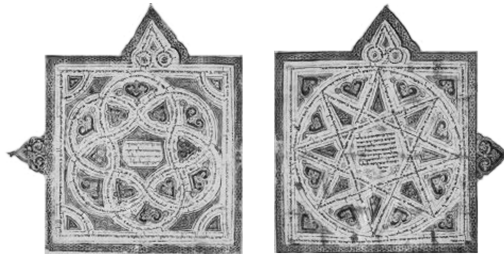
The threat is posed by the mere existence of anomalous creatures such as shellfish or individuals whose bodily boundaries are breached by certain health conditions, but much more by contact with them through touch, ingestion, or sexual intercourse: they are potential pollutants. This danger is managed by avoidance or, where this has not been possible, by self-isolation and reparative cleansing rituals. At a communal symbolic level it is managed by the sacrificial system, whose administrators have stringent personal purity requirements:

Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a

① Lucian of Samosata, *The Eunuch*, trans. by M. D. Macleod and Austin M. Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913).

② Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966), 51-71.

③ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 67.



blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.
(Leviticus 21: 17-20)

Clearly, eunuchs were excluded from the Levitical priesthood, but Deuteronomy 23: 2 also indicates that they were excluded from temple worship. The extent to which this reflects actual practice during the Second Temple period is unclear^①; Luke evidently understands the Ethiopian's visit to Jerusalem to worship as unremarkable^②, perhaps he was familiar with the eschatological promise of Isaiah 56:

Do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56: 3b-5a)

Indeed, this text may form a prophetic framework for the whole narrative, in which the coming to faith of the eunuch is a special case of the coming in of the nations in the last days (Acts 2: 17; Isaiah 55: 4-5).

V. "About Whom, May I Ask You, Does the Prophet Say This?"

The Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah 53, a passage that is in the form of a lament. The pair on the Emmaus Road are lamenting the death of Jesus and their disappointed hopes for national redemption (Luke 24: 21). The Ethiopian is reading a lament over the anonymous servant who was despised, rejected, held of no account, someone who suffered and was familiar with chronic ill

^① See Joanna Collicutt, *Jesus and the Gospel Women* (London: S. P. C. K., 2009), 39-40.

^② Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 410

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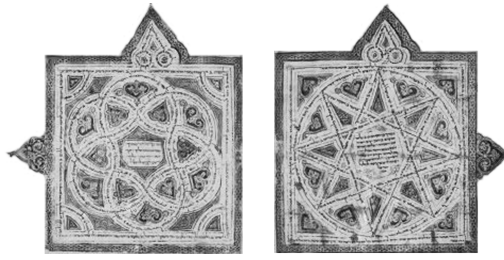
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health, wounded, crushed, oppressed, denied justice, and cut off from human society.^① Philip overhears him reading the text and asks if he understands it, to which the Ethiopian replies that he needs a guide—a *hodēgos* (note again the imagery of leading someone along a road). Philip joins the Ethiopian in the chariot; this is an interesting move, given the Ethiopian’s ambiguous status, that anticipates Peter’s visit to the house of Cornelius two chapters later. He does not answer the question directly but instead uses the text as a starting point for “proclaiming the good news about Jesus.” This is the converse pattern from that on the Road to Emmaus where the precise scriptures are left vague but the fact that they are talking about Jesus is made explicit.

It has been traditional to fill in the gaps in this account by concluding that Philip uses the servant song to explain that Jesus is the innocent servant who, through his suffering and death, atoned for the sins of the people. Protestant interpreters draw out the penal substitutionary aspects of this lament; the “good news about Jesus” is that he is the righteous one who has “borne the sins of many” and “made many righteous” (Isaiah 53: 11-12). The Ethiopian understands that he has a chance of redemption from his sins, asks to be baptized and, in textual variants cited by John Chrysostom and Ambrose and forming v. 37, utters a credal statement in order to receive salvation before undergoing baptism.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Ethiopian’s question is not answered by Philip opens up the possibilities of alternative readings. It could be that the Ethiopian is wondering if the text applies to him. The content of the servant song fits the situation of a eunuch remarkably well, and its lament form has the capacity to connect with the situation of a *doulos* who has suffered and is familiar with chronic ill health, wounded, crushed, oppressed, denied justice, and cut off from human society. By definition, this individual has gone through trauma and continues to live with its physical scars and its consequent limitations. The text may offer something more akin to the healing of wounds

^① While it is tempting to make much of the phrase “cut off” in English translations of Isaiah 53: 8 and 55: 5, two different Hebrew words are used in the Masoretic text and the idiom is absent from the Greek Old Testament on which Luke appears to be relying. Isaiah 53: 8 refers to separation and 55: 8 to discontinuation.



than salvation from sin.

