

Acts 6:1–8:2, Stephen and the Hellenists

By anyone's standards the role of Stephen and the Hellenists in chapters six and seven is critical to the development of the message of Acts. Neil comments on the variety of ways in which Stephen has been understood, "On the basis of this speech, Stephen has been variously described as an Essene, an ultra-orthodox Jewish-Christian supporter of James the Lord's brother, a radical Hellenist, or as the real founder of the mission to the Gentiles."¹ The story of Stephen clearly stands as some kind of transition between the earliest success of the Gospel in Jerusalem (1–5) and its spread to regions beyond, the first of which is Samaria (8:2).

The goal of this section briefly is to understand the meaning of the Stephen incident² (6:1–8:2) and then to determine what role it plays in the thematic development of Acts. The discussion will begin with what is considered as one of the defining components of the meaning of the Stephen incident, i.e., the distinction between Hellenists and Hebrews. Two questions which need to be addressed are: (1) were the Hellenists a definable and more progressive sect of Jewish society which saw beyond the bounds of orthodox Judaism and (2) was Stephen an eloquent spokesman for this group? Next we will analyze the meaning of Stephen's speech and its relationship to the charges offered against him. Finally, in light of that research we will evaluate the contribution of the whole incident to the argument of Acts.

The Role of Hellenism in the Section

The issue of Hellenism first arises because of the complaint on the part of the Hellenists (Ἑλληνιστῶν) against the Hebrews (Ἑβραίους), "because their widows were being overlooked in the

¹William Neil, *The Acts*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 107. Neil continues to describe his own, and what is probably the most popular, view of Stephen, "It has been argued that it marks Stephen out as a 'towering theological genius' who is pleading for the rejection of the Jerusalem Temple and its cult as the essential prelude to a Christian mission to the Samaritans. . . . on closer study it reveals itself as a subtle and skilful proclamation of the Gospel which, in its criticism of Jewish institutions, marks the beginning of the break between Judaism and Christianity," Ibid.

²A convenient word to describe the entire story of Stephen, including the introductory pericope about hellenistic widows (6:1-7), the accusations against Stephen (6:8-15), his actual speech (7:1-53), and his death and the results which follow (7:54–8:2).

daily serving of food” (6:1). When the solution is found to appoint seven men who have common Greek names (6:5) some have made the assumption that Stephen is a Hellenist whose lifestyle and theology differ from his Hebrew contemporaries. Scott represents this line of reasoning when he says:

The murmuring over the support of hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1) was probably a relatively insignificant incident that exposed latent tensions within the early Church. The potential for this and other problems between Jewish Christian groups . . . lay, at least partially, in the cultural divisions of the Judaism from which they had come. The emergence of this distinctively hellenistic Jewish influence within Christianity suggests the existence of a form of the new faith that viewed Jewish institutions, customs and traditions differently than did the Hebraic Christians. As a result of their distinct outlook and emphases, Stephen and the Christian Jewish hellenists with him seem to have forced both the Jewish leaders and the early Christians themselves to reassess the nature and ultimate mission of the Christian community.³

It is clear that Scott and others have based their conclusions on several assumptions. At this point we will investigate three key areas: (1) the meaning of *hellenist* (Ἑλληνιστής), (2) whether Stephen was one, and (3) the implications of this for the understanding of Stephen’s speech.

The Meaning of *Hellenist* (Ἑλληνιστής)

³J. Julius Scott Jr., “Stephen’s Defense and the World Mission of the People of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978): 132-33. Cf. also Kilgallen who is able to divine a full-blown theology of the “sect of the Hellenists” from an extra-biblical understanding of the term! John J. Kilgallen, “Stephen and the Life of the Primitive Church,” *Biblica* 70 (1989): 19. “The term *hellenismos* is used in the *Second Book of Maccabees* to describe one who had adopted Greek, that is, pagan ways and fashions. To the Jew it was a pejorative term. . . . Thus it could be certain Greek philosophical views, perhaps, which these Hellenists held that gave rise to their being stigmatized *Hellenistai*. We cannot say for sure, though their anti-temple, anti-ritualistic bias seems clear from Stephen’s speech. This group, suggests Simon, probably existed as a marginal sect within Judaism even before the time of Jesus’ ministry. They held some fairly unorthodox views, particularly about temple worship, and when some of them were later attracted to the Christian message (originally within Judaism), they brought with them their particular emphases—in fact it may have been their very unorthodox views that they found had an echo in some of Jesus’ teaching. This would have meant that in some ways they were opposed to the apparently orthodox group who gathered around the Twelve, and later around James the brother of Jesus. ‘The Seven’ may well have been the leading lights among these Hellenist sectarian Jews before their acceptance of Jesus’ message” p. 19. Cf. also John B. Polhill, “The Hellenist Breakthrough: Acts 6–12,” *Review and Expositor* 71 (1974): 475-86.

The alleged meaning of this term covers the spectrum from one which denotes drastic differences in lifestyle and philosophy⁴ to one which merely denotes a difference in the individual's primary language.

In general usage it meant nothing more than the elegant command of the Greek language. . . . In antiquity it was perfectly possible to speak or write fluent Greek and at the same time be a zealous and self-confident Jew. It was precisely that position which was eloquently defended by the Greek-writing author of 2 Maccabees.⁵

BAG defines Ἑλληνιστής as “a *Hellenist*, a Greek-speaking Jew in contrast to one speaking a Semitic language,”⁶ and conversely, “Ἑβραῖος is “*Hebrew* . . . as a name for the Aramaic-speaking Jews in contrast to those who spoke Gk.”⁷ Windisch notes that:

The dominant view is that the Ἑλληνιστοί of Ac. 6:1 are Jewish Christians of Greek language (and possible culture) as distinct from the Ἑβραῖοι, i. e., believing Jews of Aramaic language and purely Jewish culture, the former being Jews of the διασπορά τῶν Ἑλλήνων who had moved to Jerusalem and the latter native born Jews of Jerusalem.⁸

⁴Scott, “Stephen’s Defense and the World Mission of the People of God,” 132-33. Cadbury would even go further, asserting that the Ἑλληνιστοί of Ac. 6:1 are simply Greeks living in Jerusalem, H. J. Cadbury, “The Hellenists” in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part One: The Acts of the Apostles, eds. F. J. Foakes and Kirsopp Lake (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 4: 64. This position seems particularly difficult to sustain, however because it is out of keeping with the immediate chapters of Acts. First, if Gentiles were already a part of the Jerusalem church, Peter’s story in chapters ten and eleven makes no sense. Second, Paul’s disputing with Greeks in Jerusalem (9:29) is equally out of place. Cf. H. Windisch, “Ἑλλην,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. G. Kittel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2:512 and Joseph B. Tyson, “Acts 6:1-7 and Dietary Regulations in Early Christianity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 10 (1983): 157.

⁵Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern, section III, Jewish Traditions in Early Christian Literature, vol. 1, (n.p.: Van Gorcum, 1974), 32. After reviewing material about the covenant fidelity of diasporan Jews and specifically the careful observance of Mosaic ritual by Philo, Tomson writes, “The *halakha*, we may safely conclude, was a vital element of ancient Judaism, in the diaspora at least as much as in Palestine. In contrast to what is generally supposed Philo, the proverbial representative of Hellenistic diaspora Judaism, appeared to be one of our more significant witnesses,” *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BAG), s.v. “Ἑλληνιστής,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

⁷*Ibid.*, 213.

⁸H. Windisch, “Ἑλλην,” *TDNT*, 2:511. Lenski distinguishes the term, “The Ἑλληνιστοί (a word not found until it was used by Luke) were not Ἕλληνες, ‘Greeks,’ either by extraction, by religion, or in the broader cultural sense. They were Jews fully as much as the other class that is called ‘Hebrews.’ We read of all sorts of Hellenists in 2:9-11 and find their synagogues mentioned in 6:9. They had been reared in foreign lands, had replaced the Aramaic with the Greek language, and thus read their Scriptures on in the LXX translation. In the diaspora the second and the third generations lost their Aramaic to a great degree as the inscriptions on their tombs show. Yet they in every way remained

It is clear that Luke intends a contrast between ἑβραίους and ἑλληνιστής. The question is does the contrast extend beyond simple language to culture and perhaps also to religion? Cohen cautions, on seeing a black and white distinction between native Jews and diasporan Jews.

