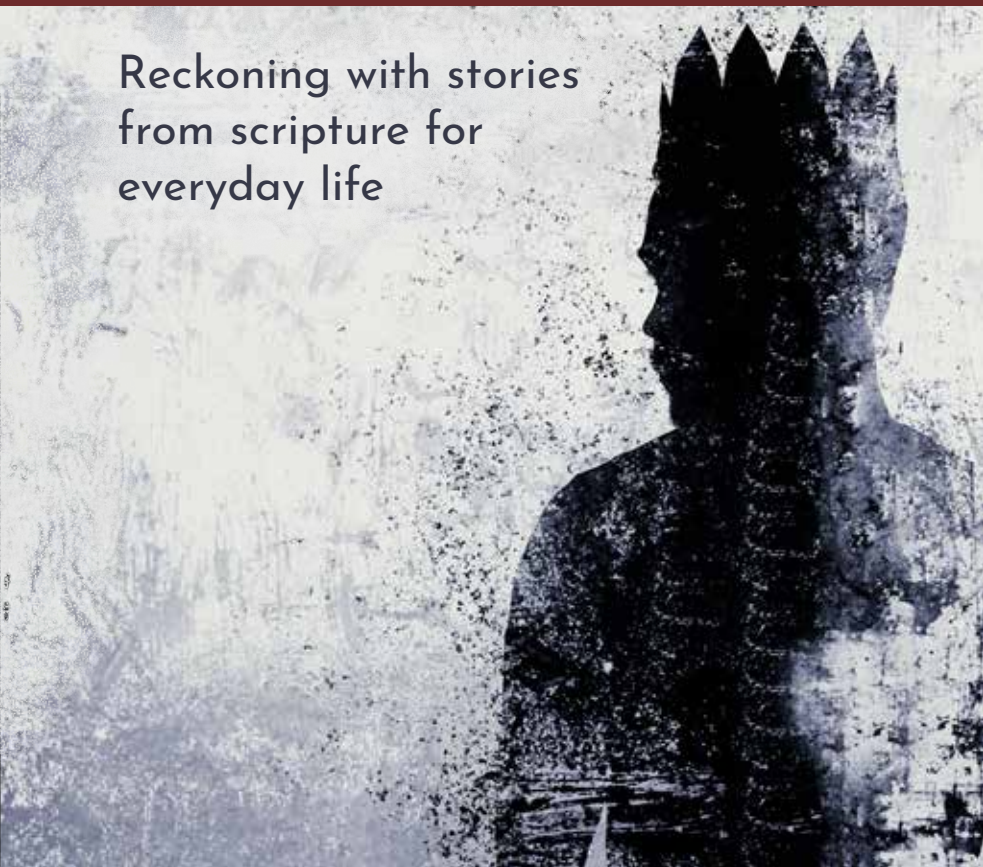
Power and Privilege

Edited by Sam Hole

Reckoning with stories from scripture for everyday life



Praise for Power and Privilege

'This timely book addresses issues which are unavoidable in the very nature of human structures, including institutional churches. This collection reflects on a number of biblical themes, not to provide a single thesis, but to offer a range of insights and challenges. It should make us all stop and think, especially those of us who hold positions of leadership and influence, and demand of us particular care, wisdom, and gentleness as we use all we have and are in the service of the kingdom of God.'
Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York

'This is a remarkable book that greatly enriches our understanding of how the scriptures wrestle with questions of power and privilege. Sam Hole has brought together a stellar group of scholars and practitioners, who write with great acuity, prescience, pastoral, and prophetic insight. This is an outstanding set of studies that cannot fail to move, challenge, and change its readers. It will inspire all those who engage with each of the chapters, and it gives us rich, fresh new insights into well-known biblical stories and characters. I wholeheartedly commend this book without reservation.'
Martyn Percy, former Dean of Christ Church, Oxford

'A timely and needed book filled with reflections that will challenge and enlighten every reader. This volume brings together exegetical and theological sophistication with practical cultural analysis that connects the role of power and privilege from biblical times to our contemporary context. A gift to all those seeking guidance and clarity through our sacred text.'
Tony Tian-Ren Lin, Associate Director and Director of Research, Center for Public Theology and Public Policy, Yale Divinity School

