

The Multivalence of the Ethiopian Eunuch and Acts 8:37

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³⁶ ὡς δὲ ἐπορεύοντο κατὰ τὴν ὁδόν, ἦλθον ἐπὶ τι ὕδωρ, καὶ φησιν ὁ εὐνοῦχος· ἰδοὺ ὕδωρ, τί κωλύει με βαπτισθῆναι; ³⁷ εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ Φίλιππος· εἴαν πιστεύεις ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου, σωθήσῃ. ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ εἶπεν· πιστεύω εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ. ³⁸ καὶ ἐκέλευσεν στήναι τὸ ἄρμα καὶ κατέβησαν ἀμφοτέροι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ, ὃ τε Φίλιππος καὶ ὁ εὐνοῦχος, καὶ ἐβάπτισεν αὐτόν.¹

³⁶As 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?” ³⁷Philip said to him, “If you believe with your whole heart, you will be saved.” And the eunuch answered, “I believe in Christ the son of God.” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.²

In the introduction to his collected essays from 1962 to 2004, Eldon Epp writes of a changed and changing world, one in which he has “come to recognize that multiple interpretations by an array of fellow human beings across the globe are, in numerous instances, each defensible and credible when seen within their varying intellectual and socio-cultural frameworks.”³ This reality, Epp continues, endangers the concept of “*the* original text,” “original text,” and even “the notion of a single ‘correct’ interpretation of a variant.”⁴

Does Epp then sound the clarion call to rescue these endangered species? Those unfamiliar with his body of work might expect a lead-up to a charge to defend, salvage, and rehabilitate. Instead, the erosion of singular truths, texts, and interpretations signals new possibilities to him. Epp was among the first to recognize the great potential of textual variants as “more than mere competitors for a place in the established text of a writing.”⁵ His first book, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts*, understands an essential task of the textual critic to be “to explore the individual interpretations that [variants] provide by locating variants—and explaining them—both within their immediate textual contexts and also within their likely contexts in the life and history of the church.”⁶ Variants must not remain “discarded snippets” but “must be carefully gathered up and reintroduced into the narrative as subplots or, on occasion, even as the main event.”⁷

¹ Acts 8:36–38 NA²⁸, including verse 37 from Codex Laudianus. The argument of this article is based on this variant form.

² Acts 8:36–38 NRSV, including my translation of verse 37 from Codex Laudianus. All English New Testament translation is from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

³ Eldon Epp, *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays, 1962–2004*, NovTSup 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), xxxv.

⁴ Epp, *Perspectives*, xxxv.

⁵ Epp, *Perspectives*, xxxvii.

⁶ Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts*, SNTSMS 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). Quote is from Epp, *Perspectives*, xxxviii.

⁷ Epp, *Perspectives*, xxxviii.

This article treats one such discarded snippet as the main event, not (only) as a variant for text-critical analysis but also within the text itself: neither authentic nor corrupt but useful for interpretation in many fields. Shunted to the footnotes of most English translations,⁸ Acts 8:37 garners minimal attention except, on occasion, from textual critics and those focused on baptism and liturgy.⁹ Bruce Metzger's authoritative textual commentary designates the verse a later addition,¹⁰ and this same conclusion is reflected in the Nestle-Aland 28th edition and the United Bible Society 5th edition, where the verse is included only in the apparatus. Commentaries likewise give the verse little consideration beyond noting its probable later addition, with only a handful of exceptions.¹¹ The treatment of Acts 8:37 as later and hence spurious spreads from editions and commentaries to affect every interpretation of the entire story of Philip and

⁸ Including the ESV, RSV, NRSV, NEB, NIV, CEB, NLT, CEV, and Message. The verse remains in the body of the text in the NASB, KJV, NKJV, KJ21, and in the main text with brackets in the HCSB and NCV. See Nicholas J. Zola, "Why Are There Verses Missing from My Bible? The Emergence of Verse Numbers in the New Testament," *ResQ* 54 (2012): 250.

