

Acts 6-9

Acts 6:1-7

- Another incident that threatens the unity and growth of the early Christ movement:
 - Conflict between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews
 - Continuous growth leads to uneven distribution of resources
- Transition from Peter's ministry to other apostles

Acts 6:1-7

- Εν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις πληθυνόντων τῶν μαθητῶν ἐγένετο
- How to translate the participle πληθυνόντων (increasing)?
- “when the number of disciples was increasing” – temporal
- “because the number of disciples was increasing” - causal

Acts 6:1-7

- Issue: uneven distribution of food leading to complain
- Who: Hellenistic widows were being neglected (παρεθεωροῦντο – imperfect, suggesting this has been going on for some time), but not the Jewish Palestinian widows
- Problem: how to reconcile with earlier reports that no one has any needs (4:34, etc)?

Acts 6:1-7

- Why the neglect?
 - Deliberate?
 - Oversight?
 - Palestinian-Hellenistic divide?

Acts 6:1-7

- Action plan: appoint 7 people to care for the Hellenistic widows
- Conditions of the 7: good reputation and filled with the Holy Spirit
- 7 chosen – all have Greek names
- Stephen introduced.
 - Luke has a way of mentioning a name, and then develops the narrative of the person later on. Cf. the way Paul is introduced as approving Stephen's death.

Acts 6:1-7: Reflection

- Charitable assistance goes hand in hand with prayer and proclamation
- Choosing of the 7 – the emphasis is not merely on the spiritual aspect (filled with the holy Spirit) but also their good reputation.
- Choosing of 7 – reflects shared governance, distribution of responsibilities, and hierarchy in the church

Acts 6:1-7: Reflection

From Acts 1-6, lists references to several different internal problems or tensions that the early church had to resolve. In a few words describe the problem in each of those references.

- Contemporary believers often view “the NT church” or “the Early Church” as more or less an ideal church – do you agree, or not? Why?

Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- Stephen – one of the 7 appointed
- The speech of Steven
- The first martyr
- The persecution of the church
- The spreading of the gospel from Jerusalem to other parts of the world

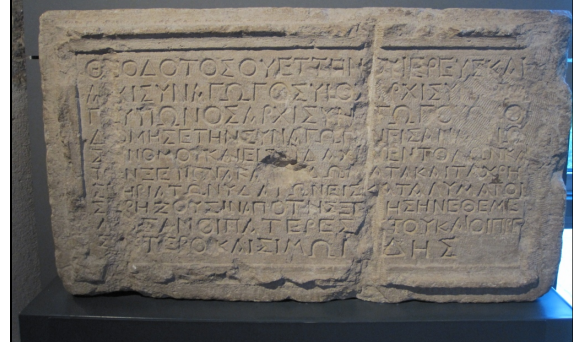
Acts 6:8-7:60: Stephen

- Stephen’s ministry:
 - “full of grace and power”
 - “performing great wonders and signs”
- Why do you think Luke does not describe Stephen’s ministry and involvement in the distribution of food among the Hellenistic widows?

Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- Stephen’s ministry provokes some diaspora members of the local synagogue of freedmen
- Social status?
- Evidence of synagogue in Jerusalem – see the Theodotos Inscription, the son of Vettenos (Latin name) – suggesting that this family probably returned from Rome to live in Jerusalem

Israeli Museum, 1st century BCE
Theodotos Inscription, discovered near the southern part of Temple Mount in 1913.



Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- Theodotus Inscription:
 “Theodotus son of Vettenuis, priest and synagogue leader, son of a synagogue leader, grandson of a synagogue leader, rebuilt this synagogue for the reading of the Law and the teaching of the commandments, and the hostelry, rooms and baths, for the lodging of those who have need from abroad. It was established by his forefathers, the elders and Simonides.”

Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- Note the function of the synagogue that includes lodging – does it include distribution of food?
- “There were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem and each had ... a school for Scripture and an academy for Mishnah study, and all were destroyed by Vespasian.” (Talmud, Megillah 3b)

Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- The debate with Stephen – why the debate? Their faith was betrayed by the early Christ followers?
- The Hellenistic Jews could not withstand Stephen’s wisdom in debate

Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- Not wanting to admit defeat, they believe that what Stephen says is tantamount to heresy and blasphemy
 - Similar charge meted against Jesus and Peter, now used against Stephen
 - Stephen dragged to face the Sanhedrin

Acts 6:8-7:1: Discussion

Acts 6-7 records the 3rd time Sanhedrin hears the case involving the early Christ movement

1. What are the similarities and differences can you see in the meeting of the Sanhedrin in Acts 6-7 compared to Acts 4 and 5?
2. What do you think Luke is trying to convey with the 3rd meeting of the Sanhedrin?

