

THE SPECTRE OF STEPHEN AND THE HAUNTING OF ACTS

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ABSTRACT

Critical studies on the *Acts of the Apostles* have consistently suggested that this late New Testament writing takes a degree of fictive license in its narration of Christian origins. This article seeks to tease out some implications from loose ends in a writing that appears to erase some difficult memories as it attempts to give a unified, coherent view of Christian origins. The article proposes that at least two uncomfortable memories emerge from this text: one, an uneasy memory for contemporaries of the writer—the murder of Stephen; and two, an ineluctable memory for Christian tradition concerning some early pejorative evaluation of contemporary Judaism. The *Acts* strategy of ameliorating difficult memories occurs at the cost of erasing the complexity and memory of the internal tensions involved.

Who killed Stephen?

Who killed Stephen? Who was involved? On the surface, the documentation conveys an unequivocal case, with the Jewish Council made entirely responsible for the martyrdom and ensuing persecution (Acts 6:12, 15; 7:1, 54-58; 8:1).¹ On closer examination, however, this is not so evident. Indeed, there are some surprises in the complex picture that emerges. The aim of this article is not to establish “what happened,” but rather, the possibility of an alternative scenario, other than that which is inscribed in the rhetorical overtures of the narrative. Whether these events happened this way is a moot point. My thesis is that the *Acts of the Apostles* can be read against its own rhetoric, to make explicit an inscribed memory of some early traumatic events and tensions—a possibility emerging from tensions in the text. In terms of method, this thesis applies

¹ However, Lüdemann suggests that Stephen’s death appears to be the consequence of “lynch law” rather than an act of the Council, which it could not do under Roman occupation law (*Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts* [London: SCM, 1989], 92).

to *Acts* a Derridean strategy—that texts inevitably contest their self-attested claims, Derrida’s “dangerous supplement”—that there is a surplus in texts that is integral to a text’s claims, which also contests those very claims.² The presence of *dissonance* within a text is ineluctable, given that the privileging of a centre in a text’s production does not occur in a homogenised context or heritage, and is therefore prone to tearing as it differs with itself.³ Careful reading is able to tease out torn loose ends, in order to see what alternative stories can unravel.⁴ Further, a text is necessarily iterable, divided between its event and representation to other readers.⁵ It cannot be made to speak univocally.⁶ It is always haunted by its other.⁷ Derrida suggests that witness is divided between reception or experience (then) and “attestation” (now).⁸ Memory carries the iterability of tradition in the temporality of living, with all the possibilities of doubt, prevarication, embellishment, and necessary interpretation being introduced into conscientious testimony.

Recognising that in the quest for *an original context*, “context” never being “saturated” or complete, and that context is always

² See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974/1976), 144-164).

³ Inheritance is always *heterogenous*, with “several voices,” and therefore in tension with itself: Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 16.

⁴ A text cannot circumscribe its claims in a closure of interpretation, but is always countersigned by new readings. Derrida, “Roundtable on Autobiography,” *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, eds. Claude Levesque and Christie McDonald (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 79-89. Text and meaning never coincide even if a text produces “meaning-effects,” because its necessary iterability or “remark” as text, ensures that this can never occur: Derrida, “The Double Session,” *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 250-252.

⁵ “Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat” (Jacques Derrida, “Limited Inc abc...,” in *Limited Inc* [Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988], 61).

⁶ Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Limited Inc*, 5-12. Reading can invoke correlations between writer and language, other than those the writer may have intended, including those that are excluded (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 159, 163-164).

⁷ Derrida’s “spectral” suggests the appearance or silhouette of something that is presented, while unable to be presented as such. Hence, what is presented is divided and haunted by its ghostly other. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 287-288. Derrida, *Specters*, xx; Derrida, “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,” in Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of my Death and Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) 91-92.

⁸ Derrida, “Demeure,” 65-66, 56.

being modified and contested through its reiteration in further representation,⁹ a brief sketch will first be drawn from some interstitial gaps in *Acts*, without prejudice for or against other suggestions for Christian origins,¹⁰ prior to demonstrating these methodological perspectives.

Tensions between Hebrew and Hellenist believers in Jerusalem became intense, surfacing explicitly over funds distributed to the poor.¹¹ The Hebrew leadership controlled the resources and manipulated them in order to gain some theological leverage over the Hellenists. As tensions between Hebrew speaking and Greek speaking believers solidified into open conflict, an alternative leadership emerged among the Greeks—Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas.

Stephen's leadership became the focus of Hebrew bitterness toward the Hellenists. His theological and exegetical skills were insurmountable. His arguments for a different understanding of the temple and law in the messianic movement created a degree of consternation and frustration among some Diaspora Jews who charged him with *speaking blasphemously* about the holy place and law. Hellenist God-fearers had always been familiar with the demands of Jewish cultural tradition, but some in the Jesus movement (i.e. Stephen), through their interpretation of the Scriptures, were questioning fundamental tenets relating to law

⁹ Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 2-3, 14-18; Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 9.