‘Talking about power and privilege in an abstract and theoretical way is one thing, as is critiquing power and privilege held by others. But working out what they are and what they might look like in our own lives is quite another. Disciples of Christ cannot afford to dismiss the cross and resurrection as an aberrant reading of power, since they are how God’s own power works. The essays in this volume draw us into profound imaginative engagement with a whole range of people from the Bible, as they live in the story of human interaction with the divine. As the reader thinks about Ruth or Paul, Nicodemus or Esther, she is brought face to face with the challenge for her own life. What story about our use of power will future generations tell?’
Jane Williams, McDonald Professor in Theology,
St Mellitus College

‘This book feels timely and necessary. It brings together some of today’s most stimulating theologians to wrestle with the question of power – something the church cannot sidestep. What makes it especially compelling is the way it grounds that question in the lives of familiar biblical figures like Moses, Ruth, and Esther, drawing us into the twists and turns of lives not unlike our own. The result is searching, constructive, and genuinely helpful: real wisdom about holding and using power well.’
Olga Fabrikant-Burke, Tutor in Old Testament,
Ridley Hall, Cambridge

‘Power is inescapable. It is also inescapably complex and cannot be simply avoided or naively embraced. It is so helpful to see power worked out in practice – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and the lives of biblical figures are a wonderful place to do this. I heartily recommend this collection of sermons exploring how scriptural characters inhabit and negotiate power and privilege.’
Nick Moore, Warden of Cranmer Hall

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everyday life

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Introduction

Sam Hole

Visit the Undercroft Museum at York Minster, and among the many colourful and historic objects on display you will see a small broken Roman clay tile. At first glance, the object looks unremarkable. Yet it is surely one of the most special pieces in the museum's collection. It dates from the second or third century AD, a time when a Roman fortress stood on the site where the Minster would be built centuries later. Just before the clay was fired, while it was still wet, someone made three simple marks into the clay to inscribe it with a 'Chi-Rho', the symbol which combines the two Greek letters (χ and ρ) that form the first two letters of Christ. That unknown worker was signalling their allegiance to Christ.

Leave the museum and step outside the Minster and your eye will be drawn to the very different sight of the grand, soaring towers of the Gothic cathedral. On one side of the Minster there is a modern statue of Emperor Constantine, sitting in military dress on a throne. For it was in York, in AD306, that Constantine became Roman Emperor. Six years later he converted to Christianity, shortly afterwards declaring it the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Think about power and the church, and it may well be contrasting images of this sort that come to mind. The anonymous soldier or labourer represents those millions of Christians who practise their faith in secret amid an often-hostile world. Conversely, the Minster building is emblematic of the vast influence and wealth gained in some periods by church institutions, while the statue of Constantine reminds us of the many contexts in which church and state have acted hand in glove, sometimes in ways that seem in tension with the way of life modelled by Christ.

Talk of power and the church may also bring to mind, however, something much darker. In recent years there have come to light a string of scandals in which prominent Christian leaders are revealed to have abused the power given to them. To name only two examples, in my own Anglican tradition I think of the recent cases of Mike Pilavachi and Bishop Peter Ball. In both cases, independent reports determined that various factors, including the leaders' charismatic personality and a wider culture of excessive deference to those in authority, enabled their abuse over many years.[1]

More broadly, Christians are increasingly aware that power dynamics within churches can exclude the vulnerable, even within congregations that proclaim a welcome to all. Writers such as Azariah France-Williams have shone a light on how, in order to be accepted in majority-white churches, individuals of ethnic minority heritage have often been expected to conform to certain behaviours which have more to do with class or culture than the gospel.[2] Likewise, people with disabilities often feel held on the margins of church life. When confronted with testimonies of this kind, many faithful churchgoers are shocked. 'Anyone can worship here!' is a common response. But it is clear that, in many settings, those joining a congregation are expected to fit in with the status quo, rather than being seen as gifts who may expand existing worshippers' understandings of the breadth of the body of Christ.

When I mention I am working on a book on power and Christian faith, it is examples of the kinds listed above – the power and wealth of some churches contrasted with the quiet faith of many Christians, or the ways that the vulnerable have been abused or excluded – that come to mind most immediately to many people. These are certainly pertinent issues. They are the places where questions of power and privilege have pressed most insistently on the life of the church in the last decade or two.

This book, however, approaches these debates from a different direction. It turns to the Bible, seeking inspiration for thinking more broadly about the relationship between power, privilege, and Christian faith.

