

November 30, 2003
St. Andrew the Apostle

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Stephen and Philip were the first two of seven Greek-speaking men ordained by the apostles by way of dealing with the "complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists" at Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6). Let us here speak of Philip.

When Stephen was martyred, a great persecution of Christians broke out, many of whom, consequently, fled from Jerusalem (8:1,4;11:19). Philip was one of these (8:5). He eventually settled in Caesarea, a coastal city to the north (8:40), where he raised a family of four daughters, all of whom were graced with the gift of prophecy (21:9; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.31.5).

Nearly two decades later, in the spring of 58, the apostle Paul, on his final trip to Jerusalem, was a guest at Philip's home in Caesarea. Luke accompanied him, and they remained in Philip's house "many days" (21:8,10). As far as we may discern from the Sacred Text, this was Luke's first meeting with Philip, nor is there solid evidence that they ever met again. It is reasonable, then, to suppose that this visit was the occasion on which Philip shared with Luke the details of his two earlier missions, the first in Samaria and the other along the Palestinian coast from Gaza to Caesarea. These missions Luke recorded in Acts 8.

Although Jesus had already gained some converts among the Samaritans (John 4:40-41), His post-Resurrection directive to bear witness in Samaria (Acts 1:8) seems first to have been followed by Philip. It was a massive success (8:5-13). The mother church back in Jerusalem, learning of the fruitfulness of Philip's mission among the Samaritans, "sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit" (8:14-15).

Luke's account here is marked by a gentle irony. Luke had earlier recorded the apostle John's reprehensible impulse to call fire from heaven on the heads of those Samaritans (Luke 9:52-54). Now, however, as a result of Philip's ministry, John is commissioned to call down on the Samaritans the true fire

from heaven, the holy flames of transformation. He and Peter "laid hands on them," Luke tells us, "and they received the Holy Spirit" (8:17). This was the beginning of a still larger Samaritan mission (8:25).

Philip's conversion of the Samaritans was a pivotal development in the mission of the early Church, because if these Jewish Christians could share the Gospel with the Samaritans, they could share it with anyone. They would indeed be "witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (1:8). Thus, the Pentecost of the Jews in Acts 2 is followed by the Pentecost of the Samaritans in Acts 8, which in turn is followed by a Pentecost of the Gentiles in Acts 10.

Philip, meanwhile, was instructed by an angel to proceed south toward the coastal road near Gaza (8:26), a route much used by pilgrims who came to Jerusalem from Egypt and other parts of Africa. Here Philip is directed by the Holy Spirit to encounter one such pilgrim, an "Ethiopian," a word at that time normally referent to Nubians who lived between Aswan and Khartoum in Upper Egypt and the Sudan. This man, a treasury official in the service of the queen mother, was returning from Jerusalem, where he had been to worship (8:27-29).

As Philip approached the man's carriage, which was either parked or making its way very slowly along the crowded road, he heard the pilgrim reading the Book of Isaiah. There was nothing particularly remarkable about this, for in antiquity it was normal to read in an audible voice, especially a work of literary merit. (So much was reading considered an auditory exercise in olden times that Augustine remarked at some length on St. Ambrose's strange custom of reading silently - *Confessions* 6.3.3).

Philip overhears the prophetic reading, interprets the Isaian text in the light of the Christian Gospel, and, in one of the swiftest conversions ever recorded, brings the man to baptismal faith (Acts 8:30-39).

It is also significant that this conversion took place near Gaza, an ancient capital of the Philistines, as though to symbolize the Christian reconciliation of the Israelites with those European invaders whom they had bitterly battled for possession of the Holy Land more than a thousand years before.

His new convert properly baptized and sent along his way, Philip, walking north along the coast, "preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea" (8:40), where Luke would interview him nearly two decades later.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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