



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership

THE IDEOLOGY OF ACCEPTABILITY: HOW CONSIDERATIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHY INFORM THE DOING OF LEADERSHIP

ANGELA N. SPRANGER

Luke the Apostle's record in Acts 8:26-40 of the Gaza Road encounter between the newly spirit-filled Philip and his first convert, the treasurer of the Ethiopian royal court, is placed by some as historiography and by others as apologetic literature. Relative to contemporaneous literature, it represents a literary concession to the reaction of the common and acceptable to the extreme and alien, regardless of education or occupation. Considerations of the various spheres of ideology at work in the Gaza Road encounter affect how modern leadership scholar-practitioners go about the business of "doing leadership." Examining how the Ethiopian Chamberlain was, literally, the stereotyped and the unacceptable, and how Philip's behavior, Luke's account, and the historical interpretations of each offer guidance for those seeking to make positive change in the lives and attitudes of others today.

Socio-rhetorical analysis of the ideological text within a scripture requires definition not only of terms and texture, but also of the text's context and contemporaneous literary and social environment. Robbins (1996) defines *ideology* as "the biases, opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a person or a group; a systematic or a generally known perspective from which a text is written, read, or interpreted," and states that ideological texture addresses "the particular alliances and conflicts nurtured and evoked by the language of the text and the language of the interpretation as well as

the way the text itself and interpreters of the text position themselves in relation to other individuals and groups.”¹ Robbins goes on to list four subtextures of ideological texture: individual location, relation to groups, modes of intellectual discourse, and spheres of ideology. The latter is the focus of this analysis of the Ethiopian nobleman’s conversion on the Gaza Road, and its implications for contemporary leadership studies.

This paper identifies the problematic system of differentiations that allowed, and still allow, dominant people to act upon the behaviors of people in a subordinate position. By contextually examining Luke’s account of Philip’s proselytizing the Ethiopian chamberlain, we place each individual within his own sphere of ideology.² The chamberlain’s conversion is examined within the ideological texture of power dynamics. The goal is to articulate the objectives held by those who act upon others, in this case, narrowing the lens to focus in tightly on Philip the apostle as he was filled with the Holy Spirit and went forth boldly and with power, stepping into the Ethiopian’s life with authority. The contemporaneous literary justifications for bringing this relationship between Philip and the chamberlain are also explored, in the context of an environment of institutionalized power dynamics and rationalizations for them. Implications for modern Christian leaders to influence diverse populations, those who are stereotyped as “unacceptable”³ are uncovered, with special attention to the concept of authentic transformational leadership and what transparency truly means for those seeking to leave a positive imprint on the modern world.

I. SPHERES OF IDEOLOGY IN ACTS 8:26-40

Robbins discusses Castelli’s summary of the power relations in a text, which lists the following principles: define the system of differentiations that allows dominant people to act upon the actions of people in a subordinate position, articulate the types of objectives held by those who act upon the actions of others, identify the means for bringing these relationships into being, identify the forms of institutionalization of power, and analyze the degree of rationalization of power relations.⁴ The subject text here, Acts 8:26-40, involves three primary characters, each acting on the other from a specific position of power. This section examines the social context, story, and scene under consideration. The next section illustrates the power relations in the text, and identifies the means for establishing those relationships and the objectives served by the power relations.

¹ Vernon K. Robbins, “Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms,” Emory University, http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/i_defns.cfm 2/2/10 (accessed February 2, 2010).

² Ibid.

³ Christopher R. Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist: Configurations of a Tradition* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002).

⁴ Robbins, “Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms.”