In each chapter a different contributor takes up a character from the Bible. Some stories (e.g. Jesus, Nicodemus, Paul) may be familiar to readers from their regular appearances in sermons or Bible studies. You may have a particular memory of others (e.g. Joseph, Moses, Ruth) from the words and images of children's Bibles, Sunday School teaching, and school assemblies. Other stories (e.g. Esther, Amos) are likely to be almost unknown to many readers. Yet all form part of scripture's telling of the ways that power and privilege are at work, in the life of the church and of the world, for good and ill, and how they may be used wisely to the glory of God.

The stories featured in this book are arranged in the order in which they appear in the Bible: Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Amos, Jesus, Nicodemus, the Ethiopian eunuch, Paul, and finally James. Each chapter begins by retelling the key points of the story, in a manner that will help even readers who have no knowledge of that story to understand the overall narrative. The authors then ponder the implications of that story for our modern-day Christian engagement with power and privilege. So while it is entirely possible to read this book from cover to cover, you may also prefer to turn first to chapters with themes that particularly interest you (being thus inspired, I hope, to read every contribution!).

And it is important that these are *stories*. Certainly, the Bible contains many memorable statements relating to power and privilege. But stories have two major advantages. First, they are enjoyable and memorable. It is my hope that this book gives you a fresh appreciation of stories that, thousands of years after they were first written, continue to speak to us. Second, stories help us make sense of how the sayings we find in scripture take effect in real life – and, as we shall see, this is particularly important when it comes to consideration of privilege, which demands an appreciation of history and context.

In reading these stories, our focus is on the ways in which biblical figures engaged wisely and creatively with power and privilege. This is in no way to downplay or ignore the deep strand of biblical concern and

suspicion about power and privilege (witness the prophets' repeated and vehement condemnation of their abuse), and indeed many of the stories examined here include tales of similar gross abuses. It is imperative that we attend to the ways in which power is used in horrendous and ungodly ways, both in the scriptures and in our own day. Yet for each of us power and privilege are inescapable, and so it is at the same time essential that we ponder how we will use them faithfully.

This book will hopefully, therefore, be valuable for those in Christian authority, in both individual congregations and denominations, in helping to deepen their own reflections on their use of power and privilege. This is not simply, however, a manual for church leaders. Contributors' meditations on power and privilege are aimed more broadly, also engaging individual members of congregations as they seek to discern how to live as Christians amid the networks and cultures of power they encounter in their daily lives – at home, at work, and among friends. This is, overall, a hopeful collection of reflections. The writers recognise the dangers ever-present in the operation of power, but in these pages turn their attention to the ways in which Christians and the church may work creatively and faithfully to use these divine gifts to God's glory.

Power and privilege: some definitions

'Power' is an important and complex concept in Christian thought. The Bible speaks of 'power' in a variety of ways. In the first instance, 'power' refers to an ability to carry out a task – the Hebrew word for Samson's great 'strength', for example, is elsewhere frequently translated as 'power' (Judges 16:5–6). More broadly, 'power' describes the ability of an individual, group, or institution to carry out their will. This language is often used of humans, for instance in recounting the 'mighty deeds' of certain Old Testament kings (e.g. 1 Kings 16:27). But in the Bible, talk of 'power' in this way most commonly refers to God, whose almighty nature is revealed in creation, healing, resurrection, judgement, and much more. This divine power is evident also in Jesus,

whose miracles are described as 'deeds of power' (Matthew 13:58; Acts 2:22). Power can, of course, be used for ill as well as for good. In the New Testament, Pilate taunts Jesus with the words, 'Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?' (John 19:10), and Paul speaks of the 'powers' with which the Christians continue to struggle (Ephesians 6:12; Romans 8:38–39).

Our modern interpretation of the language of 'power' is, however, particularly shaped by the shifting meaning of the word in the last century or so. And it is perhaps the late-19th-century thinker Friedrich Nietzsche who was most influential in spreading the use of the term, and in changing the way it is popularly imagined. His description of the human 'will to power' conceives of a world of separate individuals competing against one another for power; in Nietzsche's account, self-sacrifice in the manner of Christ is a rejection of life itself.[3]

Notably, Nietzsche's account of power sets aside a constellation of concepts to which past generations would have turned – such as 'obligation', 'responsibility', 'trust', and 'duty' – to describe the ways in which those in power (monarchs, parents, and so on) were part of a web of mutual relationships and had a moral calling to use their power in a particular way. In much 20th-century thought that comes in the wake of Nietzsche, power is more like electricity, an invisible force that flows through society (like electricity in a wire) and can be taken up and used to diverse ends (like plugging a lamp or radio into a socket). And importantly, access to power is, in this account, a zero-sum game: just as there is a limited amount of power available at any one time on the National Grid, so too must the growth in power of one individual come at the expense of another.

