

STEPHEN'S SPEECH: A THEOLOGY OF ERRORS?

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The points of seeming divergence between Stephen's words in Acts 7 and the OT record have engendered attacks on inerrancy by some and attempts at reconciliation by others. A current approach to reconciliation involves the attempt to distinguish between inerrancy of content and inerrancy of record in Acts 7. This views the divergences in Stephen's speech as admissible errors since inspiration is only posited of the author of Acts and not of Stephen as a character in the narrative. The present article seeks to show that three of these divergences are merely insertions into the narrative, not errors, and furthermore, that these divergences are calculated theological insertions. The result is a renewed need to seek their reconciliation with the OT record.

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INTRODUCTION

STEPHEN'S speech in Acts 7:2-53 has remained an enigma for much of modern scholarship. In its current form it is clearly the longest speech in the book of Acts, yet it diverges from the other speeches in the book in that it is non-apostolic and apparently non-kerygmatic.¹ Furthermore, the content of the speech is held by some to be little more than a dry recitation of the history of the Hebrews, having little to do with the judicial framework into which the author of Acts has placed it.²

An even more difficult quandary is left for those who look for historical consistency with the OT in the speech, for it diverges from the OT historical record in at least five places.³ Several approaches toward a reconciliation of these conflicts have been attempted, but

¹Bruce classifies this speech as apologetic. See F. F. Bruce, *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale, 1942) 5.

²See particularly F. J. Foakes Jackson, "Stephen's Speech in Acts," *JBL* 49 (1930) 283-86; and Benjamin Wisner Bacon, "Stephen's Speech: Its Argument and Doctrinal Relationship," in *Biblical and Semitic Studies* (New York: Yale, 1901) 213-29.

³Cadbury listed ten divergences, but he included those instances where the speech introduces material that is otherwise unknown from the OT as well as those instances

one that has been gaining vogue in recent years is an attempt to distinguish between inerrancy of content and inerrancy of record.⁴ This option leaves the divergences in Stephen's speech as admissible errors since inspiration, and its corollary, inerrancy, need only be posited of the author of Acts and not of Stephen as a character in the narrative.

Aside from the hermeneutical problems such an approach introduces,⁵ those who would adopt this distinction as an attempt to retain inerrancy fail to observe two key factors: (1) the function of the so-called errors in the theology of the speech; and (2) Luke's adoption of that theology in Acts. Leaving the Lucan adoption to be treated elsewhere,⁶ it is the aim of this study to demonstrate that at least three of the "errors" in Stephen's speech are not inadvertent mistakes, but are calculated insertions in the narrative designed to emphasize certain theological points. The implication, of course, is that if this is correct, we must take these Stephanic statements seriously and ultimately attempt to reconcile them with the OT record.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEPHEN'S THEOLOGY

In order to evaluate the function of these discrepancies in the theology of Stephen's speech, it is first necessary to place them in the

where the speech actually conflicts with the OT (H. J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* [New York: Harper, 1955] 102-3). Richard B. Rackham, following a similar inclusive approach, set the total divergences at fifteen (Richard B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* [London: Methuen, 1901] 99-101).

⁴This view was suggested as early as 1879 by Albert Barnes in *Notes on Acts* (revised edition; New York: Harper, 1879) 138. It was taken up and developed at length, however, by G. T. Stokes in *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1897) 311ff. For others suggesting this option, see the following: William Owen Carver, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1916) 69; R. A. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, n.d.) 97; Charles W. Carter and Ralph Earle, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959) 96. More recent suggestions of Lucan accuracy with Stephanic error have been given by Everett F. Harrison and Richard N. Longenecker. Harrison says, "That no alteration [of the problem in 7:14-16] was made by Luke or anyone else to bring the statement into conformity with Genesis speaks well for the accuracy with which the speech of Stephen was transmitted and later recorded by Luke" (E. F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* [Chicago: Moody, 1975] 115). Longenecker similarly writes as follows: "Again, these [apparent confusions in 7:15, 16] are but further examples of the conflation and inexactitudes of Jewish popular religion, which, it seems, Luke simply recorded from his sources in his attempt to be faithful to what Stephen actually said in his portrayal" (Richard N. Longenecker, *The Acts of the Apostles* [EBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981] 341).