⁹ Dedicated studies of the last forty years include Jenny Heimerdinger, "La foi de l'eunuque éthiopien: Le problème textuel d'Actes 8:37," *ETR* 63 (1988): 521–28; W. A. Strange, *The Problem of the Text of Acts*, SNTSMS 71 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 69–77; Cottrel R. Carson, "Acts 8:37—A Textual Reexamination," *USQR* 51 (1997): 57–78; Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, "Apg 8,37, der Westliche Text und die frühchristliche Tauftheologie," in *The Book of Acts as Church History: Text, Textual Traditions and Ancient Interpretations*, ed. Tobias Nicklas and Michael Tilly, BZNW 120 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 225–38; and Zola, "Why Are There Verses Missing." Those focused on baptism and liturgy include both historical treatments and current theological debates. See Friedrich Avemarie, *Die Taufenzählungen der Apostelgeschichte: Theologie und Geschichte*, WUNT 139 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 269–70; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans, 2009), 172–73; Alistair C. Stewart, "The Early Alexandrian Baptismal Creed: Declaratory, Interrogatory ... Or Both?" *Questions liturgiques* 95 (2014): 237–53; Seth Perry, "Scripture, Time, and Authority among Early Disciples of Christ," *CH* 85 (2016): 762–83; Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal Parson, *The Acts of the Apostles through the Centuries* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 105–7; Heather M. Gorman, "Stone-Campbell Interpretations of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40): Observations on the Last Fifty Years," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 23 (2020): 5–19.

¹⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 315–16.

¹¹ For example, Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. R. McL. Wilson et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1971), 313; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans, 1988), 178; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 157; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostle*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 433; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Testament with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 414–15; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 144; Eugene M. Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 396; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MA: Baker Academic, 2007), 345, 348; Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 191. Exceptions include Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 85, who presents the verse as part of the text, with a footnote (n. 37) that states, "This verse may have been added later in the textual tradition, but it yet represents a text present in the reading and teaching traditions of the church." On a different note, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MA: Brazos, 2005), 117, considers Acts 8:37 not as later addition but evidence of "but primitive and consistent baptismal practice entailed the existence of such a catechism or creed, functioning as a rule of faith."

the traveler on the road to Gaza.¹² Nearly all treatments of the passage outside of textual criticism and commentaries ignore the verse, while the few that include it do so with the briefest of mentions.

This is, in some sense, quite natural, given the traditional flow of influence within biblical studies as currently practiced: lower criticism, after making rulings regarding variants, is supposed to establish the baseline text, and this baseline then serves as the text used by interpreters focused on matters outside of textual criticism. For scholars pursuing more archaeological goals—for example, those investigating the historical intention of the author or compiler/redactor of the book—omitting all mention of Acts 8:37 perhaps makes good sense: if the verse was not part of the initial text, then it cannot have figured in the calculus of its first purpose and therefore of the author's intent. The variant does not, on the surface, at least, need to be considered if we are following the general rules of historical interpretation focused on the first and early second century.¹³

Up until the last thirty years or so, historical interpretation performed on a baseline (initial or original) text was the preoccupation of modern New Testament scholarship on Acts 8:26–40. The major questions asked of the passage were: is this an independent story/legend and, if so, what are its sources?¹⁴ What is the role of this story in the overall narrative structure of Acts?¹⁵ What is the significance of the Isaiah quotation?¹⁶ These questions seek to unearth an *in situ* interpretation of the text in its first reception.

¹² I use the term *traveler* here and elsewhere, inspired by Tolonda Henderson, “‘What Is To Prevent Me From Being Baptized?’: Reading beyond the Readily Apparent,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 93 (2003): 14–22, esp. 15, in order to avoid the cumbersome *Ethiopian Eunuch* (though it serves its purpose in the article title as an easily recognizable tag) and to write of this person without constantly privileging either *eunuch* or *Ethiopian* or to imply that these labels capture the totality of the character.