Context, Story, and Scene

The original social environment and context for the Gaza Road encounter is at a nexus of change, in which the Hellenistic era had just begun to give way to the advent of Roman rule with both cultures existing side-by-side. Researchers have dated the book between 60 and 62 AD, placing it in Caesarea and Rome.⁵ Jewish converts coming to the temple to worship would be taught the way of Torah, learning the *shema* and observing religious festivals.⁶ Jews in the Greco-Roman world lived more outside Palestine than inside, having created a Diaspora around the southern Mediterranean region to accommodate multiple deportations. Their social interaction with the dominant culture ranged from none at all to total assimilation. Jews became Hellenized in a variety of ways, but generally their prohibitions against idolatry and their food and purity restrictions led Diaspora Jews to stay away from Gentile settings, and to create their own markets.⁷ In contrast, Christians (followers of the Way) in the Greco-Roman world lived in conflict with the larger Jewish subculture from the very outset. They also lived in conflict with the larger Gentile culture due to their commitment to the one God and their rejection of all other deities; they were so utterly *other* to the dominant culture that they were prey to charges of atheism, infanticide, orgies, cannibalism, and, most close to accurate, political subversion. The response of the Christian community was to make the body of believers a strong positive resource in society, and to endure the exchange of dishonor in the present life for honor before God, to be manifested when Christ returns.⁸

Ethiopia, or Nubia, stretched from southern Egypt to Khartoum, Sudan. It was a society open to different paradigms of leadership, demonstrated by its history of female sovereignty, as that of the Candace (a title, not a proper name). The Candace ruled in place of her son, the King, as he was deemed an offspring of the sun and thus above “such mundane activities as ruling over a nation.”⁹ Ethiopians had experienced religious persecution “from Jewish sources.”¹⁰ In Deuteronomy 23:1, Judaic law forbid eunuchs from worshipping, but the man in question was either a high official and not a eunuch, or a believer in Isaiah 56:3-5.¹¹

In each case, the dominant culture provided a system of attitudes, values, dispositions, and norms supported by social structures vested with the power to impose its goals on people in a significantly broad territorial region, either indigenous or conquered.¹² Subcultures generally imitated the dominant culture, but differed either by the prominence of a network of community and loyalty, or by the presence of a separate conceptual system, or by their ethnic heritage and identity, as with the relationship of

⁵ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, 350-375 (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1983).

⁶ David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Toussaint, “Acts,” 374.

¹⁰ Ibid., 350.

¹¹ Ibid., 374.

¹² Robbins, “Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms.”

the Christian community to its environs.¹³ It is in this social context that Luke the Physician writes his account of the Acts of the Apostles. From what we know about the author, his situation, and the factors that shaped the composition of the text, we do know that Luke is generally taken as a credible source because of his education and profession prior to joining the Way, and that his works are detailed and thorough accounts designed specifically to convey the meaning and moment to readers and hearers, along with the factual content.¹⁴ Luke's writing is rhetorical, offering a message designed to result in a desired end and inform readers how to bring that end about in a new set of circumstances.¹⁵

Story and Scene in Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 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 before its shearer is silent,
so He opens not his mouth.
In His humiliation justice was denied Him.
Who can describe His generation?
For His life is taken away from the earth."

And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 168.

¹⁴ deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*.

¹⁵ Ibid., 380.

¹⁶ Acts 8:26-40 (English Standard Version).

Power Relations in the Text

The story opens with a matter of fact declaration that “an angel of the Lord” spoke to Philip and told him to go, and Philip went. Later, “the Spirit of the Lord” carried Philip away. The mysterious becomes historical, as God is made manifest in Luke’s account of what happened that day on the Gaza Road.

