

4. ACTS 6-7: THE MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN

Sequence

- Introduction 6:1-8:3
- Appointment of the Seven
- Stephen's speech
- Stephen's death
- Theological themes
- Use in the Lectionary
- Potential for reflection

Introduction 6:1-8:3

A long sequence, including the longest speech in Acts, in several parts

1. The appointment of the Seven
2. The accusation against Stephen
3. The speech of Steven
4. The death of Stephen
5. The persecution which followed

The shape is *somewhat* concentric

- A. Community and conflict
- B. Accusation
- C. Defence
- B*. Killing
- A*. Community and persecution

In reality, the defence speech is addressed not to the accusers but to the readership. We will treat the accusation and killing together.

Appointment of the Seven

Acts 6:1-7: self-contained unit, with an inclusion in v.1 and v.7.

Conflict resolution story

Follows a pattern taken from the OT

1. Problem: Acts 6:1-2. Cf. Exod 18:14–18; Num 27:12-14.
2. Solution and qualifications: Acts 6:3; Cf. Exod 18:19–23; Num 27:15–21)
3. New leadership set apart: Acts 6:5-6. Cf. Exod 18:25; Num 27:22–23.

This is the third cycle of empowered witness in the Acts:

1. Acts 1:12-4:23.
2. Acts 4:24-5:42.
3. Acts 6:1-8:4.

Table 1

	<i>Cycle 1</i>	<i>Cycle 2</i>	<i>Cycle 3</i>
Witnesses before the Council	4:3	5:17-18	6:12
Defence before the Council	4:5-12	5:27-32	7:1-54
Reactions of the Council	Deliberation: 4:16-17 Warning 4:21	Listening to Gamaliel 5:33-39 Beating 5:40	Infuriated, they stone him 7:54, 57, 58
	Warning	Beating	Martyrdom

Appointment of the Seven

Nature of the conflict?

1. Hellenists = Diaspora Jewish Christians
 2. Widows? OT tradition; context of the writing of the Pastorals (i.e. not 30 ad).
 3. Overlooked: money or food? *Trapeza* could be either or both.
 4. Role? *Diakonos* is not used (actually never in Luke-Acts); *diakonia* is, however.
- Purpose 1: to illustrate resolutions.
 - Purpose 2: to introduce Stephen and Philip, both very significant.
 - Stephen is immediately important and then Philip leads the narrative from chapter 8 onwards.
 - Curiosities.

- These seven never “serve” and two of them later actually preach.
- If the issue is access to the breaking of the bread, then the service of the table is not inferior to the service of the word.
- Acts 6:1-7: self-contained unit.
- Conflict resolution story.
- Behind the narrative lies a pattern from the OT for choosing auxiliary leadership:

Table 2

	Acts 6	Exodus 18	Numbers 27
Problem	1-2	14-18	12-14
Solution	3-4	18-23	15-21
Qualifications	3b, 5	21	18-21
Appointment	5-6	25	22-23

- We won’t delay on this, to leave space for the speech.
- Backward: threat to unity.
- Forward: Stephen, Philip, Saul.

- *Preliminaries*

Act 6:8-10

- Debate with the synagogue.
- Charges against Stephen, which are told in a way to resemble the arrest of Jesus in the Gospel.
- The areas mention are mostly important in Acts.

Act 6:11-17:1

Luke 21:5 Now while some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and offerings, Jesus said, 6 “As for these things that you are gazing at, the days will come when not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down!”

Luke 21:24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led away as captives among all nations. Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Jesus did not literally say he himself would destroy the Temple.

Customs: Lk 6:1-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6.

Stephen’s Speech

- A good example of *refutation*.
- Also a good example of *encomium* as great leaders from the past are praised.
- This turns into an implied *syncretism* or comparison, to the detriment of the present leadership.
- Different sections:
 - Abraham (vv. 2-8)
 - Joseph and the patriarchs (9-16)
 - Moses (in three parts) (17-43)
 - The Tent and the Temple (44-50)
 - Against the accusers (51-53)

Acts 7:2-8

1. Abraham

- Against the charge of blasphemy, the speech is thorough theocentric.
- Mesopotamia: perhaps to show that the call to a new last was intended from the very start.
- The whole history of the patriarch and their going down into Egypt is summarised.
- NB resettled (*hapax* in the NT)
- NB: After his father died, God made him move to this country where you now live. (Almost as if Stephen didn’t live there as well.)
- In this way, the sacred geography is already being undermined.
- Covenant of circumcision is unusual.