This Nietzschean set of assumptions continues to inform the way many people think about power. But, as this book shows, it is distant from the ways in which Christian reflection on the subject has typically proceeded (and to which historic thinking on power owed a great deal). For Christians have affirmed that we have a duty of care both for our fellow humans and for the entirety of God's creation. Moreover, power

is not necessarily zero-sum: good community organising, for example, helps members of that community to grow in power individually and collectively in a way that is not at the expense of others. Self-sacrifice, far from being a laughable, life-denying act, can (when practised rightly) be a sign of the power of God. Such insights, as Selina Stone has shown in her nuanced recent study of the theological issues around power and the church, are crucial but all too often ignored.[4] Taken as a whole, the following chapters present a compelling Christian vision of power, in the face of the reductive, competitive accounts that often dominate modern discussion.

In modern times discussion of power often goes alongside consideration of privilege. The Bible does not have an equivalent word or concept for 'privilege', though as we shall see in the rest of this book, we find examples of privilege in many biblical stories.[5] Privilege (and an absence of privilege) might arise from wealth, education, class, accent, cultural traditions, and much more. And the connection between power and privilege is important. Privilege, or its absence, often arises from the past exercise of power. In turn, privilege shapes the ways in which power is, or can be, exercised today.

A classic example of privilege at work is the over-representation of those from certain schools and universities in the highest positions in fields such as government, industry, and journalism. In the UK, we might think of the many Old Etonians in such positions; a similar dynamic exists in the USA with regard to graduates from Ivy League colleges. Among other factors, this over-representation arises from the privilege of connections that aspirant politicians emerging from those institutions benefit from via alumni networks, but also from the acceptance by a sufficient swathe of the public that people from this background should be trusted with leadership of the country (a cultural privilege).

Old Etonians are an extreme example of privilege. Most people will experience a more mixed, contextual picture: a wealthy individual may enjoy great privilege in some settings, but find themselves excluded

from other settings because of, say, their class background or the origins (e.g. industry) of their money.

As well as benefiting specific individuals or groups, privilege can operate at a national level. Britain's long democratic tradition has given citizens of this country the privilege of not needing to worry about autocratic political takeovers. I consider it a privilege to have grown up in a culture in which the human rights (of its citizens, at least) have been considered non-negotiable. (And note that in these past two examples, such privilege is a straightforwardly positive force, insofar as it has not come at the expense of another nation.) More widely, all native English speakers have a certain international privilege because in much of the world our mother tongue has become a *lingua franca* – although we might nowadays also recognise with sorrow the ways in which this privilege, part of the complex legacy of colonialism, has served to diminish or extinguish local cultures and languages.

Overall, as the examples above illustrate, the concept of privilege describes an *inevitable reality* of our present-day communal life. Such privilege might be long-standing (such as families in which historic wealth and status has been passed on for many generations) or more recent in origin (such as an adult who was the first in the family to receive a particular education that enabled them to join a different social class). Either way, pure meritocracy – a society in which each individual is rewarded simply according to their particular acts and achievements – is impossible to achieve because of the extent to which our life together is unavoidably shaped by aspects of our past.

Privilege can have positive as well as negative effects. But privilege is undeniably bad when it prevents the flourishing of others. This might be deliberate, as when those who benefit from a certain privilege deliberately protect their status. It might also, though, be inadvertent, as when assumptions become ossified and unquestioned. In recent times, for example, efforts in Britain and other countries to broaden the ethnic, gender, and class diversity of leaders have often focused on undoing problematic assumptions of this sort.

The work of discerning when privilege has become problematic and the possibilities for improving the situation will be distinctive to each moment. And it is here, as mentioned above, that the biblical stories become especially valuable, especially, in this collection, the studies of figures such as Esther, Nicodemus, Paul, and James. For these stories lay out before us specific characters and situations, typically enabling us to identify aspects of the context and history in which the story is set. It is through stories such as these that we can practise discerning when privilege has become problematic and can identify the possibilities for action, as we imagine the situations facing each character. The stories from scripture to which we will shortly turn give us models for thinking through the difficulties and possibilities of using privilege faithfully.

