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I. Outline and Structure

- Once again, this week's lesson covers a lot of ground. Certainly much more than we can cover in class. However, I do think it is worth while to look at the big picture. So let's take a look at an outline of the reading for this lesson. Once again, this outline is far from perfect or definitive, but I do think it allows us to think about the big picture.

- ***Outline of Acts 6–9:[1]***

- A. The Hellenists (6:1–8:40)

- a. The Commission of the Seven (6:1–7)
 - b. The Testimony of Stephen (6:8–8:3)
 - i. Mission and Trial (6:8–7:1)
 - ii. The Speech of Stephen (7:2–53)
 - iii. The Martyrdom of Stephen (7:54–8:3)
 - c. Philip and the Advance of the Word (8:4–40)
 - i. The Gospel's Triumph in Samaria (8:4–25)
 - ii. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:36–405)

- B. The Persecutor Becomes the Persecuted (9:1–31)

- a. The Conversion of Saul (9:1–19)
 - b. Saul's Preaching and Peril in Damascus (9:19–25)
 - c. Saul's Confrontations in Jerusalem (9:26–40)

- *After reading this material, what parts stuck out or resonated with you? What themes were developed in these chapters? Did you notice any themes that were carried forward from the first 5 chapters of Acts?*
- *How would you summarize all of the material? Do you see a unifying theme or themes?*
- *Would it be fair to say that these chapters chronicle or follow the Church's outward path from Jerusalem?*
- *The lesson material focuses on events involving three different men: Stephen, Philip, and Saul. What do these three men have in common? Why do you think Luke chooses to focus on stories involving these three men in this section? Why tell their stories in succession?*
- *Would it be fair to say that these stories show how the witness or the testimony of the gospel moves beyond the twelve Apostles? Do you think this is an important development*

for the early Christian community?

II. The Commission of the Seven

- Read Acts 6:1–7:

(1) And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. (2) Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. (3) Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. (4) But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. (5) And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: (6) Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. (7) And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

- It may surprise many that verse 1 is, historically, among the most debated and complicated verses in the book of Acts.[2] Much of the debate surrounds the identity of the "Grecian Jews" or "Hellenists" (Greek: *Hellenistai*) and their relation to the Aramaic speaking community (Greek: *Hebraioi*, literally "Hebraists").[3] So, who were the Hellenists?

- "Hellenist" likely mean "one who speaks Greek." Thus a range of possibilities has been suggested:[4]

1. Gentiles
2. Jewish proselytes
3. Syncretic Jewish Fringe Group (e.g., the Samaritans or Essenes)
4. Greek Speaking Jews (from the Diaspora)

- *Which identification makes the most sense?*

- Gentiles seems extremely unlikely sense the rest of Acts would be hard to reconcile with this identification. Jewish proselytes is also unlikely. The names mentioned in verses 5 and 6 do give use some information with regard to this possibility; they are all Greek Names. "Their seven Greek names need not imply that there were native Greeks. Specifying that the Antiochian Nicolaus had become a convert to Judaism ... suggests that the others were native Jews." [5] I think the most likely explanation is that it refers to Greek speaking Jews. Ben Witherington sums up the issue nicely:

If one takes all the clues that Luke gives us in Acts 6–11, it appears that in Acts 6 and 9 Luke uses the term "Hellenist" to refer to Diaspora Jews living in or around Jerusalem (or their descendants) for whom Greek is their spoken language, and who attended synagogues where Greek was the language of worship. Some of these people, such as Stephen, have become Christians.[6]

- Here we find out the "Hellenists" widows were being "overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1, NRSV). It is possible that the "Hellenists" had a relatively large population of widows. "If the 'Hellenist' widows were indeed the widows of Greek-speaking Jews, some or many of whom may have immigrated to Jerusalem in order to die in the Holy City, they may have left without support when their husbands died because their family may have been far away in the diaspora, or perhaps the Greek speaking Christians were just fewer in number and so the widows of this group has less of a natural constituency to rely on." [7]
- *What was the cause or the root of the problem? Do we ever face similar problems in the modern church?*
- *Do you think this pericope is an important followup to Luke's summary in chapter 2 after the events of the Pentecost?*

(44) And all that believed were together, and had all things common; (45) And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. (46) And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, (47) Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. Luke 2:44–47

Does it serve as an important reminder to the reader? Do you think it is important that Luke doesn't ignore the internal problem of the early church?

- *Do any of the details of the proposed solution surprise you? What do we learn about the Twelve? Peter? Do you think there is an important lesson about leadership in this pericope?*
- The names of the seven are all Greek names which suggests that all seven were "Hellenists." *Do you think this is important or notable? What does it tell us about the twelve and their leadership? What does it tell us about the Christian Community?*
- *Do you think Luke develops the idea that temporal and spiritual concerns are connected? How*

III. The Trial, Testimony, and Termination of Stephen[8]

- Luke now turns his attention to Stephen and the events that lead to the end of his life. The bulk of the narrative is comprised of Stephen's speech. His speech is the longest speech in the whole book of Acts.[9] Which is notable because Acts is a book that revolves around and is full of speeches. We certainly don't have time to look at the speech verse by verse. Hopefully we can get at some of the important aspects of the speech.
- I think it is worth noting that the opposition to Stephen comes from within the Diaspora community settled in Jerusalem ("The Latin title *libertini* ('Freedman') indicates of group of Jews of Italian origin who are now settled in Jerusalem"[10]):

(8) Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. (9) Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, (10) but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Acts 6:8–10