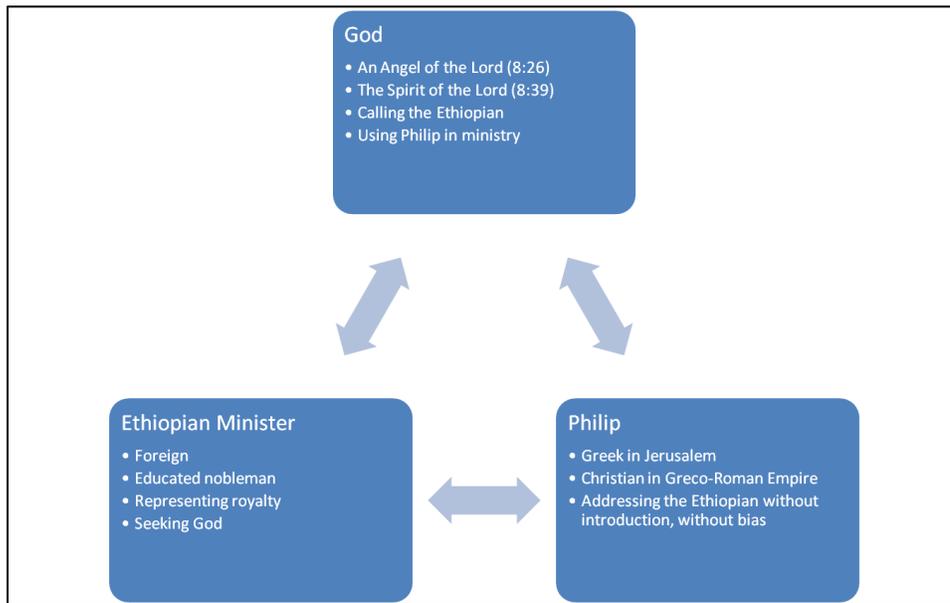


Fig. 1: Model of power relations in Acts 8:26-40.

Philip as a primary character here represents the apostles, the Greek believers, Luke, and all Christians at the time. As a Greek believer in Jerusalem, “dealing with outsiders was not a problem for Philip. He was an outsider. Not to be confused with Philip of Bethsaida (one of the Twelve), this Philip was a Greek in Jerusalem, one of the Seven appointed to run the food pantry, clinic and hospice program there, so the Twelve did not need to tend to such petty concerns as food and drink.”¹⁷ Philip had been chosen for the job because he was “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom,”¹⁸ and his role in this first Gentile conversion demonstrates that his “heart was in the eternal ready-to-go mode—a unique encounter at the intersection of need and opportunity await[ed]. A *kairos* moment [was] in the making.”¹⁹

Given the elaborate initial description of the Ethiopian in 8:27-28, some interpreters identify him as the main character of this story . . . but Philip was known by the bearers of this tradition and needed little introduction. By contrast the Ethiopian remains anonymous. What counts in his case is the communication

¹⁷ W. Brosend, “Unless Someone Guides Me,” *The Christian Century*, May 10, 2000, 535.

¹⁸ B. O’Brien, “Living by the Word,” *Christian Century*, May 5, 2009, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

of his social status and cultic condition, and for Luke, at least, his place of origin.²⁰

The Ethiopian chamberlain is presented as an icon, a representative of those from the “ends of the earth” both geographically and ethnically; he is the very symbol of *otherness*, and he further represents royalty and nobility, inquisitiveness and hunger for God, “motivated to acquire an Isaiah scroll. He was seeking faith and understanding.”²¹ A potentially intimidating figure, he is described as:

(1) an Ethiopian, (2) a eunuch, (3) a minister of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, (4) entrusted with her entire treasury, (5) on the return leg of an extended journey undertaken in order to worship in Jerusalem, and (6) reading from the Jewish scriptures. He not only possesses the expected accoutrements of an official of his rank (a chariot, servants [implied by the command in vs. 38]), but also a copy of Isaiah. Beyond his obvious ability to read the biblical text, the language that is placed in his mouth shows him to be a highly educated and cultured individual. This sophisticated character desires to understand scripture, raises the crucial question of interpretation, and follows it up with the ideal request of the prospective Christian.²²

This nobleman was on the return trip from a journey to Jerusalem, so he “may have been a proselyte to Judaism, or a God-fearer wanting to know more,”²³ but his role in this story is to provide that intersection of need and opportunity. The *kairos* moment happens, and its impact still reverberates thousands of years later.

The Text in Position: Establishing the Means for Power Relations

Acts is written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel, and it locates the Christian movement in the middle of the drama of God’s chosen people, with the Gentile believers now added into the mix. DeSilva posits that Acts is a historiography, “telling a Gentile church how it fits in with the people of God’s own choosing.”²⁴ First-century readers would have understood this attempt to reconstruct and narrate past events, identified as Luke’s by his prefaces, dedications, apologies, and comments, as well as the synchronisms by which Luke identified the place and occasion for his accounts. Those readers might have appreciated Luke’s interest “in unity, in juxtaposing his diverse sources and narratives, as well as his own redactional activities, into a coherent memory theater, on the one hand, and into a coherent geography, on the other.”²⁵ His work is “in keeping with the best of the historiographic tradition to use these speeches as a means to communicate his own understanding of the significance of the events being discussed, such as the death and resurrection of Jesus, (and) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶ However, Nasrallah states that Acts is an example of contemporary

²⁰ Matthews, *Philip*, 22.