Acts 7:9-16

2. Joseph and Jacob

- NB it is his very brothers (“the patriarchs”) who acted against Joseph.
- The motive was jealousy—and clearly unjust and reprehensible.
- I.e., from the very start the patriarchs abandoned justice, i.e., the customs handed on from Moses.
- God showed him favour (= grace) and rescued him.
- Joseph displayed wisdom.

- The parallels with the Jesus story are evident.
- Thus Joseph was a figure who was rejected and yet who redeemed — a significant pattern found throughout the Acts (2:23–24; cf. also 2:31–33; 3:15–16; 4:10–12; 5:30–31; 10:39–40; 13:27–31; 26:23)
- NB the ancestors were buried in Samaria (shock, horror!).

Acts 7:17-29

3. Moses (17-29)

- Stephen abbreviated Exodus 1-2.
- Moses story is told in the rhetorical sequence of birth, nurture, education, a traditional triad and trope.
- Echoes of the Jesus story in Luke (see text).
- The encomium of Moses thus anticipates the greatness of Jesus.
- The story of the killing of the Egyptian is greatly expanded here.
- At the same time, details are omitted and we are left with the picture of Moses as a “doer of justice.”
- Yet, even he was not understood and was rejected .
- The *syncretis* Jesus / Moses continues.

Luke 2:52 And Jesus increased in **wisdom** and in stature, and in **favour** with God and with people.

Luke 24:19 He said to them, “What things?” “The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene,” they replied, “a man who, **with his powerful deeds and words**, proved to be a prophet before God and all the people; 20 and how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be condemned to death, and crucified him.

Acts 7:30-34 3. Moses (30-34)

- Exodus 3 is invoked.
- NB Holy ground in the context of the Temple accusation. The holiness of Jerusalem is not unique and here is relativised.
- Moses is commissioned as God’s agent. Cf. in the case of Jesus, Lk 4:18; 7:27.

Acts 7:35-43

3. Moses (35-43)

- Who made Moses ruler and deliverer (NB Emmaus).
- NB: *they* had rejected, i.e. the nation as such.
- Barret saw here the bones of a Moses hymn (possible) indicating the parallels with Jesus (evident).
- The people turned back to Egypt.
- For Luke idolatry ruled in the desert and in exile. Punishment followed.
- What about the “customs of Moses”? It is apparent that the leadership from earliest day played a leading role in abandoning Moses.
- NB the abuse of the Tabernacle.
- In recognising and not rejecting Jesus as the prophet, the Christian community shows itself to be the True Israel.

1. The man **rejected** by the people becomes ruler and **deliverer** (7:35).
2. He becomes **deliverer** through **signs** and **wonders** given by God (7:36).
3. He is both **prophet** and prototype of the Coming One (7:37).
4. He is **mediator** between God and people in the “assembly” (7:38a; note the use of *ekklēsia*, which is also commonly used to refer to the gathering of Christians).
5. He is the receiver and giver of **words of life** (7:38b; cf. 5:20).
6. His people **reject** him (7:39).

Acts 7:44-50

3. Moses (44-50)

- Tabernacle is the link word here — the “tent” was a precursor of the temple.
- Finally, we come to the actual charge made against Stephen.
- NB Joshua = Jesus in Greek.
- A prophetic critique—from the Bible and so God’s word and evaluation—follows the mention of Solomon’s Temple.
- Not: God is not present in the Temple.
- But: God is not limited to *a* house.
- Yet: by using “house” for Temple, Stephen evokes the Christian practice of the house church.
- Overall: the Deuteronomistic critique is in the air: disobedience, leading to punishment (Temple destroyed), leading to repentance. Given that Herod’s Temple was long destroyed by the time of writing...

Acts 7:51-53

- The peroratio, i.e. final appeal.
- *Enumeratio* - synthesis.
- *Amplificatio* - expansion.
- *Commiseratio* - emotion.
- Stephen goes on the offensive, with penetrating negative “labelling.”
- Previous resistance is being registered again.
- NB shift to *your* ancestors.
- Stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart (see texts).
- Rejection: Acts 3:14; cf. Luke 11:47–51 (= Matt 23:34–36); Luke 13:34–35 (= Matt 23:37-39).
- NB Holy Spirit.
- NB angel evokes face of an angel.

Exod 33:3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go up among you, for you are a **stiff-necked people**, and I might destroy you on the way.”

Exod 33:5 For the Lord had said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites, ‘You are a **stiff-necked** people. If I went up among you for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments, that I may know what I should do to you.’”

Deut 9:6 Understand, therefore, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is about to give you this good land as a possession, for you are a **stubborn** people!

Jer 4:4 Just as ritual **circumcision** cuts away the foreskin as an external symbol of dedicated covenant commitment, you must genuinely dedicate yourselves to the Lord and get rid of everything that hinders your commitment to me, people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. If you do not, my anger will blaze up like a flaming fire against you that no one will be able to extinguish. That will happen because of the evil you have done.”