All the Judaisms of the Hellenistic period, of both the diaspora and the land of Israel, were Hellenized, that is, were integral parts of the culture of the ancient world. Some varieties of Judaism were more Hellenized than others, but none was an island unto itself. It is a mistake to think that the land of Palestine preserved a “pure” form of Judaism and that the diaspora was the home of adulterated or diluted forms of Judaism.⁹

At least one thing is clear: it is difficult to define the terms used by Luke from historical sources alone. In reality the best clues to the meaning of the term come from the pen of Luke himself. He only uses ἑλληνιστής one other time in the book (9:29).¹⁰ In this passage Luke refers to persons who, by their actions, identify themselves to be religiously zealous Jews. Windisch notes: “Of course, the ἑλληνισταί with whom Paul disputed in 9:29, and who tried to destroy him, were fanatical orthodox Jews of the dispersion.”¹¹

The closer context gives sufficient clues to understand Luke’s use of the term as well. From what we have seen, whatever the religious tendencies were of those outside the land, the Greek-speaking populace within the land of Palestine appears to be zealous of the Law (9:29). Those who dispute with Stephen (6:9), though not specifically termed hellenists, trace their origins to the diaspora (Alexandria, Cyrene, Cilicia and Asia) and these are the first to express fierce loyalty to Moses. Again in 21:27 it is “Jews from Asia” who incite the crowds in Jerusalem with charges against Paul’s fidelity to Moses and the Temple. Thus, although we may not be absolutely certain what the term means

loyal Jews.” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 242.

⁹Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, Library of Early Christianity, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 37.

¹⁰Another possible reference (11:19-20) would support our view but is not textually firm. In this passage (11:19-20) when Luke desires to compare different races and cultures, i.e. Jews and Greeks he uses and different terms (Ἰουδαίοις and Ἕλληνας) supporting the suggestion that Luke refers to mere differences of language when he uses the terms ἑβραίους and ἑλληνιστής. This reading is attested by β⁷⁴, 8, A, and D receiving a “C” rating in the UBS text. Other manuscripts (B, E, P) read ἑλληνιστάς. In 21:37 Luke uses the adverbial form (ἑλληνιστῖ), which has the sense of language only.

¹¹Windisch, “Ἕλλην,” 2:511-12.

because of Luke's wide variety of meanings, it would seem most likely in the context of Acts 6 and 9 that those Jews who are referred to are faithful to Moses. This being the case, it would seem that the nature of the problem in 6:1-7 was really only an overlooking of certain widows in a church which was otherwise unified in its worship and fellowship¹² rather than differences in culture and religion. Thus, the term identifies one of the parties in a dispute (which is quickly solved) rather than the cause of a dispute which results in a division within the Church.¹³

Was Stephen a Hellenist?

Because the understanding of Stephen's speech is often seen to hinge upon his alleged hellenism it is appropriate to determine Stephen's relationship to it. The two major reasons for assuming that Stephen was a hellenist are the nature of his name and the logic of the situation. First, the name Stephen is Greek which suggests that he was not a Palestinian Jew. While some Palestinian Jews did use Greek names (Andrew, Phillip) none of the others in the list of seven were used by Palestinian Jews.¹⁴ Second, it makes good sense to address the problem of hellenistic widows who were being slighted with hellenistic overseers. The problem is that Luke nowhere makes this explicit. Tyson cautions:

Martin Hengel, for example, is convinced that all members of the seven were Hellenists (meaning Greek-speaking Jews) because they all bore Greek names. There is, in this reference, no typically Jewish name, except perhaps that of Philip. According to him, these Christians came from a group of Jews who had adopted Greek names as well as Greek speech.

If, however, we confine our attention to the text itself, the matter becomes far from certain. For instance, if Luke thought of the seven as persons who spoke Greek, he did not give any indication of it. . . . They both exhibit familiarity with Hebrew Scriptures. In any case, the narrative does not give a clear signal about the group to which the seven belong.¹⁵

¹²Cf. 2:46-47; 4:32; 6:7.

¹³*Contra* Scott on p. 46 above.

¹⁴I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, ed. R. V. G. Tasker, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980): 127.

¹⁵Joseph B. Tyson, "Acts 6:1-7 and Dietary Regulations in Early Christianity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 10 (1983): 159. Though Cadbury feels that the Luke intends the meaning *Gentiles* by *hellenist*, he cautions that the connection between Stephen's alleged hellenism and his martyrdom is tenuous. "The connexion between the choice of the Seven and the controversy of Stephen is not close, and it is not stated that the foreigners at the synagogue of the Libertini should be called Hellenists. The loose connexions of an obscure passage are pressed too hard when all these deductions are drawn from them." Henry J. Cadbury, "The Hellenists," in *The Beginning of Christianity: The Acts of the Apostles*, F. J. Foakes Jackson, and Kirsopp Lake, eds., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979): 62.

Ultimately the question of whether Stephen was a hellenist can not be resolved. What can be resolved, however, is how Stephen is depicted in the text. The important question is how Luke portrays Stephen literarily. If Stephen's identity is important to Luke's message we would expect Luke to make that issue clear; in fact, he does.

Luke never states the Stephen was a hellenist but he does describe him multiple times as a man of wisdom and of the Spirit. In the solution to the problem of the widows the Apostles asked the people to find "seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task" (6:3). Stephen, of course, meets the qualifications. Then as Stephen preaches Luke describes him again in similar terms "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). Those who dispute with him are "unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (6:10). Before his speech he has a face "like the face of an angel" (6:15), a person who is close to God and reflects some of his glory as a result of being in his presence (Ex. 34:29).¹⁶ After his speech and defense Luke states that "being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven" (7:55a).

As Luke portrays Stephen (even apart from the content of his speech which will be discussed later) it is clear that he is a man full of the Spirit. However we are to understand his actions, Luke sees Stephen not as a renegade theologian who understands more about the universal nature of God's program because of his culture, but as a man whose wisdom and words are inspired by God who promised to empower his followers in times like these (Luke 12:11; 21:14-15).¹⁷ What Luke would have us see is not Stephen the hellenist, but Stephen the man of the Spirit.

¹⁶Marshall, *Acts*, 131. "D'ailleurs, dans les parallèles rabbiniques, l'assimilation d'un visage d'homme à un visage d'ange n'est jamais mise en relation avec la vision de réalités célestes; elle est plutôt le signe d'un état d'âme particulier, d'une conversion intérieure, d'une disposition spécialement bonne de celui qui ressemble à un ange. M. E. Boismard, "Le Martyre D'Étienne: Actes 6:8-8:2," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 69 (1981): 183.

¹⁷Stephen's speech "illustrates how a believer was inspired to speak in his own defense; it is an example of the fulfillment of Jesus' promises reported in Lk 12. 11 f. and in Lk 21. 12-15. The close links between the two Gospel passages and that in Acts 6. 8. ff. confirm that Luke used this dramatic unit to show how the exalted Lord kept his promise to the threatened Church. . . . In this unit Luke completed another of his themes and demonstrated to his readers the certainty of the things in which they had been instructed (Lk 1. 4)." P. Doble, "The Son of Man Saying in Stephen's Witnessing: Acts 6:8-8:2," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 72. Cf. also the numerous parallels which Luke draws between Jesus and Stephen in their accusations and their deaths.

The Role of Stephen's "Hellenism"

Although Luke went to no effort to identify Stephen as a hellenist (and even if he had it is likely that the term Ἑλληνιστοὶ does not indicate a lax attitude towards the Judaism), the tendency still exists to interpret Stephen's speech in light of his alleged hellenism. That is, words and themes which might normally have one significance are given another because of Stephen's alleged universal tendencies.¹⁸ Even if Stephen were a hellenist we should not pre-judge his words or add meaning to them which we would not otherwise attribute to his speech. Likewise, even though the theme of the geographical spread of the gospel is explicitly stated early in the book (1:8) we should be careful to let Stephen's speech interpret itself.