As a side note, I think it is interesting that in the previous verse Stephen is appointed to the seven that are in charge of food distribution for the widows. But here in verse 8 we find out that Stephen is performing miracles. *Does it feel like we are missing intermediate information about the development of the seven or Stephen? Is the somewhat abrupt transition intentional? Does it add to the story? Do you think it is evidence that Luke is building on a theme of temporal and spiritual being connected?*

- *What impressions did you have when you read the speech?*

A. Parallels

- I think one striking feature is the parallels between the final events of Stephen's life and the final events of the life Jesus Christ. I definitely think Luke writes the ending events of Stephen's life in a way that emphasizes the parallels:[11]

Event	Jesus	Stephen
Trial before high priest/Sanhedrin	Mark 14:53	Acts 6:12, 7:1
False witnesses	Mark 14:56–7 (not in Luke)	Acts 6:13
Testimony concerning the destruction of the temple	Mark 14:58 (not in Luke)	Acts 6:14
Temple "made with hands"	Mark 14:58 (not in Luke)	Acts 7:48
Son of Man saying	Mark 14:62	Acts 7:56
Charge of Blasphemy	Mark 14:64 (not in Luke)	Acts 6:11
High priest's question	Mark 14:61 (not in Luke)	Acts 7:1
Committal of spirit	Only in Luke 23:46	Acts 7:59
Cry out with a loud voice	Mark 15:34	Acts 7:60

Intercession for enemies forgiveness	Only in Luke 23:34	Acts 7:60
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- Note, that there are more parallels with Mark's version of Jesus' death than Luke's version. On the other hand, two of the parallels are only found between Luke and Acts.
- *What do you make of these parallels? Do you think they are important? Coincidence?*

B. The Charges

- Read Acts 6:11–15:

(11) Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. (12) And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, (13) And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: (14) For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. (15) And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

- The Diaspora congregation levels two charges against Stephen:
 1. Stephen is in some way against the law of Moses and wants to change it (or he believes Jesus will change it).
 2. Stephen has said bad things about the temple. He has told people Jesus will destroy it.
- *Does Stephen answer these charges in his speech? What does he have to say about the Law of Moses in his speech? What does Stephen say about the temple?*

C. Abraham, Joseph, and Moses

- *Why does Stephen start to recount stories from the Old Testament? Why are these stories important? Are the stories an important part of answering the charges level against him? Or does he tell them for some other reason?*
- Note, there are definite difference between the stories Stephen tells and the Old Testament. Some of this is because Stephen is a Hellenist. He would have used the Greek Septuagint. However, Stephen also may be paraphrasing and adding in allusions from Jewish tradition.[12]
- *Still, the preceding note does not answer the question of how these stories fit into Stephen's Speech? Do they answer the charges? Why not just skip them and get right down to business?*

- Ben Witherington points out that his crowd is hostile and in order to speak and get his point across Stephen needs to be indirect. In essence, Stephen needs to establish common ground with the hostile audience before he launches into his main argument.[13] In that sense, the history lesson really is arguing in an indirect way and is used to support Stephen's main arguments in verse 36–50. *How do the stories help Stephen build his argument indirectly?*

- Read Acts 7:1–2

(1) Then said the high priest, Are these things so? (2) And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,

and Read Acts 7:55–56

(55) But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, (56) And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

- *What do you think of this bracketing of the speech? The speech begins with a retelling of an appearance of the glory of God to Abraham and ends with the appearance of the glory of God to Stephen. Is this important? What does it emphasize? How does it connect Stephen and the early Christians with Abraham? How does it relate to the charges leveled against Stephen?*
- *Do you think Stephen is trying to show continuity between Israel's covenant with God and early Christianity? That Jesus fulfills the covenant or represents a great renewing of the covenant?*

C. The Main Argument

- Stephen's main argument is found, I think, from about 36–50. His stories build to Moses and then he uncoils his argument. Read 7:37–42:

(37) This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. (38) This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: (39) To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt, (40) Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. (41) And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. (42) Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of

heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?

- *Is Stephen accusing his audience of idolatry? Do you think he saying that his audience has built a golden calf like the Israelites did when the turned against Moses?*
- *How does the law and the temple fit into the charge of idolatry? Is Stephen suggesting that the temple has become an idol for some Israelites? Is he suggesting the law had become an idol? How?*
- Read Acts 7:43–50:

(43) Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon. (44) Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen. (45) Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David; (46) Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. (47) But Solomon built him an house. (48) Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, (49) Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? (50) Hath not my hand made all these things?

- Note, Moloch probably refers to the Canaanite–Phoenician Sun God.[14]
- *Is Stephen anti–temple?*
- I don't think this is the case at all; remember just a few chapters earlier we are told the following by Luke about the Early Christians?

(46) And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, (47) Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.
—Acts 2:46–47

- *Then what is Stephen upset about? Is he upset that the people are limiting or confining God (in their thinking) to the temple? Do we ever limit or confine God in our lives?*

Endnotes

1. Adapted from Brown, Raymond E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E.

- Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 725.
2. Gaebelin, Frank E. (editor), 1981, *The Expositor's bible Commentary: John–Acts*, Regency Reference Library, 69.
 3. Gaebelin, Frank E. (editor), 1981, *The Expositor's bible Commentary: John–Acts*, Regency Reference Library, 69.
 4. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 241.
 5. Mays, James L. (editor), 2000, *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, HarperCollins, 952.
 6. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 242.
 7. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 248.
 8. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 251.
 9. Brown, Raymond E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 740.
 10. Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1036.
 11. The list of parallels is from Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 251.
 12. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 265.
 13. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 260.
 14. Witherington, Ben, 1998, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 272.