There Is Now No Insider or Outsider

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Preface

The initiation starts early.

When I was five or six years old, I decided I wanted to be baptized. The decision was motivated by childlike faith. And a desire to belong. Because even then, I saw a divide: there were baptized believers who took communion together and constituted the church's membership, and then there were the others. The ones who weren't baptized, who weren't full-fledged believers, who weren't quite insiders yet.

As I grew older, so did the divide between me and "the world." I learned how to avoid all appearances of evil by not dating too young, not reading books with too much magic in them, and not saying words like "gosh" or "gee" because they were a form of taking God's name in vain. Armed with a smattering of Aristotelian logic and a heavy dose of creationist apologetics, I learned how to debate my beliefs. I learned how to fight for the seemingly concrete concept of truth. I read books about how to keep my femininity from being tainted by feminism, rooted for Ken Ham when he debated Bill Nye, and watched popular Christian films.

And that was when I first started to realize something was wrong.

Christian media wasn't the only thing that stirred a sense of discomfort in me, but it may have been the most prominent. I vividly remember watching the first two films in the *God's Not Dead* trilogy,[1] both of which depicted all the Christian characters as saints who never went astray and all the non-believers as angry, Christian-hating imbeciles. It didn't seem realistic. Although I didn't know very many people who weren't Christians, the ones I knew weren't at all like the ones on the screen.

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[1] *God's Not Dead* (2014), directed by Harold Cronk, Pure Flix; *God's Not Dead 2* (2016), directed by Harold Cronk, Pure Flix.

Beyond the blatant untruth of the portrait this film painted, it didn't seem *right.* If an outsider to the Christian faith watched the film, what would their response be? I feared they wouldn't be prompted to a full-scale conversion by our bigoted scripts. In fact, they would probably feel hurt and angry, and I failed to understand how that was of any benefit to the kingdom. If the film wasn't meant to bring outsiders in, it must have been made for the insiders. But for what purpose? Ostensibly, the filmmakers likely had good intentions to encourage Christians that they believed the right thing, even if others scorned them for it. All I could see was a wedge driven deeper between "us" and "them." And yet, this message was promoted to Christians across America, especially to Christian teens: *Beware the outsiders. They seek to destroy your faith*.[2]

I don't mean to say there's no difference between Christians and the rest of the world. The point is, there should be. The Church of Acts was characterized by love and service. But as a young teen, when I heard the modern Western Church characterized, I heard words like *hypocrisy* and *judgment*. I was trained to see those outside the church as strangers, almost as enemies. Yet, every pastor I knew managed to preach the story of Jesus and the woman at the well without seeming to incite any change in the congregation.

The messages didn't add up. Jesus clearly said to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, and I translated "enemies" to mean "outsiders" because I'd managed to gather the sentiment that many people outside the Church were in some sense my opponents. But strangely, Jesus didn't seem to think of people in cut-and-dry categories of insider / outsider or

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[2] David Ehrlich doesn't mince words in his review of the third film in the series, "God's Not Dead: A Light in the Darkness." Ehrlich writes, "These movies are fundamentalist propaganda aimed at people who are convinced their religion is under attack in this country just because it doesn't exempt them from the Constitution."

See David Ehrlich, "'God's not Dead: A Light in the Darkness' Review: A Hellishly Bad Drama About America's Christian Persecution Complex," *IndieWire,* 11 December 2018.

friends / enemies. The ones outside the religious system were the ones he ate with. Knowing full well his radical love would mar his reputation, Jesus loved the outcasts—the lepers, the widows, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the traitors, the frightened, the doubtful.

The irony was, these outsiders loved him back. They demonstrated a kind of faith he could not find even in Israel (Luke 7:9). In fact, most of the time, Jesus' harshest opponents weren't the outsiders at all. They were the "insiders"—the people who were supposed to be Israel's shepherds and teachers.

As I began to ponder this peculiarity, I realized the Bible had a lot to say on the topic of "insiders" and "outsiders." In ancient Israel, "insiders" were defined by circumcision or marriage to a circumcised person, limiting the innermost circles of religion to circumcised (thus, by necessity, sexually normative) men, usually those born into Israel. Later on, during Jesus' time, "insider" status was determined in categories, as evidenced by the design of the temple in Jerusalem. The innermost court was accessible only to priests; the second court was accessible to ritually clean Jewish men; the third court was accessible to ritually clean Jewish women and their husbands; and the outer court was the only place of worship available to Gentiles.[3]

Were these categories of inclusivity truly set up by God?

At ten years old, or fourteen years old, or maybe even eighteen years old, I would have answered, "Yes." In my mind, though I'm not sure I could have vocalized it or defended it, God had marked Israel as specially chosen because there was something inherently superior about the nation. Likewise, the Church possessed inherently superior morals, and thus superior status when compared with "the rest of the world."

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[3] Jan H. Nylund, "Court of the Gentiles," *TLBD* In J.D. Barry, D. Bomar, D.R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott,… W. Widder (Eds.), The Lexham Bible Dictionary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Today, a few steps into my journey beyond the surface level of Scripture, I recognize how much my perspective has changed. I've become increasingly aware of the dangers of otherization, especially as they impact the witness and calling of the Church. And I wish I could reach back through my timeline to share all the things I've learned and all the ways I've grown with my past self. I don't know if she would have listened, but I know it would have made her think.

In many ways, I'm writing this thesis to her, with as much kindness and compassion as I can muster. I'm writing to others like her, who are seeking a biblical perspective on the topics of inclusion and welcome out of a deep and honest desire to interpret God's word correctly and a righteous fear of misinterpretation. I'm writing to those who have perhaps had a very limited or one-sided perspective of "outsiders" and "insiders" and their roles in the kingdom. I'm writing to the earnest, confused eighteen-year-old who wants logical, scriptural explanations before she lowers her guard against "the world."

Perhaps I'm writing to you, too. Only you can decide.

This is not meant to be exclusively a formal report or traditional research paper. I am both a scholar and a storyteller, and I relish opportunities to combine these two pieces of my heart. The words and characters in the passages I've chosen to study compel me and fascinate me, and as I unearth more beautiful truths in these passages I find myself turning to whisper over my shoulder to that younger version of myself. It is my wish to convey my findings in an accessible style, not to bury them beneath layers of academia.

So I have turned to art to accompany me. Art has the ability to convey truth in a way that is completely different from, and often equally valuable to, a formal report. Throughout this thesis, interspersed with research, you will find a series of seven short poems depicting my

spiritual journey over the years in connection to the topic of insiders and outsiders. Each poem connects to the research surrounding it, and interacts sequentially with the other poems in the series. Read them as you would read any other poetry—as an artistic experience, not a sermon or a code.

For the more traditional research portions of this thesis, I have selected three narratives about "outsiders" that demonstrate how God interacts with people who have been cast out by those within religious systems. Naturally, there are many more such narratives throughout Scripture, but an exhaustive study of this theme is not the goal of this thesis. My goal is to examine these portraits and determine, first, how portraits of "outsiders" were intended to inform their original "insider" audiences, and second, how they should inform our understanding of "outsiders" and "insiders" today.

These stories take place in different times and different cultures across the vast landscape of Scripture, but they all tell the story of the same God. I believe these stories are not accidental brush-strokes in a picture that was meant to look different. They are not exceptions to a rule or hiccups in a master plan. They are each full of purpose, each one a deliberate detail in a work of art that is ultimately a portrait of radical welcome. And if we are attentive, I believe we will hear, beneath the shifting layers of time and culture, the unchanging rhythm of the heart of God.

Introduction

From the Abrahamic covenant to the exodus from Egypt to the writings of the prophets, God's unique interactions with the nation of Israel often take center stage in the Hebrew Bible. The assumption may follow that God "plays favorites" by offering to Israel a kind of love that is inaccessible to non-Israelites. However, Jesus' ministry welcomed "outsiders" into the kingdom of God and placed a strong emphasis on the inclusion of those traditionally excluded by the religious world, such as women, Gentiles, and lepers. What, then, can we say about the concept of "insiders" and "outsiders"? Are these divinely established categories, or human inventions?

According to the Abrahamic covenant, Abraham and his house are to become an instrument of blessing to "all the families on earth" (Gen. 12:3). Thus, by all appearances, God intended Israel to serve as the chosen bridge between God and the world, not as a blockade. God's divine plan was redemptive in nature, so Israel's purpose on the inside of this plan included the task of bringing others inside, too. Through this lens, even the separation laws in Deuteronomy seem intended to keep "insiders" in (to keep Israel from turning to idolatry) rather than to keep "outsiders" out.

According to the Law, "insiders" had a responsibility. They had God's own reputation to uphold. They had direct access to YHWH, and their job was to obey. A lot of times, they failed, as narratives from the Hebrew Bible demonstrate time and time again. And ironically, when Israel failed, non-Israelites were frequently held up as models of faith and repentance. If those outside the religious system could become models of a relationship with God, it appears that "insider" and "outsider" (when used to describe a group one belongs to because of one's ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, or other non-spiritual factors) are categories instituted by

humans, not by God. The inspired writers of Scripture deliberately cast "outsider" characters in stories where they had an opportunity to shine as role models for "insiders."

All of this raises an important question: In a text written primarily to religious "insiders" (first Israel, then the Church), what purpose do these narratives of faithful outsiders serve? And, perhaps more pressing, how should these texts influence our understanding of insiders and outsiders in the church today?[4]

Samples of such narratives abound throughout the course of Scripture. Hagar, the Egyptian slave of the first insider, becomes the first to give God a name (Gen. 16:13). Ruth, a Moabite widow, finds favor and blessing because of her kindness to her mother-in-law (Ruth 1–4). Hannah, a barren Israelite woman, dares to make a vow with YHWH, and is heard by the LORD (1 Sam. 1–2). Naaman, an Aramean who held Israelite captives, was healed of leprosy by the prophet Elisha and placed his faith in the God of Israel (2 Kings 5). And the ministry of Jesus overflows with examples of outsiders receiving welcome.

A comprehensive study of this theme in Scripture would require an in-depth examination of each of the aforementioned narratives, and many others. One could devote a lifetime of study to this topic and still not cover the beautiful complexity of the biblical theme of inclusion. This paper seeks to scratch the surface of exploring how outsider narratives are meant to inform insider readers, whether the readers were part of ancient Israel, part of the early church, or part of the church today.

I have chosen to survey three narratives that strike me as a sample or cross-section of the theme of inclusion in Scripture. First, I will examine the story of Rahab (Joshua 2 and 6), a

[4] For the purposes of this paper I will define insiders as "those traditionally perceived to be within a religious system," and outsiders as "those traditionally perceived to be outside a religious system." With these definitions in mind, I will drop the quotation marks surrounding these terms for the remainder of this paper.