The view from the Castle

The chapters of this book arose out of a sermon series, preached in Durham Castle. The Castle looms over the city of Durham, and it is a familiar sight for all those passing by on the train line from London to Edinburgh. (John Ruskin is said to have called the view of the Castle and Cathedral from beside Durham station 'the eighth wonder of the world'.) Durham Castle is nowadays the heart of University College, one of the 17 colleges that make up Durham University. Over 1,500 students live, eat, and socialise in its medieval buildings. I serve as chaplain to the students and staff who make up this community.

Before the foundation of the university in 1832, however, the castle was for almost 750 years the home of the Prince Bishops of Durham. Holders of this office exercised a vast degree of power over a large region roughly between the Tees and Tyne rivers. Given special authority by William the Conqueror to control the lawless north and protect England against Scottish invasion, the Prince Bishops had the right to raise an army and to mint their own coins. Later, as the Industrial Revolution developed, the Prince Bishops benefited from their ownership of vast swathes of coal-rich land; in the 1790s, the income of the

Bishop of Durham exceeded that of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York combined. Today, the relative wealth of central Durham, especially notable among its students, stands in stark contrast to the post-industrial deprivation of the wider region.

Power and privilege are therefore central aspects of the story of the Castle's 16th-century chapel. This was a place in which for centuries the bishops and their households prayed, and which now sits at the heart of an elite university. The sermons from which this book originated, which have since been refined and expanded into the chapters presented here, were preached in that chapel. Each Thursday evening in term-time, the chapel is filled with students, alumni, staff, and visitors. The service is Evensong, with music sung by the remarkable student choir, following the order of the Church of England's 1662 Book of Common Prayer. This act of worship in this historic chapel was a highly appropriate context in which to reflect on the ways in which power and privilege have operated – and continue to operate – for good and ill, in the life of Christians and the church.

Almost all the preachers in the sermon series are based in and around Durham. They draw on their own varied life experiences, as well as their familiarity with Christian faith and practice in the region. Some contributors draw on their experiences of their lives in local ex-industrial communities, in which many feel themselves disempowered and neglected. Many contributors – some of whom return each evening to their homes in those same communities – are based in the university's Department of Theology and Religion, at the time of writing ranked fourth-best department in the world in this subject area.[6] They draw on their vast biblical and theological expertise in their reflections. All are passionate about supporting Christians and churches in all situations to make sense of the ways in which the biblical encounters with power and privilege relate to the realities of power and privilege in our communities and churches today.

What is more, their contributions are aimed at Christians of all denominations. Admittedly, the book's contributors are all Anglicans. And

Christians within the Church of England (and the Anglican Communion more broadly) have distinctive questions to ponder about relating well to power and privilege; this is true especially given our historic establishment status, the wealth that remains in parts of the church, and the particular assumptions about class and culture in certain Anglican circles. Certain essays touch explicitly on the ways Anglicans might consider these questions. Yet as a whole, the contributions seek to address questions in a manner that is pertinent for all Christians. For dynamics of power and privilege operate in every congregation and denomination, and in most, if not all, areas of our daily lives. It is crucial that we acknowledge this reality, and consider how to engage such power and privilege wisely and faithfully.

Key themes

In these final introductory pages, I want to draw out resonances and themes from the essays in this volume, to help us to recognise recurrent scriptural themes concerning power and privilege.

First, these scriptural stories are deeply valuable for pondering the ways in which **God may be observed** both on the margins and at the centre. In the chapters that follow we have, for example, figures who begin their lives on the fringes of power: Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Amos, and Jesus. A minority – Nicodemus and Paul – are throughout their story people in positions of power, often benefiting from historic privilege. The Ethiopian eunuch is, as Chantal Noppen's chapter explores, a fascinating edge case: as an Ethiopian treasury official he has great authority; as a eunuch his power at court and in the Jewish temple will be forever limited.

The chapters examine the power held by individuals, as well as its operation in communities. We hear repeatedly of the power of our words: most extensively in Simon Oliver's study of Moses, but also in Philip Plyming's study of Paul, with both chapters pondering what faithful Christian use of social media looks like. And strikingly, in Hannah

Malcolm's examination of the prophet Amos we hear how the power of God is also experienced through God's creation, the land, which itself cries out against the sins of the powerful.

