THE SPECTRE OF STEPHEN AND THE HAUNTING OF ACTS

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ABSTRACT

Critical studies on the Acts of the Apostles have consistently suggested that this late New Testament writing takes a degree of fictive license in its narration of Christian origins. This article seeks to tease out some implications from loose ends in a writing that appears to erase some difficult memories as it attempts to give a unified, coherent view of Christian origins. The article proposes that at least two uncomfortable memories emerge from this text: one, an uneasy memory for contemporaries of the writer—the murder of Stephen; and two, an ineluctable memory for Christian tradition concerning some early pejorative evaluation of contemporary Judaism. The Acts strategy of ameliorating difficult memories occurs at the cost of erasing the complexity and memory of the internal tensions involved.

Who killed Stephen?

Who killed Stephen? Who was involved? On the surface, the documentation conveys an unequivocal case, with the Jewish Council made entirely responsible for the martyrdom and ensuing persecution (Acts 6:12, 15; 7:1, 54-58; 8:1). On closer examination, however, this is not so evident. Indeed, there are some surprises in the complex picture that emerges. The aim of this article is not to establish "what happened," but rather, the possibility of an alternative scenario, other than that which is inscribed in the rhetorical overtures of the narrative. Whether these events happened this way is a moot point. My thesis is that the Acts of the Apostles can be read against its own rhetoric, to make explicit an inscribed memory of some early traumatic events and tensions—a possibility emerging from tensions in the text. In terms of method, this thesis applies

1 However, Lüdemann suggests that Stephen's death appears to be the consequence of "lynch law" rather than an act of the Council, which it could not do under Roman occupation law [Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts [London: SCM, 1989], 92].

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to Acts a Derridean strategy—that texts inevitably contest their self-attested claims, Derrida’s “dangerous supplement”—that there is a surplus in texts that is integral to a text’s claims, which also contest those very claims. The presence of dissonance within a text is ineluctable, given that the privileging of a centre in a text’s production does not occur in a homogenised context or heritage, and is therefore prone to tearing as it differs with itself. Careful reading is able to tease out torn loose ends, in order to see what alternative stories can unravel. Further, a text is necessarily iterable, divided between its event and representation to other readers. It cannot be made to speak univocally. It is always haunted by its other. Derrida suggests that witness is divided between reception or experience (then) and “attestation” (now). Memory carries the iterability of tradition in the temporality of living, with all the possibilities of doubt, precarisation, embellishment, and necessary interpretation being introduced into conscientious testimony.

Recognising that in the quest for an original context, “context” never being “saturated” or complete, and that context is always

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6 Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” Limited Inc, 5-12. Reading can invoke correlations between writer and language, other than those the writer may have intended, including those that are excluded (Derrida, Of Grammatology, 159, 163-164).


being modified and contested through its reiteration in further representation, a brief sketch will first be drawn from some interstitial gaps in Acts, without prejudice for or against other suggestions for Christian origins, prior to demonstrating these methodological perspectives.

Tensions between Hebrew and Hellenist believers in Jerusalem became intense, surfacing explicitly over funds distributed to the poor. The Hebrew leadership controlled the resources and manipulated them in order to gain some theological leverage over the Hellenists. As tensions between Hebrew speaking and Greek speaking believers solidified into open conflict, an alternative leadership emerged among the Greeks—Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas.

Stephen’s leadership became the focus of Hebrew bitterness toward the Hellenists. His theological and exegetical skills were insurmountable. His arguments for a different understanding of the temple and law in the messianic movement created a degree of consternation and frustration among some Diaspora Jews who charged him with speaking blasphemously about the holy place and law. Hellenist God-fearers had always been familiar with the demands of Jewish cultural tradition, but some in the Jesus movement (i.e. Stephen), through their interpretation of the Scriptures, were questioning fundamental tenets relating to law

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11 “Hellenists” (6:1) are Greek speaking Jews from the Diaspora (Ἐλληνοσημίτης); Johnson, Acts, 105. “Hellenists” were “those who could speak effectively only Greek...” and “were a language and culture sub-group within Jerusalem...”: Dunn, Acts, 81.
CURKPATRICK: SPECTER OF STEPHEN

and temple. This did not meet with approval among the Hebrew believers.

The newly emerging sect of messianist believers within Judaism attracted attention from the Council, which sided with the Hebrew believers with their prevailing interpretation of two central motifs of Judaism—allegiance to temple and Torah. This was not surprising. The ferocity with which they opposed the Hellenist believers was. Stephen was summarily executed after a particularly vitriolic debate. The complicity of Hebrew believers is a moot but tantalising issue not easily dismissed. (One scholar locates the blame for Stephen’s death with the Jews, and makes the incredible suggestion that “their attempts to kill him indicates they were certainly not Christians.”) The Hellenist believers were scattered in a brief, but brutal persecution. The Hebrew believers, led by James, Peter and the Apostles, remained in Jerusalem. Many Hellenist believers moved to Antioch in Syria, where they began to develop a movement within the vision of Stephen.14

More than one story to the story

There appears to be more than one story to the Acts story. Not only are there significant differences between Acts and Paul’s writings,15 but there are also threads of several stories running