Canaanite harlot whose confession of faith defied Deuteronomic tradition and granted her a place in Israel and later Christian heritage. Second, I will look at the book of Jonah, a satirical piece of short literature that vividly illustrates what it means to be inside God's purpose. Finally, I will discuss the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), one of the first Gentile converts reported in the book of Acts.

These three stories also demonstrate a progression in the development of this theme throughout Scripture. Rahab is a convert, whose physical redemption and salvation are based on her profession of faith. The book of Jonah moves beyond a focus on a single outsider, and instead shows the dichotomy between outsiders whose faith and repentance lead to their physical deliverance and an insider whose apathy and disobedience merit punishment. Finally, the Ethipioan eunuch serves as an example of inclusion in the "new Israel" (the Church), demonstrating the boundary-breaking nature of the gospel and a kind of divine deliverance from exclusion regardless of how the eunuch is perceived by insiders.

In these texts, none of the physical characteristics marking the outsiders for exclusion are magically erased by their conversion. Rahab remains a female Canaanite, the Ninevites are still Assyrians, and the Ethiopian eunuch is still an uncircumcised Gentile. However, through these texts, God reveals that each person has the choice of either accepting God's invitation into the kingdom and participating in God's covenant love, or denying this invitation. The acceptance of this invitation is what defines inclusion in God's kingdom. Thus, insiders and outsiders are categories of perception, not categories of spiritual reality. Through these three texts, God exhibits willing and ready inclusion of those who demonstrate faith, compassion, repentance, and obedience, regardless of their perceived status.

Interlude: the first Woe

Woe to you, city of sin, your walls
though stone yet treacherously
thin, you brood of idolaters, watch and
dread the brimstone my God shall deliver
upon you, asphalt and brimstone to pave
the road for
the restoration of my people
to their promised land.

Woe to you, you harlots who make
yourselves into idols to seduce my
brothers, you faithless whores who flaunt
your unfaithfulness in the streets, all the while
calling me a prude, well,
I can take it, my people have been
persecuted before.

Woe to you who think yourselves
gods, who say there is no
God, who place your precious
textbooks on a pedestal and, void
of faith, steep your hardened hearts in
bitterness against my
people.

here in the ark we pray for your
souls, we pray earnestly so that no one
can say we didn't try, not even
God. We tried,
you saw us, signs high and voices
raised, mine was red-lettered upon
white cardstock on the corner
of South and Main, I called you to repent but
you stopped your ears but you cannot
say my people did not try

so, Woe to you, blind and deaf, oh
that you would leave your paper walls for
our stained glass ark, but you never
came further than Main Street,

I wonder why

I tried

Chapter One: Rahab

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the ***Canaanites****, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must* ***utterly destroy them****. Make* ***no covenant*** *with them and* ***show them no mercy****.* ***Do not intermarry with them****, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For* ***you are a people holy to the LORD your God****; the LORD your God has* ***chosen you*** *out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.…*

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the ***faithful*** *God who maintains* ***covenant loyalty*** *with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him.*

Deuteronomy 7:1–6, 9–10b, NRSV (emphasis added)

Introduction

The word "chosen" is both beautiful and dangerous. It implies grace, because those chosen have not been selected because of their personal merit (as God explains in Deuteronomy 7:7–8, not included above). But it also implies a certain degree of exclusivity, since the very existence of a "chosen" people necessitates a "not-chosen" people—the rest of humanity apart from Israel. In Deuteronomy 7, God's instructions regarding those not-chosen seem clear on the surface. They have no place in God's distribution of love. There are no conditions offered for their inclusion. They are given no option to become part of the chosen people. According to this passage, they are outsiders.

Fast-forward over a thousand years, and we will discover different perspectives on chosenness. In Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, he describes the Colossian Christians as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved" (Colossians 3:12). Situated in Phrygia, this was not a

church of exclusively Jews. This and many other passages in the New Testament confirm that chosenness is not limited to Israel. Luke especially emphasizes the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of God through Luke-Acts.[5]

What happened in between? Are we to conclude that, prior to Christ's coming as the promised seed of Abraham and savior of the world, God loved only Israel? If this is the case, then how do we explain accounts such as the story of Ruth, in which a Gentile woman becomes the great-grandmother of King David? What, exactly, defines an outsider in the Hebrew Bible? Is it nationality alone, or is it more complex than that?

Péter Jenei defines otherness through the eyes of Israel as "not primarily an ethnic, but rather a cultural-political and cultic-religious concern."[6] He explains the role of outsiders in defining insiders: "Through defining the other, a group determines what it is not; in short, it establishes its boundaries. The other is, therefore, an essential component of any group's project of self-definition."[7]If the "other" helps to define Israel, how do the Hebrew Bible's narratives of outsiders influence Israel's self-identity? How do they help define—or blur the definition of—YHWH's relationship with his chosen people? What were the Israelites meant to learn from these outsider narratives, and what can we learn from them today?

To answer these questions, we turn to the story of Rahab, told partly in Joshua 2 and concluded in Joshua 6. The book of Joshua is a conquest narrative, describing Israel's fulfillment of God's instructions to take over the land of Canaan. This conquest seems to rely on the idea

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[5] Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 316.

[6] Péter Jenei, "Strategies for Stranger Inclusion in the Narrative Traditions of Joshua-Judges: The cases of Rahab's household, the Kenites and the Gibeonites," *Old Testament Essays* 32, no. 1 (2019): 127-154.

[7] Ibid., 128.

that Israel is specifically chosen, and the Canaanites are specifically not-chosen. Within this context, the story of Rahab seems especially peculiar. For several reasons, it seems to be a violation of the commands given in Deuteronomy 7.

First, it tells the story of spies who *do* make a covenant with a Canaanite. Second, Joshua *does* show mercy to Rahab and her household, and he does not utterly destroy them. Third, tradition indicates that eventually, Rahab *did* marry an Israelite (Matt 1:5). Finally, Joshua 6 tells us that after the fall of Jericho, Rahab lived in Israel (Josh 6:25). Why would a conquest narrative interrupt itself with the story of a Canaanite—and a Canaanite prostitute at that—becoming an insider, in an apparent contradiction of the Deuteronomic law?

I would argue that this story is intended to clarify what it means to be an outsider or insider in terms of God's covenant. Frank Spina refers to the juxtaposition of the Rahab narrative (the story of a faithful outsider) with the story of Achan (a faithless Israelite who is executed as an outsider for disobeying the LORD's command not to take any plunder from the Canaanites) as the "interpretive key" for the book of Joshua: "Just as Rahab's confession of faith got her and her family included, Achan's violation of faith got him and his family excluded. The outsider came in, and the insider was ousted; confessing faith and violating faith were the variables."[8]

Rahab's story serves as a stepping stone in the path toward redemption for the world. Throughout the Bible, YHWH leads the people along a trajectory toward redemption, one small step at a time. This chapter seeks to examine the narrative of Rahab as a demonstration of God's covenant love, which transcends gender, occupation, and ethnicity. This is the story of an outsider boldly requesting entrance into the covenant, and being included by YHWH. This is the

[8] Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical* Story (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 71.

story of a conversion—the first in a trio of conversions I will examine in this project. Above all, this is a story of faith and faithfulness.

The Story of Rahab

To understand this story, we must first take a look at the chapter preceding it. Joshua 1 captures an exhortation to the Israelites as they prepare to begin the Canaanite conquest. Moses is dead, leaving Joshua in command (Joshua 1:1). The time has come to claim the Promised Land. The LORD tells Joshua to be "strong and courageous" in verse 6, and the Israelites repeat this encouragement in verse 18. Since Joshua needed these instructions twice, one might gather that strength and courage were something of a struggle for him, an observation further strengthened by the opening of chapter 2. Immediately after the words, "Only be strong and brave!" (1:18), we find, "Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies" (2:1).

As the text reveals, these two spies proceeded to bungle their mission pretty badly. But perhaps it was destined for misfortune for the beginning. Spina points out that in light of God's promises to Joshua in chapter 1, the sending of spies seems unnecessary. God has promised to give them the land (1:2), and has said no one can stand against Joshua (1:5). According to Spina, this is "at least a failure of nerve, if not of faith, on Joshua's part."[9]

The mission goes awry quite soon after the spies enter Jericho. They enter the house of a prostitute named Rahab, "and [spend] the night there" (2:1). This in itself seems a questionable decision. Rahab is a *zônāh*—a harlot. This Hebrew word is often employed in Scripture to

[9] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 57.

describe unfaithfulness or the unfaithful, and throughout the prophets is frequently used as a metaphor for Israel's idolatry.[10]

In Israel, harlots were marginalized and despised.[11] Rahab's identity as a harlot, heaped upon her identity as a Canaanite, makes her a "threat to the Israelite self-identity."[12] She serves as the perfect character study when examining the relationship between God and the outsider. Spina refers to Rahab as possibly the "madam" of the brothel. Even her name is a bit risqué.[13] The Hebrew word means "broad," which may allude to Rahab's experience in her profession, but possibly also borrows from the Ugaritic word *rahab,* referring to the female genitalia.[14] The Deuteronomist leaves the specifics of the Hebrew spies' activities to the imagination, but provides plentiful clues through suggestive language, including the phrase "entered her house."[15] In short, the author goes to great lengths to establish Rahab as a woman of ill repute, whose very existence contradicts Israelite values: she is the "quintessential Other."[16]

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[10] See Ezekiel 16:35, and the story of Hosea, in which the *zônāh* Gomer represents unfaithful Israel. It is curious and ironic that here, the *zônāh* Rahab represents a faithful Gentile.

[11] Jenei, "Strategies," 137.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 54.

[14] Ibid., 55.

[15] This word (בּאוֹ — to go in, enter) is used 9 times throughout Joshua 2, both to refer to the spies' coming to Rahab and to Israel's eventual invasion (entering into) Canaan. It seems especially suggestive in the context of Rahab's interaction with the king's men, who say, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house" (2:3). Spina describes this as a jab at Rahab's profession, since the phrase translated as "have come to you" in the NRSV can, in Hebrew, be a reference to "entering unto" with sexual intent. Spina illustrates this with his own "translation" of words of the king's agents: "Send out the men who entered you...er, who entered your house" (Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 55). I wonder how much discomfort this bawdy humor would cause to insiders in the church today. For some reason, these details don't seem to get preached from the pulpit very often. Is our silence on parts of the Bible we deem too lewd for our sterile church services just another example of our fear and otherization of those we deem outsiders?

[16] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 119.

When the king of Jericho gets wind of the spies' presence at Rahab's house, he sends men to fetch them. One wonders how the spies could have been so clumsy as to allow the discovery of their presence. At this point, they seem to have gained no intelligence; they have accomplished only an implied evening of revelry at a brothel and the inadvertent revelation of their identity as Hebrew spies.