⁵See, in this regard, Rex A. Koivisto, "Stephen's Speech: A Case Study in Rhetoric and Biblical Inerrancy," *JETS* 20 (1977) 353-64.

⁶See Rex A. Koivisto, "Stephen's Speech and Inerrancy: An Investigation of the Divergences from Old Testament History in Acts 7" (unpublished Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982) 7-9; 157-59.

context of that speech—it is in their context that Stephen's "errors" show their clearest theological import.

Although the unity of the speech around a common theological theme has been questioned by a number of critics,⁷ there has been a strain of scholarship that has viewed the entire pericope of Acts 6:1–8:3 as an integrated unit, the speech itself being a response to the allegations of Stephen's opponents.⁸ Those accusations are found capsulized in the words of the false⁹ witnesses: "This fellow never stops speaking against the holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."¹⁰ From these words it can be concluded that the case against Stephen hinged upon his proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth, particularly as Jesus related to two of the most sacred Jewish institutions, Temple and Torah. Stephen is accused of saying that Jesus would "destroy" the Temple and "change" the Torah.¹¹ If these charges were sustained, the Sanhedrin could easily classify this as blasphemy, and Stephen would be perceived as having committed a capital offense.¹²

⁷This is mostly due to a tendency to see no relationship between the charges against Stephen and the speech. See Jackson, "Stephen's Speech," 283–86; Alfred Loisy, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1920) 318.

⁸J. Kilgallen traces the exegesis based on an integration with the accusations back to Chrysostom, Augustine, Bede, and Rupert of Dentz in *Stephen's Speech: A Literary and Redactional Study of Acts 7, 2–53* (Analecta Biblica 67; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976) 6; cf. H. Wendt, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar, Part 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1899) 151. More recent exponents of this integration are E. Jacquier, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (Etudes Bibliques; Paris: Lecoffre, 1920) 201; and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 141.

⁹H. Beyer believes that the witnesses were only false in that they opposed Stephen, whereas Stephen as a Hellenist did speak against the Temple as they claimed. Beyer argues that the degradation of the Temple was Stephen's particular way of declaring the *Herrschermacht* of Jesus (*Die Apostelgeschichte* [6th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1951] 46). One wonders, however, whether the degradation of the Temple was a Stephanic means of asserting the *Herrschermacht* of Jesus, or whether Stephen's declaration of the *Herrschermacht* of Jesus was misunderstood by his hearers as a degradation of the Temple.

¹⁰Acts 6:13–14. Unless otherwise noted, the biblical citations are taken from the NIV. The earlier accusations (6:11) are not the formal judicial allegations, but broad generalizations intended to stir up the crowds against Stephen (cf. 6:12).

¹¹Cf. Longenecker, *Acts*, 336. The words selected by these false witnesses are καταλύω (of the Temple) and ἀλλάσσω (of the Torah). Cf. our Lord's words in John 2:19 (λύω) and the report of these words before the Sanhedrin by "false witnesses" (καταλύω, Matt 26:61; Mark 14:48; 15:29).

¹²Cf. the tradition later collected in the *b. Sanhedrin 49b*: "Stoning is severer than burning, since thus the blasphemer and idol-worshipper are executed. Wherein lies the enormity of these offences?—Because they constitute an attack upon the fundamental belief of Judaism."

Given the not unreasonable assumption that Luke recorded the accusations because he saw a definite correlation between them and the content of the discourse, the next step is to observe any overriding emphases within the speech that correspond to the accusations. In this sense, the structure of the discourse indicates that it is not a dry recitation of well-known sacred history, but rather a carefully selected grouping of certain elements from within that history which were arranged and adapted to prove a theological point in response to legal accusations.¹³ Although there was obviously a great bulk of material available to him, the speechmaker selected and grouped his material under five sections:

- A. Observations on Abraham (7:2-8)
- B. Observations on Joseph (7:9-16)
- C. Observations on Moses (7:17-43)
- D. Observations on the Temple (7:44-50)
- E. Direct application (7:71-53)¹⁴

¹³The cutting edge of Stephanic studies has recently been involved with this careful redactive evaluation and is yielding results in terms of understanding the theological development of the speech. For an excellent treatment of one section of the speech commonly held to be irrelevant, see E. Richard, "The Polemical Character of the Joseph Episode in Acts 7," *JBL* 98 (1979) 255-67.