The Meaning of Stephen's Defense

The point of Stephen's speech has been the object of much debate. Is it unrelated to the accusations brought against him or is it a recital of hellenistic theology? To answer these questions we will look at the accusations brought against him, and the themes of his speech.

The Accusations against Stephen

The formal charges against Stephen appear to be twofold, including a general statement (6:13) and then the specification of it (6:14). Speaking against *this holy place* (6:13) seems to be defined by *Jesus will destroy this place* (6:14), while speaking against *the Law* (6:13) is equivalent to *altering the customs which Moses handed down to us* (6:14).¹⁹

¹⁸Toussaint argues that ". . . the reference to Grecian Jews looks ahead to the wider spread of the gospel outside the circle of Jerusalem and Judea" Stanley Toussaint, "Acts," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, (n.p.: Victor Books, 1983), 367.

¹⁹Dupont sees an intensification of the charges, "Les lecteurs ont été prévenus d'abord d'une inculpation très générale. Ses accusateurs disaient: 'Nous l'avons entendu proférer des paroles blasphématoires contre Moïse et contre Dieu' (6:11). Le grief devient plus précis au v. 13: 'Cet homme ne cesse de proférer des paroles contre le Lieu saint et la Loi.' Enfin la formulation du v. 14 explicite exactement l'imputation: 'Nous l'avons entendu dire que Jésus, ce Nazôréen, détruirait ce Lieu et changerait les coutumes que Moïse nous a transmises,'" Jacques Dupont, "La structure oratoire du discours d'Étienne (Actes 7)," *Biblica* 66 (1985): 157.

While Luke labels the accusations against Stephen as false (6:13), many question exactly how²⁰ false they were. The question is a significant one because of its relationship to Stephen's speech. To put the issue in different terms, "Is Stephen's speech meant to refute the charges against him completely, in part or not at all?"²¹ While Stephen's speech must stand on its own we can attempt to answer how Luke portrays Stephen's innocence.

Luke first informs the reader that certain men were "secretly induced" (ὕπεβραλον, 6:11) to bring charges against him. When they are put forward to testify, Luke again labels them as "false witnesses" (μάρτυρας ψευδεῖς, 6:13). Further, very similar charges occasionally surface in Acts suggesting that Luke considered them to be a common misunderstanding of the Christian faith.²² In 21:28 Paul is accused as "the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place," a charge he had taken definitive measures to defeat (21:20-26). Elsewhere he is credited with attacks on the Mosaic Law (18:13-15; 24:5-9) which he carefully refutes (24:10-18) before Felix.

Luke also records that the charge involves Jesus, "for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (6:14). These are the same false charges brought against Jesus at his trial (Matt 26:60-61; 27:40; Mark 14:57-

²⁰According to Bruce the charges were hardly false at all! "Jesus Himself had said, 'one greater than the temple is here' (Matt. 12:6); these and other sayings of His about the temple were apparently preserved by the early church in Jerusalem, but it was Stephen who appreciated their full force. The gospel meant the end of the sacrificial cultus and all the ceremonial law. These were the outward and visible signs of Jewish particularism, and could not be reconciled with the universal scope of the Christian message of salvation accomplished. This was the argument, pressed by Stephen in synagogue debate, which formed the real basis of the case for the prosecution" F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 136. Marshall also sees the basis for the charges against Stephen in his preaching about the replacement of the Mosaic system, including the Temple, by Christ. Marshall, *Acts*, 130. Toussaint agrees, "The other half of the allegation against Stephen involved the temporary nature of the Mosaic system. Undoubtedly he saw the theological implications of justification by faith and the fulfillment of the Law in Christ. Furthermore, if the gospel was for the whole world (Acts 1:8), the Law had to be a temporary arrangement," Toussaint, *Acts*, 368-69.

²¹Lenski is more direct, "After one fashion or another commentators endeavor to determine exactly wherein the lie of these false witnesses consisted, and some of them pare down the lie to very moderate proportions. Fortunately, we have Stephen's own reply. He takes up these charges in detail and first refutes the charge that he blasphemed God; secondly, he blasphemed Moses and the law; thirdly, that he blasphemed the Temple. In fact, he proves that he does the very opposite" Lenski, *Acts*, 256.

²²Doble, "The Son of Man Saying," 72.

59; 15:29).²³ “And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ‘We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet not even so did their testimony agree” (Mark 14:57-59). Each of the respective Gospel writers indicates that these charges were false, though only John explains *why* they were false: “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’. The Jews therefore said, ‘It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of His body” (John 2:19-21). If the charges against Stephen are modeled after those against Christ then it would appear that they are completely false. As Luke renders the circumstances which precipitate Stephen’s speech the reader is encouraged to understand that Stephen is innocent of the charges brought against him. If this is correct, one would expect the defendant’s words to corroborate this conclusion.

²³Boismard notes at least three deliberate parallels drawn in the indictment alone against Stephen and Jesus (the mention of false witnesses, the hearing before the Sanhedrin and the charges about destroying the Temple). He summarizes, “En comparant 6:11 et 6:12b-14, on peut donc dire que le but des additions lucaniennes a été d’établir un parallélisme entre Etienne et Jésus,” Boismard, “Le Martyre D’Etienne: Actes 6:8–8:2,” 191.

Jesus’ other words about the destruction of the Temple (Matt. 24:1-2; Luke 19:44; 21:5-6) do not single out the Temple as an institution which must be replaced, but rather link its destruction with that of the city. “It is primarily the city, and the Temple only incidentally, which is threatened because of its resistance to God (Lk 13.34-35; 19.41-44; 21.6),” Doble, “The Son of Man Saying in Acts 7.56,” 80. More importantly, the form of the accusations against Stephen echo the charges brought against Jesus at his trial which are a *distortion* of his discussions after the first cleansing of the Temple (Mark 14:58-59 and John 2:19-21).

The Speech of Stephen

Stephen's speech may appear at first to be not only unrelated to the accusations brought against him but also a pointless recital of Jewish history.²⁴ Many have seen Stephen's emphasis upon the blessings of God on people outside the land as an important element in his speech.

Movement outside of Palestine

One possible unifying factor may be the emphasis upon geographical movement outside of Palestine. This is understood not only as a rebuke to nationalistic Judaism with its selfish and provincial attachment to the Temple but also as the basis for a universal movement beyond the bounds of Palestine and Judaism. Scott writes:

The Judaism of Stephen's day had become increasingly 'place-conscious,' provincial and localized in its view of God. Palestine in general, and Jerusalem in particular, had come to be looked upon as the only places where God could be found and as the full extent of his earthly activity and concern. . . . for many first-century Jews, for all practical purposes, God was little more than a tribal deity of the Hebrews.

Stephen's speech attempts to show that this notion was both historically and theologically incorrect. He reminded his listeners of numerous important events of the history of Israel in which God had appeared and acted outside the geographical borders of Canaan, the promised land.²⁵

The idea however that God's activity outside the land of Palestine should be a clue that God's program has now become universal is problematic for several reasons. Although much of Israel's history as

²⁴Dupont argues forcefully that Stephen's speech really does answer the charges against him. The early part of the speech (7:2-34) may seem to be a neutral recitation of history but is in reality an important oratorical element in the discourse, namely the *narratio*. "La *narratio* ne doit pas anticiper sur l'*argumentatio*, mais simplement la préparer. La préparation la meilleure est celle qui cache le sens de l'*argumentation*, qui contient, de manière disséminée, les preuves à l'état de germes inapparents (*semina probationum*). Une *narratio* bien conduite sa présente comme un exposé objectif, auquel les auditeurs ne peuvent qu'acquiescer," Dupont, "La structure oratoire du discours d'Etienne (Actes 7)," 157. "In form it is a lengthy recital of Old Testament history, discussing in detail what appear to be insignificant points and culminating in a bitter attack on the speaker's hearers. What is the speaker trying to do? Is the speech really a defence to the charges brought against him (6:11, 13 f.)?" Marshall, *Acts*, 131. Neil concurs, "it is not designed to secure Stephen's acquittal of the charges brought against him, but to proclaim the essence of the new faith" Neil, *The Acts*, 116.