Acts 6:8-7:1: Stephen

- False witnesses are called
- The charges: destroying the temple and changing (not abolishing) the custom of Moses

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- Stephen's speech is the longest in Acts
- Biblical theology?
 - From Abraham, → Joseph → Moses → temple
 - Story of Israel as a story of God raising up leaders by giving them land, Law, temple, but Israel turns away from God to idolatry
 - Dense references to the OT

Acts 7:2-8:3: Reflection

- Stephen's speech outlines Israel's history from Abraham to Solomon. What is Stephen getting at throughout this speech? What is his point?

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- Note 7:54 is not the end of Stephen's speech, but the end of speech is 7:56 with Jesus at the right hand of God when he was interrupted by Jewish leaders. 7:54 is not an interruption on Stephen's speech but merely highlighting the response of the people!
 - Cf how various translation truncated this section: ESV, NASB, NET, NIV, NRSV, etc.
 - This is unfortunate!

Acts 7:2-8:3: Discussion

1. Why do you think Stephen presents Israel in a negative light in his speech?
2. How is Stephen's negative critique of Israel similar/different to the Deuteronomistic perspective of several OT passages (eg. 2 Kings 17:7-20; 2 Chro 36:14-16)?
3. Why do you think Stephen practises "distancing" in his speech when he uses second person pronouns ("you" instead of "us") in addressing the audience (see 7:4 the land "in which you are living"; 7:38, the Law God gave "to you)? What is the significance of this "distancing"?

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- Some highlights:
 - God as the actor
 - Fulfillment of God's promises (count the number of times God's promises are fulfilled!)
 - God uses both his people and pagans to fulfill his promises and plans
 - The rebellion of the people of God
 - Typology – eg., Moses rejected by the people is chosen by God is linked to Jesus

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- Some highlights:
 - 7:51-53 – Stephen's charge to the Sandedrin
 1. Stiff-necked people
 2. Uncircumcised in hearts and ears
 3. Resisted to the Holy Spirit
 4. Killed the prophets
 5. Betrayed and murdered Jesus
 6. Failed to observe the Law
 → No different from their forefathers.

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- 7:54 – Response: “infuriated and gnashed their teeth”
- 7:55-56 – climax and end of speech
 - Stephen sees the exalted Jesus
 - Jesus is the Resurrected Messiah
 - Jesus is God

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- 7:57-58 – the judgement on Stephen: stoning
 - The dramatic response: “they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.
 - Covering their ears – suggests blasphemy has been uttered
 - Rushed to Stephen – suggests that they may have lost their sanity like an uncontrollable mob.
 - Note that no verbal verdict was given, but the verdict was reflected in the actions of the Sanhedrin

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- Stephen's death
 - Stephen was dragged outside the city
 - Stephen was stoned (ἐλιθοβόλου) to death on account of blasphemy –imperfect tense, suggesting the stoning went on for some time
 - Stephen's final prayer
 - The Lord to receive his spirit
 - Forgiveness for his prosecutors
 - Follows the example of Jesus

Acts 7:2-8:3: Stephen's Speech

- 7:58; 8:1, 3 – Saul is mentioned, suggesting that Luke will have more to say later. He is instrumental in persecuting the believers
- 8:1 – persecution against the church; resulting in scattering of the Christ-followers from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, but the apostles remained in Jerusalem.
 - Important to note that the apostles did not run away – persecution did not break up the church in Jerusalem

Reflections

1. Why did Saul persecute the believers?
2. The Sanhedrin is charged with disobedience in Stephen's speech. Reflect on the roles of leaders in the church today Are we guilty of the same?
3. If Israel's history is the history of the church, what lessons can we learn from Israel's disobedience and rejection of God's messengers?
4. What can we learn from the persecution carried out against the early Christ followers?

