

**THE GREEK-SPEAKING JEWISH  
CHRISTIANS IN JERUSALEM**

**ACTS 6:1 - 8:1**

**<sup>1</sup>Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.**

**<sup>2</sup>And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables [*minister at the table*].**

**<sup>3</sup>Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup>while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.'**

**<sup>5</sup>What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup>They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup>The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**

'Hellenist' is probably meant to be understood here as 'Greek-speaking' and is being used by Luke to describe Jewish Christians from the Diaspora (outside Palestine) who were part of the Jerusalem church but who spoke only Greek. They faced a language problem when they came together with their Aramaic-speaking brothers and sisters (the 'Hebrews'). This affected their being nourished by the scriptures and their faith-sharing. It also affected those who were widows. Since their families were elsewhere, they were particularly dependent on the community. Not being part of the local scene they tended to be overlooked in the day to day organisation of the community.

When the Israelites complained during their desert journey, God fed them with manna from heaven (see Exodus 17). How was God to nourish these especially needy members of the community? During the desert journey, Moses father-in-law, Jethro, advised him against trying to do everything himself:

The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone ... You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God ... they will bear the burden with you.

– Exodus 18:18-22

The apostles see the need to find others who can minister (Greek: diakoneō, see 1:17) at table for the Greek-speaking Christians. The Greek diakoneō is used for serving at table, but in a religious context. The servant is one who ministers as a servant of the Lord. Luke uses it in this sense in his Gospel (see 4:39; 8:3; 10:40; 17:8). Jesus assures his disciples that if they are faithful in carrying out the will of their lord, he himself will come and serve them:

Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.

– Luke 12:37

The following text is particularly relevant, for the setting is the table of the last supper:

The leader among you must become like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

– Luke 22:26-27

At issue is the community prayer, the breaking of bread at home, when ‘they ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God’ (2:46-47). The growing complexity of the community is resulting in the ministry of the table taking up all the time of the apostles, so that they are neglecting prayer and the ministry of the word. They decide to select seven Greek-speaking Christians to see that the Greek-speakers in the community are being properly ministered to when the community gathers to break bread. Luke focuses briefly on only two of the seven: Stephen and Philip. It is noteworthy that the element of their ministry which he highlights is their ministry of the word, the very ministry which the apostles were concerned to preserve.

The number seven is significant (compare Luke 10:1; also Exodus 24:9; Numbers 11:16-24). Like twelve it signifies completeness, but, unlike twelve, its focus is not on Israel. The seven are to serve Christians ‘from every nation under heaven’ (2:5). As in the case of the choosing of Matthias (see 1:24), the choice is to be preceded by prayer, for the choice is to be God’s. Among the qualities that the community is looking for is that the seven ‘be of good standing’. They cannot lead without the trust of those whom they are to serve. They are also to show in their lives the fruits of the Holy Spirit, for they can carry out their ministry only if Jesus is serving through them. In a special way they are to give evidence of wisdom, for they are being chosen to reveal the mysteries of God in the day to day life of the community.

The laying on of hands is a gesture used in many and varied situations in the New Testament, as in the Old. In essence it demonstrates a recognition of communion in the blessing of God. Here, as in other places (see 13:3; 14:23), it includes a recognition that God has called a person to carry out a certain ministry within the community.

The growth of the community is seen as a sign of God’s blessing (see Genesis 1:28). Luke notes that ‘a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith’. As Jewish priests their obedience to God was guided by the law. Now they have learned to observe the faith of the disciples of Jesus, a faith that bears fruit in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, especially in the fruit of love. Paul recognises that he has ‘received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles’ (Romans 1:5). The apostles, and now the seven, are graced to bring about this same obedience among the Jews in Jerusalem, and their ministry is being abundantly blessed.

**<sup>8</sup>Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.**

**<sup>9</sup>Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen.**

**<sup>10</sup>But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.**

**<sup>11</sup>Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'**

**<sup>12</sup>They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council.**

**<sup>13</sup>They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; <sup>14</sup>for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.'**

Like Jesus (see Luke 4:36; 5:17), and like the apostles (1:8; 4:33), Stephen is described as being full of grace and power. Like Jesus (2:22), and like the apostles (2:43; 5:12), he does great wonders and signs among the people. Just as Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is powerfully active in and through the apostles, so now he is powerfully active in and through the seven.