¹⁴Richard (257) offers a different division of the speech:

- I. History of the Patriarchs (2-16)
 - A. Story of Abraham (2-8)
 - B. Story of Joseph (9-16)
- II. History of Moses (17-19)
 - A. Hebrews in Egypt (17-19)
 - B. Moses prior to the Sinai event (20-29)
 - C. Theophany and mission (30-34)
- III. Thematic section (35-50)
 - A. Moses and the fathers (34-41)
 - B. God and the fathers (42-50)
- IV. Invective against audience (51-53)

J. Bihler, *Die Stephanusgeschichte im Zusammenhang der Apostelgeschichte* (Munchener Theologische Studien; Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1963) vii, finds a simpler threefold division:

- I. Die Geschichte Israels von Abraham bis Moses (2-37)
 - A. Die Abrahamsgeschichte (2-8a) (8a=transition)
 - B. Die Josephs-geschichte (9-16) (17-19=transition)
 - C. Die Mosesgeschichte (20-37)
- II. Israel's Abfall: Gotzendienst und Tempelbau (38-50)
 - A. Der Gotzendienst (38-43)
 - B. Der Bau des Tempels (44-50)
- III. Der Schuld Israels (51-53)

Kilgallen, *Stephen's Speech*, ix-xii, develops it this way:

- I. The Abraham Story (2-7)
- II. The Joseph Story (9-16) (8=transition)

On Abraham

The initial division of the speech ostensibly treats Abraham the patriarch, yet a careful evaluation reveals that the section is much more closely related to the "God of Glory" than to Abraham.¹⁵ Abraham is selected and discussed, of course, as the father of the nation,¹⁶ but his deeds are minimized while the divine activities are maximized. The speech thus gains a theological tenor from the outset. Since Stephen is accused of aberrant theological views, he produces an *apologia* not of himself, but of his theology. Abraham thus serves as a link between the land (which made the Temple of import) and the instructive oracle of Yahweh regarding the land.

With this in mind, the location of the revelatory acts of God rises to prominence. Yahweh gave his revelation to Abraham in Ur and Haran, well outside the limits of the sacred land upon which the Temple came to be constructed (vv 2-4). When Abraham finally arrived in the land of promise, Stephen emphasizes that "(God) gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground" (v 5). Though God promised Abraham the possession of the land, it would be his only after his descendants were enslaved for four hundred years outside the land, "in a country not their own" (v 6). Then, after that lengthy delay, "they will come out of that country and worship me in this place" (v 7).¹⁷

III. The Moses Story (17-43)

IV. The Temple (44-50)

V. Conclusion (51-53)

It should be observed from this sampling that certain elements are commonly held; i.e., the concluding invective against the audience (51-53), the Abraham Story (2-8) and the Joseph Story (9-16). The bulk of variation comes in the division of the larger section of 17-50. Precisely where the Moses section ends and the Temple section begins is difficult to determine due to the use of a Mosaic element (the Tabernacle) as a pivot from which to launch into the discussion of the Temple. It is probably most logical to find a natural break at 44 due to the internal consistency of the unit from a literary standpoint (e.g., the constant use of the rhetorical οὐτός in vv 35, 36, 37, and 38, and the connection of the final οὐτός with the complete thought of 38-43).

¹⁵Note particularly the subject/verb relationship in this section: the divine term ὁ θεός is followed by eight verbs of which it is the subject (Ernst Carl Rauch, "Ueber den Martyrer Stephanus und den Inhalt, Zweck, und Gang seiner Rede; Apostelgeschichte 6 und 7," *TSK* 30 [1857] 363; and K. Panke, "Der Stephanismus der Apostelgeschichte," *TSK* 85 [1912] 4).

¹⁶Adolf Schlatter notes the significance of beginning with Abraham from a thematic perspective in *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1962) 84.

¹⁷It is common to see in this slight redaction of Gen 15:14 an inclusion of the term τόπος as an oblique reference to the Temple, which would not serve as a focal point for worship until at least 430 years of Israel's history had elapsed (J. Bihler, *Stephanusgeschichte*, 43; and E. Jacquier, *Actes*, 2089).