A second theme is that it is possible, though not necessarily straightforward, to make **faithful use of power and privilege whatever our position in society**. Certainly, a simple count of the book's chapters reveals that most of the figures here begin from a position of limited power and influence. And this is important. On the one hand, stories about those with limited power can more clearly convey when God is at work. The stories of Ruth and Esther, for example, show the power of God's love, because it is indisputable that their success, as women in situations that make them especially vulnerable, does not arise from following the ways of the world. More than this, however, those who hold power can find it harder to act faithfully, because the self-interested temptation to hold on to power can overcome the instincts towards godly action. Amos and James both warn, for instance, about the danger that those in power will come to rely on their inherited privilege. Once held and enjoyed, power is hard to relinquish.

Yet it remains possible for the powerful to act faithfully. The stories of Joseph, Moses, and Esther all tell how, by God's grace, they were brought from the fringes into a position of power, for the good of God's chosen people. Certainly, these stories convey how difficult it is to do this: Joseph and Moses both have many flaws, and there are many compromises and ambiguities in their use of power. Yet overall the stories make clear that some are called to be in positions where they exercise power with wisdom, justice, and faithfulness – though even those in these positions may repeatedly fail to live up to the fullness of their vocation.

Third, we find in these stories that **institutions are inescapable**, and as Christians we need to be wise to the distinctive ways that power and privilege operate in such settings. Many readers will work in or have experienced secular institutions, such as large corporations, government settings, and schools. The story of Joseph is in part an illustration

of how God's work can be carried out by one person (in Joseph's case, a senior one) in a vast organisation such as the Egyptian state. We must assume that on his return home the Ethiopian eunuch sought to live faithfully to Christ through his work as a treasury official. Esther offers a slightly different example: her success significantly depends on learning to navigate the legal mechanisms and political customs of the Persian court, and yet she remains vulnerable throughout to the capricious whims of the king, who is able to have her killed simply for approaching him when he does not want it.

Just as crucial, however, is that we recognise the church to be an institution and develop wisdom in the ways that power works within it. This is indisputably the case in large, long-established churches such as the Church of England. Yet newly established churches, we must remember, quickly begin to acquire institutional characteristics – often within a decade or so – such as hierarchies, unspoken customs, and policies around matters such as accountability and discipline. When congregations resist recognising this sociological reality, it is often a crisis that subsequently forces them to do so, usually accompanied by much hurt and disillusionment. Reflecting on this process of institutionalisation, Andy Crouch memorably points to the repeated Old Testament statement that God is the God 'of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'. It takes, as Crouch observes, 'three generations for the promises of God to Abraham to sink deeply enough into the memory and imagination of his descendants to be transmittable across future generations'. Joseph, son of Jacob and therefore the fourth generation, is in this light the story of 'the training of a trustee', as subsequent generations learn to handle this inheritance of faith.[7]

To those in recently established churches, Mike Higton's study of James is a crucial reminder that there is no single biblically agreed model for church life. James' leadership occurs perhaps two decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, at a time when the first believers begin to develop the institutional nature of the church, explicitly recognising that formal processes for agreeing leaders and decisions need to exist for the good of the church. For all that it is tempting to revere

the one-man leadership of Jesus and Paul (figures who are advised and supported by others, but essentially unchecked in their authority), Higton's chapter reminds us of the importance of the church as a community in which all have a share in building up in love and into Christ, with James' leadership just one part of that web of trusting, interdependent relationships.[8]

A fourth theme is that **power and weakness are not opposites** that exclude each other – they can coexist. This point is brought across in Philip Plyming's study of Paul, who, despite his great authority over the nascent Christian communities to whom he writes, promises to boast only of his weaknesses, and reports God telling him that 'power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:5, 9). Yet we might also make the point through the example of Jesus: his birth and death are iconic of human vulnerability, yet both these events in fact took place through Christ's free will, and were means by which he accomplished salvation.

In exalting the importance of weakness and vulnerability, as Plyming recognises, the danger for modern Christian authority is that we first construct a straw-man image of secular leadership that is authoritarian, uncollaborative, and unresponsive to the needs of those being led, and then subconsciously make our Christian life into a reaction against this. In reality, much (though by no means all) secular leadership is collaborative and compassionate, and Christian communities continue, like their secular counterparts, to experience complex dynamics of power.