²¹ Brosend, “Unless Someone Guides Me,” 535.

²² Matthews, *Philip*, 79-80.

²³ O’Brien, “Living by the Word,” 22.

²⁴ deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 348.

²⁵ L. Nasrallah, “The Acts of the Apostles, Greek Cities, and Hadrian’s Panhellenion,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 3 (2008): 533-566.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

literature establishing the roles of the Greek, the Roman, the Jew, and the other by figures like Hadrian and the orator Aelius Aristides, who “deployed commonly available discourses about civic identity, ethnicity, kinship, and correct religion. They did so in order to ask their audiences to consider their place within the geography of the Roman Empire and in order to unify their audiences . . . this is a form of ‘ethnic reasoning’; Denise Buell’s term for the deploying of arguments about fixed and fluid identity in the service of constructing . . . God’s race.”²⁷

What Prompted the Discussion: Luke’s Objective

The first-century power dynamics required a response by the Christians; Luke’s historiographic documents offered an alternative to the system of differentiation within the prevalent society. But the book of Acts also has an apologetic purpose, “as a legal brief . . . for the Christian movement as a whole.”²⁸ It is a sales pitch; this story takes place at a time when both “Christian and non-Christian intellectuals debated what exactly constituted right religion,”²⁹ so Luke sought to win the hearts and minds of people from all backgrounds rather than lose them to Jewish law or to pagan monotheism, an emerging religious practice. As a preacher and evangelist, Luke has a responsibility to help legitimize the Way, the newborn Christian movement, and to help shape the form it will take as a Gentile-inclusive movement. The text takes an “anti-thaumaturgic” stance, according to Robbins, since the gospel is rendered superior to the activities of the key personages.³⁰

Every player in the story has a purpose, whether playing a primary role (the angel, the Spirit of the Lord, Philip, the Ethiopian chamberlain) or a secondary one (Luke, the apostles, all Christians, the queen, all Ethiopians), and Luke uses each one to make a point, starting with Philip: outsider that he is, he is the one who gets to go on “an adventure in evangelism that is without precedent in the New Testament.”³¹ The iconic Ethiopian was at a pivotal decision point—an inflection point—in his life; in his world, he was part of the dominant culture, but becoming a Christian put him into a subculture, even a counterculture, rejecting the traditionally explicit and central values of Judaism in favor of a new Messianic “Way.”³²

The Underlying Message

The text identifies the objectives of those who act on others—primarily Philip as the agent of God, in this case—as purely motivated by a missionary drive, to take the gospel to “the ends of the earth.” Luke’s main message, though, is to promote the connection between God’s original chosen people—the people of Israel—and God’s newly adopted children, and he does so using an extreme example; if God can reach, and redeem someone so completely foreign, rendering the powerful weak and changing

²⁷ .Ibid., 535.

²⁸ deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 355.

²⁹ Nasrallah, “The Acts of the Apostles,” 551.

³⁰ Robbins, “Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms,” 157.

³¹ Brosend, “Unless Someone Guides Me,” 535.

³² Robbins, “Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms,” 169.

their paradigm completely, then certainly the original hearers would find themselves somewhere on the spectrum of who can be saved, who might be acceptable to God. By crafting the story the way that he did, Luke addressed the ideology of power by responding to the dominant culture's primary messages of divisiveness, reinforced by Biblical law (Dt 23:1).

[His] rhetoric of universalism was carefully and strategically employed, often to argue for Christian inclusivity over and against Jewish particularity. In order to make Christianity more appealing in light of Jewish uprisings against Rome, Acts sacrifices Jews, molding the community of "the Way" into a form of religion that looks less foreign and more pious to a philosophical, Hellenized Rome.³³