Opposition comes from among the Hellenist Jews. They know what it is like to have to resist being drawn into a pagan culture. To maintain their identity, it is especially important for them to adhere to the Torah and to the temple. Stephen is one of them and they recognise in his teaching an opening to the Gentile world that challenges their sectarian identity. Jesus had promised:

They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues ... This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

– Luke 21:12-15

Stephen's opponents cannot argue against him, for, like Jesus himself (see Luke 2:52), he is filled with wisdom and the Spirit (see 6:3). He is teaching that there is something more important than either the temple ('this holy place') or the Torah. His opponents claim that in doing so he is putting himself above Moses, and arrogating to himself power which belongs only to God. They accuse him, as others had accused Jesus (see Luke 5:21), of blasphemy.

Like Jesus (see Luke 22:66), and like the apostles (4:7) Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin. They accuse him, falsely, of saying that Jesus will destroy the temple. Jesus came to destroy the power of evil (see Luke 4:34). He came to save life not to destroy it (see Luke 6:9). At the same time, he did warn about and lament the coming destruction of the temple (Luke 21:6), and he did speak of the destruction of the tenants of the vineyard who refused to give the produce to its rightful owner (see Luke 20:1-18); and 'when the scribes and chief priests realized that Jesus had told this parable against them, they wanted to lay hands on him' (Luke 20:19). Stephen is following in the footsteps of Jesus.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai his face radiated divine glory (see Exodus 34:29-30). So it is with Stephen. Luke wants us to listen to his words as the words of a prophet. God is addressing the highest court of Israel through him. Like Jesus (see Luke 22:67), Stephen is called on by the high priest to respond to the accusations.

Stephen addresses them as ‘brothers’ for he is a Jew and shares their faith and their history. He addresses them as ‘fathers’, respectfully acknowledging their authority. To explain the present, he goes back to the past to the fundamentals of the faith which he shares with them.

For reasons that will become obvious as he develops his argument, Stephen begins by reminding the Jewish authorities that Abraham was not born in the Holy Land. God called him from outside (Jesus was an outsider to the Jewish establishment). He reminds them also that to answer God’s call, Abraham had to leave all that was sacred to him (they are called to leave their understanding of the temple).

God promised Abraham ‘this country in which you are now living’, but Abraham himself lived in it only as a ‘resident alien’. He speaks also of the long period of slavery in Egypt (see Genesis 15:13). At this point in his argument, Stephen anticipates God’s promise to Moses that the people would worship God ‘in this place’ (Exodus 3:12) – a reference to Sinai, and to the temple. Stephen will return to the question of where it is that God wishes to be worshipped. God also promised descendants to Abraham and gave him the rite of circumcision as a sign that Abraham’s descendants belong to God, and as a sign also of recognition of God’s initiative in liberating Israel.

**<sup>15</sup>And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**

**<sup>1</sup>Then the high priest asked him, ‘Are these things so?’**

**<sup>2</sup>And Stephen replied: ‘Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup>and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.’ [Genesis 12:1]**

**<sup>4</sup>Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living.**

**<sup>5</sup>He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child.**

**<sup>6</sup>And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and mistreat them during four hundred years.**

**<sup>7</sup>‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’**

**<sup>8</sup>Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision [Gen 17:10-14]. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day [Gen 21:4]; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.**

**<sup>9</sup>The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, <sup>10</sup>and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favour and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.**

**<sup>11</sup>Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food.**

**<sup>12</sup>But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit. <sup>13</sup>On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers [Genesis 45:3-4], and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.**

**<sup>14</sup>Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five in all;**

**<sup>15</sup>so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors [Genesis 49:33; Exodus 1:6], <sup>16</sup>and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem [Genesis 33:18-19].**

Stephen now speaks of Joseph. As his name indicates (it means 'he who increases'), Joseph is a symbol of the growth of the people. God is clearly with him, but he arouses jealousy among his brothers. Luke has already spoken of the jealousy of the Jewish leaders towards the apostles (see 5:17), which is in fact jealousy of Jesus, the one whom they recently rejected and had crucified.