¹³ Irenaeus is the earliest witness to this variant. See *Haer.* 3.12.8.

¹⁴ For example, Martin Dibelius, “Style Criticism of the Book of Acts,” in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Mary Ling (London: SCM, 1956), 1–25; Étienne Trocmé, *Le ‘livre des Actes’ et l’histoire*, Études d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses 45 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 180; Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 316; Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary*, trans. J. Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 15; Thomas L. Brodie, “Towards Unraveling the Rhetorical Imitation of Sources in Acts: 2 Kgs 5 as One Component of Acts 8,9–40,” *Bib* 67 (1986): 41–67; more recently, see Christopher R. Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist: Configurations of a Tradition*, NovT-Sup 105 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 71–94.

¹⁵ For example, W. C. van Unnik, “Der Ausdruck ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς (Apostelgeschichte I 8) und sein alttestamentlicher Hintergrund,” in *Evangelia, Paulina, Acta*, part 1 of *Sparsa collecta: The Collected Essays of W. C. van Unnik*, NovT-Sup 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 386–401; Erich Dinkler, “Phillipus und der ANHP ΑΙΘΙΟΥ [Apg 8,26–40]: Historische und geographische Bemerkungen zum Missionsablauf nach Lukas,” in *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Earle Ellis and Erich Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 85–95; James M. Gibbs, “Luke 24:13–33 and Acts 8:26–39: The Emmaus Incident and the Eunuch’s Baptism as Parallel Stories,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 7 (1975): 17–30; Dionisio Mínguez, “Hechos 8:25–40: Anàlisis estructural del relato,” *Bib* 57 (1976): 168–91; C. H. Lindijer, “Two Creative Encounters from the Work of Luke: Luke xxiv 13–35 and Acts viii 26–40,” in *Miscellanea neotestamentica* 2, ed. T. Baarda, A.F. J. Klijn, and W. C. van Unnik, NovT-Sup 48 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 77–85; and Robert F. O’Toole, “Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts VIII 25–40),” *JSNT* 17 (1983): 25–34.

¹⁶ For example, P. B. Decock, “The Understanding of Isaiah 53:7–8 in Acts 8:32–33,” *Neot* 14 (1981): 111–33; more recently, see Patrick Fabien, “L’interprétation de la citation d’Is 53,7–8 en Ac 8,23–33,”

The identity of the traveler that Philip encounters, while precisely the attraction of the story for many European—particularly Dutch—Renaissance painters,¹⁷ received short shrift until recently. In the past, scholars treated the descriptors of the traveler—Αἰθίοψ εὐνοῦχος—as merely incidental details and of import only insofar as they helped determine the overall role of the passage in Acts. For example, Ernst Haenchen’s discussion of the traveler’s identity as Ethiopian and as a eunuch revolves entirely around whether this means he is a gentile or not; Haenchen displays little interest in those details themselves.¹⁸ He wished only to determine whether this conversion story represented a stepping-stone to the conversion of Cornelius in chapter 10; that is, if the traveler is between Jewish and gentile identities then this is a stepping-stone story; if, however, the traveler is definitely a gentile then story is a rival that usurps Cornelius’s role as the “first Gentile convert.”¹⁹ Nils Dahl explicitly concluded that the detail that the traveler comes from Ethiopia is inconsequential, solving the usurpation problem by dismissing the traveler’s importance: “[Through the story] we get a picture of a progressive widening of the circle reached by the gospel; but the question of nationality has no special importance.”²⁰

For interpreters intent on determining the role of the traveler in the original trajectory and narrative structure of Acts, the contents of 8:37 could be, and were, excluded from discussion. But for scholars who focus on more than the story’s first significance and the importance of the traveler well beyond the second century, 8:37 can be of vital importance. In the last thirty years, studies of Acts 8:26–40 have shifted focus onto the identity of the traveler in relation to contemporary contexts. This shift comes from the recognition that the traveler, in all his particularities, serves as a powerful historic and symbolic representative in the biblical text for certain marginalized and excluded peoples.