In terms of Tedeschi and Calhoun's account of posttraumatic growth, the acute trauma for the Ethiopian may be some time in the past and he is in a phase of living with chronic adversity, albeit in a privileged context. He appears to be seeking meaning (journeying to Jerusalem and searching the scriptures) and he asks a question about identity. Just as on the Emmaus Road, he can make little headway without a companion guide. Just as in that narrative, what the companion says is secondary to the fact that he "draws near" (Luke 24:15) and accepts an invitation to come in and sit beside him (Luke 24:29). This is an act of solidarity in itself and can be understood as the beginning of the proclamation of the good news that God has come to pitch his tent with humanity (John 1:14). But in the text offers yet greater solidarity because the Ethiopian is now no longer lamenting alone but joining in with a greater lament, and his guide shows him that this lament is about the God who has drawn near to him in Jesus. The transformation in understanding is that the things he had previously thought separated him from God are, in their way, a mark of the divine.

The idiom "What is to prevent me...?" (v. 36) is then seen not simply as a way of saying "Let's do it now", but a statement that previous barriers to full participation in the people of God are seen to have been dismantled. Philip apparently agrees and, without further ado and no requirement for credal statements, in another mark of solidarity, "Both of them...went down into the water" (v.38). No wonder the Ethiopian rejoiced as he continued on his road (*hodos*), which we might understand as referring to continued posttraumatic growth in the faith.

VI. Contemporary Readings

The alternative reading is no less Christological than the first but it is more psychologically compelling. It offers a multilayered approach to Isaiah 53 which can at once be seen as originating in a specific context in ancient Judaism but which is also capable of embracing the lament of all those who are innocent and marginalised. The present-day reader is able to place themselves in this lament and, in a Christian context, when the church acts as a *hodēgos* the

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significance of Christ, the Man of Sorrows, can be more fully appreciated and appropriated. Christ is not simply admired with gratitude for his saving work but received as one who is in solidarity with human suffering and able to transform its significance.

The Ethiopian's story has, unsurprisingly, proved very attractive to those who feel they are anomalous or on the margins of human society, especially in the area of sexual identity and sexuality^① and its intersection with ethnicity. The actor and biblical scholar Peterson Toscano brings these responses movingly to life in a blog article entitled "The Mystery of the Ethiopian Eunuch"^②:

Imagine you are a child taken from home and parents, taken to another country. Men held you down. They operated on you as you lay frozen with fear. You felt the searing pain of castration and suffered a long recovery.

You grew up but never experienced puberty. As boys matured, you did not change in the same ways. You began your work in the royal court. You longed to be in a family again, and even to have your own children. But you were busy and unable.

Non-eunuchs in the court respected and mocked you, sometimes at the same time... You felt rejected and alone. You were sick often and grew fragile because you lacked testosterone. Your bones grew brittle. Your heart grew bitter.

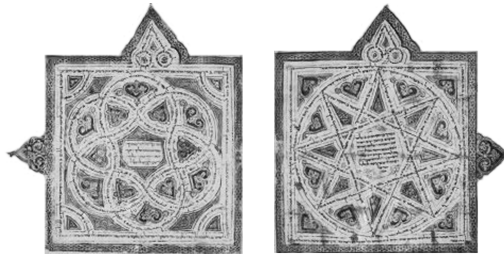
Then at a temple stall, you purchase a passage of scripture, one about a man of sorrow acquainted with grief...

You read the words, and it is like you're looking in a mirror.

The afterlife of Isaiah 53 owes much to the narrative of Philip and the Ethiopian as presented by Luke, that most psychologically attuned of all the New Testament writers, who offers a hermeneutic key in the question posed

① See, for example, Sean Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

② Peterson Toscano, "The Mystery of the Ethiopian Eunuch," <https://www.meetinghouse.xyz/everything/2017/3/23/the-mystery-of-the-ethiopian-eunuch>.



by Ethiopian. Luke understands the human predicament to be that of feeling alone in the universe, separated from others, separated from self, and separated from God. This predicament is to be voiced as lament and then transformed, with solidarity playing a crucial part in the process and being its primary outcome.^①

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^① See also Luke 8:48; Luke 19:9 and extensive discussion of Luke 15 in Duff and Collicutt, *Meeting Jesus*.

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