²⁵Scott, "Stephen's Defense and the World Mission," 133. Cf. also T. L. Donaldson, "Moses Typology and the Sectarian Nature of Early Christian Anti-Judaism: A Study in Acts 7," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 12 (1981): 31. Toussaint connects Stephen's emphasis on "blessing outside the land" with the universal nature of Christianity, summarizing the thrust of Stephen's speech, "Stephen's three main points in this discourse fit together. Since there is progression in God's program and since His blessings are not limited to the temple, Israel had better be careful not to 'resist' (Acts 7:51) His workings as they had in the past. They would withstand God's purpose by refusing to see His work in the church and His blessing *outside the borders of Israel*," Toussaint, *Acts*, 370 (emphasis mine). Marshall would not go so far, "It seems doubtful in particular whether we can attribute to Stephen a vision of the world mission of the church on the basis of this speech. What is unique is the critical attitude to the temple, which had evidently not been voiced earlier . . ." Marshall, *Acts*, 134.

recited by Stephen occurs outside of Palestine, it is clear that the goal of that movement is *toward* the land. Abraham only leaves his home because he is promised a land of his own (7:3). Although he possessed none of it, the same land is promised to his offspring (7:5). The goal of the Exodus as stated by Stephen is that the nation “would come out and serve Me in this place,” a reference to Jerusalem and the Temple (7:7), and Israel’s entrance into the land is accompanied by a “dispossessing of the nations” (7:45). It is true that Israel is a nation on the move, but that movement comes to an end with the conquest of her enemies and rest in Canaan. Rather than simple movement outside the land, the theme is progression toward the land. It is the *fulfillment*²⁶ of what was promised which is stressed. If a theme of universalism exists in Stephen’s speech it cannot be found in the geographical movements of Israel’s history.²⁷

A defense and refutation of the charges

A better understanding of Stephen’s speech may be that Stephen is actually answering²⁸ the charges levelled toward him. In reality, as Stephen refutes the charges against him he also demonstrates

²⁶L. D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 65 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 99. God’s program has not changed according to Stephen. Israel’s possession of the land and worship at the Temple are proof of God’s faithfulness to his promises.

²⁷With the stated theme of movement in Acts 1:8 it might be easy to impose this theme of movement outward from the land onto Stephen, but we must be careful to let Stephen speak for himself. Within the confines of Stephen’s speech he sees the goal as being in the land, not moving from it.

²⁸What Luke has preserved for us should not be understood as a record of the message which led to Stephen’s arrest. Neither is it necessarily a record of his typical preaching. In reality Stephen is not a preacher or proclaimer like the apostles, but rather a debater (6:9). Doble comments, “Once it is recognized that Luke distinguished Stephen from the apostles, it becomes clearer that the speech in chapter 7 is not evidence for the martyr’s distinctive message. The long speech illustrates how a believer was inspired to speak in his own defence; it is an example of the fulfillment of Jesus’ promises reported in Lk 12. 11f. and in Lk 21. 12-15. The close links between the two Gospel passages and that in Acts 6. 8 ff. confirm that Luke used this dramatic unit to show how the exalted Lord kept his promise to the threatened Church. The speech was a Spirit- or Jesus-inspired defence (Lk 12. 12; 21. 15 cf. Acts 6. 10), unprepared (Lk 21. 14), but eloquent and characterised by wisdom (Lk 21. 15 cf. Acts 6. 10).” Doble, “The Son of Man Sayings in Acts 7.56,” 72. Cf. also Marshall, *Acts*, 132, though he argues that Stephen was loyal to the Law but not the temple so that in Marshall’s view, Stephen’s speech is properly a defense of himself, though not a refutation of the charges brought against him. Neil disagrees affirming that the speech “is not designed to secure Stephen’s acquittal of the charges brought against him, but to proclaim the essence of the new faith” Neil, *The Acts*, 116.

how Israel is guilty of them.²⁹ If this is the case, three emphases, all of which intertwine, may be seen flowing through his speech: fidelity to the Law, and the Temple, and the proper understanding of “this Nazarene, Jesus.” In each of these charges, Stephen is seen as faithful while Stephen’s accusers are unfaithful. These three emphases can all be seen in Stephen’s words in the introduction (6:14), in the conclusion (7:51-53) and, throughout the body of the speech. Luke clearly sets the stage in the introduction (6:14–7:1) when, through the words of the accusers, he announces this threefold theme of Jesus, Temple and Law,

for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, *Jesus*, will destroy this *place* and alter the customs which *Moses* handed down to us. And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

These are all included in Stephen’s dramatic conclusion as well: Temple, (7:48-50); Jesus, (7:51-52); and Law (7:53).

Stephen addresses his audience for the most part in the form of a historical narrative. For this reason he does not deal with each charge fully and then progress to the next but rather emphasizes various points of Israel’s history as they demonstrate his various points. In addition, the three themes are themselves inter-related. The Temple is not an independent institution but is given through Moses and much of the material concerning Moses really speaks to the theme of Jesus, the “prophet like me” whom God raised up (7:37). Nevertheless we will attempt to summarize Stephen’s message as he speaks to each of these issues.

Stephen’s words about the law. The accusations against Stephen are worded in such a way as to describe more than the Mosaic covenant in particular (“This man incessantly speaks against . . . the Law” 6:13), but also the revelation handed down through Moses (“alter the customs which Moses handed down to us”). The customs from Moses and the Law in particular were the things which constituted Israel a nation and set her apart from the nations. Thus, one’s attitude toward the Law and the customs of Moses reflected one’s attitude toward the nation and the Law defined the boundaries of

²⁹Thus the accusers become the accused. With each defense of an accusation comes a counter-accusation of Israel and of this generation which has proven itself to be one with the disobedient portion of Israel in the past.

those who desired to be in the nation.³⁰ This is why Stephen's first words concerning God's promise of land to Abraham immediately address the accusation of his unfaithfulness to the Law. He looks favorably on God's call of Abraham and the tangible promise of land (7:3) which defines the territory of the nation. Although Abraham did not possess the land, God promised that his offspring would inherit it as their own (7:5) and would "serve Me in this place" (7:7), a likely reference to the Temple.³¹ Stephen thus approves of God's individual dealing with the nation and sees worship in Jerusalem as a divinely granted fulfillment of the original promise. Stephen next narrates with approval the giving of the covenant of circumcision to Abraham and records the "lawfully correct" circumcision of Isaac on the eighth day (7:8).³²

The largest section of this, the longest speech recorded by Luke, is devoted to Moses (7:17-44), the giver of the Law. Moses is presented from beginning to end in the most favorable light; none of his weaknesses are ever mentioned. To the Old Testament statement that Moses was a "goodly child" (Exod 2:2) Stephen adds "in the sight of God" (7:20) underscoring the divine approval. Even his murder of the Egyptian and consequent flight to the desert are cast in the most favorable light (7:23-29). Moses is described as the divinely approved "ruler and deliverer" (7:35) credited with performing signs and wonders (7:35) who spoke directly with God at Sinai (7:38). Then, in perhaps his most

³⁰Cf. the discussion on proselytes and god-fearers on page 80.