Jer 6:10 I answered,
 “Who would listen
 if I spoke to them and warned them?
Their ears are so closed
 that they cannot hear!
 Indeed, what the Lord says is offensive to them.
 They do not like it at all.

Jer 9:26 That is, I will punish the Egyptians, the Judeans, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and all the desert people who cut their hair short at the temples. I will do so because none of the people of those nations are really circumcised in the Lord’s sight. Moreover, **none of the people of Israel are circumcised when it comes to their hearts.**”

Ezek 44:7 When you bring foreigners, **those uncircumcised in heart and in flesh**, into my

Deut 9:13 Moreover, he said to me, “I have taken note of these people; they are a **stubborn** lot!

Deut 9:27 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; ignore the **stubbornness**, wickedness, and sin of these people.

Lev 26:41 (and I myself will walk in hostility against them and bring them into the land of their enemies), and then their **uncircumcised hearts** become humbled and they make up for their iniquity,

sanctuary, you desecrate it—even my house—when you offer my food, the fat and the blood. You have broken my covenant by all your abominable practices.

Ezek 44:9 This is what the sovereign Lord says: No foreigner, **who is uncircumcised in heart and flesh** among all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, will enter into my sanctuary.

Table 3

Encomium	Invective
7:2-8 Abraham (obeys God; receives promise)	7:2-8 Egyptians (who enslaved Abraham’s descendants for 400 years)
7:9 Joseph (God was with him)	7:9-10 Joseph’s brothers (patriarchs who were jealous; sold Joseph, rejecting God’s representative)
7:30-39 Moses (God sends him to liberate Israelite slaves; raised up as a prophet; received living oracles.	7:35-41 Israelites in the Wilderness (reject Moses; disobedient (golden calf); reject worship of God)
7:52 Prophets (prophesied the coming of the Righteous one.	7:52 Ancestors (kill the prophets thus rejecting God’s representatives)

7:52 The Righteous One (God's appointed one)	7:52 Stephen's audience (betrayed and murder the Righteous One, God's representative)
7:54-60 Stephen (representing the church; full of faith and the Spirit; 6:5: sees vision of God, martyr's death.	7:54-60 Stephen's audience (kills Stephen, God's representative)

Acts 7:54-60

Stephen's death 7:54-60

- The clarity of Stephen achieves its effect.
- NB repetition of "the right hand of God."
- I.e. Jesus as advocated.
- NB clear parallels with the story of Jesus (see texts).
- Stephen, like Jesus in the Third Gospel, dies the death of an innocent martyr and thus takes his place as yet another example of a prophet who, because he spoke of "the coming of the Righteous One" (Acts 7:52), is the victim of "stiff-necked people" who continue to persecute the representatives of God.

Luke 22:69 But from now on *the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand* of the power of God."

Luke 23:34 [But Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."]

Luke 23:46 Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, *into your hands I commit my spirit!*" And after he said this he breathed his last.

Acts 8:1-3 (No comment on this conclusion)

Theological themes

- The Holy Spirit in the life of the church.
- The church in a non-Christian culture.
- How to become a Christian.
- The church as the continuation of the plan and purpose of God.
- The relations of Christians to the secular world.
- The unity of the one church.

Use the Lectionary

Sundays

Acts 6:1-7 (Easter 5A)

Acts 7:55-60 (Easter 7C)

Weekdays

Acts 6:1-7 (Easter 2 Saturday 1+2)

Acts 6:8-15 (Easter 3, Monday 1+2)

Acts 7:51—8:1a (Easter 3, Tuesday 1+2)

Acts 8:1b-8 (Easter 3, Wednesday 1+2)

26 December: Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59

Potential for reflection

- This is a vast reflection on the history of Israel and God's providence.
- It is an attempt to find patterns, in which "irregularities" are already part of the pattern.
- It reflects on the roots of The Way in Judaism and yet on the distinctiveness of Christianity.
- It patterns the destiny of the true witness on Jesus' own destiny.
- It is an example of costly witness.

Summary

- Introduces Stephen and Saul.
- The speech does not really address the "case" against Stephen
- It is not even addressed to his accusers but rather to the audience of the book.
- It does speak of rejection, but in a balanced way. There were always good figures who recognised and did the work of God.
- No rejection of Judaism.
- Rather, the disciples of The Way are heirs to the faithful one of the past and thus represent the True Israel of today.
- Once more, Luke does not support incipient Marcionism.

Prayer

Lord, today we celebrate the entrance of Saint Stephen into eternal glory. He died praying for those who killed him. Help us to imitate his goodness and to love our enemies.