It is no coincidence that two black scholars are the first to highlight the traveler’s Ethiopian identity as important in itself and not only for historical studies of the text.²¹ Cain Hope

RB 117 (2010): 550–570; and Annette Weissenrieder, “Searching for the Middle Ground from the End of the Earth: The Embodiment of Space in Acts 8:26–40,” *Neot* 48 (2014): 115–61.

¹⁷ For example, Gillis d’Hondecoeter, *The Baptism of the Moorish Chamberlain* (ca. early seventeenth century, Rockoxhuis, Antwerp); Abraham Bloemaert, *The Baptism of the Chamberlain* (1620–1625, Centraal Museum, Utrecht); Hendrick van Balen and Jan Brueghel the Younger (attributed), *The Baptism of Queen Candace’s Eunuch* (1625–1630, Mauritshuis, The Hague); Rembrandt, *The Baptism of the Eunuch* (1626, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht); Gerrit Claesz Bleker, *The Baptism of the Eunuch* (1630–1635, Christian Museum, Esztergom). Many, if not most, of the paintings of this passage during the Renaissance depict the traveler as black-skinned, dressed sumptuously in typical Orientalized fashion, and traveling with a caravan of attendants, also luxuriously clothed.

¹⁸ Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 314–16.

¹⁹ Haenchen concludes that the passage is originally a rival Hellenist tradition, with the Hellenist hero Philip, with the honor of bringing about the first gentile conversion. He posits that Luke incorporated the story but left out its more explicitly rivalrous character, in order to honor Peter’s role in chapter 10. See Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 315–16.

²⁰ Nils A. Dahl, “Nations in the New Testament,” in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honor of Harry Sawyer*, ed. Mark E. Glaswell and Edward Fashole-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974), 62–63. Quoted in Clarice J. Martin, “A Chamberlain’s Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation,” *Semeia* 47 (1989): 110.

²¹ One European scholar, faculty at the National University of Zaire at the writing of the article, understood the traveler as representative of Africa (via his Ethiopian identity) so that Africa may claim the first gentile convert and not Rome (as represented by Cornelius). See Paul de Meester, “‘Philippe et l’eunuque éthiopien’ ou ‘Le baptême d’un pèlerin de Nubie?’,” *La nouvelle revue théologique* 103 (1981): 360–74. De Meester’s article still focuses primarily on theology and the history of the spread of Christianity through a missiological perspective.

Felder and Clarice J. Martin both draw attention to a “politics of omission” in New Testament texts and modern biblical scholarship, which consistently centers on Rome and the northwest Mediterranean as “the ultimate destination of the Christian kerygma.”²² This focus—apparent even in the maps of textbooks and Bibles²³—neglects the south and east, its black and brown peoples, and their twentieth/twenty-first century descendants by ignoring their traditions and legacies from early Christianity.

Since Felder and Martin made these contributions, a growing body of scholarship has taken seriously the transhistorical impact of a biblical figure that is African and black, queer in gender identity as both ἀνήρ and εὐνοῦχος, and of ambiguous social standing.²⁴ While most of these studies take into account the ancient context and constructions of Αἰθίοψ εὐνοῦχος, they also foreground the symbolic significance such a person has for current readers and communities who identify as black, African, queer, trans, and/or otherwise marginalized as liminal and Other.

For example, Martin exposes a “politics of omission” and recenters black Africa for a “liberatory vision of biblical traditions . . . as an empowering force in *all* contemporary communities of faith.”²⁵ Likewise, Marianne B. Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes argue that “the figure of the eunuch may be seen as a formative picture by Christians who are unable to identify with a traditional, western, heterosexual understanding of Christianity.”²⁶ Zorodzai Dube, identifying as

²² See Cain Hope Felder, “Racial Ambiguities in the Biblical Narratives,” in *The Church and Racism*, ed. Gregory Baum and John Coleman, Concilium 151 (New York: Seabury, 1982), 17–24; and Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 13, 47–48. Quotes come from Martin, “Chamberlain’s Journey,” 105, 120–26 and Felder, “Racial Ambiguities,” 22, respectively.