But Rahab is several steps ahead of everyone. When the king's men demand that she send out the spies, she doesn't miss a beat. She acknowledges that the men came to her, and quickly weaves a deception about their current whereabouts. According to Rahab, the spies seemed on their way to leave the city (2:5). The narrator includes a brief aside indicating her awareness that the spies are not outside the city; Rahab has them hidden on her roof. Rahab's instructions send the king's men out of the city gates in pursuit of the spies—just in time for the gates to close and trap the spies' pursuers out for the night. Situational irony abounds, and Zaḳovits refers to the players in this story as "comic-book characters—a clever, calculating Canaanite harlot and two bungling spies."[17]

Here the story takes a turn from humorous to serious and reaches the heart of the narrative. Once she has saved the spies, Rahab approaches them with a bargain, and a very Israelite bargain at that. First, she uses the divine name, YHWH. In fact, four of the six occurrences of the covenant name *YHWH* in this chapter are spoken by Rahab. Second, she affirms God's promise to Joshua in 1:2 with her declaration, "I know that the LORD has given you the land"—seemingly with more confidence than Joshua himself, if we judge by Joshua's

[17] Yaʾir Zaḳovits, "Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary-Folkoric Approach to Joshua 2," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 75-98.

decision to send the spies. Third, Rahab's knowledge of Israelite history is remarkable.[18] Notably, she refers to the Israelite exodus from Egypt as an example of YHWH's power and a reason for the Canaanites' fear of Israel's God, which is a connection we will explore in greater depth later.

Next, Rahab makes a profession of faith: "The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and in earth below" (2:11), a tremendous attribution of power to YHWH. Although some scholars have questioned whether or not we should take this confession as explicitly monotheistic,[19] this doesn't necessarily lessen the power of her confession in this context. Because of her identity as a Canaanite, the "other of others," the implied reader can assume Rahab has not had access to the personal encounters with YHWH that Moses and the other patriarchs had. Thus, Rahab would have no way of understanding YHWH's uniqueness (not just one God among gods, but *one God).*[20] Rahab offers all the faith and knowledge she has, attributing to YHWH power beyond that of the gods of Canaan with the proclamation that YHWH has the ability to deliver Canaan into the hands of Israel.

After progressing from the divine name through Israel's history and to her confession of faith, Rahab makes a final appeal to one of God's most salient attributes. She invokes *ḥesed*, which, by Scripture's frequent mention, is rendered an important part of YHWH's economy. The word is sometimes translated as *kindness* (KJV); *allegiance* (NET Bible); or *covenant loyalty*

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[18] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 59.

[19] Berel Dov Lerner notes that the definitive article *ha* is absent from Rahab's description of God—that is, she is not saying that YHWH is *the* God of the heavens and the earth; her profession is better rendered "the Lord your god is a god in heaven above and on earth below," in Berel Dov Lerner, "Rahab the Harlot: And Other Philosophers of Religion," *JBQ* 28, no. 1 (January 2000), 52-55.

[20] Ibid., 55.

(NRSV), as in the Deuteronomy 7 passage above.[21] Her phrasing makes this appeal particularly striking. By Rahab's reasoning, because she has shown *ḥesed* to the spies, she demands that the spies "swear to me by the LORD"[22] to show *ḥesed* to her in return. Although Deuteronomy 7:1–10 seems to advocate excluding all foreigners, the passage also contains God's promise to maintain *ḥesed* "with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations," and to "repay in their own person those who reject him" (Deuteronomy 7:10). Here, ethnicity is not a requirement for God's *ḥesed.* Instead, YHWH gives *ḥesed* according to obedience; YHWH withdraws it according to rejection. Will Rahab's *ḥesed* be enough to save her?

The spies find themselves in an uncomfortable position. Rahab could still find a way to turn them in, as evidenced by their fear that she will tell "this business of ours" (2:14, 17). They seem left with no choice but to agree to Rahab's terms, despite explicit instructions to make no covenants with foreigners and to show them no mercy (Deuteronomy 7:2). Rahab has demanded sanctuary when Israel enters the land, and the spies grant it to her, so Rahab helps them escape. Josh 2:15 tells the reader that Rahab's house is conveniently situated in the city wall, so she lets the spies down through her window with instructions to hide in the hill country until their pursuers have stopped looking for them outside the city (2:15–16).

The author makes no mention of any attempt on the part of the spies to neglect their covenant with Rahab. Although no one else knows of their encounter and no human could hold them responsible for breaking faith, they have sworn by YHWH. They clearly treat their promise

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[21] "H2617 - ḥesed - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." https://www.blueletterbible.org//lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H02617&t=KJV.

[22] A very Israelite formula for making a vow. See Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 61.

as binding, because they carefully arrange a method for upholding their end of the covenant before they leave:

> We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death. (Josh 2:17b–19)

Rahab agrees to these terms. Evidently, tying a scarlet cord in the window will not arouse suspicion from the Canaanites but will be enough to identify her to the invaders. Spina sees this as a potential extension of the sexual allusions in this chapter, and ties it to her profession, suggesting that a scarlet cord may have been a signal of a brothel.[23] But some scholars have noted another possibility. Nicholas Lunn believes the Rahab narrative is designed to interact with the exodus narrative in Exodus 12–15.[24]

Although uncertainty abounds in regard to the date of composition or compilation for the exodus account, Lunn suggests that the tradition of the exodus would have been well known to the Deuteronomist, either in oral or written form.[25] One connection between the accounts is the celebration of the Passover in Joshua 5:10–11, of which Lunn notes, "Exodus and Joshua temporally locate the Passover meal by means of precisely the same time phrase: 'on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening'… in both Exodus 12:18 and בְּעֶצֶם Joshua 5:10."[26]

Further, Lunn sees ties between the scarlet cord and the blood of the Passover lamb painted on the doorway. In both narratives, staying inside the house—behind the sign

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[23] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 62.

[24] Nicholas P. Lunn, "The Deliverance of Rahab (Joshua 2,6) as the Gentile Exodus," *Tyndale Bulletin* 65, no. 1 (2014): 11–19.

[25] Lunn, 12.

[26] Ibid., 13.

distinguishing the obedient—is imperative for deliverance. Both accounts include a warning not to leave the house (Exodus 12:22; Joshua 2:19). Both passages also prominently feature what Lunn calls a "scarlet external sign."[27] Further, both accounts use the same Hebrew word for "sign" (אוֹת) and utilize the same verb (צִיל֫וֹ) to express the concept of deliverance through this sign.[28] The connections to the book of Exodus will continue later in the narrative. For now, Rahab is obedient: after the spies depart, she ties the crimson cord in her window (Joshua 2:21).

The spies obey Rahab as well. They hide in the hill country for the length of time she specified (three days),[29] then report to Joshua Rahab's words of faith in YHWH: "Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; moreover all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us" (Josh 2:24). They do not mention that this testimony is borrowed from a Canaanite they are now bound to protect.

Between the first part of Rahab's story and the second, the Deuteronomist shifts his focus to Israel's preparations to invade Jericho. Per the LORD's instructions, the men of Israel are circumcised (5:2–8). As previously mentioned, the Deuteronomist records the celebration of the passover (5:10–11). Then comes the famous passage that has made its way into children's songs, in which Joshua receives the counterintuitive instructions to march around the city of Jericho with the ark of the covenant and shout to bring down the walls (6:1–17). While giving instructions on the final day of marching, Joshua commands the protection of Rahab and her

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[27] Ibid., 14.

[28] Ibid., 15. See Lunn's article for further parallels.

[29] One does not want to risk overinterpreting, but if this account is meant to interact with other Hebrew texts and/or traditions, "three days" is an important measure of time. See the interval of three days between prophetic dreams and their fulfillments which lead to the deliverance and execution for Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, respectively (Genesis 40:12-19); dense darkness throughout Egypt during the plagues for three days (Exodus 10:22); and eventually Jonah's three days in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2). Three is a common number in Hebrew numerology, but could its occurrence here possibly suggest another intentional tie to other accounts of deliverance?

family: “The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live because she hid the messengers we sent” (6:17). Thus, Rahab’s act of *ḥesed* becomes the rationale for her salvation.

Then the miraculous happens. When the Israelites shout and blow their trumpets, the wall of Jericho falls down flat. But Rahab’s house, which is in the wall (2:15), is evidently left intact. If the toppling of the wall was a miracle, the preservation of one segment of it is even more astonishing. This can only be an act of divine intervention. YHWH, too, has honored Rahab’s *ḥesed.* It appears the spies placed enough confidence in Rahab’s confession of faith to believe YHWH would deliver her, because the deliverance they assured Rahab of was far out of their hands.

Here follows a scene which Lunn recognizes as another exodus parallel. Joshua instructs his spies to “bring out” Rahab and her family (6:22), a phrase which is repeated twice more in the following two verses. This word, הוֹצִיא, is according to Lunn “that verb from which the… book of Exodus derives its name in the Christian canon… [a word that] occurs dozens of times throughout the exodus narrative.”[30] From the scarlet cord of deliverance to Rahab’s exit from Jericho into Israel, Rahab has, in a way, experienced her own divinely ordained exodus.

Despite the Deuteronomy 7 commandment to show no mercy, Joshua spares Rahab and her entire family. The story ends here with a happily-ever-after conclusion: “Her family has lived in Israel ever since. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho” (Joshua 6:25). According to Lunn, “She and those with her had, so to speak, become ‘grafted in’ to Israel.”[31] If Gentiles too can have an exodus, and if the *ḥesed* of Gentiles brings them into the

[30] Lunn, 15.

[31] Ibid., 19.

covenant community, this narrative is a beautiful demonstration of the progression of redemption and inclusion.

Once again, this narrative seems to demonstrate to Israel what it is that YHWH is looking for. Ethnicity is not the issue. Insiders are defined by YHWH's faithfulness in the case of Israel; they have been chosen from among the nations. But according to Deuteronomy 7:10, insiders can fall from the covenant by rejecting YHWH. If belonging to the category of "those who love him and keep his commandments" (Deut 7:10) defines one's participation in the covenant, it appears that an outsider can enter the covenant community by this means. By exhibiting *ḥesed,* Rahab has, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, kept God's commandments and spoken the covenant language of God.

This text on outsider inclusion is not entirely without its problems. Judith E. McKinlay points out that we don't really get Rahab's perspective on this story. Because the story is told through the Israelite lens, we are led to assume this was exactly what Rahab wanted. We don't know how she felt about her people being destroyed while she and her family alone survived. Questions about how Rahab knew so much about Israel or what kind of pain she experienced afterward are "irrelevant;" she is a "winner" for choosing Israel.[32] McKinlay calls this text a "polarizing strategy" and mentions the dangers of viewing Rahab exclusively as a hero/ine, because "The Deuteronomists used Others against whom their community could assert and define themselves, even if those Others, like Rahab, were in reality their own ethnic grouping, now set apart and stigmatized."[33]

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[32] Judith E. McKinlay, "Rahab: A Hero/Ine?" *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 1 (1999): 44–57.

[33] Ibid., 57.