The words 'favour' ('grace') and 'wisdom' are not words found in the Genesis account of Joseph upon which Luke is drawing. It is no accident that these are the words he has used to describe Jesus (see Luke 2:40,52), and Stephen himself (see 6:8,10).

Joseph was exalted to the right hand of the king and given authority over the king's household. Here, too, the language is meant to prepare his audience for the exalted Jesus.

Joseph's family did not at first recognise Joseph, when he offered them pardon and salvation. They do so, however, on their second encounter. Again we are to have Jesus in mind. The Sanhedrin failed to recognise Jesus as their Messiah, but now they are being given a second chance.

Jacob died outside the promised land, as did their other ancestors. The son of the owner of the vineyard was thrown out of the vineyard and was killed there (see Luke 20:15); as was Jesus.

Jacob was buried in Hebron (Genesis 49:31). Joseph was buried in Shechem (Joshua 24:32). Luke's interest is in Shechem, for it was at Shechem at the time of Joshua that the confederation of the twelve tribes was inaugurated and where the people of Israel promised to abide by the covenant, to worship the Lord and to listen to his voice (see Joshua 24:19-28). The question of where it is that God wishes to be worshipped, and hence the place of the temple in Jerusalem, is again being broached.

Stephen's summary of the first forty years spent by Moses in Egypt followed by his flight to Midian draws on the first two chapters of the Book of Exodus. His focus is on 'the fulfilment of the promise', on Moses being 'abandoned', on his 'wisdom', and the fact that he was 'powerful in his words and deeds' – themes which Luke has already used in regard to Jesus and Jesus' witnesses.

The Israelites fail to recognise the one whom God has sent to rescue them (as the Sanhedrin failed to recognise Jesus). They 'failed to understand'. Luke used this same expression of Jesus' parents when they failed to understand why Jesus had slipped away from them because he had to be in his Father's house (see Luke 2:50). Likewise, when Jesus spoke of his coming rejection, death and resurrection, Luke tells us that the twelve 'understood nothing about all these things; in fact what Jesus said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what he said' (Luke 18:50). As Stephen will go on to demonstrate, God's response to their failure to understand is not to punish them, but to pardon and liberate them.

The Israelites are divided among themselves (much as Jerusalem is divided in its response to Jesus). Moses tries to reconcile them (much as Stephen is trying to do now). They misunderstand Moses' intention, accusing him of wanting to be their 'ruler and judge'. This is the role which Jesus rejects (see Luke 12:14). Jesus came to reconcile, to pardon, to liberate and save, not to control or condemn.

It is while he is a resident alien that God's blessing comes down on Moses: he becomes 'the father of two sons'.

**17**But as the time drew near for the fulfilment of the promise that God had made to Abraham, our people in Egypt increased and multiplied <sup>18</sup>until another king who had not known Joseph ruled over Egypt. <sup>19</sup>He dealt craftily with our race and forced our ancestors to abandon their infants so that they would die.

<sup>20</sup>At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God. For three months he was brought up in his father's house; <sup>21</sup>and when he was abandoned, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup>So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

<sup>23</sup>When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his relatives, the Israelites. <sup>24</sup>When he saw one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup>He supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them, but they did not understand.

<sup>26</sup>The next day he came to some of them as they were quarrelling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you wrong each other?' <sup>27</sup>But the man who was wronging his neighbour pushed Moses aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?' <sup>28</sup>Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' <sup>29</sup>When he heard this, Moses fled and became a resident alien in the land of Midian. There he became the father of two sons.

**<sup>30</sup>Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush.**

**<sup>31</sup>When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight; and as he approached to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup>'I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'**

**Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look.**

**<sup>33</sup>Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.**

**<sup>34</sup>I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt.'**

The appearance of an angel and the presence of fire which does not destroy prepare us for a divine revelation. The God who speaks to Moses is the same God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses' ancestors, the God who is faithful to his promises.

