

Q. Baptists and Presbyterians argue over whether the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is evidence for immersion baptism. Who is right?

A. They both are—at least in most cases. That's because they are both usually arguing over the wrong verses. As the Baptists assert, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch does imply immersion baptism. But it is not for the reasons immersionists, such as Baptists, usually cite and which those who baptize by sprinkling, such as Presbyterians, argue against. And the Presbyterians are right to argue against the verses the Baptists claim support their cause.

Acts 8:26-27 tell us, "But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise, and go towards the south to the way that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert.' He arose and went; and behold, there was a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was over all her treasure, who had come to Jerusalem to worship." In the verses that follow, we find that Philip heard the eunuch reading Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 53:7-8. The eunuch then asks Philip who Isaiah is talking about. Because the passage the eunuch was reading is a prophecy about Jesus, Philip uses this opportunity to evangelize the eunuch (verses 33-35).

After this, we read in verse 36, "As they went on the way, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Behold, here is water. What is keeping me from being baptised?'" Then, in Bible versions based on the Textus Receptus, Philip says, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (King James Version). Other versions omit this verse, but the implication is still there that, hearing the Gospel from Philip, the eunuch came to believe on Jesus.

Next, we come to the verses that are so often debated: "He commanded the chariot to stand still, and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, and the eunuch didn't see him any more, for he went on his way

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rejoicing" (Acts 8:38-39). Just choosing at random from a couple of Baptist websites that address this topic, we read on the website of Calvary Baptist Church, under the heading, "Why Baptism by Immersion?", under subheading b4, "Acts 8:36-39- When Phillip baptizes the Ethiopian they go 'down into' and 'come up out of the water'" ("Baptism") (<http://www.calvarynow.com/baptism>). The Word of Life Baptist Church website states under the heading, "Why Be Baptized by Immersion?": "2. Every baptism in the Bible was by immersion. (Example) '...then both Philip and the man went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water...' --Acts 8:38-39" ("Baptism") (<http://www.wolbc.org/#/about-us/baptism>). I am not picking on anyone here. I could have cited many other websites, books, and preachers. It is simply the common teaching among those who believe in baptism by immersion to assert that both the eunuch's and Philip's going down into the water and coming up out of the water is evidence for immersion baptism.

But now read the opposing side. Robert Rayburn, on the Faith Presbyterian Church website, says,

The prepositions used in these two verses (*eis*, in or into, and *ek* from or out of), that is into the water and out of the water (though it would be just as good Greek to say "to the water" and "from the water"), have been claimed by immersionists to teach immersion as the mode of baptism. One goes "into" the water and "out of" the water, that is, one was completely dipped under the water and came up out of the water. But this is admitted on almost all hands to press the Greek words beyond their limit and, in any case, if taken that way, proves to [sic] much. For in these sentences, whatever the eunuch did, Philip did too!

"Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch"
(<http://www.faithtacoma.org/content/1997-09-28-pm.aspx>)

He's right. The argument based on the prepositions isn't strong on either side of the debate. But what is conclusive is that these verses say that whatever the eunuch did, Philip did also. That is, if these verses are saying that the eunuch was immersed, then they are also saying that Philip was immersed. And that is absurd. The person performing the baptism does not also go under the water.

The plain meaning of Acts 8:38-39 is that, after commanding the chariot to stop, the eunuch and Philip walked down a slope, such as a

river bank, to a body of water. And, after Philip baptized the eunuch, they both walked up the bank back to the chariot.

But the advocates of baptism by sprinkling are still wrong in their conclusion. When Philip and the eunuch got down to the water, Philip did not sprinkle the eunuch. The account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch does truly imply baptism by immersion. But the evidence is not found in verses 38 and 39 but in verses 36 and 38a.

Remember that verse 36 says, "As they went on the way, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Behold, here is water. What is keeping me from being baptised?'" Both the eunuch and Philip were traveling a long way through wilderness. There can be no doubt that they were both carrying containers of drinking water. The eunuch was traveling with others. When we first see him, he is sitting in the chariot reading. In verse 38a, he commands the chariot to stop. So, he was not the driver and sole occupant of a small chariot. Someone else was driving, and, considering that he was someone of great authority under the queen (verse 27), he was probably traveling with an entourage.

Why is this important? Because they would have had a good quantity of water with them—enough to perform a baptism by sprinkling. Between whatever water Philip had on him and the water the eunuch and his companions had in their train, they would have had plenty of water for Philip to simply take a handful and sprinkle it on the eunuch. But it wasn't until "they came to some water" that the eunuch said, "Behold, here is water. What is keeping me from being baptised?"

Put simply, if New Testament baptism was by sprinkling, there would be no need to point out a body of water, stop the chariot, and go down the bank to the water to perform the baptism. Philip could have done it right in the chariot with a handful of drinking water. But he didn't. He needed a body of water in which to immerse the eunuch.

So, the Baptists point to the wrong verses to support immersion baptism, and the Presbyterians are right to challenge them on the evidence of those verses. But the fact that Philip and the eunuch stopped the chariot and walked to a body of water is powerful evidence in support of immersion baptism.

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