Other authors, however, see this story as potentially a hoped-for ticket into Israel for Rahab.[34] According to Godoy de Danielson, in Israel, the method for an outsider to become an insider was complicated at best and nearly impossible for some to achieve. Men could conceivably become circumcised converts, but women could not become a part of Israel unless they had a husband who chose to be circumcised. For a single woman—which Rahab the *zônāh* seems to be—Rahab has no option for inclusion. Godoy de Danielson identifies *ḥesed* as "vitally important…to the process of conversion as seen in the Old Testament,"[35] and as the reason for Rahab's inclusion in the insider community. Faith has paved Rahab's way into the covenant community.

Conclusion

Although the story of Rahab ends with Joshua 6, her legacy continues, solidifying her status as an insider. At some point in extrabiblical tradition, she was assigned a Jewish husband,[36] a marriage that would have been forbidden by Deuteronomy 7, but which was later mirrored by Ruth's marriage to Boaz and subsequent Israelite status. According to Matt 1:5, Rahab married Salmon, and became the mother of Boaz.[37] Thus, she is accorded a place in the

[34] See Kelly J. Godoy de Danielson, "Women on the Outside Looking In: Rahab and Ruth as Foreign Converts to the People of God," *The Asbury Journal* 75, no. 2 (2020), 255-270. Speaking from the perspective of an immigrant, Godoy de Danielson offers a valuable and insightful take on this narrative.

[35] Godoy de Danielson, "Women," 264.

[36] Richard Bauckham attributes this to a "common midrashic desire to make connexions between biblical characters," which assumed that significant single women must "have married illustrious men who themselves appear in the biblical history." See Richard Bauckham, "Tamar's Ancestry and Rahab's Marriage: Two Problems in the Matthean Genealogy." *Novum Testamentum* 37, no. 4 (October 1995): 313–29.

[37] If Rahab was indeed an ancestor of Boaz, one wonders if Boaz's own part-Gentile heritage influenced his compassion toward Ruth the Moabitess, and his willingness to eventually marry her. According to the story of Ruth, *ḥesed* was also a key player (see Ruth 3:10).

geneology of Christ himself. She is considered a part of King David's family tree. How much farther "inside" can one get?

Finally, Rahab is praised in Hebrews 11, the famous "Hall of Faith" passage in the New Testament: "*By faith* Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Heb 11:31). Here again, the categories are determined either by faith or by disobedience, and Rahab is in the former category. Among a list of "chosen ones," Rahab stands alone as the only Gentile—a Gentile harlot who was saved by *ḥesed.*

Although Rahab's nationality does not supernaturally change, as far as the author of the narrative is concerned, the outsider has become the insider. Even though we are not told how the other Israelites perceived Rahab, or whether or not they included her, the praise she receives from the narrator and later tradition indicate that she is no longer outside the covenant community. She has a unique place in the community, and inside the hearts and memories of Israelites. This in-bringing is not a result of her personal background, or a flawless theology. The determining factors for Rahab's inclusion are her faith and *ḥesed*.

Interlude: the first Confession

oh, little lost lamb, welcome to the
fold, leave your shoes at the door lest
you track your mud inside, come as you
are, let me help you bury all
your pride lust shame your
agenda far outside the camp lest
you bring uncleanliness into this sacred
house

never thought I'd see you here, honey, but
I prayed, yes I did, every night, every
day that the Man Upstairs might listen in, might
save you from your sin, hallelujah! don't
forget about your shoes, take them off
at the door

listen close, let me teach you what I prayed
on the day I got saved, oh glory! won't you
wash in the water, so you don't track blood
on the carpet, it's new, like you
can I get an amen? hallelujah! don't forget
about your shoes

Chapter Three: Jonah

No, this cannot be
your messages are meant for me (and my brothers)
we are your chosen people
and Nineveh—well!
They're not!
~Jonah, VeggieTales[38]

Introduction

For a book with only four short chapters, Jonah is a remarkably deep, theologically rich narrative. It is no wonder pastors and Sunday school features have gravitated toward this brilliant little story, and simultaneously struggled to interpret and summarize it in the format of sermons and children's books. According to many picture books, Jonah is a whiny prophet who turns his life around after being swallowed by a whale. The whale seems very important. It is on the front cover, and probably also in the title. The single mysterious page about a plant and a worm at the end doesn't affect the overall message of the story: *Jonah was disobedient, but then he repented and did God's will. So should you.*

Clearly something got lost in translation. A lot of things, in fact, as often happens when one is taking Hebrew narratives and poetry and translating them into English. And then taking that English translation and passing it on for centuries, into a culture so far removed from the world of Jonah that the genre and customs are lost on us. Then taking that cultural understanding

[38] Ameake Owens, Phil Vischer, et al, *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie* (United States: Big Idea Productions, 2003).

and translating it into a children's story, boiling it down until we think the main point of the story is a miraculous fish.[39]

It's tremendously hard to distill such a masterfully written story into a children's picture book, so I have a fair amount of grace for the writers of the cardboard books in church preschools. Still, even a cursory glance at any English translation of Jonah reveals that the "whale" (Hebrew *dag gadol,* "great fish") gets very little attention. Rather, the focus seems to be on the prophet himself, and on a few conspicuous groups of foreigners who serve as Jonah's foils.

One can identify six main characters or groups of characters in this narrative: Jonah, YHWH, the pagan sailors, the captain, the Ninevites, and the Ninevite king. Jonah is an insider through the lens of Judaism: a Hebrew, a male, and a prophet of YHWH. The sailors, captain, Ninevites, and king all fall into the category of outsiders—neither ethnic Jews nor Gentile converts, they are uncircumcised foreigners who worship strange gods and idols.

At first glance, the literary genre appears to be prophecy. After all, Jonah is considered a minor prophet in the *Nevi'im* (The Prophets) of the Hebrew Tanakh, and the main substance of the book revolves around Jonah's divine mandate to cry out against Nineveh. We might expect a book of prophecy to highlight the Hebrew prophet as an exemplary figure in contrast to all the pagan characters, but the result is quite the opposite. This book not only throws Jonah under the bus, it buries him under the bus station.

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[39] For all the ridiculousness inherent in a show about talking vegetables, VeggieTales got at least one detail right. In the song "Jonah Was a Prophet" from *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie* (which, for many Christians born in the 90s or early 2000s, was our introduction to the character of Jonah), the lyrics are as follows:

Jonah was a prophet (oo-ooh) / But he really never got it (sad but true) / And if you watch him you can spot it (a-doodley-doo) / He did not get the point! (Ameake Owens et. al, *Jonah,* 2003).

"The point" in the VeggieTales version is *second chances.* Which, admittedly, is a key piece of the story—a point Jonah did, in fact, miss. But there's a lot more going on in the story of Jonah than a gospel choir of angelic vegetables showing up to sing in the belly of the whale.

By contrast, the outsiders in this story—the pagan sailors and the Ninevites—demonstrate immense reverence for the God of Israel, and exhibit attitudes of humility and compassion, several attributes Jonah's character decidedly does not possess. Thus, this "book of prophecy" becomes less of an oracle and more of a satire, especially considering the way the book plays off of prophetic formulas and subverts expectations. Rather than containing deep, artistic prophetic messages, as one finds in the book of Amos or any of the other books considered part of the *Nevi'im*, Jonah contains a short narrative in prose (with some poetry in chapter 2), full of twists and turns.

Nineveh, the famously wicked city in this narrative, would have belonged to the Assyrian Empire (later Babylon), which was notorious for its cruelty toward captives and foreigners.[40] The idea of an Assyrian city would have been a particularly despicable concept to any self-respecting Israelite, especially following the exile to Babylon, so the author's choice to use Nineveh as the object of God's mercy is a bold and intentional one in any case, particularly if this book is considered a post-exilic work. This dramatic subversion of expectations and role reversal between the outsiders (the pagan sailors and the Ninevites) and Jonah (an Israelite prophet) demonstrate the author's point: inclusion and exclusion are not determined by nationality, but by character. In this case, each character's status in the eyes of YHWH is determined by repentance and humility.

The book of Jonah was written to the nation of Israel, and, as part of the *Nevi'im*, was well-known in Jewish scholarship and tradition. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus refers to Jonah

[40] See the descriptions of Assyrian warfare in Simon Anglim et al., *Fighting Techniques of the Ancient World 3000 BCE–500CE: Equipment, Combat Skills and Tactics* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2002), 185. The authors include a harrowing quote from King Ashurbanipal upon his conquering of the city of Suru: "I built a pillar at the city gate and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up inside the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes."

five times as he addresses the Pharisees' lack of faith, offering only the "sign of Jonah" in response to their demand for a sign. Why would a book about a Hebrew prophet, written to the Hebrew people, contain such a negative example of YHWH's followers? Why would the book feature pagans and foreigners—*Assyrians,* no less—in a narrative intended for the chosen people of YHWH? Why would these pagans and Ninevites be portrayed as better examples of faithfulness than Jonah himself?

This brief study of the portraits painted of these insiders and outsiders focuses on the theological themes of the exclusion and inclusion illustrated through the book of Jonah. Despite Jonah's apparent insider status, he is the one reprimanded by YHWH multiple times throughout the book, while in contrast, the outsiders find mercy. Jonah, the insider prophet, completely fails to seek the heart of YHWH when it comes to mercy and repentance, while the outsiders demonstrate extraordinary kindness and faith. These portraits are clearly juxtaposed for a reason. In the study below, I will show how the book of Jonah challenges traditional assumptions about insiders and outsiders, and contributes to the theme of inclusion that courses through the veins of Scripture.

Jonah 1

The book of Jonah opens exactly as one would expect a prophetic book to open:[41] "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me'" (Jonah 1:1–2, ESV[42]).

[41] This "prophetic formula" is used throughout the Old Testament to introduce a new section of prophecy. See Jeremiah 1:4, 1:11, 1:13; Ezekiel 1:3, etc. for examples.

[42] The ESV excellently captures the irony in the first several verses of Jonah, which can be lost in translation from Hebrew to English. Hereafter, unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations will be from the NRSV translation.

The next verse continues as one would expect: "But Jonah rose…" but finishes quite unexpectedly: "to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:3, ESV). Here the author hints that this is not our classic book of prophecy. Instead of arising and going, as YHWH instructed and as the reader expects, Jonah arises and *flees*. The destination of his flight is Tarshish: as far as he can go from Nineveh. Desperate for an escape route, he does not hesitate to pay for passage on a ship sailed by pagans.

Later in the narrative, the author gives the information that when Jonah boards the ship, he tells the sailors outright what he's doing (1:10): He's running from his God. In a culture where national and territorial gods were normal,[43] the sailors probably assumed Jonah had a disagreement with one of the gods in his region, and thus taking to the sea was an entirely logical way to evade judgment. But as the story progresses, it is evident that Jonah's actions are not without consequences.

