

## 6.2 Stephen

The narrative about the first disciple to become a witness who died for being a follower of Christ, again, as most of the narrative of Luke-Acts, raises questions on the historical as well as on the narrative level. On the historical level it cannot be ascertained what events lead to Stephen's death. A scenario in the context of the turmoil and volatile situation prior to the outbreak of the Roman-Jewish war (66-70CE) can be envisaged and situations when tensions among different factions among the Jewish population in Jerusalem could cause outbursts of violence cannot be denied. In this section we will focus primarily on aspects of Stephen's speech which supposedly are a direct attack against the Temple in Jerusalem. (For a more detailed analysis of the Stephen narrative see Gaventa, Beverly, *Acts*, 111-118).

In Acts 6.13-14 Stephen is accused of attacking the foundations of Jewish life, that is, Temple and Torah, and Moses. What follows in chapter 7.1-53 is not so much a defence speech which would soothe the accusations brought forward and the charges therefore are not specifically addressed, but Stephen here relates to the issues raised in a broad sense. Stephen clearly relates the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Christ to the traditions of Israel. The bulk of the speech actually consists in a retelling of the Scriptural story of Israel from Abraham to Solomon. He reminds the audience that this story is permeated with repeated stumbling of the people and their failing to understand and live according to the covenant. He mentions the persecution of the prophets e.g. in 7.52, a topic which is an allusion to what contemporary scholarship perceives as the Deuteronomistic view of history: the repeatedly disobedient people is admonished by prophets whose words are rejected, followed by God's intervention (cf. e.g. 2 Kings 17.7-20 and 2 Chr 36.14-16). Both Stephen's interpretation of Israel's history and the Lukan story of Jesus and his witnesses proclaim salvation for Israel and then report the tragic rejection of this message of salvation just as it is coming to fulfilment (Luke 1-2; Acts 28.26-27). However, this is a perception from within Jewish tradition not from outside! It includes the recognition of the significance of the traditions of the Scriptures, of the role of Moses and the Torah ('the divine oracles-law' Acts 7.38) and of the Temple. There is a significant focus on the role of the Temple, as this is one of the key points of the accusation brought forward against Stephen (6.13). But Stephen's arguments in 7.44-50 are neither a rejection of the Temple nor a criticism of Solomon building it is rather an important part of Abraham's promise (7.7). Stephen simply warns against any implied restriction of the presence of God to the Temple and reminds the audience that God is not dependent on works of human hands. This declaration of God's independence of the Temple is also a declaration of God's availability to all with or without the Temple. The Temple was a special provision for the Jewish people in fulfilment of God's promise, but it is not needed in order to worship God, for God's presence spans heaven and earth. But rather than viewing this as a rejection of the Temple as such, this is a widening of the horizon at a time when gentiles had begun to join Israel in worshipping God through Christ. In addition to this widening of the horizon in the context of the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel and the nations, this is a point of high relevance in the author's historical setting. The background of Stephen's speech is the knowledge shared by the author and the audience: the Temple lay in ruins (Lk 13:32; 19:41-44; 21:5-6, 20-24; 23:27-31). The memory of the Temple's destruction was still painful for any who honoured Israel's tradition and respected the devout men and women who worshipped in the Temple (cf. Lk 1 and 2). Thus, rather than being a rejection of the Temple worship it is a speech which provides comfort and a perspective for worshipping God when this was not possible any more in the Temple. In addition the traditions of the ancestors are confirmed in this speech rather than rejected or superseded, thus Stephen is seen as being faithful to the traditions rather than as challenging them.

**Essential Readings**

\*\* Gaventa, Beverly, *Acts*, pp. 116-34.

**Further Readings**

Fitzmyer, Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday 1998, pp. 354-395.