



By
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TRADE
& TRAVEL ROUTES TO
Ethiopia

ACCUSTOMED TO THE modern multi-lane highways that crisscross our country today, conceiving the primitive travel conditions that existed in biblical lands in the first century A.D. is hard to do. Though the Romans, hailed for their road building, had made vast travel improvements, still most travel routes lacked comfort and safety.

In the first century, people traveled by foot, on animals, or in ox-driven carts. Jesus' itinerant ministry in Judea, Samaria, and throughout Galilee was mainly on foot. Particularly in the Galilee area, the terrain was hilly and thus physically challenging to walk. Yet the development of the major roads and travel routes was an example of God's sovereignty. He used the expertise of the Roman road builders, pagans though they were, to prepare roadways over which Christ's followers could carry the gospel message throughout the known world.

Following God's Directions

The land of Israel was a small land corridor in the Middle East. Its capital, Jerusalem, was comparatively a third-rate trade center in a world that already had some great cities. Israel lay between two of the great cultural centers of the ancient world, Egypt and Mesopotamia, both of which had built expansive and impressive cities.

Passing through Israel's borders, many people traveled on the great trade routes. The

promised land, from north to south, is less than 150 miles long. The northern end of the Dead Sea is only 50 miles from the Mediterranean coast. The land has been compared to the roof of a house. It rises from the Mediterranean to about 3,200 feet above sea level, and then plunges downward to the Jordan Rift Valley.¹ In the first century, highway engineers did not build roads to ensure *both* safety and comfort. Jesus' story of the good Samaritan highlights the inherent dangers of travel in that day (Luke 10:30-35).

Philip was part of the Jerusalem church. After the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), great persecution of believers broke out in Jerusalem, scattering Christians throughout the land. Philip went to a city in Samaria; there many were converted because of his powerful preaching. In the midst of Philip's Samaritan ministry, an angel told him, "go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is the *desert* road.)" (8:26, HCSB, emphasis added).

First-Century Roads

The angel's instructions focused on one of two roads that led south from Jerusalem. One passed through Hebron and the other ran farther to the west. The road Philip was to take would pass through Gaza, an ancient Philistine city, which was the southern-most town on the way to Egypt. Because God knew the way the Ethiopian would take to his native land, He told Philip the exact route to



Above: Limestone relief, thought to be from Rome, depicts Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

follow. Actually there were two cities called Gaza. "The old Gaza, which lay two and a half miles from the Mediterranean, had been destroyed by Alexander the Great (332 B.C.) and was still deserted. The new Gaza was a Hellenistic city on the coast and was partially destroyed in A.D. 66. Perhaps the best conclusion is to [interpret] *desert* [as referring] to the old city destroyed by Alexander."²

The two main north-south highways were the Via Maris (meaning "the Way of the Sea") on Israel's Mediterranean coast and, in Jordan, the King's Way, running from Eilat on the Red Sea northward to Damascus in Syria. Principal road junctions on the coast were Gaza in the south and Acre (modern Acco) in the north. Later, Jaffa and Caesarea Maritima became coastal traffic centers. Under King David, Jerusalem became a major crossroads, and during the Second Temple period (538 B.C.-A.D. 70), roads radiated out in all directions from Jerusalem. Until the end of the 19th century, no paved roads existed; people transported goods on camels or donkeys.

Philip met with the Ethiopian at some point between Jerusalem and Gaza when the eunuch likely had just

The Gulf of Aqaba at Eilat, Israel.

begun the trip back to his homeland. It was an incredibly long journey. For if the eunuch and his retinue covered an average of 25 miles per day, the trip to Jerusalem would have taken about 48-60 days and round-trip, 96-120 days.³

This initial stage of his journey led south on one of two possible routes out of Jerusalem. One led southwest through the city of Eleutheropolis (or *Bayt Jibrin*, Arabic). Many Bible historians agree this is the road the eunuch would have taken because it was the most direct path to the coastal highway. Others think he would have chosen the more-southerly route that would have brought him to Bethlehem, and then farther south to Hebron. From Hebron, he would have taken the east-west road leading toward Ashkelon on the coast. Nonetheless we see the sincerity

of this proselyte in his willingness to undertake this difficult and dangerous journey.⁴

Overnight accommodations in the first century were poor. Inns were not clean; many guests were of questionable character. The eunuch would have found a guesthouse in one of the smaller villages. He may even have had acquaintances along the way with whom he could have found lodging. Travelers sometimes carried bedding and a tent in order to camp along the way. Since the eunuch was a person of wealth, he likely traveled in a large cart (probably four-wheeled, which Luke called a “chariot”), which a servant would have driven. These springless carts were furnished with cushions for the passengers.

Having crossed the minor roads

from Jerusalem, the eunuch and his entourage would have reached the coastal road, the Via Maris, which ran south and west to Egypt. Having passed through Gaza, the travelers would have crossed the barren area along the Mediterranean coast, finally reaching the borders of Egypt.