The theological point of this section is clear: the God of Israel is not tied to the land (upon which the Temple rests).¹⁸ The land must not be given the overriding significance that the Jewish contemporaries of Stephen were giving to it. It certainly has importance as the gift of God to the descendants of Abraham in the fulfillment of promise (vv 6-7), but to require that the God of the promise be limited in his revelation and/or worship to one place is to reduce that God to a localized deity unworthy of proper respect.

That this consideration should be important to Luke in his theology and structure of Acts is clear. To this point the Church itself had been localized in Jerusalem, impeding progress on the fulfillment of the Great Commission (Acts 1:8). It is only after Stephen's speech and martyrdom that the Word of God is finally extended beyond Judea.¹⁹ In view of this connection, it is difficult to deny that the theology of Stephen was central to the theology of Luke as he composed Acts.

On Joseph

Stephen's careful selection continues in the Joseph section with the omission of the Isaac and Jacob stories found in his sources and with the condensation of the eleven chapters of the Genesis account of Joseph into roughly eight verses. The key phrase to be considered thematically is found in verses 9-10a: "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles." The earlier motif of God as transcending location is thus reiterated in the Joseph story.²⁰ It is even possible that a slight polemical jab is here thrust at Stephen's auditors who, like the brothers of Joseph, were still in the land but were without God, disobedient, and suffering.²¹

¹⁸Bruce captures this flavor well (*Acts*, 145): "It was in Mesopotamia, far from the promised land, that God first revealed Himself to Abraham. . . . Those who are obedient to the heavenly vision, Stephen seems to suggest, will always live loose to any one spot on earth, will always be ready to get out and go wherever God may guide." Cf. also Longenecker, *Acts*, 339; and Rauch, "Stephanus," 363-64.

¹⁹In this connection see the fine summary by J. Julius Scott, "Stephen's Defense and the World Mission of the People of God," *JETS* 21 (1978) 131-41.

²⁰Richard ("Acts 7," 260) states the following in this regard: The Joseph section "emphasizes once more that the events of salvation history for the most part occur outside of Judaea." This commonality with the Abraham section had been noted earlier by B. Heather: "But there underlies this section [7:2-16], I think a suggestion that God was truly God, and the Hebrews were truly His people, long before Moses or his Law; with the immediate implication that the Mosaic legislation had no more than a relative value" ("Early Christian Homiletics: St. Stephen's Defence [Acts 7:2-53]," *Australasian Catholic Record* 5 [1959] 238).

²¹Richard, "Acts 7," 260-61.

It is in this section that a second theological motif arises, one that is to reappear in the final invective (vv 51-53). That motif is the exaltation of the rejected one as deliverer of the rejectors.²² It is this particular motif that serves as Stephen's means of both putting his interrogators on the defensive as well as proclaiming Christ from the Scriptures: Joseph, like Christ, was rejected by his brothers. This section, then, develops an offensive element in Stephen's "defense" as well, an element that will continue in the succeeding sections.

On Moses

As in the Joseph unit, Stephen has again selectively styled the Moses material with a theological point in mind. Both the "God outside the land" motif as well as the "rejected deliverer" motif find their places here.

The former begins in the introductory sentences, where Stephen emphasizes the Egyptian location of the people (vv 17, 18, 22). The implication is that since the place from which Israel was delivered was Egypt, then obviously the God who delivered them cannot be restricted by national boundaries. This is emphasized even further by the following notations: It was in *Midian* that the divine oracle to Moses took place (v 29); and the divine workings were seen when God "did wonders and miraculous signs in *Egypt*, at the *Red Sea*, and for forty years in *the desert*" (v 36).²³

The point is that if the land and the Temple are required for the presence of God among his people, then the fundamental historical/theological roots of Israel as a nation must be excluded. Stephen's initial motif is thus strengthened by his selection of details from Moses' life. Yet it is the second motif, introduced in the Joseph section, that finds an even stronger emphasis.

The "rejected deliverer" motif finds its furtherance here in the recounting of the story about Moses and the oppressive Egyptian

²²Although this typological motif finds its detractors, there is a trend toward reasserting its legitimate existence in Stephen's speech. Earlier writers favoring this approach include Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1979 reprint of 1870 ed.), I, 237; and R. B. Rackham, *Acts*, 103. More recently this has been promoted by C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964) 105-6; and F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, 148. The most thorough treatment of this Joseph "typology" is found in Kilgallen (*Stephen's Speech*, 49-60), who sees the determining factor here in the distinctly Christian terms used in this section.