YHWH, ever the orchestrator in this story, "[hurls] a great wind upon the sea," and causes a storm so severe that the narrator says the ship itself considered breaking up into pieces (1:4). In a display of apathy which proves a defining character trait for Jonah, the runaway prophet is sleeping in the bottom of the boat. This prophet, who is supposed to have a personal relationship with YHWH, is trying to block out the problem his disobedience has caused. In terms of the Rahab narrative, this is a remarkable display of a lack of *ḥesed.* Meanwhile, the pagan sailors desperately and humbly call out to their individual gods, recognizing their peril and powerlessness.

Spina points out the contrast between Jonah and the sailors in *The Faith of the Outsider*. The sailors, who know nothing of YHWH, are fully prepared to repent, sacrifice, pray, and do

[43] Steven E. Grosby, "Once Again, Nationality and Religion," *Genealogy* 3, no. 3 (2019): 48.

whatever they must to placate the god of the storm. “Their theology may be fatally flawed, but there is nothing wrong with their faith,” says Spina. “The narrator acknowledges that credit must be given where credit is due.”[44] On the other hand, Jonah knows very well which God is causing the storm. Yet, he doesn’t volunteer any information. He doesn’t even offer a prayer. Despite the captain’s desperate request that he call out to his god, the narrator never gives us any indication that Jonah follows through on this. It is important to note during this section the extent of Jonah’s egocentrism. Jonah knows exactly why the sailors are in peril, but instead of making amends with YHWH, Jonah is willing to let the whole ship sink with him. He would rather perish in the storm than go to Nineveh.

In his confession to the sailors, he admits to fleeing from the God of the land, sea, and sky, which can only have been received by the sailors with the utmost horror. Jonah, the prophet of YHWH, who should’ve known better than anyone not to trifle with such a God, has exhibited a kind of flippancy in his religious practice that even the pagans would never have dared. Herein lies a touch of humor or at least satire: Jonah made an effort to escape *by sea* from the God *of the sea.* There is a clear inconsistency between this religious insider’s profession of faith in YHWH and his actions. In contrast, the outsiders have no problem connecting their beliefs to their actions.[45] They believe a god has caused the storm. Therefore, they will do whatever it takes to appease the god, because they are not so pretentious as to believe the delusion that they can outrun, outsmart, or outfight a deity.

One has to wonder whether at this point in the story, Jonah’s repentance could’ve saved the ship. Had Jonah truly cried out to YHWH as the captain of the ship requested him to, what would have happened? Had Jonah repented of his fault and vowed to obey, would YHWH have

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[44] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 101.

[45] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 100–103

relented then and there? We are not given the opportunity to find out, because Jonah apparently decides he would rather drown than repent. According to him, the sea will be silenced if the sailors throw him overboard (1:12). Again, the reader is left wondering whether this is a fact Jonah deeply believes, a lucky guess, or a desperate and selfish attempt to remove himself from the picture and leave the sailors to deal with an angry YHWH themselves.

In an astonishing display of *ḥesed* and respect for human life, the pagan sailors resist this idea. Even though their ship is about to capsize, they make an effort to row back to land to save the foreign man of God who would have let them all sink with him. The narrator includes a moving prayer from the sailors to YHWH, who, like Rahab, refer to YHWH by the covenant name and plead for mercy.[46] They express their fear of shedding innocent blood, and acknowledge YHWH's sovereignty over the situation: "You, O LORD, have done as it pleased you" (1:14b). In a final effort to save themselves and their vessel—they have already lost their cargo—they toss Jonah overboard.

As it turns out, the prophet was right. The storm does stop. The sailors, astonished, switch from fearing the sea to fearing the LORD. The narrator notes they "offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows" (1:16). In consideration of the fact that they were likely sailing on a smaller wooden vessel, upon which a sacrifice (at least, one involving fire) might have been dangerous, Tim Mackie suggests their faith in YHWH may have lasted until they reached dry land.[47] Perhaps these sailors have merely added YHWH to their pantheon. The author is not

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[46] Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 148.

[47] The Tim Mackie Archives (Tim Mackie), "1. Running From Your Life - Amazing Jonah" (YouTube, August 16, 2017).

interested in whether the outsiders have made a full-scale conversion.[48] The point is that here, they have displayed tremendous hope in YHWH's saving power, respect toward YHWH's prophet, and worship of YHWH—none of which Jonah participates in.

While the sailors marvel at their rescue, Jonah is presumably floundering in the sea, ready to take his message to the depths with him. But Jonah is not out of YHWH's sight yet. Rather than letting him drown, YHWH sends a great fish to swallow him, and gives the prophet plenty of time to think about what he's done—three nights and three days.

Jonah 2

We catch up with Jonah as he decides to cry out to God, in a half-hearted way characteristic of the less-than-exemplary prophet. For several verses, Jonah poetically meditates on his miserable condition. The passage overflows with imagery of water, and carries a tone of lament. Truly, this short poem is beautifully written, and worthy of study from a more literary point of view. However, within the scope of this paper, I will only examine it briefly as it relates to the portrait of Jonah's character and his relationship with YHWH and with outsiders.

At this point in sermons on the book of Jonah, I have often heard pastors assert that Jonah is offering a prayer of repentance. Jonah recognizes he's in a tight spot, and is finally verbally acknowledging YHWH's sovereignty and presence.[49] However, the text appears to be notably *lacking* in repentance. Further, even in his prayer of lament over his plight, Jonah manages to make a jab at those he considers outsiders, "those who worship vain idols [and] forsake their true

[48] Spina says that this is not outside the realm of possibility, however. *The Faith of the Outsider,* 108.

[49] "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice" (2:2), serving as an acknowledgment of YHWH's presence even in the depths of the sea, is strikingly different from Jonah's previous delusion that fleeing "away from the presence of the LORD" was a possibility (1:3).

loyalty" (2:8).[50] Jonah still seems to feel self-righteous, and speaks of his vows and sacrifices in 2:9, despite the fact that the only characters who have made vows and sacrifices in the story thus far are the pagan sailors.

Nonetheless, YHWH seems to think Jonah has made sufficient growth for a second chance. At the very least, Jonah is now fully aware that nothing he can do can get him out of his predicament. Jonah has attempted to run from YHWH, tried to ignore YHWH, and even jumped into the ocean to avoid YHWH, but each attempt to evade his God has proved futile. Every step of the way, he has been dogged by a deity, and he finally comes to terms with this, at least a little. In the words of the pagan sailors, "You, O LORD, have done as it pleased you" (1:14). YHWH cannot be deterred from his purpose.

Jonah 3

The first round of conflict is over, only to begin again afresh. In what feels like a complete reset, the second section of the book begins with a repetition of the prophetic formula: "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you'" (3:1–2). This time, Jonah arises and goes, as instructed. The reader is not given the substance of the message he is to deliver, but we are led to believe he is willing to do it.

The narrator hyperbolically describes the size of the city of Nineveh as "three days' journey in breadth" (3:3). However, Jonah stops to deliver his message after only one day of traveling into the city. This seems to be yet another characterization of the prophet's halfhearted obedience. From this spot, Jonah delivers a hilariously short oracle: "Yet forty days, and

[50] The word translated in the NRSV as "true loyalty" is חסד, the same root as *ḥesed.* Notably, it appears to be Jonah who has forsaken loyalty / kindness / compassion.

Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4), a message which takes up only five words in Hebrew. A different translation renders "overthrown" as "overturned," and thus could carry the meaning of either "destroyed" or "delivered."[51] We are left wondering whether this ambiguity is intentional on Jonah's part, and whether this is truly the content YHWH instructed him to declare. Is this to suggest judgment or salvation?

Jonah's oracle appears to leave no room for negotiation, but that does not stop the Ninevites. Despite Jonah's neglect to mention God, we are told "the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (3:5). Sackcloth was usually worn by only the poor and slaves in the Near East, but the narrator reveals that everyone in the city, including those of the highest social status, repented in a way the Israelites would have recognized.[52] By all appearances, this is a full-scale repentance and conversion on the part of the whole nation. It is so dramatic and exaggerated that it serves as a perfect caricature of repentance, and the perfect foil to Jonah's apathy.

We are given special insight into the reception of Jonah's message by the king and nobles of Nineveh. Not wanting to take any chances, the king makes a decree, forcing even the *livestock* to fast and wear sackcloth. Using the same verb God used to command Jonah to "cry out" against Nineveh, the king now urges the people to "cry out" to YHWH. He issues a command for a full repentance—a distinct turning from former evil—by requiring his people to each "turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (2:8). Once again, we must note that the Ninevites have received no promise that any amount of repentance will make a difference. They

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[51] Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider,* 110.

[52] For a description of expressions of grief, repentance, and other emotions through the tearing of clothes and donning of sackcloth, see Obiorah M. Jerome and Favour C. Uroko, "Tearing of Clothes: A Study of an Ancient Practice in the Old Testament," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no. 1 (2018): 1–8.

haven't even received a *suggestion* that their repentance will make a difference. Nonetheless, they exhibit a great deal of hope, trusting the outcome of their plight to YHWH's hands just as the sailors did (1:15).

The Ninevite king does not exempt himself from any of these measures of repentance. In fact, he goes a step further, moving from his throne to sit in ashes (2:6). He demonstrates a remarkably insider theology.[53] The king suggests that if the people *turn* from their evil, perhaps God will *turn* from his anger.[54] The result of the Ninevites' repentance is consistent with God's character. When people repent of their evil, God does the same (although the word concerning God's "evil" is often translated as "calamity" or "judgment," so it is sometimes hard to see this direct parallel in English translations). This is a promise distinctly worded in Jeremiah 18:7–10.[55] God is merciful, and his protection or destruction of a people are proportionate to their desire to

[53] The date of Jonah's composition remains uncertain. In consideration of the brief mention of "Jonah son of Amittai" in 2 Kings 14:25, the book of Jonah has been suggested to be a pseudepigraphal, post-exilic work based on this little-known prophet (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Book of Jonah" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 July 2010). However, no strong evidence exists for such a date, and as the book does not identify an author, it is impossible to form a definite conclusion. As mentioned earlier, there is no way to be certain of the date of composition for this book, so it is impossible to tell whether the author is borrowing from other sources in the Tanakh, but it is interesting to note the similarities between Nineveh's repentance and David's repentance in 2 Samuel 12:15-23. Like the Ninevite king, David fasts and prays earnestly. To explain their reasoning for their actions, both the Ninevite king and David pose a very powerful question: "Who knows?" (מי יודע), a question that only appears one other time in Scripture (in Joel 2:14, in similar circumstances of repentance and hoped-for deliverance). Although their circumstances are different, and the results of David's repentance are certainly less favorable to him than the Ninevite king's were, the parallel between the two figures is strong. One wonders whether the author of Jonah was imitating the story of David, seeking to tie this "outsider" to the archetype of an Israelite "insider." Regardless of whether the imitation was intentional or even possible, future generations of Jews studying the Tanakh must have seen a parallel here. The author of Jonah is very intentionally portraying the Ninevites' repentance as orthodox and effective.