The social and cultural texture of Acts 8:26-40 involve the represented world of Philip and the Ethiopian. Roman emperors traveled the Mediterranean basin, "making benefactions and binding cities with Greek identity more closely into the Roman Empire."³⁴ There may have been communication issues, based on different languages, which are not addressed in the Acts 8 text. Also left undiscussed is the fact of the Ethiopian's decision to relinquish his position of power in the dominant culture to join a subversive subculture relative to the Greco-Roman Empire. There is probably more of the apologetic and mystical included for validation of the Christian movement, but it is evident that Luke used his texts to strategically produce "a Christian memory theater by juxtaposing materials ancient (such as the Septuagint) and recent (Christian oral and written traditions), locations exotic (Malta and Lystra) and central (Athens, with all its culture)."³⁵ The Book of Acts is Luke's opportunity to preach, not just to offer a "fabrication of speeches . . . (or) an appeal to Roman authorities for tolerance."³⁶ He "selects what to include based on *his* interests in that story and the usefulness of that story for his pastoral goals."³⁷ The author "consistently shows how God authorizes each step taken by the church, either through prophetic fulfillment or the specific guidance of the Spirit."³⁸ Robbins states that social and cultural texture analysis is where the scholar invites in "the full resources of the social sciences into the environment of exegetical interpretation,"³⁹ but this is where we actually get into trouble. This is where the erasure begins.

II. THE PIVOTAL ISSUES: ERASURE THROUGH THE POLITICS OF OMISSION, AND UNACCEPTABLE PEOPLE

Historical criticism of Acts requires that we challenge the text as presented, and dig deeper to grasp the complete texture of the messages from the first-century writer from the perspective of an implied first-century reader as well as that of a modern leadership scholar-practitioner. When we do this, we see that there are indeed persons, events, and power dynamics embedded in the Acts 8:26-40 text about which the reader

³³ Nasrallah, "The Acts of the Apostles," 558.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 535.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 535.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 540.

³⁷ deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 351.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 354.

³⁹ Robbins, "Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms," 35.

should know in order to have a fuller picture of the interaction between the Ethiopian nobleman and Philip. As O'Brien asks, "Why was this Ethiopian eunuch traveling on this road. . . . Was it coincidental that he was reading from Isaiah when Philip came alongside the chariot?"⁴⁰ There is no coincidence; we have simply begun to question the gaps in the story, to recolor what has been erased. This section addresses the issues of erasure and unacceptability in the Acts 8:26-40 theological tradition, from the standpoint of theological trajectories and the politics of omission.

Martin offers four theological trajectories that explain Luke's mission in Acts 8, starting first with the emphasis on the strategic role of the Holy Spirit in preaching and evangelism and moving on to the "witness" motif, in which early Christians witness to the significance of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. A third trajectory is the expression of joy in response to conversion, and the fourth is the proof-from-prophecy theme, establishing continuity and community between the Israel of the Old Testament and the new Church, born of the fulfillment of prophecies from both the Old and New Testaments.⁴¹

What was known during the first century is that "already within the church there was an understanding of the suffering servant passages as fulfilled in Christ."⁴² Along with this understanding, Luke confirms Jesus' fulfillment of God's promise by referencing the eunuch's worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem, thus demonstrating the promise of God in Isaiah 56:3-7 as overriding the law in Deuteronomy 23:1. The Ethiopian is reading Isaiah 53, demonstrating a personal connection to and representation of Isaiah 56 regarding eunuchs pleasing God. A third and final confirmation of Jesus' fulfillment of God's promise—the proof-of-prophecy trajectory—is the acceptance of foreigners into the Body of Christ, prophesied in Isaiah 56 and Psalm 68:31. The apologetic validity of Acts 8 remains theologically sound. But, as Martin asks, "What is the significance for Luke of including a story about a recognizably black African official?"⁴³ Black was decidedly not beautiful in the literature of the Early Church. "Origen, Jerome, Augustine and others down to the 7th century interpret the Old Testament references to Black peoples frequently but in an allegorical and typological manner . . . Jerome . . . shows in his letters a dreadful aversion to black Ethiopians,"⁴⁴ perpetuating the concept of omitting the unacceptable.

The Politics of Omission

What prompts the current discussion is that a normative ideological and theological focus is the primary thrust of the research on Acts 8:26-40. Martin agrees that a literature survey reveals a predominant interest in prophecy fulfillment and

⁴⁰ O'Brien, "Living by the Word."