²³Maurice Carrez sees an even greater emphasis on this theme in the Moses section ("Présence et Fonctionnement de L'Ancien Testament dans L'Annonce de L'Évangile," *RSR* 63 [1975] 333). See also Célestin Charlier, "Le Manifeste D'Étienne (Actes 7)," *BVC* 3 (1953) 87; and Longenecker, *Acts*, 344.

(vv 23–29). The sacred lawgiver, Stephen recounts, “thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not” (v 25). Similar to the Joseph episode, a polemical jab is thrust at the unresponsive people who were to have received the deliverance. They, in fact, refused deliverance by refusing the deliverer. It is the one the people rejected, says Stephen, that God used to save them: “This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the word, ‘who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush” (v 35).²⁴

It was, in fact, the rejection of Moses that led ultimately to a rejection of God himself in the golden calf incident (vv 40–41) and, even further, in their idolatry throughout the desert wandering period (vv 42–43). In the midst of his extensive treatment of Moses, Stephen gives an anticipatory glance at his final application (vv 51–53) by quoting a well-known messianic passage, Deut 18:15: “This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’”²⁵

In Stephen’s treatment of the Moses episode, then, we find a further development of the “God outside the land” motif as well as an amplification of the “rejected deliverer” motif. The Moses story, like the Abraham and Joseph stories, is selected and arranged to demonstrate a theological point for Stephen’s auditors. Jesus of Nazareth, like Joseph and Moses, is the rejected deliverer sent by God. It would be difficult indeed to find this theological concept to be at variance with the theology of Luke in his development of thought in Luke-Acts.

On the Temple

Although the Temple issue has been implicitly addressed from the outset in the “God outside the land” motif, it receives explicit development in this final section preceding the concluding remarks (7:44–50). The precursor of the Temple, the “Tabernacle of Testimony,” is treated initially in this section, and in a genuinely positive light. The Tabernacle has been made in accord with a divine design and through a divine revelation to Moses (v 44). The Tabernacle

²⁴In this connection note the polemical use of the following phrases in this section: “Our fathers *refused* to obey him”; and “they *rejected* him” (v 39).

²⁵J. Jeremias, “Μωϋσῆς,” *TDNT* 4 (1967) 868–69. Cf. Kirsopp Lake and H. J. Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 4 of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, eds. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (reprint of the 1933 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965) 38, 78; Rackham, *Acts*, 104; Gloag, *Acts*, 1. 236–47; Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (second ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 172; *Acts*, 152.

again suits Stephen's "God outside the land" concept, being a portable structure not bound to one place. The Tabernacle, in fact, is carried into the land from outside. It continued to be functional in the land until the time of David. Then, in Stephen's discussion of the time of David, the Temple is finally introduced. Here, however, the tone of the discussion shifts dramatically: "But it was Solomon who built the house for him. However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (vv 47-48). Stephen forcefully emphasizes his point by a quotation of Isa 66:1-2, in which Yahweh stresses his omnipresence in contrast to the Temple. It is certainly to be observed that Stephen is minimizing the place of the Temple by such statements, particularly in contrast to the Tabernacle. God is not located only in Palestine, as Stephen has been stressing prior to this climactic assertion. Since this is the case, then the Temple cannot at all be perceived as the sole focal point for the worship of such a God.²⁶ With this, the "God outside the land" motif reaches its climax.

Direct Application

The direct application section is demarcated by a shift from the use of a third person narrative form to a second person confrontation. Stephen is no longer summarizing sacred history. He is now addressing his auditors directly in the light of his oration (vv 51-53). He accuses them of resisting the Holy Spirit (viz., God). Just as Joseph's brothers had rejected Joseph, their divinely designated