[54] Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism,* 187.

[55] "At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it" (Jer 18:7–10). Trible also notes several examples of this theme (*Rhetorical Criticism,* 93).

live in accordance with his law. Thus, the Ninevites' "insider theology" has a result quite similar to what the nation of Israel has experienced time and time again.

Jonah 4

As the reader soon discovers, Jonah was well-versed with this theology. In chapter 4, the narrator turns from the exemplary outsiders back to God's questionable prophet, who is preparing to unleash his own personal wrath. Rather than rejoicing over the effectiveness of his five-word sermon, Jonah *grieves* YHWH's decision to be merciful. In an ultimate demonstration of his lack of connection with God's will, Jonah expresses his disgust over YHWH's very nature: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (4:2–3).

Jonah cites an almost creedal confession of God's attributes, which existed in the covenant community of Israel from the days of Moses (Exodus 34:4–6). In previous episodes within Scripture, YHWH's followers have used this confession to "remind" YHWH of his attributes in a plea for mercy (see Num 14:18, which is tied to another instance of God relenting from evil, as discussed previously). Here, ironically, Jonah admits that YHWH's nature is the precise reason why he fled his commission in the first place. Clearly, Jonah has a deep-seated hatred for the Ninevites.[56] The thought that they might be shown the same mercy and forgiveness as the nation of Israel is too much for him. For the second time in the book of Jonah, the prophet thinks it would be better to die than to participate in YHWH's redemption of Nineveh. He openly

[56] Douglas K. Stuart, "'The Great City of Nineveh' (Jon 1:2)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171, no. 684 (2014): 387–400.

scorns God's *ḥesed* (here translated as "steadfast love"), showing once again that he possesses little to none of this attribute himself.

By this point in the story, Jonah, who as a prophet is supposed to be in tune with God's will, has 1) fled from God (1:3); 2) exhibited enormous contempt for the lives of those around him by putting at risk all the sailors (1:4–10); 3) failed to actually repent (chapter 2); 4) treated his prophetic message about as lightly as he could (3:4–5); and now 5) disdained the very nature of God (4:2–3). In contrast, the outsiders (the pagan sailors and the Ninevites) have 1) turned to God at the first sign of God's saving power (1:11–16); 2) demonstrated deep reverence for Jonah's life by putting their own lives at risk in an effort to save him (1:13–14); 3) turned fully toward God in repentance (3:5–9); 4) believed Jonah's words about God, treating his warnings with the highest respect (1:10, 1:14–15, 3:5–9); and 5) made a correct guess about God's merciful nature and acted in accordance (3:9).

God proceeds to teach Jonah an object lesson. As Jonah fumes on the edge of the city, clinging to hope that YHWH may yet destroy Nineveh, YHWH appoints a plant to provide Jonah with shade.[57] For the first time in the entire book, Jonah is "exceedingly glad" (4:6). He never expressed gladness over his prophetic commission, or over his rescue from the sea, or over his second chance, or over God's mercy; but this plant is something else altogether. Jonah's personal comfort as he awaits Nineveh's destruction gives the prophet great joy. After Jonah has formed an attachment to the plant, YHWH appoints a worm to destroy it. Then YHWH appoints a "scorching east wind," tormenting Jonah and drawing forth his third death wish of the book. Further, when questioned by YHWH, Jonah feels entirely justified in his anger (4:9).

[57] Just as YHWH created the storm in 1:4, and appointed the "great fish to swallow Jonah" in 1:17, YHWH also demonstrates sovereignty over nature here by appointing this plant to provide shade. In every part of this story, YHWH is working behind the scenes to accomplish a divine purpose.

The book's masterful ending demonstrates how much Jonah the Insider has strayed from seeking the heart of God. "And the LORD said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'" (4:10–11). YHWH's concern is for the lives of people and animals, a concern reflected initially in his decision to destroy Nineveh for their evil and eventually in his decision to relent, following Nineveh's repentance. Jonah cannot get beyond his own egocentrism. To him, he is the center of the story. His comfort, his emotions, and his opinions are paramount. His pride has pulled him out of alignment with the will of God.

Conclusion

Over the course of the story, the outsiders have done a far better job aligning their priorities with YHWH's than God's own prophet has. They demonstrated deep *ḥesed,* vibrant faith, and true repentance. The author has very intentionally contrasted Jonah and the outsiders, in this skillfully-told, memorable, moving, and at times humorous story about mercy of YHWH.

Jonah refused to see these repentant outsiders as insiders, but YHWH's *ḥesed* has redeemed them nonetheless. Rather than focusing specifically on an outsider's faith as exemplary, as in the story of Rahab, this narrative offers us a different choice: we can be like Jonah, or we can be like YHWH. YHWH's *ḥesed* allows the welcome, forgiveness, and deliverance of outsiders, while Jonah's lack of *ḥesed* and humility places him in a position where he is unable to see how much he himself needs forgiveness and deliverance.

The book's plot ends without a tidy conclusion. Jonah's final fate is not revealed, leaving us with no choice but to imagine the end of the story for ourselves. This ending offers us a

challenge. Will we be like Jonah, focused only on ourselves at the expense of God's greater plan? Will we be like the outsiders in the story, who turned to YHWH wholeheartedly? Ultimately, will we be like YHWH, extending mercy even where it is undeserved?

Interlude: the second Confession

turns out I was wrong about the cardstock
sign, it was blood not paint, and I guess
maybe I'm a little lost lamb, too, or I
was, before I saw the second light, got saved
anew, unlike you
hypocrites stuck up in the same pew every
week, shouting on the streets so loud you
go hoarse, haven't got any
voice left by Sunday, but thank God for
the watered-down song you can sing without
thinking, thank God for the five-note
melody, easy on your tone-deaf ears, deafened by your
own cries trying so hard to bring down
Jericho, pray your way out of the
whale, just two steps into the city with a
five-word sermon on a cardstock sign, red-
lettered

the second Woe

Woe to you who in the darkness eat
the bones of honest men, grind them into bread
to feed your children who grow up
satiated with blood, their own
bones weak

Woe to you who from your earthen vessels drown
the broken voices that chafed your uncalloused
fingers, you
who with tongues of seaweed bind their
heads to the bases of mountains you
built like Babel

Woe to you who with unrepentant trumpets sound
a call to arms despite the wailing in the
wasteland which you
would use for your battlefield though
you already burned the houses in your
way

my wings are spread and waiting
but I guess you couldn't stand the smell
of all the children I have already sheltered, the smell
of the seaweed shackles I pulled them
from, the smell
of the salt water dripping from their ears and down their
faces
the smell of the smoke from their houses, the smell
of blood

so I will cry tonight like
I did last
night like I did
the night before like
I will do tomorrow
as though maybe in my
tears I will
somehow
wash you

Chapter Four: The Ethiopian Eunuch

Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?

Acts 8:36

Introduction

So far, we have looked at two examples from the Hebrew Bible of times when the kingdom of God transcended Israel's human concept of what insider and outsider meant. So far, we've discovered that in God's terms, there is no such thing as an outsider. To YHWH, the important categories have more to do with humility before YHWH (like the Ninevites and Rahab) than gender or ethnicity. The love and salvation of YHWH are not limited by ethnicity, gender, or occupation. They are a free gift to all who are willing to receive it.

Like a lot of scriptural concepts, this one is very easy to say, but significantly harder to apply to our lives today, especially in our society, where the Western Church tends to think it has already sorted this issue. It's tempting to look at current churches as models of God's radical inclusivity. Many churches have both men and women in the pews, and perhaps even a variety of races and nationalities represented in their congregations. Theoretically, many Christians don't consider a person's income or occupation a hindrance, either.

Thus, culturally, the issues we face today are far different from the ones faced by ancient Israel, and even different from the ones faced by the early church. We are no longer asking the question of "Jew or Gentile?" or debating whether circumcision is a necessary requirement to become a Christian. However, we still find ourselves engaged in debates over who can be included in the kingdom of God. In this chapter, we will turn to the New Testament to examine a

fascinating passage in which the gospel breaks through boundaries of ethnicity, status, and sex, once again challenging the categories of insider and outsider.

The narrative of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, found in Acts 8:26–40, is arguably the most prominent scriptural passage featuring a figure who falls outside the traditionally-held binary of male and female.[58] Although Hebrew Bible contains several passages pertaining to eunuchs, and even Jesus addresses the topic of eunuchs in Matthew 19:10–12, the narrative in Acts is the only time a eunuch takes center stage. In many ways, this character, like Rahab, represents the ultimate outsider, both because of his ethnicity and his body's inability to fit the definition of a traditional male. As others have wisely noted, it is risky to read into the Bible our current cultural climate, or to assume that a given passage directly translates to our lives today.[59] However, I believe the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch had a lot to teach the early Church about including people who traditionally stood outside the Holy Place, and I think many of these same lessons still apply to us today.

The considerable depth and complexity of this passage are largely tied to the cultural, religious, and historical background of this story. But before plunging into the historical and cultural context of the narrative, let us see what we can observe by reading an English translation of the text.

Observations from the text

[58] Although both the Old Testament and New Testament contain stories of barren women, that is, women whose bodies failed to act as they were expected to, Scripture seems to have very little to say about men whose bodies do not fit cultural expectations of male physiology.

[59] Emma Percy, "Can a eunuch be baptized?" *Theology* 119, no. 5 (2016), 327-334.

Right from the beginning of the passage, we can see that this is a divinely-ordained encounter. Philip the Evangelist (also known as Philip the Deacon,[60] not to be confused with Philip the Apostle[61]) is instructed by an angel of the Lord to go south from Jerusalem toward Gaza. The text is careful to specify: "This is a wilderness road" (Acts 8:26b). At once, we can tell this encounter is taking place on the border of civilization, outside of the Holy City of Jerusalem.

The Ethiopian eunuch is introduced as a court official and treasurer in the service of the Ethiopian queen. These titles indicate he is a high-ranking official, but we are also given the information that he is returning to his country after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem "to worship" (8:27). However, after his introduction, he is referred to only as "the eunuch," a label repeated five times in this passage. Nowhere else is he referred to as a court official or treasurer, so it appears Luke wants us to focus on the man's identity as a eunuch. In the story, this is his defining trait.[62]

Although the narrator does not designate him as such, at first glance, we might label the eunuch a "God-fearer"—traditionally understood to mean a Gentile who worships YHWH. More recent scholarship has clarified that the understanding of "God-fearer" in reference to a Gentile who worships YHWH may not be the most accurate understanding.[63] However, it is still within

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[60] One of seven deacons appointed by the apostles to serve the Jerusalem church in Acts 6:6.

[61] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Saint Philip the Evangelist" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 9, 2010).