⁴¹ C. J. Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 105-135.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁴ C. B. Copher, C. B. (1989). "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples," in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore, 105-128 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

apologetics.⁴⁵ However, the ethnographic identity and geographic provenance of the Ethiopian Chamberlain have received less attention and been deemed “indeterminable” and “inconsequential” by theologians through the centuries, and thus susceptible to omission, even though his ethnographic provenance represents a “graphic illustration and symbol of the diverse persons who will constitute the Church of the Risen Christ.”⁴⁶

But at issue is the argument that Luke “avoids the matter altogether,”⁴⁷ thus initiating the practice of omission. Three approaches in established theology deal with the “unacceptable” Ethiopian as an entity. The first is one of prevailing uncertainty; Martin cites Dahl specifically stating the nationality of the chamberlain is of “no special importance,”⁴⁸ just as African Americans were told that the race of the first African American secretary of defense, secretary of state, Grammy Award winner, governor, and president of the United States was irrelevant. Certainly the goal is for every person to “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,”⁴⁹ but to ignore it is to erase it, and that is just as bad. Exemplars of all kinds are needed for role models, with honest representations of first-century believers included.

The second approach is that of acknowledging that on the Gaza Road waiting for Philip to arrive was “a man from a place”—a Nubian, but that is of no consequence. The third and final approach is to acknowledge that the man was actually an Ethiopian, from a region where there were “more or less negroid tribespeople.”⁵⁰ This approach to dealing with the ethnicity and relevance of the Ethiopian eunuch is surprising, as skin color was greatly important to Greco–Roman society and Ethiopians were the extremes by which people’s color was measured.⁵¹ The Roman seneca, a contemporary of Luke’s, wrote that Ethiopians’ “burnt color” was due to a hot climate.⁵² The chamberlain’s geographic provenance “sets the stage for the great discussion between the Jerusalem church and the mission churches regarding the admission of Gentiles into the Church.”⁵³ Martin agrees with Zahn that Acts 1:8 is fulfilled in Acts 8:26-40, citing Zahn’s comment that the latter “concerns Gentiles (heathens) native to the end of the then-known world.”⁵⁴ Early writers like Homer would have agreed with Isaiah and with Jesus, that the Ethiopians “represented a geographical extreme”⁵⁵ in literature such as the *Odyssey*, a basic educational text in the Greco–Roman world. “Homer’s ‘distant Ethiopians’ are reprised in Herodotus, Strabo, Philostratus, and others who follow Homer in locating Ethiopia at the edge of the inhabited world.”⁵⁶

Within the New Testament ideological framework, there is a built-in erasure of Ethiopians. The focus was on Rome instead of Jerusalem, which represented a shift in

⁴⁵ Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The I Have a Dream Speech,” U.S. Constitution Online, <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html> (accessed February 13, 2010).

⁵⁰ Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey,” 111.

⁵¹ Ibid., 111.

⁵² Ibid., 114.

⁵³ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁵ Matthews, *Philip*, 72.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 73.

ideological and geographic acceptability from the southeastern Mediterranean region to the northwestern regions.⁵⁷ Further erasure is confirmed by the fact that he who draws the maps decides who exists; most Bible atlases “do not include Meroë (or Nubia) in their maps of the world of the New Testament.”⁵⁸ If it is not in the Bible, it does not exist. The people are not discussed; the race and culture are effectively omitted. As Martin says, “Maps which purport to include regions reflective of the expanding evangelistic outreach of the Church . . . should, in fact, depict those regions to which New Testament narrative texts allude.”⁵⁹ But for what objective have theologians perpetuated such erasure? This is an example of secularization, “the process by which the sociopolitical realities of the secular framework of the Christian authors in the New Testament authors led to a marginalization of the darker races.”⁶⁰ It started with the Bible; they became unacceptable.