Once again we hear of 'the place' where God appears. The first time Luke used the expression he was speaking of the place where the Christian community was gathered in prayer (see 4:31). Then when the false witnesses were referring to the temple (see 6:13-14). Then Stephen himself uses the expression when quoting God's words to Moses concerning Mount Sinai (see 7:7). Now it refers to the ground in the wilderness where Moses is standing. Stephen is attempting to broaden the understanding of his audience who are locked into limiting 'the place' to the temple in Jerusalem. God can choose to appear anywhere, and wherever God chooses to appear is 'holy ground'.

Finally, Stephen quotes from the Book of Exodus the words which commission Moses to go as God's envoy into Egypt. God is the one who hears the cry of the poor. God is the Redeemer and Saviour of his people. The one whom the people have rejected is the one chosen by God to go back into Egypt 'to rescue them'.

Stephen is following tradition in telling the story of Moses in three sections. First his forty years in the land of slavery; then his escape; and then his being called to serve God in the task of liberating his brothers and sisters. It is interesting to re-read 5:17-21, which follows the same pattern. The apostles are imprisoned; they are miraculously rescued by God; and then they are sent back to the people 'in the temple' to proclaim to them 'the whole message about this life'. Has the temple become another Egypt? Do the people need to be liberated from the place in which they have thought to confine God? If they are going to carry out the mission given them by God and enjoy the promised blessing, must they be ready to 'leave your country and your relatives and go to the land I will show you'(7:3)?



Stephen continues to speak of Moses, concentrating on the way in which the people rejected him and on the way in which God continued to carry out his redeeming purpose through him. In the following verses he will go on to speak of their failure to obey Moses, and of the consequences of this failure. Stephen's critique is not new. It has many precedents in the prophetic literature of Israel. As in the prophetic declarations of the prophets (see Isaiah 1:2-20; Jeremiah 7:1-15), the purpose of naming sin is not punishment, but to bring about repentance so that God's constant offer of forgiveness can be received, and God's loving blessing experienced. What is new in Stephen's critique is the fact that he has Jesus in mind as the one through whom God's redeeming action in Moses has reached its fulfilment.

As noted earlier, his compatriots misunderstood Moses' intention. They rejected him, thinking he wanted to take away their freedom and be their 'ruler and judge'. They were wrong in this. Moses was sent not to condemn them but to be their 'liberator'. Stephen wants the Jewish leadership to reflect on what they have done in rejecting Jesus, who, like Moses, did not set himself up as their judge (see Luke 12:14), but was sent by God as their 'Leader and Saviour' (5:31).

With this in mind, Stephen reminds them of the 'wonders and signs' that God did through Moses – an expression already used by Luke concerning Jesus (2:21), the apostles (2:43, 5:12), and Stephen himself (6:8). He speaks again of the burning bush, recalling the way Luke described Stephen himself at the beginning of this discourse (see 6:15). He recalls also, as did Peter to the people in Solomon's portico (3:22), the words in which Moses prophesied that God would 'raise up a prophet for you from your own people' (Deuteronomy 18:15). He is about to identify this prophet as Jesus.

Luke, through the mouth of Stephen, speaks most beautifully of the Torah as consisting of 'living oracles'. Moses gave them God's life-giving words. It is these words which found their perfect expression in Jesus and which are now being spoken through the apostles (see 5:20) and through Stephen. To reject their words is to reject Moses.

**<sup>35</sup>It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.**

**<sup>36</sup>He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years.**

**<sup>37</sup>This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.**

**<sup>38</sup>He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors;**

**and he received living oracles to give to us.**

**<sup>39</sup>Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt.**

[Numbers 14:3]

**<sup>40</sup>saying to Aaron, 'Make gods for us who will lead the way for us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.'**[Exodus 32:1,23]

**<sup>41</sup>At that time they made a calf, offered a sacrifice to the idol, and revelled in the works of their hands.**

[Exodus 32:4-6]

**<sup>42</sup>But God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:**

**'Did you offer to me slain victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? <sup>43</sup>No; you took along the tent of Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; so I will remove you beyond Babylon.'**

[Amos 5:25-27]

The members of the Sanhedrin know what happened when their ancestors refused to obey Moses. They 'pushed him aside' (as they have just done to Jesus, to Jesus' apostles and now to Stephen himself). They rejected the covenant, and the liberation being offered them by God and 'in their hearts they turned back to Egypt' and to idolatry. The fact that it was the leading priest, Aaron, who went along with this apostasy is relevant to Stephen's challenge to the priests in the Sanhedrin, as is the prophetic critique of the temple sacrifices in the quotation from the prophet Amos.