On Toward Ethiopia

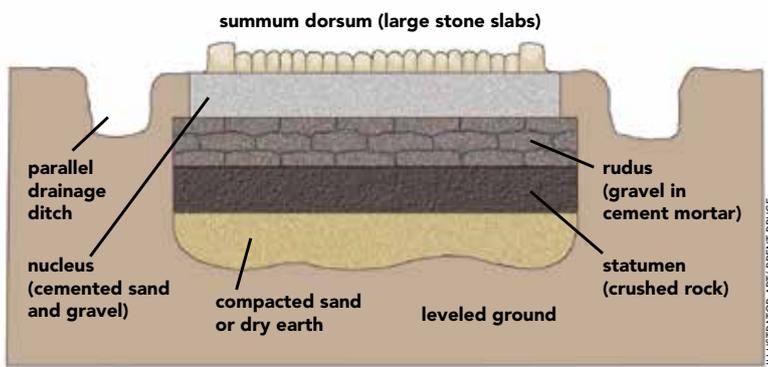
The first important Egyptian city would be Pelusium (translated “the city of mud”), the point at which the travelers would have taken another road south to the city of Heliopolis, the ancient Egyptian center of sun worship. Leaving Heliopolis, the main route would lead to Memphis, featuring ancient ruins and the pyramids nearby. From here, travelers faced another decision about what road they



Left: Temple precinct of Ptah at Memphis. Although Ptah was supposedly the creator god of Memphis, he was worshiped throughout Egypt and Nubia. People believed Ptah to have created the arts.

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (10/15/17)



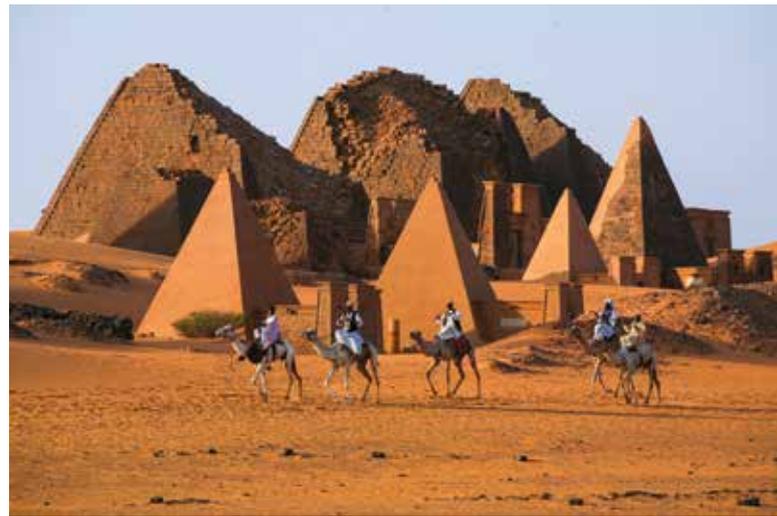
Left: Artist's rendering showing a cross-section of a Roman road.

Right: A Via Maris milestone at Capernaum; dates from the 2nd cent. A.D. The Via Maris, which went through Canaan, stretched from Babylon to Egypt.

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Above: Meroe grew in importance after the Cushites (also spelled "Kushites") moved their capital to here from Napata. At its height, the Cushite Dynasty reached from Meroe to the Nile Delta. Believing their rulers to be divine intermediaries, the Meroitic people erected pyramids for their royal burials. In the 1st cent. A.D., Meroe's powerful Queen Candace (also spelled "Kandake") protected Meroe from threats of Roman rule.

would take to Ethiopia. Two roads, one on either side of the Nile, or passage by boat on the river, would carry travelers to the borders of Ethiopia, a kingdom on the Nile between modern Aswan and Khartoum.⁵

Cities along this route included Oxyrhynchus, Hermopolis, Lycopolis, and Coptus, just north of Thebes. While at Coptus, the eunuch was faced with another route decision. At this point most merchants left the Nile and continued overland to the Red Sea. Here the merchandise was transferred to camels or mules and taken

either northeast to Myoshormos or southeast to the port city of Berenice. By New Testament times, Berenice, with its warehouses, was becoming the predominant city on this trade route. Had the eunuch chosen this route, he could have booked passage on another ship sailing down the eastern coast of Africa. The traveler would arrive several days later at the port of Adulis, which serviced the kingdom of Ethiopia.

Landlocked in east central Africa, Ethiopia was bordered on the west by what is now the Sudan, on the east by

Somalia and Djibouti, on the south by Kenya. Eritea was northeast of ancient Ethiopia. Once again the eunuch would go overland from Adulis and eventually arrive at Meroe, Ethiopia's capital.

Should the eunuch have chosen not to travel by sea, he could have gone down the Nile either by boat or by road to the southern border of Egypt. From here, the Nile was no longer navigable. The eunuch could then have traveled overland to reach his home in Meroe, Ethiopia.

Today, Ethiopia is the world's 27th-largest country, comparable in size to Bolivia in central South America. It has a land area of more than 432 million square miles and boasts a population of more than 96 million. Ethiopia's schools teach English, the country's primary foreign language. Several other languages are spoken in the various states and districts of the country. **B**

1. *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1986), 10.
2. Charles W. Carter and Ralph Earle, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 118.
3. Clifton E. Arnold, "Acts" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 2:285.
4. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Columbus, OH.: Wartburg, 1957), 339.
5. William S. LaSor, "Egypt" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 30.

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