²⁶The building of the Temple as a point of idolatry or apostasy and thus as contrary to the intentions of God is viewed by most recent interpreters as Stephen's point here. See particularly Marcel Simon, "Saint Stephen and the Jerusalem Temple," *JEH* 2 (1951) 127-42; L. W. Barnard, "Saint Stephen and early Alexandrian Christianity," *NTS* 7 (1960-61) 31-45; Bihler, *Stephanusgeschichte*, 74-75; Bacon, "Stephen's Speech," 272; Longenecker, *Acts*, 346. Even Bruce adopts this position in his most recent work on the subject, emphasizing the unique assertion of Stephen as a Hellenist: "the idea that the Temple was a mistake from the beginning is unparalleled in the New Testament." He does try to divest Luke of such an opinion, however: "Stephen's reply is not the epitome of Luke's own position: Luke, in other parts of his work, reveals a much more positive attitude to the Temple than Stephen does." F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James, and John: Studies in Early Non-Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 53. It must be kept in mind, however, that OT theology places the impetus for the building of the Temple with Yahweh himself, who gave explicit instructions for its design, just as he did for the Tabernacle (1 Chr 28:12, 19). To suggest that Stephen viewed the construction of the Temple as an act of apostasy or idolatry is to suggest that he either misunderstood or misrepresented OT theology at this point. The older interpreters understood Stephen's words in a less stinging sense, holding that he spoke against the current view of the Temple and its use rather than its existence. Cf. Heather, "St. Stephen's Defence," 240: "The Temple, then, like the law, had a relative, not an absolute value." See also Ephraim C. Sheld, "Stephen's Defence before the Sanhedrin," *BW* 13 (January-June 1899) 98.

deliverer, so they have rejected the Righteous One. Just as Israel rejected Moses, their divinely designated deliverer, so they have rejected, betrayed, and murdered the Savior. Thus the "rejected deliverer" motif is brought to a climax in this final section.

In view of the foregoing, it can be seen that Stephen has met the accusations by utilizing the Torah selectively to defend his position on the nature of Israel's God as well as to show his hearers their guilt in rejecting God's Deliverer, Jesus. Stephen's defense becomes his means of offense. His accusers become his accused.

THE "ERRORS" AND STEPHEN'S THEOLOGY

Now that the theology of Stephen has been established in terms of its connection to the speech's thematic development and flow of thought, it remains to be seen where the problematic passages lie in relation to this theological development. Of the five conflicts of a historical nature in the speech, two are contained in the Abraham section, and three in the Joseph section. The relation of the three explicit problems to the theology of the speech will now be considered.²⁷

The Call of Abraham

The first phrase causing difficulty is that which locates the initial revelation to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) "in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran" (7:2). It has been seen that the point of the Abrahamic story in the Stephen speech is to initiate the concept that Yahweh's presence is not limited to the land on which the Temple lies. Certainly this point could have been made without the limiting phrase "before he lived in Haran." Yet the fact that this foundational revelation took place in Mesopotamia, "the land of the Chaldeans" (7:4), appears to have theological significance for Stephen. To him, it is not simply at Haran, the second stage of the patriarchal sojourn, where the divine oracle overtook Abraham. Rather, it was in the very seedbed of idolatry, the farthest point from the land, and at the very dawn of redemptive history that the divine oracle reached him.²⁸ J. Kilgallen, although not necessarily assuming a non-conflicting Genesis account, expresses this same kind of idea:

²⁷The numeric problem of 70/75 will not be treated under this heading as a theological alteration, since this issue has a textual problem at its base, nor will the patristic burial issue be treated in that it involves in its solution a textual-grammatical matter rather than a theological one. See Koivisto, "Stephen's Speech and Inerrancy," chaps. 4-5.

²⁸Cf. Jacquier, *Actes*, 295.

Theologically, we believe that Stephen chose this tradition (Gen. 15, 7) rather than that of 11, 31–12, 5 because he wanted to show his listeners that the call to a new land (to worship God) was at the very root of Abraham's earliest migration. God's call did not come after a first and secular movement of Abraham. Abraham's initial movement was in response to a divine mandate; conversely, any movement that tended toward the new land was inspired by God, not simply capitalized upon by God somewhere along the journey (as the Gen 12 tradition might indicate). The divine plan was primordial.²⁹

The point is well taken. Stephen's reference to a Chaldean call is not a homiletical slip or inadvertent error brought about by the pressures of litigation. It is, on the contrary, a deliberate attempt to develop his theology by selecting materials from the biblical text.³⁰ As such, the reference to the Abrahamic call in Ur is conscious and planned; it is an integral part of the theology that Stephen is presenting and that Luke is integrating with his theological development in the book of Acts.