God is a God of love. Love cannot and will not force itself upon anyone. Their rejection withdrew them from God, with the result that their descendants found themselves back in slavery – this time in Babylon.

However, as Stephen will go on to say, human infidelity cannot change God's loving design. Even though 'they made a calf at Horeb and worshipped a cast image'; even though 'they exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass'; even though 'they forgot God, their Saviour, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea' (Psalm 106:19-22); they are still 'Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend' (Isaiah 41:8).

That God remained with his people as they journeyed through the wilderness was symbolised by the ‘tent of testimony’ (see Numbers 1:51-53). As the final words of the book of Exodus state, it was God who decided when they would camp and when they would move on:

The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle ... Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

– Exodus 40:34-38

Moreover, it was God, not the people, who designed the tent (see Exodus 25:9-40). The tent remained with them in the land which, as Stephen reminds them, was given them by God. They did not conquer it by their own power.

When David thought of building a permanent temple in Jerusalem, God rejected the idea. David’s descendants were to be the house, and God would be the one to build it (see 2Samuel 7:1-16). It was Solomon, the one responsible for causing the division of the kingdom, who went against God’s command and built a temple. Even so, the faithful God did not abandon his people because of this. He accepted to stay, but with this warning:

If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight.

– 1Kings 9:6-7

**<sup>44</sup>Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness [Numbers 1:51-53], as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen.**

**<sup>45</sup>Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors.**

**And it was there until the time of David,**

**<sup>46</sup>who found favour with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. [Psalm 132:5]**

**<sup>47</sup>But it was Solomon who built a house for him.**

God is not bound to the temple

**<sup>48</sup>Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says,**

**<sup>49</sup>‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?’**

**<sup>50</sup>‘Did not my hand make all these things?’ [Isaiah 66:1-2]**

Stephen has been building up to this conclusion by careful argument. The disciples of Isaiah, responsible for the words quoted here by Stephen, were drawing on a long prophetic tradition. Micah warned those who gloried in Jerusalem and its temple but who failed to live by the covenant:

Because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

– Micah 3:12

Jeremiah spoke out against those who thought that because they had God’s temple they could behave as they wished and be safe:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

– Jeremiah 7:3-7

However, they did not act in these ways:

When I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh.

– Jeremiah 7:13-14

It is not the temple itself that is rejected by the prophets or by Stephen. Jesus himself looked upon it as ‘my Father’s house’ (Luke 2:49). Jesus’ criticism was against those who used the temple to support their own power, rather than respecting it as ‘a house of prayer’ (Luke 19:46). He lamented:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.

– Luke 13:34-35

To this point Stephen's discourse has been carefully argued. Suddenly he breaks into a powerful, prophetic denunciation. The strength of the language is a measure of the importance of the message. It is a matter of life or death how the authorities respond. Stephen would be showing no love if he softened the terrible truth. We must not forget that the aim of this denunciation is not to respond in kind to his accusers, nor to threaten punishment. Stephen wants the seriousness of his accusation to shock them into repentance, so that they might be pardoned and, even now, enjoy the promised blessing.

He calls them a 'stiff-necked people', an accusation made against the people when they rejected Moses and built the golden calf (see Exodus 32:9; 33:3,5). Remember that on that occasion the people were pardoned when Moses interceded for them. He accuses them of being 'uncircumcised in heart', an accusation levelled at the people by God, but followed by the promise:

If their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

– Leviticus 26:41-42

Their ears, too, are uncircumcised, for they do not want to 'listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed' (Isaiah 6:10). They are obstinate in 'opposing the Holy Spirit', an accusation which echoes Isaiah and shares Isaiah's hope:

They rebelled and grieved his holy spirit ... Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant.