Acts 8-11

- Acts 8 marks the beginning of new section where the gospel is now spread beyond Jewish territory to the Gentiles as a result of persecution – cf. Acts 1:8 geographical expansion
 - Samaritans and an Ethiopians (Acts 8:4-40)
 - Call/conversion of Paul to be apostle to the gentiles (Acts 9:1-30)
 - Conversion of Cornelius (Acts 9:31-11:18)
 - Gentile mission HQ in Antioch (Acts 11:19-30)

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- 2 episodes:
 1. Mission to the Samaritans
 2. Mission to the Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Philip traveled to Samaria.
- Shechem at the foot of Mt Gerizim is about 60km from Jerusalem, perhaps 2-3 days of journey on foot

Acts 8:4-40: THINK

Apart from John 4, Luke's interest in Samaritans is obvious: see Luke 9:52-56; Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37); Samaritan leper who gave thanks to Jesus (Luke 17:11-19).

1. Why is Luke interested in the Samaritans?
2. What does this tell you about Luke?
3. What do you think is the purpose of Luke to include to story of the Samaritans in Acts 8?

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Philip: signs and wonders, exorcism, healing
- Simon: sorcerer, magic

 1. Note the contrast of how and why the Samaritans respond to Philip and Simon
 2. Could Simon be jealous of the success of Philip?
 3. Why do you think Simon believed?
 4. Do you think Simon's conversion is genuine?

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- The Jerusalem leaders came to Samaria and prayed for the baptism of the Holy Spirit for the Samaritans

 1. Do you think this would have been easy for Peter to go to his "enemies"?
 2. In what ways have the ministry of Jesus to the Samaritans prepared Peter for his ministry to the Samaritans?

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- The purpose and significance of tongues and Holy Spirit in light of salvation-history:
 - Acts 2 - Pentecost
 - Acts 8 – Samaritans (implied, since Simon saw it)
 - Acts 10 - Cornelius
 - Acts 19 – Ephesian believers

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Simon's desire for the power he saw in Peter and Peter's rebuke

Acts 8:4-40: Reflections

- Power encounter, magic, sorcery and forces of darkness are real in any mission of God.
- Peter accepts the Samaritans as people of God when he prays for them to receive the Holy Spirit. This also suggests ethnic reconciliation between hostile groups

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Ethiopian official – possibly a proselyte
- Wealthy and educated – able to afford a chariot, owns a scroll on Isaiah

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Importance of the narrative – an eunuch (εὐνοῦχος – BDAG: a castrated male person, *eunuch*.)
 - Jewish perspective: Excluded from admission to the people of Israel (Lev 21:17-21; Deut 23:1)
 - Greco-Roman perspective: an unmanly man
 - Ethiopian - Fulfillment of Zeph 2:4, 11-12; 3:4, 10
 - references to Gaza, desert, Ethiopian; Ps 68:31 (LXX 67:31); and Isa 11:11; 18:1-7; 45:14.
 - Eunuch – Fulfillment of Isa 56:3-8

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Even an eunuch can be a follower of Jesus!
- How do you think the leaders of Jerusalem would have reacted?
- Why do you think Philip is not adverse to the Ethiopian eunuch?

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- The Ethiopian eunuch was reading from Isa 53:7-8, with Acts quoting from the LXX – suggesting the eunuch is reading from LXX and not MT.
- Context of Isa 52:13-53:12 – a servant of Yahweh who suffers intense humiliation and affliction, deprived from justice and treated as an outcast; yet suffers willingly, silent like a lamb to be slaughtered, without complaint. He is killed, only to be vindicated by God

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Question by the eunuch: who is this servant?
- Philip uses Isaiah to explain about Jesus (see Mark 10:45, often seen as Jesus applying Isa 53 to himself)

Acts 8:4-40: Philip

- Baptism follows immediately
- Philip is then taken away to Azotus, some 35km north of Gaza, travelling all the way to Caesarea (which will be the focus of the narrative in Acts 10).

Acts 8:4-40: Reflection

- Even an eunuch, despised by the Law and the prevailing social convention can become a child of God.
 - Who could be the equivalent to the “eunuchs” in our society today?
 - Are there any groups of people the church is reluctant to reach out to today?
 - What do you think the church must do today in order to reach out to the likes of the Ethiopian eunuch today?

Acts 9: Paul’s Call/Conversion

- The focus is now on gentile mission; and Paul is the vessel chosen for this task
- The beginning of the expansion of the church as per Acts 1:8
- The debate on the call/conversion of Paul
- Paul of Acts and the Paul of Letters – Luke does not describe everything (eg – missing out Paul’s retreat to the desert of Arabia)

Acts 9: Paul’s Call/Conversion

- The narrative now turns to Paul, and then subsequently, the gentile mission.