So Christian communities need to think carefully about what is distinctive about Christian leadership. The language of 'servant leadership' has something to offer, as does thoughtful consideration of how the 'self-emptying' of Jesus ('kenosis', Philippians 2:7) might serve as a model for leadership today. But all too easily such language can become a false sign of humility. At worst, the appeal to a leader's 'servant' calling can be used to wrongly avoid scrutiny of the hierarchies at work in the church. As *The Economist* pointed out in a resonant secular example: 'Starbucks has long had the practice of not capitalising job titles as a way of signalling that all employees are valued.' Yet, it continued, it

remains the 'ceo' who has the power to make decisions about closing stores and laying off workers.[9]

A fifth and final theme is that **wise attention to power and privilege is essential** if we are to live faithfully in the world. The important word here is 'wise'. As the writers in this book show, there is no simple biblical model for how to live in this way. Even Jesus, who we might hope to turn to as a model, is not a straightforward ideal, since so much of the gospels (as Walter Moberly's chapter exemplifies) deals with Jesus' divinity. Jesus' challenging of the power and privilege of the Roman and Jewish authorities is in many ways particular to his specific identity; it is not a model for how all Christians are to live.

It is here that the Old Testament, with its rich narrative traditions, comes into its own. This is a treasury of tales of individuals seeking to act faithfully, amid diverse challenges. We come to know their flaws and foibles, yet also encounter the various ways they live out God's calling for their lives. And while at times we may find ourselves, from a Christian perspective, questioning and grappling with some aspects of these stories, they remain fundamentally part of our scriptures, our inheritance of the ways that individuals throughout time have responded in faith to the one true God.

* * *

The current public attitude to power and privilege in much of the west is fraught and often contradictory. As I write, this is most evidently true in politics. But we might say similar of the way we treat celebrities, those who lead businesses, and those in charge of our local institutions. For all the anti-establishment atmosphere of politics in the last decade or so, we continue frequently to elect politicians from immensely privileged backgrounds. We hold individuals to varying moral standards. We focus on the power held by individuals, neglecting the importance of strong institutions that support and enable good leadership.

We do not live in the same setting as the scriptures, but they provide a resonant series of stories through which we can hone our own imagination of what constitutes faithful and holy action in our own lives. Power and privilege are unavoidable realities of life in the world, with great potential for good and ill. We are called to be wise to their temptation and discerning of the many ways we and others abuse them. And it is at the same time our Christian duty to learn how to use them well, so that we may together build up the body of Christ.

8

The Ethiopian eunuch: gatekeeping grace

Chantal Noppen



The Revd Chantal Noppen is an Anglican priest and National Coordinator of Inclusive Church. A practical theologian whose work explores the intersections of theology, justice, and lived experience, she has a particular interest in overlooked people and places. She is passionate about how grace is practised, resisted, and recognised in the ordinary, messy realities of everyday life.

Locating landscape

I live in Horden, a former pit village on the coast of County Durham. The sea is beautiful, vast, and persistent, but the village has long been overlooked. When the pits closed, livelihoods disappeared, and with them, a sense of communal purpose. For many, it never returned. Families fractured and communities splintered. The scars remain as deep and widespread as the coal seams. Each wave of 'regeneration' seems to deliver a short-term fix while inflicting fresh long-term wounds. These communities have endured generations of neglect, abandonment, and systemic disempowerment. The cycles of grief, anger, and powerlessness are not historical footnotes, but very present realities.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that reactionary politics gain traction here. This isn't because people harbour hatred towards their Black or Brown neighbours or lie awake plotting the exclusion of queer people. Rather, when one's own rights feel eroded, it feels impossible to advocate for others. In such conditions, grievance politics thrive and privilege is imagined as a scarce commodity. When trust in 'the establishment'

is depleted, it is easily redirected into blame and suspicion of those identified as different.

I witness fear, grief, and frustration harden and calcify into resentment, but it is not Christian to allow this to happen. No community or individual is excluded from the equitable invitation of grace that Jesus offers. The kingdom is just as real and relevant here, in a forgotten pit village, as in Westminster, York Minster, or Canterbury Cathedral. Thus, in Acts 8:26–40 I find a radical story of hope.