– Isaiah 63:10-11

Throughout his speech, Stephen has been reminding them of the actions of their ancestors in rejecting the ones sent them by God, in refusing to obey and in being unfaithful to the covenant. Now he reminds them of how their ancestors persecuted the prophets (see 2Chronicles 36:16). He is repeating Jesus' own accusation (see Luke 11:47-51). They have betrayed and murdered 'the Righteous One' (see 3:14; 1Thessalonians 2:15). Stephen was accused of 'changing the customs that Moses handed down' (6:14). He accuses the Sanhedrin, not of changing customs, but of failing to keep the Torah, even though their claim to power is as the ones who uphold it.

**<sup>51</sup>You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.**

**<sup>52</sup>Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?**

**They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.**

**<sup>53</sup>You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'**

**<sup>54</sup>When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.**

**<sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.**

**<sup>56</sup>'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'**[Daniel 7:13]

The Sanhedrin reacts with rage to Stephen's stinging accusations, as they had reacted earlier to the apostles (see 5:33). They 'ground their teeth' as did those who oppressed the psalmist (see Psalm 35:16).

As noted in an earlier scene, Jesus promised his disciples that when they were persecuted and dragged before the courts: 'I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict' (Luke 21:15). Stephen is 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. Caught up in prayer (see 6:15), he gazes into heaven itself. What he sees reveals the nature of God's glory as being one of love. At the centre of this love that God is pouring out upon the world is Jesus. He is standing, ever ready to carry out the will of God; he is at God's right hand, for God's powerful redeeming and saving action in the world is happening through him.

God's response to human sin is now as always, but in a far more wonderful way, one of love. In describing God's ultimate judgment upon the world, Jesus said:

They will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

– Luke 21:27-28 (see 22:69)

To be shocked into believing in God's unconditional love, Jesus' contemporaries had to see the fidelity of God's servant demonstrated in his suffering and death. Even then not everyone was open to see. Now it is necessary to see the same fidelity in the one who witnesses to Jesus.

Stephen sees what Jesus had promised. He sees heaven open and he sees God's ultimate judgment as one of compassion. The one who identifies with us in our weakness and oppression, the 'Son of Man', is the one whom God vindicates. If we would only cling to him, we, too, would share in his glory. Stephen is the first to give his life in witness to Jesus. He will soon enjoy God's glory. God will offer the same gift to all who repent.

Stephen's death is not in vain, for among those who approve of this violent crime is a man called Saul (see 22:20). It will be Paul who reaches out beyond the Greek-speaking Jews to become the leading missionary to the Gentiles. Luke wants us to see a connection between what is happening to Stephen and Saul's later conversion.

Stephen has witnessed to Jesus by his life. He now witnesses by his death. The Greek for witness is *martyrs*, whence the English 'martyr'. He dies as did Jesus, with the same loud voice and the same words:

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.

– Luke 23:46

Jesus prayed for pardon for those responsible for his death (see Luke 23:34). Stephen does the same, giving further proof, if it were needed, of the spirit in which he made his final speech and of his aim in pronouncing his final prophetic denunciation.

Not even the rejection of the Lord's Messiah can change God's offer of salvation. So it is when Jesus' witness, Stephen, is rejected. Jesus is risen, and he continues to act to save, though now he comes in a cloud (see 1:11), his Spirit acting through his disciples.

We have seen Jesus 'restoring the kingdom to Israel' (1:6). The apostles have filled Jerusalem with their teaching (5:28). They have chosen leaders to nourish the Greek-speakers in the community, Jews who have come from every nation under heaven and have become disciples of Jesus.

In the first section of the Acts the focus has been exclusively on Jerusalem. The time has come for the word to spread beyond the confines of Jerusalem and to reach out to 'Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (1:8).

**57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.**

**58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him;**

**and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

**59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'.**

[Psalm 31:6]

**60Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.**

**1And Saul approved of their killing him.**