[62] Anna Rebecca Solevåg, "No Nuts? No Problem!: Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch in Acts 8:26-40," *Biblical Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (2016): 81–99.

[63] The term "God-fearer" seems to have more potential applications than simply a Gentile who worships YHWH. F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations* (JSNTSup 67; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 160–65.

reason to assume that this character is a Gentile, based on his ethnic identity as an Ethiopian and the story's absence of any indication otherwise.[64]

The theme of divine orchestration in this story is continued, as the Spirit is the one who distinctly prompts Philip to approach the eunuch's chariot (8:29). Here we realize that the Ethiopian eunuch is literate and well-educated.[65] Likely, the eunuch also has great wealth, considering that his chariot is large enough to hold himself, Philip, and a driver.[66]

When Philip joins the eunuch in the chariot, the eunuch is reading part of the famous "Suffering Servant" passage in Isaiah 53. Philip uses this scripture as a launching point for the proclamation of the gospel, which the eunuch receives immediately (53:35–36). At once, the eunuch expresses a desire to be baptized, and Philip baptizes him.

Finally, in the third divine intervention of the story, the Spirit snatches Philip away and drops him off at Azotus,leaving the rejoicing eunuch alone.[67] Thus, from beginning to end, this encounter was entirely directed by the Holy Spirit. The text seems to imply that very little, if any, of Philip's personal volition is involved; he is credited only with obedience.

In summary, this is a story about a divinely appointed encounter between one of the seven deacons of the Jerusalem church and a figure whom Luke wants us to remember as a eunuch. The encounter revolves around a fragment of the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah, and culminates in the eunuch's immediate expression of a desire to be baptized and Philip's

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[64] Spencer, *Portrait of Philip in Acts,* 129.

[65] Brittany Wilson, "'Neither Male nor Female': The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26-40," *New Test. Stud.* 60, no. 3 (2016): 403–422.

[66] Ibid., 419.

[67] About 20-25 miles away. Also known as Ashdod (NET study note 98 on Acts 8).

execution of this desire. The encounter is concluded abruptly when Philip is swept away by the Spirit, and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing.

Already, the story seems a bit wild. We have two men from radically different cultures and positions in life meeting quite literally in the middle of nowhere, resulting in the baptism of one and the Spirit-teleportation of the other. But as previously mentioned, Luke's accounts are nothing if not wild and radical. The theme of boundary-crossing inclusion Luke began in his account of the gospel is continued here. In order to see just how radical this story is, and just how many boundaries the gospel crosses in this account, we must look deeper into the historical, religious, and cultural context of this account, particularly as we seek to identify the eunuch.

"Neither Male nor Female"

It has been argued that the term "eunuch" (εὐνοῦχος) is here used to denote a political or governmental role, rather than to identify this figure as a castrated male.[68] In fact, some translations have avoided using the term "eunuch" altogether, both here and elsewhere in the New Testament, glossing over the issues of physiological differences and perceived disability.[69] However, in consideration of the fact that the terms "eunuch" and "court official" are employed side-by-side, it is unlikely that they were meant to be understood as synonymous. If, in fact, "eunuch" is a governmental designation instead of a physical description, then the further classification of this figure is a court official and a treasurer is redundant.[70] Thus, although it is

[68] Scott Shauf, "Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and Narrative Context in Acts 8:26–40," *CBQ* 71, no. 4 (October 2009): 762–75.

[69] Solevåg, "Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch," 99.

[70] Wilson, 406.

impossible to be certain, it is most probable that Luke is using the term εὐνοῦχος to denote a physical eunuch.

Eunuchs were not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world. The category of "eunuch" had three primary subdivisions: males who were castrated in their youth or later life to serve as slaves, males who castrated themselves for religious or other reasons, and males who were born with ambiguous genitalia.[71] We are given the information that the figure in this story is in service of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians, and may therefore assume that this is an enslaved eunuch. Because eunuchs were unable to procreate and therefore unable to form their own families, they were often highly valued slaves in the ancient world. Their status, as Brittany Wilson phrases it, as "un-manned men," placed them outside the traditional binary of male and female and allowed them to serve female rulers in a capacity a sexually normative man would never have been permitted to.[72]

Despite their relative ubiquity and domestic value in the ancient world, writings from the time demonstrate that eunuchs did, indeed, fall into the category of perceived outsiders, especially in the Jewish mind. In the words of the Jewish philosopher Philo, a eunuch is:

> …a soul which is impotent and barren …. For such a soul is neither able to drop truly masculine seeds of virtue nor yet to receive and foster what is dropped, but like a stony field is only capable of blighting the successive growths, which were meant to live. … [He] can produce no fruit of wisdom. He is neither male nor female, for he is incapable of either giving or receiving seed. None such does Moses permit to enter the congregation of the Lord, for what use can he find in listening to holy words when the knife has cut away the power of faith and the store of the truth.[73]

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[71] Solevåg, "Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch," 86.

[72] Wilson, 406–407.

[73] Philo of Alexandria, *Ebr.* 211–12.

This harsh assessment of a eunuch's moral and spiritual capabilities may stem from Jewish purity codes, which forbade eunuchs from entering the temple. For example, Deuteronomy 23:1 reads, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD." Because eunuchs' bodies mixed the boundaries between male and female, they were considered ritually unclean.[74] Thus, it is intriguing that our eunuch in Acts 8 has just made an extensive journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship.[75] He completed this pilgrimage despite the perils of first-century travel, including the threat of highwaymen; he endured the long, slow journey of a chariot along bad roads; he risked the danger of running out of food, water, and other supplies.[76] And the eunuch makes this entire journey to worship in Jerusalem with the knowledge that he cannot even enter the temple.[77] Clearly, this person is seeking God. Yet, because of his perceived status as an outsider, the community of insiders has restricted him to a limited level of access to YHWH.

However, if we expand our understanding of YHWH's relationship with eunuchs beyond Deuteronomy 23, we will find an apparently contradictory passage in the book of Isaiah. The prophet says:

> Thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a

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[74] Wilson, 410.

[75] "Ethiopian" (Αἰθίοψ) meant "burnt face" and generally denoted an "other" (non-Greek, non-Roman, non-Jewish) person from the very edge of the "civilized" world (Wilson, 412). Yamauchi estimates that the eunuch was probably from Meroë (or Nubia), which was over 1000 miles from Jerusalem. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Acts 8:26-40: Why the Ethiopian Eunuch Was Not from Ethiopia," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis* (eds. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning; Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 351–66.

[76] Zorodzai Dube, "The Ethiopian Eunuch in Transit: A Migrant Theoretical Perspective," *HTS* 69, no. 1 (2013): 1–7.

[77] Shauf notes that because of his physicality, the eunuch almost certainly cannot be a "full Jew" (Shauf, "Locating the Eunuch," 764). It is unclear whether he could have been circumcised (Wilson, 421). I would further like to add that the eunuch's blurring of the traditional gender binary may have forced him to remain even beyond the Court of Women in the Jerusalem temple area.

> monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:4–5).

Thus, even before the incarnation of Christ, we can see a trajectory toward redemption for all people. YHWH reveals that in this passage that normative genitalia are not the primary concern—obedience is. Jesus also paints eunuchs in a favorable light in Matthew 19.[78] In light of these passages, Luke's inclusion of a eunuch's baptism in his exploration of the boundary-breaking gospel is really just a continuation of what God has already begun.[79]

The Eunuch's Reading

When Philip comes upon the eunuch, he finds him reading from the book of Isaiah, not far from the passage regarding the inclusion of eunuchs in God's house. Brittany Wilson notes the significance of the passage the eunuch is reading: "Via his vignette of the eunuch, Luke lifts up a eunuch official, or impotent 'power' (δυνάστης), and points to Jesus' own impotent power as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the slaughtered and shorn lamb who is humiliated and exalted, crucified and risen."[80] Other authors have pointed out the connection between Isaiah 53 and the eunuch's own experience. The passage deals with someone who has suffered humiliation, has

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[78] Here Jesus refers to "eunuchs who have been so from birth," which could be interpreted as a reference to intersex individuals or individuals who otherwise do not fit the concept of standard masculinity; "eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others," which is most likely the case for the Ethiopian eunuch; and "eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," which probably refers to celibacy (Matthew 19:12). Some have understood this passage to be a justification for self-mutilation or self-castration; see Ra'anan Abusch, "Eunuchs and Gender Transformation: Philo's Exegesis of the Joseph Narrative," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (ed. Shaun Tougher; London: The Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002), 112–113.

[79] For more information on the intersectionality of the eunuch's identity, including the way his status, gender, and ethnicity combine to make him a perfect example of the gospel's boundary-breaking nature, see Brittany Wilson's "'Neither Male nor Female': The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40."

Anna Solevåg also offers an interesting take on the eunuch's placement in the book of Acts, referring to the character as a "narrative prosthesis" which continues the stigmatization of eunuchs rather than truly wrestling with it. Solevåg explores the eunuch's role as a disabled character as well. See Solevåg, "Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch," 85.

[80] Wilson, 422.

been "sheared," and who has suffered in silence. Solevåg poses the question, "Could the text also be speaking about a eunuch?"[81] In this passage, the eunuch finds a point of connection with Jesus, and Philip uses it as a launching point for the communication of the gospel.

It is noteworthy that Philip begins neither with his own personal experience, nor with the Torah, nor with the traditions of Judaism. As he finds himself in the middle of nowhere, interacting with someone his people would consider an outsider, he begins where the man already is. We are told that "Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). This process of sharing the good news meets the seeker in the wilderness.

The Eunuch's Conversion and Baptism

After taking the reader on a journey with the eunuch from Jerusalem through the Scriptures and to the good news, Luke brings the narrative to a climax with the eunuch's response. Wilson describes the eunuch as "an ideal convert who joyfully receives the good news."[82] He immediately recognizes his next step and takes initiative by asking, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (8:36). According to Deuteronomy, it would not be beyond reason for Philip to respond that the man's very status as a eunuch precludes him from entering fully into a covenant community.[83] But instead, Philip does not reply. He simply baptizes the man.[84]

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[81] Solevåg, "Disability, Stigma, and the Baptized Eunuch," 91.

[82] Wilson, 405.

[83] Wilson, 410.

[84] One wonders if the reason the eunuch had to propose his own baptism might be because Philip was reluctant to suggest it! Regardless, when asked, Philip does not appear to hesitate.

Here it is worthwhile to note the significance of baptism for this former-outsider. Although doctrines regarding the exact purpose and necessity of baptism vary between denominations and Christian traditions, baptism is widely held to represent inclusion in the covenant of grace.[85] In Romans 6:4, Paul describes baptism as a metaphor for our union with Christ—"Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." In Ephesians, baptism is cited as an example of unity with other believers as "one body and one Spirit" (Eph 4:4–5). Thus, baptism is a tremendously inclusive act.