The Death of Terah

At first glance, the reference to Terah's death in Acts 7:4 seems to contain no theological significance, but is rather a simple allusion to an apparent historical fact in Genesis: the call of Abraham is recorded as occurring subsequent to Terah's death. Strack and Billerbeck suggest that the reason for the intrusion of this problematic phrase in Acts 7 is a simple reliance on an old rabbinic tradition that was created to absolve Abraham from the atrocious action of deserting his aged father.³¹

²⁹Kilgallen, *Stephen's Speech*, 42–43. See also Nils A. Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. by Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 143: "Thus God's revelation is made the starting point of Abraham's migrations."

³⁰E. Richard, though attributing the redactive work to the Lucan author, stresses that the changes in the Stephen speech are not accidental, but are related to the "overall purpose of the speech and its context." *Acts 6:1–8:4: The Author's Method of Composition* (SBL Dissertation Series, 41; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 56.

³¹Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (6 vols.; Munich: C. H. Beck'sche, 1961) 2. 667–68. See particularly the rabbinic tradition reflected in *Gen. Rab.* 39:7: "Now what precedes this passage? *And Terah died in Haran* [which is followed by] *Now the Lord said unto Abram: Get thee (lek leka)*. R. Isaac said: From the point of view of chronology a period of sixty-five years is still required. But first you may learn that the wicked, even during their lifetime, are called dead. For Abraham was afraid saying, 'Shall I go out and bring dishonor upon the Divine Name, as people will say, "he left his father in his old age and departed"?' Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, reassured him: 'I exempt thee (leka) from the

This suggestion may be too simple, however. In view of the obvious apologetic activity of Stephen, the phrase may well have been introduced for a distinct theological purpose. It is certainly possible that the reason for this inclusion is the relationship between Jewish tradition surrounding Terah and a subsidiary "exodus" motif that arises in the speech.

The Jewish tradition regarding Terah is exemplified in *Gen. Rab.* 38:13, where Terah is referred to as a manufacturer of idols, and it is held that the death of his son Haran was due to Terah's practice.³² The implication in the tradition is that, even though Abraham left Ur at the divine call, he brought with him an idolatrous father—and thereby a potential return to Chaldean idolatry.

The text of Acts 7 implies, moreover, that the stay in Haran was itself divinely directed.³³ In this way Stephen stresses that Abraham did not enter the land of promise until his idolatrous father was dead and hence unable to contaminate his pure devotion to Yahweh. For Stephen, the death of Terah may thus mark Abraham's final break with his past.³⁴

This emphasis on Abraham's break with his father is significant in view of a subsidiary "exodus" motif that may be seen in the Stephen speech. In the Joseph section (vv 9-16), Joseph (like Abraham) is separated from his family. The text indicates, however, that God was with *Joseph* as opposed to the "fathers." In the Moses section, it was "our fathers" who refused to obey Moses and turned

duty of honouring thy parents, though I exempt no one else from this duty. Moreover, I will record his death before thy departure.' Hence, 'And Terah died in Haran' is stated first, and then, Now the LORD said unto Abram, etc."

³²The tradition probably has its roots in the canonical statement of Josh 24:2: "Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and *worshipped other gods.*" A similar reflection of the tradition stemming from this may be found in *Jub.* 12:1-6, where Abram is said to have confronted his father on the uselessness of idolatry before leaving Ur, and where his brother Haran is to have died trying to save his idols from a conflagration set by Abram for the purpose of destroying them.

³³In 7:3 the words "Go into the land I will show you" are immediately followed by "then he settled in Haran." This implies that the otherwise inexplicable stopover in Haran was done at Yahweh's command. Abraham may well have waited there for the idolatrous tendencies in his own family to be resolved before entering the land of promise.

³⁴This is contrary to the opinion of Vawter. He holds that the priestly author of Genesis 11-12 intended to indicate that Terah was very much alive during the first years of Abram in Canaan, thus making the separation of the two ways all the more real since both leaving and staying would have been live options for Abraham (Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977], 173-74). Vawter does not consider the possibility, however, that the listing of Terah's sons may have been theological in order rather than chronological.

their hearts back to Egypt (v 39). The patriarchal distinction is brought to a pointed conclusion with the final words of Stephen: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like *your fathers*: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (v 51).

These internal factors suggest that the reference to the death of Terah may begin a foil against which the disobedience of Stephen's own contemporaries is brought into sharp relief. Abraham broke with his disobedient father at his death; Stephen's contemporaries had not yet broken with their disobedient and long-dead fathers.

