

## STEPHEN'S SPEECH: A POSSIBLE MODEL FOR LUKE'S HISTORICAL METHOD?

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Stephen's speech is different from the other speeches in Acts. It is longer and more polemical; it is more apologetic than evangelistic. Other speeches are organized around the Christocentric kerygma, Stephen mentions Jesus by name only after his speech has been interrupted and his audience transformed into a lynch mob. In the Acts speeches of Peter and Paul the OT is cited only by brief quotations or through allusions to events or predictions believed fulfilled by Jesus. In contrast most of Stephen's speech comprises a survey of almost a millenium of OT history and used both quotations and descriptions of OT events, not merely to support his argument, but as his primary method for presenting it. This historical element in Acts 7 invites study, not only of the author's theology and place in early Christianity,<sup>1</sup> but also of his historical method.

In examining the historiography of Stephen's speech the researcher finds himself in an unusually favorable position. Since most sources used by ancient historians have perished the modern student is usually limited only to tentative and conjectural conclusions about the writer's attitudes toward his task and his methods of handling sources at his disposal. However, the major source for the history related in Stephen's speech is the Old Testament. Consequently, in this case we can compare the historian's product (the Acts 7 speech) with his primary source (the OT) and come to some fairly definite conclusions about how at least this one ancient historian practiced his craft.

To further set the scene we should note that this investigation is inter-related with two broader areas of enquiry, ancient historiography in general and the historical methods and reliability of Luke-Acts in the NT. Regarding the former a popularly held generalization assumes that ancient reporters did not have modern concerns for accuracy. They were motivated by desires to propogate a particular point of view, to please a wealthy patron, or to use history as a stage on which to display their own inventiveness, rhetorical or literary skills. As a result truth, in the sense of a reliable account of what actually happened, was either ignored, distorted, or obscured in their writings.

In contemporary NT studies a growing number of students, led by Hans Conzelmann and Ernst Haenchen,<sup>2</sup> hold that Luke-Acts is the product of this ancient attitude toward reporting the past. They regard "Luke" as a theologian who used the framework of history to address the questions

1. I have dealt with these matters in "The Church of Jerusalem, A.D. 30-100: An Investigation of the Growth of Internal Factions and the Extension of its Influence in the Larger Church" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Manchester, England: The University of Manchester, 1969), pp. 98ff., 242ff.

and needs of the Church of his own day (the end of the first Christian century) and to present his own view of the nature of Christianity. To this end "Luke" compressed, expanded, selected, slanted, and created historical records to the degree that while his writings accurately convey the faith of one part of the primitive Christian community, they do not portray a reliable picture of the events and developments they purport to relate.

I am in disagreement with some basic implications of both of these attitudes. First, I question the implication that there was some pervasive atmosphere or controlling spirit which encompassed all ancient historical writers. In fact some ancient writers themselves, Thucydides (ca. 460-400 B.C.) and Lucian of Samosata (ca. A.D. 125-280) among others, criticized some of their contemporaries for faulty methods and inaccurate reports. Careful studies by modern scholars<sup>3</sup> demonstrate that there were indeed ancient historians who were more interested in form than in accuracy and more concerned with making an impression upon readers than in transmitting reliable information. There were also ancients who were committed to standards of historical research and writing approaching those of the modern period.

I am also bothered by the assumption that Luke was not concerned with history and that being a theologian (or preacher, as C. K. Barrett and Bertil Gartner have probably more accurately classed him<sup>4</sup>) precluded the possibility of his dealing honestly and accurately with the data at his disposal. The very fact that Luke wrote in the form and related the facts he did clearly indicates that he did have some historical interest. Furthermore, the degree of accuracy of a report depends upon the reliability of a reporter's sources and upon the way he handles them, not on whether the reporter is a trained historian, a theologian, physician, politician, fisherman, or whatever.

Here I desire only to call attention to two obvious features of the historical method employed in Stephen's speech. I do so in an attempt to determine if the speech gives evidence of the influence of a general lack of concern for accuracy among ancient reporters of historical data. I also want to see how the adaptation of material from a given source (in this case the OT) in order to present a distinct point-of-view and to communicate a message affected the faithfulness with which the general picture and the details of the source are related in this particular report. But, in order to see clearly

2. See Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, Geoffrey Buswell, trans. (London: 1960) and *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Tubingen: 1963) and Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, R. McL. Wilson, trans. (Philadelphia: 1971) and "The Book of Acts as Source Material for the History of Early Christianity," *Studies in Luke-Acts, Essays Presented in Honor of Paul Schubert*. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn, eds. (Nashville: 1966), pp. 258ff.
3. A. W. Mosley, "Historical Reporting in the Ancient World," *New Testament Studies*, XII (1965), pp. 10ff.; cf. Harry E. Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, 2d ed. (New York: 1962); R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: 1946); James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, Vol. I (New York: 1942); and Robert C. Dentan, ed. *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: 1965).
4. C. K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: 1961), pp. 52 ff.; Bertil Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: 1955), p. 7.

the author's method we need to note generally what the speech is all about.