³¹Stephen emends the words originally spoken in Genesis 15:14 "but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out *with great possessions*" to "But I will judge the nation that they serve," said God, "and after that they shall come out *and worship me in this place*" (Acts 7:7). Because of the context of the previous verse it would appear that Stephen intends at least Palestine, if not Jerusalem and the Temple. The common references to the Temple in the context (particularly the charges against Stephen concerning the Temple, "he speaks incessantly against this holy place" and "will destroy this place," 6:13-14) as "this place" (τόπον τοῦτον) would suggest this correlation. The writer of 2 Maccabees uses the same familiar terminology: 2 Maccabees 5:19-20, "But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the *holy place*, but the *place* for the sake of the nation. 20 Therefore the *place* itself shared in the misfortunes that befell the nation and afterward participated in its benefits; and what was forsaken in the wrath of the Almighty was restored again in all its glory when the great Lord became reconciled" (NRSV). Conzelmann sees Stephen's words "and worship me in this place" as a replacement of the words of Exodus 3:12, "you shall worship God on this mountain." Whatever the original text was, it is clear that Stephen has changed it to "this place," which Conzelmann also sees as a reference to the Temple, "ὄρος, 'mountain,' is replaced by τόπος, 'place,' thus Sinai is replaced by Jerusalem or the Temple (these two meaning essentially the same thing)" Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, eds. Eldon Jay Epp and Christopher R. Matthews, trans. James A. Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 52.

³²Conzelmann says, "There is no hint of criticism of any sort here," *Ibid.*, 52.

remarkable and direct answer to the charge made against him concerning the “customs of Moses,” Stephen describes the Law which Moses received from God as “living oracles” (λόγια ζῶντα, 7:38). If Stephen considered Moses and the Law to have been anything except God’s gracious gift to be treasured, he hid his feelings well.

Not only does Stephen exalt the “customs of Moses” and exonerate himself, but also turns the charge against his accusers. He first narrates the historical rejection of the Law-giver and the Law by the nation and then indicts the present generation with the same crime. This is first evident as he describes Israel’s misunderstanding of Moses first dealings with them, “And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand” (7:25). Consequently they rejected him with the words ““Who made you a ruler and judge over us?”” (7:27). This key phrase is repeated again for emphasis (7:35).³³ One of the more direct attacks against the nation’s rejection of the Law comes when it is first delivered (7:38-40). Moses received the “living oracles” from God and delivered them to the people (7:39); the people “were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt” (7:40), and then asked Aaron to “make for us gods who will go before us” (7:41) in obvious rejection of the very first commandment. From then to the exile in Babylon the nation was plagued by idolatry, the most blatant form of disobedience to the Law (7:41-43). Stephen’s most direct criticism of the people’s rejection of the Law comes when he compares their behavior to previous generations, “You men who are stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. . . . you who received the Law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it” (7:51, 53).

Thus, Stephen, unlike his accusers who resist the Spirit, is full of the Spirit (6:3, 10; 7:55), and, unlike his accusers who do not keep the Law, he reverences the Law. Although many years later, and in a much different context, Paul would view Spirit and Law as antithetical, Jervell notes that:

³³In the second citation of the verse, Stephen slightly alters the quotation to indict the entire nation rather than one individual. Cf. Boismard who notes, “Ici, Etienne généralise et c’est tout le peuple hébreu qui est censé avoir renié Moïse. D’un épisode qui ne mettait en cause qu’un individu, on est passé à une hostilité où tout le peuple est impliqué. Il ne s’agit plus de l’histoire de Moïse, venant après celle d’Abraham et de Joseph; c’est une virulente diatribe contre le peuple hébreu,” “Le Martyre D’Étienne: Actes 6:8–8:2,” 185.

Luke does not separate πνεῦμα and νόμος, charismatic life and observance of the law. . . . Stephen is characterized as an adherent of the law and as a charismatic-ecstatic prophet (6:8-15; 7:51-53, 54-60). Suggestive are verses 7:51-53: The nonbelieving Jews resist the Spirit, which means that they do not keep the law!³⁴

These words, of course, lead to Stephen's death. Those who bury Stephen are described as "devout men" (ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς), that is, men who are scrupulously observant about the Law.³⁵ Thus, Luke shows that, to the very end of Stephen's life, those who honored the Law also honored him.³⁶

Stephen's words about the temple. Because the priesthood and sacrificial cultus were given through Moses and rightly belong to the "customs of Moses" the subjects of Moses and the Temple cannot be completely divorced from each other. In many ways Stephen's endorsement of Moses is also an endorsement of the Temple cultus. However, Stephen does speak directly to the charge that he "spoke incessantly against this holy place" and that it would be destroyed³⁷ (6:13-14). Early in his narrative Stephen emends the text of God's promise to Abraham (Gen 15:13-14) to express God's ultimate intention of the exodus, that "they will come out and serve Me in this place" (7:7). Given the wording of the charges against Stephen, that he "spoke incessantly against *this place*" (6:13-14) it is likely that he is directly answering those accusations.³⁸ Stephen sees the Temple as more than an afterthought in the mind of God; it has been a fundamental part of his plan for the nation since the earliest promises to Abraham.

³⁴J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 72.

³⁵Bultmann describes the significance of εὐλαβεῖς: "At Ac. 2:5 the Jews of the dispersion dwelling at Jerusalem are called ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς, and those who bury Stephen at 8:2 are again Jews. Ananias is called an ἄνηρ εὐλαβῆς κατὰ τὸν νόμον, at Ac. 22:12. εὐλαβῆς always means "pious" or "devout" as in the LXX, and it is no accident that the piety thus characterised is that which consists in scrupulous observance of the Law, as may be seen in Ac. 22:12." R. Bultmann, "εὐλαβεῖς," *TDNT*, 2:753.

³⁶Bruce notes that εὐλαβεῖς is used "regularly of devout Jews in the New Testament," Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 174. "In Ch. 8:2 εὐλαβῆς is used of the men who buried Stephen, in Ch. 22:12 of Ananias of Damascus, in Luke 2:25 of the aged Simeon. The word is quite different from that used for Gentile God-fearers," 61, n. 19.

³⁷Cf. note number 26 on page 54 for the specific charge that Jesus would destroy this place.

³⁸Boismard, "Le Martyre D'Étienne: Actes 6:8-8:2," 186-89. For evidence that "this place" is a reference to the Temple see note number 34 above on page 59.

Despite the idolatrous history of the nation from the exodus to the exile (7:39-43), Stephen affirms that the tabernacle was made exactly according to the plan of God as He had directed Moses (7:44). That God was pleased with it as a place of worship is implied by his driving out the nations of Canaan as the tabernacle accompanied the people upon their entrance into the land (7:45). This happy tradition continues through the time of David who found favor with God and sought to build another house for God (7:46). While some charge that Stephen found the Tabernacle acceptable while repudiating the Temple,³⁹ he clearly paints David, with whom, humanly speaking, the original intention to build the Temple was born, in the most divinely approved terms. He found “favor” (χάρις) with God (7:46).

Some suppose that at this point in the narrative Stephen’s attitude toward the Temple changes.⁴⁰ The argument is that while David envisioned a dwelling place (σκήνωμα, 7:46), Solomon wrongly built a house (οἶκος, 7:47). First, the δέ of 7:47 is not adversative indicating a change from an attitude of divine approval to one of disapproval, but merely that David originated the plan and Solomon fulfilled it. Second, interpreting Solomon’s building of a *house* as contrary to the divine intention is artificial since this wording corresponds to the Old Testament references. Solomon states, “So I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD said to my father David, ‘Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house (οἶκος, LXX) for my name.’” 1 Kings 5:5.⁴¹

³⁹Paul Trudinger, “Stephen and the Life of the Primitive Church,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14 (1984): 20.

⁴⁰Neil states in reference to Solomon, “it was, in fact, this ostentatious monarch, who even in the flattering *OT* record of his achievements is criticized for not being as true to the Lord as his father David had been (1 Kg. 11:4), who was in Stephen’s view misguided enough to build the first Temple at Jerusalem;” Neil, *The Acts*, 114. Boismard takes a less negative view that the building of the Temple is presented not so much as a fault as a useless action. He perceptively notes that the tone of 7:45-50 is different from the invective which both precedes (7:35-43) and follows (7:51-53). “Ce reproche, si tant est qu’il y ait reproche (Dieu n’avait-il pas lui-même ordonné la construction de la Tente du Témoignage ?), est sans commune mesure avec le ton agressif des vv. 35-43,” Boismard, “Le Martyre D’Etienne: Actes 6:8–8:2,” 185-86.