²³ Martin, “Chamberlain’s Journey,” 121.

²⁴ On the African and black identity of the traveler, see Abraham Smith, “Do You Understand What You Are Reading?: A Literary Critical Reading of the Ethiopian (Kushite) Episode (Acts 8:26–40),” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22 (1994): 48–70; Marcus Jenkins, “The Dynamism of Blackness in *An Ethiopian Story* and Acts,” *PRSt* 46 (2019): 307–26; for discussion of his gender identity, see Victorai S. Kolakowski, “Toward a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons,” *Theology & Sexuality* 6 (1997): 10–31; Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 259, 270–72; Justin Tanis, *Transgendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 61–79; 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; Manuel Villalobos, “Bodies *Del Otro Lado* Finding Life and Hope in the Borderland; Gloria Anzaldúa, the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8:26–40, *y Yo*,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, SemeisaSt 67 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 191–221; Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013). Work highlighting the intersectionality at play in the traveler’s identity include Henderson, “What Is To Prevent Me?”; Zorodzai Dube, “The Ethiopian Eunuch in Transit: A Migrant Theoretical Perspective,” *HvTSt* 69 (2013): art. 2019, <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/2019>; Brittany Wilson, “Neither Male nor Female; The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26–40,” *NTS* 60 (2014): 403–22; Kopya John Kaoma, “Beyond Adam and Eve: Jesus, Sexual Minorities and Sexual Politics in the Church in Africa,” *JTSA* 153 (2015): 7–28; and Felicia Howell LaBoy, “You Want Me to Talk to Whom? Explorations in Fear and Faith from the Underside of the Bible,” *RevExp* 115 (2018): 26–39. Most of the works in the prior two footnotes also touch on intersectionality, since constructions of race and gender are intertwined.

²⁵ Martin, “Chamberlain’s Journey,” 126.

²⁶ Kartzow and Moxnes, “Complex Identities,” 184.

a poststructuralist exegete, “disputes the existence of an ultimate and objective meaning of the text,” and reads the story through the experience of migrant workers today.²⁷

Yet while these recent scholars bring together methods, contexts, and exigencies outside of strictly historical critical scholarship,²⁸ almost none of them consider Acts 8:37. In the few instances when the verse is mentioned, it usually appears in a footnote or a brief aside that first acknowledges its questioned authenticity.²⁹ And so the verse remains off-limits because, within the confines of traditional textual criticism, it is taken to be a later addition. But why should the primary text of these studies be restrained by the rules of historical criticism when their methods and perspectives are not?

Acts 8:37 provides the perfect opportunity for these interpreters to engage textual critics and their work in new, creative ways. If the task of the textual critic is, as Epp states, “to explore the individual interpretations that [variants] provide by locating variants . . . within their immediate textual contexts and also within their likely contexts *in the life and history of the church*,”³⁰ what more urgent and relevant context does this variant have than in the current life of marginalized communities identifying with the traveler?³¹ This missing verse can provide a wealth of different avenues for African, black, queer, trans, migrant, and minoritized readings.

Consider the preceding verse, Acts 8:36: “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?’” Interpreters are divided over understanding the traveler’s question as rhetorical or sincere.³² But for people reading the story from a contemporary, marginalized perspective, *many* barriers that could prevent the baptism spring to mind, whether the question is rhetorical or not. One’s race, ethnicity, skin color, class, sexuality, genitalia, cult, and general ambiguity of identity in the eyes of society could prevent inclusion. Of course, verse 38 might provide somewhat of a resolution to the question—the baptism occurs—but skipping over verse 37 leaves a yawning gap that is exactly what interpreters sensitive to the issues of identity have been filling: an answer that explicitly articulates the barriers to inclusion and how one might overcome them.