Acts and Paul’s Life

1. Paul does not say much about his life from his letters. Much of what we know about his background and his missionary activities come from Acts

Acts and Paul's Life

2. Acts remains a selective source of information, and does not tell us the full picture, and it remains a secondary source on Paul (eg – what did Paul do between his call/conversion and 1st missionary journey? What did Paul do in his 18-month stay at Corinth? What happened after Acts 28?)

Acts and Paul's Life

3. Relatively few dates to anchor Paul's life – eg., 51/52CE – Paul before Gallio in Corinth; 58-59CE – Paul in Caesarea during last part of the leadership of Felix.

The World of Paul

- The Jewish world
 - Paul's education and training under Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3)
 - Paul's understanding of the Law
 - Paul's life as a Pharisee

The World of Paul

- The Greco-Roman world
 - Paul's hometown – Tarsus (cf. Acts 21:39)
 - Paul's exposure to the Hellenistic world – rhetoric, the art of letter writing, and his proficiency in Greek

The World of Paul

- The Christian world
 - Paul's Jewish and Greco-Roman world prepared him for his ministry
 - Damascus road encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9)
 - Reorientation of his life (Phil 3:7-11)
 - Reinterpretation of scripture configured around Jesus the Messiah

Discussion

- In your opinion, how would Paul's exposure to the Jewish and Greco-Roman world prepare him for his mission to the Gentiles?
- Reflect on your own life. How would your life experiences in the past prepare you for your ministry today and in the future? Share 1 or 2 insights/experiences from your life.

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- Paul as the persecutor of the followers of the Way – breathing threats and murder (9:2)
- Paul's action contradicts Gamaliel's advice
- Did Paul consider Gamaliel's advice as too soft?

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- Paul's conversion/call:
 - Light from heaven
 - Paul fell to the ground
 - Voice speaking to him: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (notice it is "me" and not "followers of the Way")
 - Paul's question: "Who are you, Lord?" – "Lord" does not necessarily mean Paul recognises that it was Jesus speaking to him; more like a polite address

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- Paul's conversion/call:
 - The reply: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."
 - Paul is not given the full extent of what is to happen next – he is merely told to go into the city, suggesting that obedience and surrender are expected from Paul.

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- Paul had to be led to the city as he was blinded.
- Paul's arrival in Damascus is completely the opposite from what he expected.

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- Ananias being chosen to pray for Paul.
 - Could Ananias be one of those Paul intended to persecute and brought back to Jerusalem?
 - If you are Ananias, how would you have felt if you are called to pray and reach out to your "enemy"? Would you be fearful? Would you obey?

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- 9:15-16
 "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- Ananias arrives at Judas' house:
 - Prays for healing
 - Prays for Paul to receive the Holy Spirit
 - Paul regains his sight
 - Paul receives water baptism

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- 9:19b-20: "For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."
 - Ambiguous – "several days"
 - Cf. Gal 1:17; 2 Cor 11:32-33
 - Hence may refer prior to the period of Paul going into Arabia – what did he do in Arabia?
 - See also 9:23 – "After some time had passed" – suggests Luke's selective reporting

What was Paul doing?

- What was Paul doing during his years in the Arabian desert that even King Aretas wanted to arrest him? (9:23-25; cf. 2 Cor 11:22-23)

Acts 9: Paul's Call/Conversion

- 9:26 – Paul's visit to Jerusalem after his call/ conversion
 - The apostles remain suspicious
- 9:27 – The role of Barnabas
- 9:28-29 – Paul's preaching, with his life threatened
- 9:30 – Paul sent to Caesarea, and Tarsus

Acts 9:30

- Back to Tarsus after meeting the leaders in Jerusalem
- "Silent years" until Acts 11:25 where Barnabas sought Paul

Acts 9: Reflection

Scholars often describe the period after Paul's return from Jerusalem to Tarsus until Barnabas sought him out as "the silent years".

- If you were Paul, after encountering such a dramatic conversion/call experience, would you be frustrated/disappointed to remain for more than a decade of "silent years"?
- Would you consider these "silent years" a period of wasted time?
- How can you prepare yourself if you are in your "silent years" as you wait upon the Lord for your next step?