⁴¹Cf. also the original giving of the promise as well, 2 Samuel 7:13 and 1 Chronicles 17:12.

Stephen's next words, "However, (ἀλλὰ) the Most High does not dwell in houses . . ." (7:48) do clearly indicate a contrast, the exact nature of which, is hotly debated.⁴² Does Stephen continue in the tradition of faithfulness to the Law and Temple which he has established thus far in his narrative or does he depart from that view here? Does he stand with Moses and the Law or is he now giving new revelation which opposes Moses? Hurst captures the issue well when referring to these verses (7:47-50) he says, "My question, however, is this: Does Acts 7 stand in a thoroughly *well-precedented* prophetic tradition, or does it stand as a radical new element in Judaism which transcends anything going before?"⁴³ Some argue that Stephen's reference to the Temple as "made with hands" (χειροποιήτοις) is deprecatory because the term often refers to idolatry in the Septuagint.⁴⁴ We need look no further, however, for the meaning of the passage than to the words of the one just mentioned, Solomon himself. The words of Stephen in 7:48 are a virtual paraphrase taken from Solomon's own dedicatory prayer of the temple, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).⁴⁵ Certainly Solomon's intent was not to deprecate the Temple which was being dedicated to God, but to recognize that it was only a place in which the transcendent God had graciously chosen to localize his presence. The God of Israel was not like an idol which needed a house to protect and preserve him. Whatever the meaning of Stephen's words is here, he intended that it should be clarified and supported

⁴²"These verses have been interpreted as signifying either a replacement of the temple, a rejection and condemnation of the temple, or an affirmation of God's transcendence of the temple," Dennis D. Sylva, "The Meaning and Function of Acts 7:46-50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (June 1987): 261. Neil considers this verse to form the "real thrust" of Stephen's speech and is a "direct attack on the Temple cult," Neil, *The Acts*, 114. Kee is an example of one who goes beyond the bounds of the text in stating that ". . . Stephen, denies that God is specially present in any humanly constructed building—including, implicitly, the Temple . . ." Howard C. Kee, "After the Crucifixion—Christianity Through Paul," in *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism*, edited by Hershel Shanks (Washington, D. C.: Biblical Archeology Society, 1992), 107.

⁴³Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 92.

⁴⁴"It was the term used most frequently by the pre-Christian translators of the OT into Greek for 'idol' or 'false god,'" Scott, "Stephen's Defense and the World Mission," 133-34.

⁴⁵"En réalité, cet oracle ne dit pas autre chose que ce que Salomon luimême avait déclaré lors de la dédicace du Temple . . . Mais le discours d'Étienne est conséquent avec lui-même en terminant chacune de ses grandes divisions par des paroles prononcées par Dieu en personne," Jacques Dupont, "La structure oratoire du discours d'Étienne (Actes 7)," 155.

by his next quotation because he introduces it with the words, “as the prophet says” (καθὼς ὁ προφήτης λέγει).

These next verses (7:49-50) are often taken as a testimony to God’s transcendence by which Stephen implies the universal nature of the gospel. God’s program is no longer limited to Jerusalem but should go to all nations.⁴⁶ If this is the interpretation of the quotation, however, then Stephen has given a different meaning to the words than the original author did. A closer look at the context of Isaiah (66:1-6) reveals that the prophet was not speaking derogatorily of the Temple, but rather condemning the people of his day who abused it. They had forgotten that God looked “to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at his word” (66:2b). Isaiah continues with the words,⁴⁷

He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog’s neck; he who presents a cereal offering, like him who offers swine’s blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like him who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; (Isa 66:3).

The point is that God is indeed transcendent and free from creaturely restraint, i. e., men cannot obligate God to them through the means of the Temple cultus. Apart from a heart of contrition, the best sacrifices are abominable to God. Isaiah made this point more than once in his prophetic career.⁴⁸ Thus, these verses do speak of God’s transcendence, but this message serves as a warning against those who would abuse the Temple, not as a call to abandon the Temple because Jesus had replaced it or called

⁴⁶Toussaint, *Acts*, 369.

⁴⁷The rest of the context of Isaiah 66 is extremely relevant to Stephen’s situation. The whole of Stephen’s speech dealt with God’s righteous messengers whom Israel had rejected, as also was the case with Stephen himself. Isaiah 66:5 reads, “Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word: “Your brethren who hate you and cast you out for my name’s sake have said, ‘Let the LORD be glorified, that we may see your joy’; but it is they who shall be put to shame.” The text of Isaiah 66:6 was about to find expression as well as Stephen was about to directly accuse his obdurate brothers in the midst of the Temple, “Hark, an uproar from the city! A voice from the temple! The voice of the LORD, rendering recompense to his enemies! ”

⁴⁸Certainly no one accused Isaiah of being against the Temple when he said “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats” (Isaiah 1:11). “You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings. Nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, Nor wearied you with incense. You have bought Me no sweet cane with money, Neither have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices. Rather you have burdened Me with your sins, You have wearied Me with your iniquities” (Isa 43:23-24). Isaiah’s clear intent (and Stephen’s we might add) was not to *prohibit* but to *promote* proper Temple worship.

his followers to go beyond the bounds of Judaism.⁴⁹ Doble paraphrases and evaluates this quotation: “Zeal for God’s Temple was no guarantee of loyalty to God. The speech, and the quotation from Isaiah, are directed against the accusers, not against the Temple.”⁵⁰ That Stephen was speaking against abuse of the Temple rather than the Temple itself is then preferred for the following reasons. This view demonstrates better continuity of thought in the narrative by expressing divine approval and veneration of the Temple itself while at the same time turning the same charges against Stephen’s attackers as the ones who were really guilty. This understanding also harmonizes well with the pattern of Stephen answering the false charges against him. Most importantly, it allows Stephen’s quotations to have the same sense as Solomon and Isaiah intended by them.

Stephen’s words about Jesus. At first glance Stephen’s speech seems not to involve Jesus at all. As Neil notes, however, “It has been well said that, although the name of Christ is never mentioned, Stephen is all the while ‘preaching Jesus.’”⁵¹ That the person of Jesus is behind much of

⁴⁹Clearly, the Temple was eventually superseded as the book of Hebrews teaches and within just a few years (Acts 10) God would clearly reveal to the surprise of Peter and his contemporaries that Gentiles were accepted just as Jews, but we must be careful not to read later revelation back into the speech of Stephen. Weinert makes this point concerning the Temple: “many scholars even today continue to confuse Luke’s outlook on the Temple with insights taken from elsewhere in the NT, or else to use only a handful of the more than 60 references to the Temple in Luke-Acts as a basis for generalizations about Luke’s attitude toward the Temple. The results are anything but systematic or complete, and often they are highly questionable.

As an example, one widely-held and persistent misconception is that Luke basically is critical of the Temple, and sees this institution as something to be rejected, destined only for destruction and replacement by a higher kind of worship. The Lucan basis for this interpretation, however, is hardly solid or broad. In Acts, it is true that Stephen (7:48-50) and then Paul (17:24-25) both affirm that God does not dwell within what is mere human handiwork. For Luke such statements represent a traditional prophetic assertion of God’s transcendence and freedom from creaturely constraint (cf. Isa 66:1-2),” Francis D. Weinert, “The Meaning of the Temple in Luke-Acts,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (July 1981): 85.

⁵⁰Doble, “The Son of Man Saying in Acts 7.56,” 80. “In Stephen’s speech Isaiah’s oracle cannot be set against the Temple’s existence for both Stephen and Wisdom agreed that it was by divine institution. Stephen’s speech is not an anti-Temple polemic, rather an argument that God revealed himself to Israel through men and institutions - especially Moses and the Temple (cf. Acts 6. 13 f.) - but that both had been abused. This conclusion coheres with Luke’s positive attitude to the Temple throughout the rest of his work. His Gospel begins (1.5 - 22 and ends (24.53) in the Temple where Jesus regularly taught (19. 47; 21. 337; 22. 53). In the Jerusalem section of Acts, Luke represents the apostles as resorting to it daily (2. 46, 45 ff.). His account of the cleansing of the Temple (Lk 19. 45 ff.) attributes to Jesus much the same attitude as that found in Stephen’s speech: the Temple was God’s House of Prayer, abused by men,” 80.