Verse 37 can be read as enriching this discussion in numerous ways. First, its very existence demonstrates a felt need—whether by a writer of the tradition or a later editor—for something

²⁷ Dube, “Ethiopian Eunuch in Transit.”

²⁸ Of course, historical critical scholarship is also contextual and driven by its own exigencies.

²⁹ For example, Henderson, “What Is To Prevent Me?,” 21, notes the addition as an intervention between the traveler’s question about baptism and the act itself, but only states with no further discussion: “This verse is generally recognized, however, as a later addition to the text, and perhaps is an indication of the discomfort of later readers.” Similarly, Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 137, shows all the factors that might prevent the traveler’s baptism and how these obstacles are then delegitimated by his immediate baptism, but then he writes in the footnote (n. 47): “While the inclusion of [Acts 8:37] would not change my reading of the story, I do agree with the majority of scholars that it is a later addition and is not original to the text of Acts.”

³⁰ Epp, *Perspectives*, xxxviii, emphasis mine.

³¹ I do not mean to imply here that identifying with the traveler is unproblematic. See Joseph A. Marchal, “Who Are You Calling a Eunuch?! Staging Conversations between Feminist and Queer Biblical Studies and Intersex Advocacy,” in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*, ed. Susannah Cornwall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 29–54.

³² For example, Zola, “Why Are There Verses Missing,” 250, understands the question as rhetorical. For those reading the question intended as sincere, see F. Scott Spencer, “The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Social-Science Analysis,” *BTB* 22 (1992): 163; Barrett, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 432; Johnson, *Acts*, 159; Holladay, *Acts*, 191. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 136–37, locates the “rhetorical climax” of the story in verse 36 but understands the traveler’s question as loaded with unspoken but clearly implied reasons for barring his baptism.

more than instant baptism. Historically, the addition could have satisfied the need for some form of ritual or declaration of allegiance,³³ but beyond this need lies the desire for actual (and not merely symbolic or off-stage) dialogue and, thus, true inclusion into a community. Without verse 37, the passage contains not a single direct word of affirmation, teaching, or invitation from Philip. With it, the traveler's question—"full of meaning"³⁴—receives an answer, which is also a call to which the traveler can explicitly respond. Besides ritual legitimation, the exchange, however brief, provides a deeper dimension of relationship and understanding to an otherwise lopsided story.

Verse 37 also names the contribution the traveler can make for his baptism, something other than his ethnicity or skin color or genitalia or court status: he must make an offering of his "whole heart." Read one way, this contribution transcends and obviates the intersectionalities³⁵ that have cut through the traveler's body and laid it open for dissection through the centuries, whether by church patriarchs who marveled that a black Ethiopian could "be made white in soul" or by modern interpreters who debate whether the εὐνοῦχος is actually castrated or not.³⁶ Instead, the demand for one's whole heart cuts right to the center of a human existence, pinpointing a contribution that can either elude all consideration of intersectioning identities or include all of them.

The requirement of belief with one's whole heart is multivalent: does such a form of belief mean that one can believe and be saved *regardless* of one's identity? That despite all outward differences, all believers share something essential? Or does it mean that one must believe with all the might of all one's particularities, inextricable from the heart? The multivalence ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας allows for either of these readings or both.