The story tells of an encounter between Philip the deacon and an Ethiopian eunuch, on the road to Gaza. Philip is always on the move, practised at stepping into what is unfamiliar when prompted by God. He listens with his whole body: to words spoken, to silence, and to the quiet insistence of the Spirit. I imagine him travel-worn, sweaty, and breathless, shaped more by dust and distance than by polish and prestige; a preacher, teacher, and healer, grounded and direct. In contrast, the eunuch I picture richly clothed, carrying authority with a poise I have never mastered. A senior official, returning from pilgrimage, reading Isaiah aloud as they travel home. Scripture is close at hand, but understanding out of reach.

When Philip comes alongside the chariot, he audaciously asks, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' The eunuch answers, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?', and they invite Philip to do just that (vv. 30–31). Philip retells the story of the suffering servant, drawing out fulfilment in Jesus. Contagious, enthusiastic testimony shaped by experience, delivered with conviction.

The powerful words land. Faith stirs.

Passing by some water, the eunuch exclaims, 'Look… What is to prevent me from being baptised?' (v. 36). Philip realises there is nothing. They stop. The eunuch is baptised. Philip is gone. The eunuch continues rejoicing, carrying faith into a world that never expected to receive it.

The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is not merely a curious story about an unusual traveller on a desert road. It is a story about power and powerlessness, inclusion and transformation. Philip does not dominate or dismiss; he listens, runs alongside, and allows the eunuch to lead. He uses his power not to obstruct or gatekeep, but to serve. The encounter reminds us that power and privilege are not static, fixed possessions. They shift and evolve, sometimes granting influence, sometimes removing it. Both Philip and the eunuch experience this fluidity.

It is a story that reconfigures assumptions about where power lies, who belongs, and who does not. It is a story that speaks directly into Horden, into the North East, and into the church of today.

Embodying paradox

The eunuch in Acts 8 embodies a paradox. On the one hand, they are in charge of the treasury, and therefore clearly a person of significant authority and trust. They have money, status, literacy, and mobility (they are travelling by chariot, not on foot). By most measures they are powerful. Yet simultaneously, they are also profoundly powerless. As a eunuch, they are excluded from full participation in Jewish religious life. This exclusion is immutable. They are 'other', considered neither fully male nor female. They embody contradiction, carrying both wealth and wound, privilege and exclusion.

It is here, in this paradox, that God acts. The Spirit sends Philip not to the temple elite, but on to a wilderness road where power and powerlessness converge in one body: physically, metaphorically, and spiritually. The eunuch's question, 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?', is both deeply personal and profoundly political. It encompasses every barrier constructed by privilege and resonates in the hearts of any who have experienced feeling isolated, rejected, or marginalised from a community.

The eunuch's simple question demands our attention. The two great commandments of Matthew 22:36–40 – to love both God and our neighbour – are the unequivocal baseline of the Christian faith, so our response cannot be justifications or theological gatekeeping, for these do not start, nor end, with love.

The eunuch's baptism is not a quiet footnote; it disrupts the neat binary categories of who belongs and who doesn't. It forces the church to confront the truth that God has already gone ahead, blessing those the world deems unblessable. As a queer, disabled woman, living where pride and wounds coexist, the eunuch's story does not feel distant to me; it feels uncomfortably close. I, and the communities to which I belong, know the pain and power of exclusion. We are, in our own way, both powerful and powerless. Our cumulative experiences of marginalisation carry weight and allow us to speak into painful realities. As Giles Goddard says, 'Our wound is our Word.'[42]

My neighbours may not see themselves in Philip or the eunuch, but they still live with the consequences of power and exclusion. They're not the central characters, but they're still shaped by the story.

Gatekeeping

Power is not static, finite, or binary. It shifts, layered within the complexities of human life. To pivot within this paradox is to echo the radical inclusivity of the gospel. The eunuch embodies both privilege and exclusion, calling us to hold such truths together without denial or defensiveness. Too often the church defaults to defensive exclusion: romanticising the marginalised as victims in need of saving or fixating on the powerful as though privilege were proof of God's favour. Both are short-sighted distortions that Jesus repeatedly opposed.

Jarel Robinson-Brown, an Anglican priest of Jamaican heritage, is unflinching in his critique of how churches have colluded in propping up the powerful and excluding the rest, cordoning off good news for

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