Unacceptable People

Some find ways in which Luke’s text “overturns physiognomy”⁶¹ and addresses the progeny and provenance of the chamberlain:

In Acts 8, the Ethiopian eunuch’s physical condition (anatomical physiognomy), his place of origin and color of his skin (ethnographic physiognomy) and his being drawn to read the humiliation of the lamb led to the slaughter in Isaiah (zoological physiognomy) do not prevent him from being baptized. . . . Parsons regards this episode as ‘the culmination of Luke’s argument that those who are physically ‘defective’ [emphasis added] by the prevailing cultural standards are in no way excluded from the body of the new Abrahamic community. . . . Now in the new community of the church, their value is not to be decided by physiognomy.’⁶²

But in Acts 8:26-40, according to Matthews:

Not only does the Ethiopian go unnamed, but also as the narrative unfolds he is referred to exclusively as “the eunuch” (suggesting that) the focus of the story is upon Philip’s encounter with and baptism of a foreigner who acted as though he were a Jew . . . notwithstanding his ineligibility to become a proselyte on account of his mutilation. Thus this story moves beyond a demonstration of openness to gentiles to an emphasis on the acceptance of cultically and culturally *unacceptable people* [emphasis added].⁶³

Matthews cites Mailina and Neyrey in explaining the concept of first-century profiling: “The characters in Luke’s narratives (and presumably Luke’s readers as well) depend on stereotypes to locate people. ‘When we know a person’s father and family (including gender and sibling rank), clan or tribe, ethnos, place of origin (region, village) and trade, according to the canons of Luke’s world we truly know them. According to

⁵⁷ Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey,” 120.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁶¹ T. J. Lane, review of *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity*, by Mikeal C. Parsons, *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2008): 615-616.

⁶² Ibid., 616.

⁶³ Matthews, *Philip*, 77.

their ways of perceiving and describing, we genuinely know the essential and relevant information about them’—they knew others generically by their ‘nature.’”⁶⁴ And here we come to the essence of modern stereotyping and profiling.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN LEADERSHIP APPLICATION

Christian leaders today face a continuing politics of omission, much like the modern concepts of selective perception while making sense of incidents and environments, described by Weick as “noticing some things and not others,”⁶⁵ and by Argyris as attempting to avoid or conceal our undiscussable issues.⁶⁶ But the questions of who is unacceptable, who can be redeemed, why, and how people are stereotyped is an important one for leaders to recognize, admit, and acknowledge, if only to themselves. All too often rather than identify what each individual brings to the story (as in the Ethiopian’s case—he goes unnamed and without follow-up), we stop at what is commonly known and visible to all, on the surface. Even within a participation model of decision making, “group discussion tends to focus on what is known by everyone, and relevant information possessed by individual members either goes unmentioned or tends to be ignored when it is brought up.”⁶⁷ Indeed, when people—leaders, Christians, even missionaries—get together to make a decision on how to tell the story, how to write the history book, the attention of the participants is divided and decisions do not derive from linear or unidirectional processes.⁶⁸ In other words, valuable parts get left out.

What Martin’s work means for modern leadership studies is an acknowledgment that there are discussions that need to be had, honest conversations that will require re-evaluating what gets considered and what gets omitted, whose definitions are acceptable and whose definitions are madness. “Ideological, psychosocial and cultural marginalization and ‘omission’ continues to foster an ‘opaque’ and . . . culturally or ethnically proscribed prism”⁶⁹ through which the acceptable and the significant are envisioned. African Americans are often judged as angry or militant when reacting harshly to being told, in surprised tones, that they are beautiful, intelligent, talented, or articulate. Martin cites West’s description of how classical ideals have for centuries “prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity,⁷⁰” even to the point of equating legitimizing black intellectualism or beauty with idiocy. This conditioned thought pattern results in the surprised affect that even today overshadows the compliment and renders the insult. For modern leadership studies this indicates a critical need to learn to react to the work,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁵ D. S. Pugh and D. J. Hickson, *Great Writers on Organizations: The Third Omnibus Edition* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

⁶⁶ Chris Argyris, “Making the Undiscussable and Its Undiscussability Discussable,” *Public Administration Review* 40, no. 3 (1980): 205-213.