Elsewhere<sup>5</sup> I have attempted to show that Stephen's speech is a direct response to the charges made against him—that Stephen spoke “blasphemous words against Moses and God,” that he never ceased “to speak words against this holy place and the law,” and that “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and change the customs which Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:11-14). In response the speech seeks to establish four points: (1) that Christianity is not out of accord with the historical faith of Israel but rather the legitimate continuation and fulfillment of it; (2) that the presence and activity of God cannot be limited to a single geographical area such as the land of Canaan or the Jerusalem temple as implied by the attitude and activities of Stephen's Jewish contemporaries; (3) that the history of Israel was marked by a long succession of acts of rebellion against God and his messengers, the betrayal and murder of “The Righteous One” (Jesus) was only the latest and most serious in this series; and (4) that Jesus, a more-than-Jewish Messiah, the Son of man (cf. Dan. 7:13-14), is even now ruling in heaven as the *universal* Lord.

The most obvious method used to make these points is a summarization of OT history from the call of Abraham to the construction of the temple under Solomon. It is a highly selective and compressed summary. A surprising amount of detail not germane to Stephen's immediate purpose is included. At the same time many facts, such as all but the most allusive reference to the plagues and passover in Egypt and any reference to the period of the Judges and the reign of Saul, are omitted. The major events and details which are included are carefully chosen and presented to indicate convincingly the accuracy of Stephen's interpretation of Israel's past history.

The speech demonstrates that God's promise to Abraham was not primary territorial. In fact the patriarchs actually had “. . . no inheritance. . . not even a foot's length. . .” (vs. 5) in Canaan and were forced to buy burial space in “the Promised Land” (cf. vs. 16). Those specific geographical locations which are mentioned document that on significant occasions God revealed himself outside the boundaries of Canaan—to Abraham in Mesopotamia (vss. 2ff.); to Joseph in Egypt (vss. 9ff.); to Moses in the wilderness (vss. 30ff.); that it was in Egypt Israel grew and experienced God's deliverance (vss. 17ff., 35ff.); that even the Law was given, not in Canaan, but at Mt. Sinai (vs. 38). Thus the speaker implies that any place God chooses to reveal himself is “holy ground” (cf. vs. 33).

The theme of Hebrew rejection and rebellion against God is highlighted both by the material selected and by the way OT themes, institutions, and passages are compared and contrasted, brought together, summarized, and emphasized in the Acts 7 speech. This appears to be the reason for specifically stating that those who sold Joseph into Egypt were *patriarchs* (vs. 9). The speaker reminds that Israel rejected her founding-hero Moses both in Egypt (vss. 27ff., 35) and in the wilderness (vss. 39ff.) and that rejecting Moses involved a rejection of God (vs. 39ff.). The

5. “The Church of Jerusalem,” pp. 104ff.

Golden Calf incident (vss. 40f.) was but the first of many occasions of actual national idolatry. Amos 5:25f. (quoted in Acts 7:42f. in a basically Septuagintal form<sup>6</sup>) summarizes a long history of Israelite idolatry. This included worship of Canaanite deities (represented by Moloch) during the periods of the Judges and early monarchy and worship of Mesopotamian planetary powers (such as Saturn-Rephan) in the later monarchy and early captivity. The tabernacle (*skene*) and temple-house (*oikos*) are set against each other in such a way that distinct preference is expressed for the former.<sup>7</sup> Distain for Solomon's act of building the temple is implied by describing the structure with the derogatory term "made with hands" (*cheiropoietos* is usually as a synonym for "idols" in the LXX)<sup>8</sup> and crediting the affirmation of the "non-confinability" of God to Isaiah (66:1-2) alone although the same sentiments are credited to Solomon in I Kings 8:27 and II Chron. 6:16.

More could be said about the way OT history is handled in Stephen's speech. Additional data would only further indicate that the speech selects, organizes, summarizes, and generally manipulates (if this word may be used without negative nuance) OT material so as to create the impressions and to make the points desired by its author. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that Stephen's summary of OT history does *not distort* that history. The essential facts and proper sequence of the portion of the OT summarized are preserved in the Acts 7 speech. Even if one had never seen the OT records he could get some idea, and a reliable idea at that, of the history of Israel from Abraham to Solomon by reading Stephen's speech.