⁵¹Neil, *The Acts*, 116. “He is demonstrating that everything in Israel’s past history and experience pointed forward to God’s culminating act in his plan for the redemption of the world in sending the Christ,” *Ibid*.

Stephen's speech can be discerned from: (1) the emphasis upon him at both beginning and end, (2) certain direct clues within the speech, and (3) from the literary style of a long historical recital.

Marshall describes the impact of the literary style:

By choosing this style of presentation Stephen was able to show that the present conduct of the Jews was all of a piece with that of their ancestors and at the same time that God was still working in the same way as he had done in the past. This means that we may expect to find a deliberate use of typological language, and it is the case that some of the language used about Moses suggests a parallel between him and Jesus. Although, therefore, Jesus is mentioned only once in the speech (7:52) . . . a Christian outlook pervades the speech as a whole.⁵²

Luke indicates the importance of Jesus in the speech by recording in the beginning that the charges against Stephen involve not just his view of the Law and Temple but also "this Nazarene Jesus" (6:14). At the end of Stephen's speech Jesus is identified as "the Righteous One whose betrayers and murderers you have now become" (7:52). His reference to Jesus as the "Son of Man" (7:56) and prayer to Jesus (7:60) emphasize the place of Jesus in both the thinking of Stephen and in the debate. Finally, an example of a direct clue that Jesus is the unnamed subject of the speech may be found in Stephen's reference to Moses' messianic prophecy of Deuteronomy 18:15 that "God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren" (7:37).

Even in the references to Abraham Luke prepares the reader in a subtle way for the message of Jesus. The story of Abraham in this speech begins in Mesopotamia and ends with the promise of the nation worshipping God in the land. That promise had obviously been fulfilled and was being enjoyed by those present. In the same way Stephen identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of the Messiah who was also promised. As God had been faithful to fulfill the promise of Land it was not unusual to think He would fulfill the promise of the Son of Man as well.⁵³

In the second main section of the speech (7:9-16) involving Joseph, Stephen begins to show the pattern of opposition to God's leaders. Joseph's brothers reject him out of a spirit of jealousy

⁵²Marshall, *Acts*, 134.

⁵³Bruce agrees that the original intention of God in bringing Abraham out of Mesopotamia was of a piece with his promise of Messiah. ". . . God was continuously superintending the accomplishment of that one increasing purpose which He inaugurated when He called the father of the faithful out of Mesopotamia and which was to find its consummation with the coming of Christ" Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 148.

which corresponds to the attitude of the current leadership towards Jesus.⁵⁴ Luke also records that “God was with him” (ὁ θεὸς ἦν μετ’ αὐτοῦ, 7:9), the identical phrase by which he describes Jesus (10:38). Although Joseph was sold as a slave and experienced many afflictions (7:10) God rescued him and eventually used him to rescue his own brothers (7:11-15). Thus, Stephen shapes the narrative on a humiliation-vindication-glorification pattern⁵⁵ which reflects the story of Jesus.

The next main character, Moses, provides the greatest reflection of the “Righteous One.” He too was one chosen by God (7:20) to deliver and rule his people (7:35). Stephen breaks the historical narrative which he had established for a word of interpretation about Moses meant to articulate his main point about his own accusers and audience with the words, “And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand” (7:25). When Moses first attempted to rescue his brothers they refused him with the harsh words, ““Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?”” (7:27), words which are repeated for emphasis in 7:35. As Stephen portrays Moses fleeing from Egypt he ignores the reason given in the text of Exodus (Exod 2:15, for fear of Pharaoh), connecting it with the rejection of the people, making the parallel with Jesus all the more clear. This Moses was at first rejected by his own, humiliated and then vindicated by God (7:27-35).

A literary change occurs at 7:35 from the purely historical narrative to a rhetorical style. The demonstrative τοῦτον, “this” occurs twice in verse thirty-five and οὗτος, “this one” introduces verses thirty-six through thirty-eight.⁵⁶ Each of these verses emphasize an important part of the

⁵⁴“For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up,” (Mark 15:10 RSV) describes the attitude of this same council toward Jesus and Luke records the same attitude toward the followers of Jesus who preach in his name, “But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy” (Acts 5:17 RSV).

⁵⁵Doble, “The Son of Man Saying in Acts 7.56,” 78.

⁵⁶“Moïse est en quelque sorte ‘stylisé,’ pour souligner l’opposition entre ce que Dieu avait fait de lui et ce que les Hébreux en ont fait. Cette ‘stylistique’ est marquée par une accumulation de démonstratifs pour désigner Moïse, accumulation qui ne se rencontre nulle part ailleurs dans le discours . . .” Boismard, “Le Martyre D’Etienne: Actes 6:8–8:2,” 185.

Moses/Christ typology.⁵⁷ The first clarifies that “*This* Moses whom they disowned saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer . . .” (7:35). Clearly the nation’s response to the deliverer did not change God’s intention for him. Next Stephen indicates, “This man led them out, performing wonders and signs (τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα) . . .” (7:36) a parallel to Jesus own miracle working powers (τέρασι καὶ σημείοις, Acts 2:22).⁵⁸ Once again Stephen emphasizes that the Moses who was destined as ruler and deliver though rejected by his own, who was also a miracle worker, “*This* is the Moses who said . . . ‘God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren’” (7:37). That is, the points of correspondence between Moses and Messiah are his appointment as a ruler and deliverer by God, his rejection as such by the people and his performance of miracles. The climax to this section, however comes with 7:38-39 where Stephen’s last “This is the one” statement is found. Moses spoke to God on the mountain, and received living oracles from God but the fathers were “unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”

Thus, when Stephen asks rhetorically, and accuses, “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One” (7:52) he has thoroughly demonstrated his case. Both Stephen and Moses have “announced” (at least typologically, 7:37) the coming of the righteous one and were rejected by their brothers. Using the pattern of one rejected by his brothers, humiliated and yet vindicated by God, Stephen has answered the third part of the charges brought against him. He has declared that “this Nazarene, Jesus,” (6:14) is, in fact, the Righteous One (7:52) and the “Son of Man” who stands at the right hand of God (7:56).

This concludes the discussion on the defense of Stephen. His speech has not only served to defend himself but also, in each point, to accuse the accusers. He has demonstrated loyalty to Moses,

⁵⁷Conzelmann, *Acts*, 54. “The Moses typology is responsible for certain stylized expressions here. The words ἄρχοντα καὶ λυτρωτῆν, ‘ruler and deliverer,’ sound the first theme of the Moses typology, connecting Moses and Jesus (cf. 5:31; Luke 1:68; 2:38; 24:21).

⁵⁸Conzelmann says, “Moses as miracle worker is also understood typologically,” 54. Acts 2:22 reads, “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through him in your midst, just as you yourselves know.”

honored the Temple and recognized and accepted the Messiah. His accusers are found guilty on all counts. At this point we will attempt to define the contribution of the Stephen incident to the book.

The Contribution to the Argument of Acts

Without doubt, Stephen's speech stands between the spread of the word in Jerusalem (Acts 1–5) and its spread to the rest of the earth (Acts 8–14). Exactly how it contributes to that transition can now be evaluated based upon the analysis of Stephen's speech. Three major possibilities exist which explain the meaning of the Stephen incident in reference to the book of Acts: (1) a rejection of Law and Temple, (2) rejection of the Jewish people and Jerusalem and (3) rejection of the message of Jesus by the leadership.