The Belgic Confession, a statement of faith for the Reformed tradition, states that "what circumcision was to the Jews, baptism is to our children. And for this reason St. Paul calls baptism the *circumcision of Christ*" (emphasis original).[86] In some Christian traditions, baptism is interpreted as "the new circumcision." Although some scholars have pointed out that the verses most frequently used to defend baptism as "the new circumcision" (primarily Colossians 2:11–12) may be misinterpreted,[87] Michael Horton still compares the two, in that both signify a covenant. However, he is careful to note that baptism is far more inclusive: it does not require a male body, because it is a circumcision of the heart.[88] Thus, entry into the inner rings of the covenant community is no longer limited by priestly status, nationality, and gender. All have received the same cleansing

[85] Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 368.

[86] Belgic Confession, art. 34, in *Psalter Hymnal,* 87.

[87] Martin C. Salter, "Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?: An Examination of the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11-12," *Themelios* 35, no. 1 (2010): 15–29.

[88] Horton, *Pilgrim Theology,* 372.

Luke's emphasis on the eunuch's baptism is consistent with Luke's focus on bringing the outsiders inside. Even though the man probably was unable to be circumcised, and thus unable to participate fully in Judaism, he has been welcomed into Christianity with the sign of baptism. He is now fully a part of a covenant community. When we are told he "went on his way rejoicing" (8:39), it is easy to understand why: after a lifetime of being looked upon as "other," and after a journey fraught with exclusion from the religious community of the God he worshipped, the eunuch has now been welcomed in.

In the context of the book of Acts, this story comes directly before the conversion of Paul, the golden standard of Jewishness (Acts 9). Two chapters after the eunuch's conversion comes the conversion of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile. Thus the gospel continues to spread like wildfire, consuming Jews and Gentiles alike and drawing them into the same body of believers. Those who, like the eunuch, were perceived as hopelessly far outside the temple, are now temples themselves (1 Cor 6:19).

Conclusion

Luke makes it clear that the gospel's inclusivity is radical and revolutionary, and those who embrace it, like Philip, are called to be the same. Although written to "most excellent Theophilus," who was probably a Greek Gentile, the book of Acts has been widely circulated with its companion volume, Luke, throughout the "insider community" of Christianity for years. As mentioned earlier, we cannot assume the text addresses the exact kinds of concerns about inclusivity that the Church is wrestling with in 21st-century America. Nonetheless, Luke's primary identification of the convert in this story as a eunuch demonstrates that the gospel is far

bigger than human constructs and categories that attempt to exclude individuals from the kingdom of God.[89]

In this narrative, we receive an example of evangelism that seeks to meet outsiders in the wilderness and bring them in. This kind of evangelism comes with no agenda except the gospel. Philip allows his encounter with the eunuch to revolve around the Scripture the eunuch finds confusing, and the result is a rejoicing, baptized convert. The church today would do well to take a cue from Philip's simple, sincere, and outward-focused evangelism.

As with Rahab and the Ninevites, the eunuch's physical and ethnic status do not change. In the eyes of many Jews, he may still be perceived as ritually unclean and unable to enter the temple to worship. However, God offers him welcome in a new kind of temple. Once again, God's welcome transcends social and societal customs, bringing this "outsider of outsiders" into the church because of his faith and obedience.

Luke's portraits of the inclusion of those perceived to be outsiders pose a challenge to us. There are many people today who are desperate to hear the good news, longing to worship God, even though some churches have refused to allow them into the temple courts, so to speak. Is the Spirit calling us to run alongside their chariots and welcome them in? If we truly believe that we carry the good news, shouldn't we extend it to everyone, even those we perceive as outsiders?

[89] Percy, "Can a Eunuch Be Baptized?" 332.

Interlude: the third woe

Woe to you who balance on boxes, heads
above passersby, and cry
judgment like it was yours to deliver,
sheltered by pulpits and shielded by
the cardstock sign you made with your
eyes closed after you took off
your church clothes

Woe to you whose closets are filled
with white robes, further back
sackcloth, moth-eaten, drooping off the hangers, further
back
skeletons

Woe to you who cry Woe
without first opening your own closet

without first finding the sackcloth you forgot you owned

woe to you who rise to oppress
the oppressors, who are quick
to forget the days you
were among them, the ways
you are among them

and perhaps I am not speaking to you at all

and as these woes hit the asphalt and the
back of the cathedral, their echoes
come back louder than echoes should until I
am left deafened and
silent

Chapter Five: Conclusion

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

To the list of categories Paul provides in Galatians 3:28, we might add, "There is no longer insider or outsider." Furthermore, there never has been. Paul takes great pains to convey this theme throughout the course of his letter, as he constantly reminds the churches of the limitless, boundary-breaking love of God. God has welcomed in Gentiles and Jews alike (Romans 11), and even embraced Paul, who considered himself the "foremost of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15).

From Rahab to the pagan sailors and Ninevites to the Ethiopian eunuch and beyond, Scripture is clear about this: God does not look at the things humans look at. God's love is not deterred by human categorizations. God looks at the heart: those who seek find, and the door is never closed to those who truly desire entry.

More ominously, the door is never locked to those who desire exit. As Jesus makes clear, it is quite possible for the "heirs of the kingdom [to] be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:12). When Jonah refuses to show mercy to the Ninevites, he receives a harsh reprimand from God (Jonah 4). Scripture is full of other examples—Achan, of the tribe of Judah, whose story of unfaithfulness and the resulting punishment is juxtaposed with Rahab's faith and reward in Joshua 7; the Pharisees, whose hypocrisy blinded them to the kingdom they thought they were watching for so vigilantly;

Ananias and Sapphira, two members of the church whose deceit cost them their lives, just three chapters prior to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 5:1–11); the list goes on.

The concepts of insiders and outsiders, inclusion and exclusion, predestination and election are so ingrained in the fabric of our Church today, I fear many Christians don't even realize they're there. According to a 2011 study by David Kinnaman, the president of Barna Group, out of the top six reasons why young Christians leave the church, five of them have to do with the church's exclusivity or close-mindedness in one way or another.[90] In a study of young adults outside the church, Kinnaman and Lyons found that 87 percent of these "outsiders" (as the study terms them) perceived present-day Christianity as judgmental, and 85 percent described it as hypocritical.[91] In contrast, out of those within the church, only 52 percent saw the church as judgmental and 47 percent saw the church as hypocritical.[92] Clearly, those within the church fail to see the negative impressions they are creating.

In my personal experience, conservative Christians are quick to take to social media with memes and text posts bearing slogans like "Truth doesn't cease to be truth just because it makes you uncomfortable" and "If the Bible calls it sin, it's sin," which, while true, seem utterly

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[90] The study reports that the top reason Christians leave the church is the demonization of "everything outside the church" and the "church ignoring the problems of the real world." Other reasons include the Church's opposition to science (again creating an us vs. them mentality); judgmental responses to sexuality; the exclusivity of Christianity; and the unwillingness of the church to engage with young people's questions and doubts about their faith. For a summary of this research, see Barna Group (David Kinnaman). "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church." Barna, 27 Sept 2011, https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/

For a more in-depth look at this research, see David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church… and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

[91] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 27. 70 percent of these "outsiders" described the church as "insensitive to others," and 64 percent described them as "not accepting of other faiths."

[92] Ibid., 34.

unproductive. I fail to comprehend how either of these statements could possibly change anyone's mind or promote discussion and understanding. If anything, they seem to be pats on the back for those who share such opinions, serving to pull more planks out of the bridge between insiders and outsiders. If these statements are anything to go by, some Christians may not care if the outside world perceives them as judgmental and hypocritical. Some even use verses like John 15:18 (in which Jesus prepares his followers for the fact that the world may hate them) as justification for their own hateful and judgmental behavior. If Christians are perfectly content to be perceived as judgmental hypocrites, deeming it some kind of persecution or martyrdom when their social media posts are censored or defamed, how can we blame those who seek truth for turning away in disgust?

To answer the question this thesis set out to explore, the Bible's many portraits of outsiders point to two common purposes. First, they demonstrate God's willingness to welcome those who are faithful, repentant, and obedient, regardless of whether they are perceived as insiders or outsiders. Second, they serve to challenge insiders to be more like YHWH, as the account of Jonah so eloquently sets forth. In some ways, they also seem to indicate a warning: if these faithful outsiders are the kinds of people whom God welcomes into the kingdom, we cannot count on our perceived status to tell us whether we truly exist on the inside or outside.

In light of this, the temptation arises to condemn those we may deem to be "hypocritical insiders." And here we find a different dilemma: it is terrifyingly easy to set up new walls. As one begins to critique the insiders, a new "inside" begins to form: now, the ones who disdain the hypocrites become a club, creating once again an "us" and "them." The Church splits into more

denominations and factions, beginning to imagine outsiders in the church down the street because they are "too conservative" or "too stuffy." The cycle is endless.

I've found myself here. I, too, have stood secure on the inside, looking down my nose at Christians more liberal than I or those outside the Church. More recently, I've stood in a different kind of inside, scorning those more conservative than I for scorning those like me. When we begin to create circles of insiders and outsiders even within our own churches, what will become of us? When the Church continues dividing against itself, how can we stand?

In the end, I feel the truth lies in a simple principle: It has never been the task of humans to decide who is "in" and who is "out." God never asked us to devise categories to distinguish "us" from "them." Our responsibility is the same as Rahab's: we are called to faithfulness. Our task is the same as Jonah's: we are bound to represent God through mercy and obedience. Our mission is that of the Ethiopian eunuch: to seek, to learn, and to worship.

Ultimately, I must agree with C. S. Lewis' assessment in *The Great Divorce,* a gorgeously imaginative book about inclusion and the afterlife:

> Never fear. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, '*Thy* will be done.' … No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.[93]

In the stories of outsiders throughout Scripture, we all learn our place in the kingdom of God. We learn the attributes God welcomes in, and we are given the opportunity to examine ourselves against the narratives we find. We see the beauty and redeeming inclusion offered by

[93] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), 72–73.

the God of *ḥesed*, and we are offered the opportunity to participate in a covenant of love, if only we are willing.

the third confession

so maybe we all have the power
to erect stakes and Asherahs
to burn saints and sinners and poets and children and become
ourselves the fire and
ourselves the fuel and
ourselves the brimstone

and maybe while the witches writhe it is us
(who with our torches believe ourselves the light)
after all
it is us
who burn our souls to cinders and maybe
it has always been more holy to be on fire than
to hold the torch

I swear
I thought it was only a candle

Resolution

therefore, if this little light of mine must burn
in Nero's garden to be sacred, who am I
to stand inside these paper-thin walls casting tinder
from the windows even if
we are burning Nero himself

where then shall I stand?

or shall I instead kneel?

shall I march? shall I shout? shall I heal or,
one moment

let me find my sackcloth, it has been so
long I can't remember where
I hid it, is it
under the ashes of the cardstock sign or in the
water?

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