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12 The Jerusalem believers meet, teach, and pray in the temple (3:1; 5:12, 42). Haenchen notes that “the stumbling-block could not have been the preaching of Jesus as Messiah, for James the brother of the Lord was able to maintain this doctrine in Jerusalem right up until year 60” (The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 267). Cf. Dunn (Acts, 89): “The preaching of Peter had called no vital principle of Israel’s religion or heritage in question.” Further, “the support of the many priests... (6:7), indicates a movement wholly in accord with Israel’s central traditions.” Citing some Christological motifs that are frequently assumed to be the source of conflict between early Christians and Jew, Sanders notes that “it was indeed Jesus – early Jewish Christians of various stripes – who accepted all these beliefs” (Schismatics, 83). Acts and 1 Peter are the only New Testament writings to refer to followers of Christ as “Christians” (11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The term “Christians” was used by opponents, and only became a self-designation in the second century: see Lüdemann, Acts, 136. For convenience only, this article will refer to early believers as Christians.


15 Exactly what the writer of Acts knew from Pauline tradition (whether little, adapted, or direct tradition) is a contested issue: Lüdemann, Acts, 6-8 (see pp. 1-9 for an evaluation of “The Historical Value of the Acts of the Apostles”). Hengel
through the *Acts* document itself, which may betray a certain *cover-up*. One can also posit an ensuing tradition of *cover-ups* with the propensity for explanation of narrative gaps by commentative tradition. For example, with reference to Acts 6:1-15, Johnson says that there is "a gap between what the story seems to be saying, and what it is actually doing within the narrative." He uses terms such as "gap," "puzzling," "puzzlement," "discrepancy," "disjointedness of the account," "problem of this passage," but rather than seeing more than one story, seeks to ameliorate its difficulties by positing an explicable, unified narrative.  

At no point in the *Acts* narrative are the apostles depicted initiating the dominical apostolic commission to a mission encompassing the nations (1:8b). Whatever the *Acts' memory*, every development of mission until the Gentile mission of Paul, whether by intention or crisis, meets with response not initiative from the (Jerusalem) apostles, who eventually give their apostolic approval. At every point in the narrative, the apostles (only once referred to as "the Twelve" after their completion in Acts 1) respond to developments that have already occurred. None of the apostles initiates this mission. Others do so. The apostles only verify these *divine initiatives* after the fact. In short, however, there is a major schism in Jerusalem—some flee, some stay. In the face of a tradition of schism over the terms of Gentile inclusion, the writer turns this incorrigible memory into an "apposite" virtue, with legitimation of Gentile mission occurring as "the will of God." The apostles remain in Jerusalem while persecution has decimated the community. For much of the story, those who stay are checking up on those who have left concerning the movement's spread to the Gentiles. What is

(Acts, 38) suggests two variables in the relationship between Acts and Paul: he describes Acts as "incomplete, fragmentary and misleading," and yet pertaining to Paul that it is "almost impossible to put Paul and his work in a chronological and geographical setting." The relationship between them does not amount to mutual explanation, but ineluctable relativity.


20 Sanders is unequivocal: "[w]e must remain incredulous in the face of an account that tells us that a persecution against the church took place that left the leaders untouched but drove the entire rank and file out of the city." What are we to make of the apostles being in Jerusalem throughout the entire narrative? For example, late in the narrative, it is in Jerusalem that James informs Paul of his precarious reputation of speaking against the law and circumcision among Diaspora Jews, and encourages him to ameliorate his compromised reputation (21:21-26). What then are we to make of such persistent tensions in Acts? What are we to make of the spectre of Stephen that lingers over much of the narrative in the movement from Jerusalem to the nations, and the narrative's explicit emphases countering the implicit theological horizon of Jerusalem apostles?

There are sufficient loose ends to tell an alternative story from Acts, which revolves around Jewish identity and the perceived threat of Hellenism. Memories of the "Maccabean crisis" nearly two centuries earlier, and the influence of Hellenistic culture in Palestine (1 Macc. 1),22 not to mention a memory of the temple's defilement,23 were always present. Hebraist true believers, whether from Palestine or the Diaspora, were aspi-

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20 Johnson's explanation (Acts, 141) is unsatisfactory: apostles "whom the narrative has already established as untouchable," are untouched by the persecution. Haenchen suggests (Acts, 268) that the Hebrew's "immunity from the persecution shows that they did not adopt" the Hellenists' kerygma. Dunn's explanation (Acts, 103-104) is that "the apostles, by remaining in Jerusalem when all the rest of the church had been scattered, maintained the continuity of the new movement with Jerusalem and its beginnings there."

21 Sanders, Schismatics, 2-3.


23 Circa 167 BCE, Daniel 8:9; 1 Macc. 1:20-23; 2 Macc. 5:15-21a. Hengel (Acts, 73) observes, "The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians... remained more deeply rooted in the religious tradition of Palestine, which from the time of the Maccabees inevitably regarded any attack on Torah and Temple as sacrilege." Howard Clark Kee suggests that "temple-oriented Judaism [was] concerned primarily to preserve Palestinian land and culture" (Good News to the Ends of the Earth: The Theology of Acts [London: SCM/TPP, 1999], 48).