Rejection of Law and Temple

Neil summarizes this view of Stephen's speech:

He is demonstrating that everything in Israel's past history and experience pointed forward to God's culminating act in his plan for the redemption of the world in sending Christ. The witness of Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David in one way or another underlined the transitory nature of existing Jewish institutions and the hollowness of Jewish claims to have the monopoly of the way to salvation. The presence of God could not be restricted to one Holy Land or confined in one holy Temple, nor could his Law be atrophied in the ceremonialism of the Sadducees or the legalism of the Pharisees. Such a critique . . . was under the guidance of the Spirit, the cause of the next great advance in the expansion of the Church.⁵⁹

As we have seen, however, Stephen's speech demonstrates only the highest reverence and faithfulness to the institutions of Israel. The Law is held high, being of divine origin (7:53)⁶⁰ and valid (7:38).⁶¹ Likewise, Stephen's words are not directed against the law *per se* but, in the traditions of Solomon and Isaiah, against its abuse by sinful men. In the words of Hurst, "A declaration that Jesus means to

⁵⁹Neil, *The Acts*, 116.

⁶⁰While in Galatians the role of angels seems to be an argument for the weakness of the Law (3:19), here Stephen views the involvement of angels as a mark of divine interest and approval.

⁶¹Hurst notes, ". . . even if Luke wishes his readers to see the difference between 'Hebrew' and 'Hellenist' Christians as one of attitude [a concession which Hurst grants only for the sake of argument], to make the point of departure the speech's attitude toward the law is clearly impossible," Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 91-92.

change and supersede the cultus and the Law of Judaism' is hardly obvious in Acts 7 and seems to be drawn instead from the 'false' charge of 6:14."⁶²

Rejection of Jewish People and Jerusalem

In distinction to the institutions of Israel, are the people and place where they live an object of rejection? Luke answers clearly in the negative. Although many of the leadership reject Stephen's message, Luke is careful to inform us just before the speech that the word kept on spreading and that "the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem," to which he adds "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith" (6:7). Although the subsequent persecution drives many from the city, the apostles remain (8:1) and when Luke describes the church in the city some twenty years later,⁶³ it is composed of "many thousands of believers" (21:20). While some of the people may have rejected Stephen's testimony, many did not.

In addition, the leading role of the church of Jerusalem did not seem to be affected by the martyrdom of Stephen any more than it was by the martyrdom of Jesus. Luke continues to "use Jerusalem as the hub of the wheel of the church."⁶⁴ The apostles remain in Jerusalem (8:1) and the mission to Samaria is legitimized only when the apostles come from Jerusalem (8:14-17). Paul was brought there for confirmation of his calling (11:27) and Peter reported back to the apostles and brothers in Jerusalem when the door was opened to Gentiles (11:4 ff.). Clearly, the most important council in the growth of the early church which involved the place of Gentiles in the church was decided in Jerusalem (15:1-29). Thus, according to Luke the central role played by the church at Jerusalem is basically unaffected by the Stephen incident.

Rejection by the Council of Jesus and the Spread of the Word

⁶²Ibid., 98. "Wilson . . . correctly observes that while a condemnation of the Jews similar to that of Stephen in Acts 13:46, 18:6 and 20:28 is linked to a turning to the Gentiles, no such idea can be found in Acts 7. The most that can be found there is a turning *away* from the Jerusalem Jews," Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 165 referring to S. G. Wilson, *Gentile Mission*, 135-36.

⁶³This assumes a date of A.D. 35 for Stephen's martyrdom and A.D. 57 for James' description of the Church (Acts 21).

⁶⁴David A. desilva, "The Stoning of Stephen: Purging and Consolidating an Endangered Institution," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 17 (1989): 182.

The rejection of Stephen's message by the Sanhedrin is a turning point in the book, but a turning point which involves a rejection of Jesus by the leadership rather than a rejection of Judaism by Jesus. That is, this rejection of the message of Jesus involves a spreading of the word, but not a changing of the word. A modification to the message does occur in the book of Acts, but when it happens several years later⁶⁵ it is inspired by direct revelation (Acts 10–11) and confirmed by Apostolic council (Acts 15). If the scenario presented here is correct, Stephen did not lose his life because of false doctrine about the Law or the Temple any more than Jesus did but because, like Jesus, he spoke the truth about his accusers and who the Messiah was. In fact, the words which Stephen spoke were really not new and the reaction which they elicited had occurred before as well. The culmination of Stephen's speech, that (1) Jesus who is the Messiah, (2) was betrayed and murdered by the Jewish leadership, (3) now stands at the right hand of God (4) as ruler and deliverer and (5) this is acknowledged by those who do not resist the Holy Spirit but obey him, simply reflects the major points of Peter's defense delivered to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5.

Acts 5:30-32

30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Acts 7:35, 51-52, 56

52 the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.

Acts 7:56 the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God! 7:35 God now sent as both ruler and liberator

7:51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.

The results are also cast in parallel terms by Luke:

Acts 5:33

But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them.

Acts 7:54

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

The only factor which seems to have prevented the same outcome for Peter which occurred with Stephen is that before Peter's enemies could kill him Gamaliel interjected his advice (5:34-40). His

⁶⁵If Stephen's martyrdom occurs in approximately April, A.D. 35, then Peter's vision in Joppa would be about five or six years later in 40–41, with the Jerusalem council coming another eight or nine years after that in the autumn of 49.

advice, which is included by Luke, plays an important role in how Luke intends Stephen's death to be understood. Gamaliel commented that twice in the past when men who had claimed a cause were killed, their followers were scattered and the movements came to nothing (5:35-38), making it evident that these movements were not of God (5:39). Luke joyously reports that though in the death of Stephen, many believers were scattered to Judea and Samaria (8:1), "those who had been scattered went about preaching the word" (8:4). Thus, Gamaliel's words are used by Luke to confirm the divine approval of the gospel as it spreads through persecution. Thus, the Stephen incident is a significant turning point in the message of the book of Acts because it is the catalyst which ignites the spread of the message beyond Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria. It is first stated as a general truth that many were scattered and began to preach in Judea and Samaria and then Philip's ministry in Samaria is presented in chapter eight as a specific example of the evangelization stimulated by the persecution.

Acts 8:1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.

The persecution which spreads the gospel outside of Jerusalem is clearly the result of chapter seven but it is neither what Stephen was calling for nor the reason for which he was stoned. The message was the same message which Peter preached, that Jesus was the risen Messiah and salvation could be found only in Him.

Conclusion

The first issue discussed in this section was Hellenism and its relationship to Stephen. It was found that in the context of Acts the concept of Hellenism probably implies little more than the language of the speakers. Those hellenistic Jews which were mentioned in the account were found to be just as zealous and loyal to the Law as Aramaic speaking Jews. Furthermore, as he composes the story Luke goes to little effort to paint Stephen as a Hellenist, preferring to emphasize his character, power and relationship to the Spirit. Though the Hellenists may have been an identifiable group in the Church they were not a faction which heralded an *avant garde* theology. Thus, it is doubtful that Luke's

mention of certain hellenistic widows in chapter six was a clue by which he intended the reader to understand any universal overtones to Stephen's speech.

Stephen's speech was a powerful and double-edged sword which both defended him and attacked his accusers. If his speech was any indication of his theology then he was thoroughly faithful with regard to three areas: his view of Moses, the Temple and the Messiah. While his accusers were the ones who disobeyed Moses, abused the Temple and rejected the Messiah, Stephen, as a man of the Spirit, properly honored all three. His death came, like Jesus whose silhouette can be seen behind the kneeling martyr, not as a result of heresy but because of his bold speaking of the truth which cut his accusers to the heart. Stephen was a devout, Spirit-filled and Law-observant, Jewish believer, not a theological renegade.

The contribution of the Stephen incident is therefore not difficult to understand. It plays an essential part of the story which Luke would communicate about the triumphant spread of the Gospel in the midst of persecution. As a result of Stephen's death centrifugal forces are set in motion which result in the first major advance of the Gospel away from Jerusalem and Judea into Samaria. Essential to understand, however, is that the message is spread but not changed. Though Stephen did accuse his accusers of rejecting God he never taught that God had rejected them or spoke of any Gentile mission. That is the territory of later Pauline theology and is best left in its own chronological and theological setting.