At the same time, the utterance of the traveler in verse 37, πιστεύω εἰς τὸν Χριστὸν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, is a speech act, a ritual response, a spell, a binding and anchoring of a shaky narrative of a liminal character on a wilderness road in a story on the margins of the great central histories of Acts.³⁷ It provides justification and legitimation and comforting surety, which the

³³ This seems indeed what some church fathers felt was lacking: a catechesis of some sort or at least some justification for the hasty baptism. In fact, Augustine, who includes verse 37, remains highly unsatisfied, despite the inclusion of the verse, and concludes that the narrative must *imply* a longer catechetical process. See Augustine, *Fid. op.* 48.14. See also William Frank Lawrence, "The History of the Interpretation of Acts 8:26–40 by the Church Fathers Prior to the Fall of Rome" (PhD diss., New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1984). For the verse as evidence of an early Christological confession, see Jenny Heimderinger, "Acts 8:37: A Textual and Exegetical Study," *The Bulletin of the Institute for Reformation Biblical Studies* 2 (1991): 12, and Horn, "Apg 8,37," 236–39.

³⁴ Heimderinger, "Acts 8:37," 11, argues that the presence or absence of verse 37 presumes different reactions (and audiences) to the question, "full of meaning," in verse 36.

³⁵ *Intersectionality* is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, describing overlapping, inextricable, and heuristically separate elements of identity such as gender, race, class, etc. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1989): 139–67.

³⁶ Quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 40.26; see also Jerome, *Ep.* 69.6; Ephraim the Syrian, *Orat. de margarita pretiosa* 3.2. For modern debate regarding whether εὐνοῦχος indicates castration, see Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986), 109; William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1988), 71–72; Spencer, "Ethiopian Eunuch," 156–57.

³⁷ Those of Peter and Paul, of course. See note 14 above for works discussing this story as an independent tradition incorporated into the larger narrative of Acts. For a consideration of the story as liminal, see Wilson, "Neither Male nor Female." See Villalobos, "Bodies *Del Otro Lado*," for a consideration of the story, set on a wilderness road, as transgressing boundaries of all kinds.

gap between verses 36 and 38 leave out. Verse 37 explains what the traveler has done with his whole heart so that he goes rejoicing on his way.

Yet at the same time, comforting surety is often ripe for deconstruction. The above few paragraphs present positive interpretations of verse 37, but negative ones are possible as well. Does the verse show an implicit suspicion of the traveler and his multivalent identity? Does the demand for his heart deny that his engagement and eagerness are enough? Does his declaration of belief reduce all he is into a tidy catechism? These are all possible and valid interpretations, which the verse opens up for consideration.

Verse 37 is a variant—its identity, like the traveler's, is liminal. It also contains multitudes, since there are further variations of it in different manuscripts. It has been called a Western addition to the text, although its first Greek New Testament witness, Codex Laudianus, is not easily classified as any text type; the folio on which the verse would be found is missing from the great Western codex, the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis; and the status of the Western text as a discernible text-type with clearly established borders has now been called into question.³⁸

Nevertheless, the inclusion of this verse—like the inclusion of the traveler himself—multiplies the possibilities for interpretation. If the goal of the interpreter is not to narrow down, not to unearth a singular meaning or intent, then this verse enriches and aids interpretation by means of its very uncertainties. In this perspective of productive, creative interpretation, the variant should not be discarded but rather become part of the main event.

³⁸ See D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 289–90 on the difficulty of characterizing the text of Codex Laudianus; on doubts regarding the Western text-type, see Georg Gäbel, “‘Western Text,’ ‘D-Text Cluster,’ ‘Bezan Trajectory,’ Or What Else?—A Preliminary Study,” and Klaus Wachtel, “On the Relationship of the ‘Western Text’ and the Byzantine Tradition of Acts—A Plea Against the Text-Type Concept,” in *Studien*, part 3 of *Die Apostelgeschichte*, vol. 3 of *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2017), 83–136 and 137–48. Neither Gäbel nor Wachtel consider 8:37 specifically, but both express caution about the text-type theory and the Western text in general, recommending further research into clusters of variants that may include 8:37. The *Editio Critica Maior* text of Acts places 8:37 in double brackets, affirming the current consensus: this verse has no place in the initial text (*Die Apostelgeschichte*, part 1.1, *Text Chapter 1–14*, 283).