A second feature of the historical method of the Acts 7 speech involves supplementing the basic source by the occasional additional of details not found in it. Verse 22 says that Moses was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds." This statement is not in the OT but reflects attitudes about Moses found in such contemporary Jewish Hellenist writers as Philo (*Life of Moses* 1:20ff.) and Josephus (*Antiquities* II:9, 6[224ff.]). The suggestion that even before his flight from Egypt Moses knew and understood his mission as God's deliver (vs. 25) is absent from the OT but the claim that Moses had special knowledge and understanding on at least one other occasion (the Golden Calf incident) is preserved in ancient tradition (cf. Barnabas 4:8; 14:3). The angelic mediation of the Law (vs. 53; cf. 30, 35) is not found in the Masoretic text of the OT but is implied in the LXX of Deut. 33:2, a number of non-canonical Jewish writings,<sup>9</sup> and is mentioned in Gal. 3:19 and Heb. 2:2. The number 75 instead of 70 members of the family of Jacob who

6. See F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: 1952), p. 174; Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 114ff.

7. Cf. Marcel Simon, *St. Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church* (New York: 1958), pp. 51ff.; and "St. Stephen and the Jerusalem Temple," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, II (1951), pp. 127ff; Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 116ff.

8. Simon, "Stephen and the Temple," *JEH* II (1951), pp. 133ff.; Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 119ff.

9. Jubilees I:27-2:1; Testament of the XII Patriarchs, *Test. of Dan.* 6:2 Philo, *On Dreams* I:141-143; Josephus *Ant.* XV:5, 3 [136].

went into Egypt (vs. 14) has textual and traditional evidence behind it.<sup>10</sup> The most difficult variation between Stephen's speech and the OT is its locating Abraham's burial place at Shechem instead of Hebron; this is the probable result of conflating the burial accounts of Abraham and Joseph.

It is noteworthy that the instances at which the author of Stephen's speech departs from or adds to the OT account of the history he relates are not numerous. When he does so he is probably reflecting knowledge of a variant source or tradition. He certainly gives no evidence of having composed freely or invented details to embellish the history he records.

I suggest that this brief look at the use of sources by the author of the Acts 7 speech indicates a concern for accuracy in reporting information found in the OT. This concern is reflected in his faithfulness to the over-all outline of his source and to details found in it. Departures from the outline involve omissions but not additions or changes of sequence. Additions to or changes in details found in the source are apparently made only if there is some tradition to provide authority for the alteration. As stated earlier, the fact that the author's interests are polemical and theological and not primarily historical has not caused him to compromise the accuracy with which he reports the data found in his source.

Now, in what sense may this investigation possibly assist in assessing Luke's use of his sources? Scholars disagree about the nature of the relationship between Luke and the present form of Stephen's speech.<sup>11</sup> The presence of the speech in Acts is sufficient to establish some connection between it and Luke. Furthermore, Luke has in common with the author of this speech much not evident in other speeches in Acts. Both write from the point-of-view and with the purpose of a theologian-preacher. Both use the form and content of history to present their views and take a Salvation-history view of the events with which they deal. Both have a background in Hellenistic culture and appear to have been influenced by Hellenistic historical models in shaping their accounts.<sup>12</sup> Both intend to portray the Jewish roots but also the universal scope of Christianity.

It is tempting to suggest that Luke and the author of Stephen's speech may share similar points of view about the nature of Christianity and ways of handling historical data. Of course Stephen's speech is much too short to make possible conclusive establishment of a connection between it and any particular school of ancient historiography. Yet, there are some interesting parallels between the historical methods observable in Luke-Acts and the two features of Stephen's historiography observed above.

For the present let us accept the conclusion of source criticism that the

10. See Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 165.

11. Opinions range from the assumption that Luke incorporated into Acts an unchanged verbatim manuscript of Stephen's speech to the opinion that the speech is an original composition by Luke himself. See Simon, *St. Stephen and the Hellenists*, pp. 39 ff.; Johannes Bihler, *Die Stephanusgeschichte im Zusammenhang der Apostelgeschichte* (Munich: 1963), pp. 10ff., 90ff.; Martin H. Scharlemann, *Stephen: A Singular Saint* (Rome: 1968), pp. 22ff.; Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 98ff.; and recent commentaries on Acts, especially those by F. F. Bruce and Ernst Haenchen.

12. Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech*, pp. 7ff.