⁶⁷ L. R. Beach and T. Connolly, (2005). *The Psychology of Decision Making: People in Organizations*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 128.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁹ Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey,” 121.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 123.

to the person, and not to the stereotype. “Human beings assume . . . that truth is a good idea when it is not threatening. When information is threatening, the normal tendency is to hide the fact that this is the case and to act as if you are not hiding the facts.”⁷¹ For leadership scholar–practitioners, this is an opportunity to redefine and reinforce “a culturally affirming and empowering tradition.”⁷²

Martin’s concept of interpretation for liberation, to effect full humanity, empowerment, and justice in Church and society under God, is one that challenges modern leaders to consider their own approach to authentic leadership. It is reasonable to challenge one’s own position as well as those of one’s colleagues and environment, since “individuals are usually unaware of the extent to which they are producing such conditions for error. They are unaware . . . because (1) the actions that produce the errors are skilled and tacit and (2), the causes for error are frequently undiscussable, and (3) they hold theories in their head about effective action that make them blind to what they are doing and blind to the fact that they are blind.”⁷³ Not until one has acknowledged that there is a need to critically analyze the story, to consider and reconsider the unacceptable and the stereotype, can one begin to effect transformational leadership on anyone or any group; self-leadership is the first step to avoiding “perpetuating the marginalization and ‘invisibility’ of traditionally marginalized persons, groups, and ideologies in biblical narratives.”⁷⁴

IV. CONCLUSION: REFRAMING THE DIALOGUE

In the spirit of Martin’s endorsement of the minority-oriented hermeneutics of suspicion, motivating leaders to reframe the dialogue of Biblical history and relevance of the characters therein, it would be entirely reasonable to periodically reread the following statement by Martin Luther King, Jr., substituting the names of other marginalized groups for the Negro:

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, “When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. . . . We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity.⁷⁵

As modern leaders operating from the same Christian worldview as both Philip the apostle and the first Ethiopian Christian, we can take away several specific leadership nuggets from the Gaza Road encounter. Practically speaking, Philip teaches that when we receive a clear direction from God we should follow it. Faced with a life-changing *kairos* moment, we should speak up and act with boldness and then move to the next moment. From the Ethiopian, we learn to invest in spiritual development and feed the hunger for God, and to reject pride when offered godly counsel and guidance.

⁷¹ Argyris, “Making the Undiscussable,” 206.

⁷² Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey,” 125.

⁷³ Argyris, “Making the Undiscussable,” 211-212.

⁷⁴ Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey,” 126.

⁷⁵ King, “The I Have a Dream Speech.”

He also teaches us to celebrate, rejoice, and share the message. But the text overall has a deeper meaning: the prod to consider who the unacceptable and unredeemable are, to find the stories that have been omitted, and to reframe the dialogue. Including diverse voices of those previously considered unacceptable will lead to discussing the undiscussable, but will remove the blinders from the would-be transformational leader's eyes and permit a more transparent, transformational leadership stance.

The Book of Acts is about action, about the movement of the Early Church, and it requires looking at leadership through multiple lenses. In this instance, it is valuable to see leadership with “four I’s”—the four principles of transformational leadership: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation.⁷⁶ Philip demonstrated each of these, considering the Ethiopian as an individual person rather than a noble, a negroid African, a eunuch; this is the relevance of Philip's failure to greet the Ethiopian or to establish any of the rituals or ceremonies that might previously have defined their interaction. But Philip goes further, challenging the Ethiopian's comprehension of the Isaiah text—not in a condescending manner, but as a challenge from one with specialized knowledge to an equal. Philip goes on to demonstrate idealized influence by positioning himself as a guide for the Ethiopian, and offers the inspirational motivation needed for the chamberlain to request baptism. As modern leaders, we can combat stereotyping, the symptom of cultural and spiritual blindness, by seeing with these four “I’s” and climbing into the chariot with those who may seem unacceptable, but who represent influential champions for the cause of world-changing leadership.

About the Author

Angela Spranger is a doctoral student in organizational leadership at Regent University. She holds an MBA in marketing and a master's degree in human and organizational learning, and holds professional certification in human resources. Angela has worked in recruiting and staffing, labor-management relations, and instructional design. She takes a “theory-into-practice” approach to organizational leadership and development in the corporate setting, working to maximize group and individual progress toward goals and objectives. An instructor of undergraduate business courses at Hampton University, Angela also facilitates workshops on career development, generational diversity, personal marketing, decision making, and conflict resolution.

Email: angesp1@regent.edu

⁷⁶ Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2006).