This "error" thus shows marks of a calculated insertion into the narrative for theological purposes as well. Like the call of Abraham in Stephen's speech, the problem cannot simply be removed without violating the theology which Stephen is building, and which Luke condones.

The Abrahamic Purchase

Both a theological point and an exegetical difficulty are involved in Stephen's inclusion of an otherwise unknown acquisition by Abraham of land at Shechem. Shechem certainly held theological significance in the Abrahamic narrative of the OT, for it was there that Abraham first exhibited his relationship to the land of promise by building an altar to Yahweh.³⁵ A reference to an Abrahamic tomb purchase, however, would have most likely brought to the minds of Stephen's listeners the sacred and revered tomb at Hebron. Stephen asserts that Abraham purchased a tomb not at revered Hebron, but at despised Shechem.

Certainly this reference to what was Samaritan territory in Stephen's day, particularly in the context of the Temple and worship motifs in his speech, would have had significant theological overtones,³⁶ especially since the Samaritans were for all practical purposes considered outside the land.³⁷ It is thus not without significance that

³⁵Martin H. Scharlemann, *Stephen: A Singular Saint (AnBib 34)*; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1968) 38.

³⁶Cf. E. F. Harrison: "Stephen's mention of Shechem was probably not casual but deliberate. . . . A rigid Jew might want to forget the patriarchal contacts with Shechem, but Stephen would not permit that. To mention Shechem was almost the equivalent of calling attention to Samaria" (*Acts*, 115-16). See also Bacon, "Stephen's Speech," 230. For a contrary opinion, see Loisy, *Actes*, 327. Loisy's objection to a polemic here, however, assumes that the only Abrahamic tomb purchase known to the Jews was the Hittite transaction of Genesis 23. With the abundance of extrabiblical accounts and traditions of Abraham circulating in the first century, this may be too great an assumption.

³⁷Cf. Gerhard Schneider ("Stephanus, die Hellenisten, und Samaria," in *Les Actes des Apôtres: Tradition, Rédaction, Théologie*, ed. by J. Kremer [Louvain: Paris Gembloux, 1979] 229). Note particularly the "God is spirit" concept communicated to

Luke follows this speech with a narrative of the evangelization of that same Samaritan territory (Acts 8:4-25). In view of the conscious theological selection of the term "Shechem" on Stephen's part, and the significant Lucan use of this element in his narrative, one must again conclude that the use of this "error" is a conscious one loaded with theological import.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The theological function of the "errors" within the development of Acts 7 indicates that at least three of the divergences are intentional assertions that produce in their contexts a theological thrust that would be absent without them. And though a systematic reconciliation between Stephen's recounting of history and the OT record itself has not been attempted in this study, such an approach must reckon with the conclusion drawn here: that the divergences found in Stephen's speech and recorded by Luke are deliberate. Hence, there is a renewed need to reconcile Stephen's comments on OT history with the OT record. Allowing Stephen to have been "in error" simply will not do if a sound view of the trustworthiness of Scripture is to be maintained.

the Samaritans by our Lord (John 4:24). The possible connection between the Johannine theology thus represented and the Hellenistic concept represented by Stephen is shown by Oscar Cullmann, "A New Approach to the Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel," Parts I and II, *ET* 71 (1959) 8-12; 39-43.

³⁸This may explain why Shechem has a part in the theological focus, but it does not explain why Abraham was the one who needed to have made the purchase, nor why a tomb purchase is significant in the narrative at all. The role of a tomb in OT theology, however, may relate here to the concept of promise. Abraham's purchase of a tomb plot in Hebron, for example, was evidence of his settling down in the land of promise. In the same way the patriarchal burials in Shechem, not mentioned by Stephen, are further examples of fulfillment in the land of promise. This fits Stephen's theology quite well in that it is the rejected brother who ensures burial of the rejectors in the land of promise. The mention of Abraham as the purchaser forms a nice literary inclusion: "Abraham began this history, receiving the promise of the land, at v. 16, before the new generation of Exodus and the Pharaoh 'who knew not Joseph' appear. We see a literary, redactional nicety which gives a partial fulfillment to what God had promised Israel in the person of Abraham which in turn becomes an encouragement to hope for the future that some day all the land will pass into total possession of Abraham's descendants" (Kilgallen, *Stephen's Speech*, 62).