Third Gospel is dependent upon Mark or a source similar to it.<sup>13</sup> Luke, in his Gospel, faithfully follows the major features of the Marcan outline in sequence and in many details. However, as the Acts 7 speech selects, compresses, and generally edits its OT source, so also Luke appears to have used Mark in a similar way. Stephen probably limited additions and alterations to his basic source to materials for which he found some established authority other than his own creativity. The presence of "Q" material in Luke suggests that he also had at least one source from which he supplemented Mark. Some investigators also believe that Luke had additional sources, either oral or written, from which he drew his "L" material; but lack of information prohibits dogmatism at this point.

A comparison of the immediate post-conversion activities of Paul as recorded in Acts with allusions to these events in the Epistles shows both agreement and variation.<sup>14</sup> I am not suggesting any literary dependence between Acts and the Epistles but merely observing that Luke's reporting method may here again be similar to that of Stephen's speech. The geographical movement and outline from Damascus to Jerusalem and then out of Jerusalem is the same in both Acts and in the Epistles. Both mention opposition in Damascus and a dramatic escape as the prelude to the Jerusalem visit. Yet here again Luke, if he or his source knew of Paul's Arabian sojourn (Gal. 1:17), omits or condenses in order to focus attention upon events more directly relevant to his primary interests.

In Acts as a whole, Luke, like the author of the Stephen speech, uses historical incidents and quotations as the backbone of his preaching. Luke, like Stephen, quotes the OT and possibly other written sources, in translation. Both Stephen and Luke focus their historical accounts around particular hero-individual. Acts, like Stephen's speech, makes no effort to present a complete history of the period it describes but appears to have recorded only selected incidents, compressed and summarized historical material. However, Luke's carefulness and accuracy in relating relatively unimportant details, as indicated by the generally favorable verdict on those points where his accuracy can be checked,<sup>15</sup> suggest that he may have treated his sources for Acts in much the same way as Stephen used the OT. As Stephen occasionally included materials not found in his "primary" source and which appear to be of minimal importance, so too Acts may

13. For discussions on the sources and the handling of them in the Gospel of Luke see B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*. Rev. ed. (New York: 1930), other literature on Synoptic origins, and recent commentaries on Luke. Of special relevance is F. C. Burkett, "The Use of Mark in the Gospel According to Luke," *The Beginnings of Christianity*. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, eds. (London: 1922), Vol. II, pp. 106ff.
14. See F. F. Bruce, "The Epistles of Paul," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley, eds. (New York: 1963), pp. 927ff.; cf. Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 24ff.
15. Cf. the archaeological researches of Sir William Ramsay, especially his demonstrations of Luke's accurate knowledge of local usage; *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*. 14th ed. (London: 1920), Chap. 1; *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: 1915), etc. More recently H. J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* (London: 1955), has shown how well Acts fits into its setting in the ancient world.

contain traditional reports which were not commonly regarded as significant as most of the data it contains (eg., inclusion of the *agraphon* of Jesus in Acts 20:35).

It seems to me that Luke and the author of Stephen's speech employ some of the same significant concepts and methods of historical writing. Indeed, Stephen's speech may provide a model for understanding the way the longer and more complicated Luke-Acts documents have been compiled. Both by extension and on the basis of some (although not conclusive) evidence it seems possible that Luke, in proclaiming his view of Christian theology, dealt as faithfully with his sources for the history of the early Church as the author of Stephen's speech did with the OT.

Much more study of the historiography of Stephen's speech and of that of Luke must be undertaken before more than tentative suggestions can be put forward. Nevertheless, if the proposals implied here prove to be at least generally correct they could have an important influence upon the direction of future studies and attitudes toward the reliability of Luke's historical reports.

Acts might still be looked upon as a document whose primary purpose is more theological than historical. It may still be thought to contain a particularized, incomplete, and possibly even slanted portrayal of the history of the early Church. But, at the same time the author-editor could, with reason, be classed among those ancient historians who handled their sources carefully and with integrity. Thus the influence of Redaction Criticism, and especially concentration upon the theology of Luke as a determining factor in assessing the reliability of Acts, would be considerably lessened.<sup>16</sup> For, it seems to me, the discovery of solid grounds for assuming Luke's basic personal honesty in handling his sources would free the investigator from the temptation to make subjective judgments about the alleged influences of Luke's possible motives. Assessments of the historical reliability of Acts would, and I think properly, then be returned to that more objective part of historical criticism which, on the basis of both internal and external evidence, seeks to determine the identity and quality of those sources available to Luke.

16. I do not imply a denegation of Redaction Criticism as an interpretative tool. I only question its appropriateness for determining the historical reliability of accounts reported by a writer who gives evidence of handling his material with care and integrity.