¹⁰ For example, Galilee or Syrian beginnings. James D.G. Dunn speaks of the writer "foreshortening," "telescoping," and "tidying up... complex or messy events..." (*The Acts of the Apostles* [London: Epworth, 1996], 105). Jack T. Sanders cites the ineluctable and variegated developments of the Christian movement, and observes in summary of *Schismatics*, that, "[a]s new religious movements evolve, the *primary cause of dissension within them* will be disagreement over the speed and course of deviation away from the parent movement and towards adaptation to the broader environment" (*Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations* [London: SCM, 1993], 257, emphasis added). Martin Hengel observes, "Past events present themselves to us in an overwhelming multiplicity" (*Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* [London: SCM, 1979], 71-80). Cf. Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992), 130.

¹¹ "Hellenists" (6:1) are Greek speaking Jews from the Diaspora (Ἑλληνιστῆς): Johnson, *Acts*, 105. "Hellenists" were "those who could speak effectively only Greek..." and "were a language and culture sub-group within Jerusalem . . .": Dunn, *Acts*, 81.

and temple. This did not meet with approval among the Hebrew believers.

The newly emerging sect of *messianist* believers within Judaism attracted attention from the Council, which sided with the Hebrew believers with their prevailing interpretation of two central motifs of Judaism—allegiance to temple and Torah.¹² This was not surprising. The ferocity with which they opposed the Hellenist believers was. Stephen was summarily executed after a particularly vitriolic debate. The complicity of Hebrew believers is a moot but tantalising issue not easily dismissed. (One scholar locates the blame for Stephen’s death with the Jews, and makes the incredible suggestion that “their attempts to kill him indicates they were certainly not Christians.”)¹³ The Hellenist believers were scattered in a brief, but brutal persecution. The Hebrew believers, led by James, Peter and the Apostles, remained in Jerusalem. Many Hellenist believers moved to Antioch in Syria, where they began to develop a movement within the vision of Stephen.¹⁴

More than one story to the story

There appears to be more than one story to the *Acts* story. Not only are there significant differences between *Acts* and Paul’s writings,¹⁵ but there are also threads of several stories running

¹² The Jerusalem believers meet, teach, and pray in the temple (3:1; 5:12, 42). Haenchen notes that “the stumbling-block could not have been the preaching of Jesus as Messiah, for James the brother of the Lord was able to maintain this doctrine in Jerusalem right up until year 60” (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 267). Cf. Dunn (*Acts*, 85): “The preaching of Peter had called no vital principle of Israel’s religion or heritage in question.” Further, “the support of the many priests... (6:7), indicates a movement wholly in accord with Israel’s central traditions.” Citing some Christological motifs that are frequently assumed to be the source of conflict between early Christians and Jews, Sanders notes that “it was indeed Jews – early Jewish Christians of various stripes – who accepted all those beliefs” (*Schismatics*, 83). *Acts* and 1 Peter are the only New Testament writings to refer to followers of Christ as “Christians” (11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The term “Christians” was used by opponents, and only became a self-designation in the second century: see Lüdemann, *Acts*, 138. For convenience only, this article will refer to early believers as *Christians*.

¹³ John B. Polhill, *Acts*. The New American Commentary, Volume 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 177.

¹⁴ For further detail, see Lüdemann, *Acts*, 73-93; Haenchen, *Acts*, 260-274, 293-299, 365-372; Dunn, *Acts*, 75-106, 117-130, 152-158; Philip Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lukan Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987) 135-143, 146-148, 154-160; Hengel *Acts*, 105-113, 202-203, 206-207; Sanders, *Schismatics*, 2-3, 95-99.

¹⁵ Exactly what the writer of *Acts* knew from Pauline tradition (whether little, adapted, or direct tradition) is a contested issue: Lüdemann, *Acts*, 6-8 (see pp. 1-9 for an evaluation of “The Historical Value of the Acts of the Apostles”). Hengel

through the *Acts* document itself, which may betray a certain *cover-up*. One can also posit an ensuing tradition of *cover-ups* with the propensity for explanation of narrative gaps by commentative tradition. For example, with reference to Acts 6:1-15, Johnson says that there is “a gap between what the story seems to be saying, and what it is actually doing within the narrative.” He uses terms such as “gap,” “puzzling,” “puzzlement,” “discrepancy,” “disjointedness of the account,” “problem of this passage,” but rather than seeing more than one story, seeks to ameliorate its difficulties by positing an explicable, unified narrative.¹⁶

At no point in the *Acts* narrative are the apostles depicted initiating the dominical apostolic commission to a mission encompassing the nations (1:8b). Whatever the *Acts’ memory*, every development of mission until the Gentile mission of Paul, whether by intention or crisis, meets with response not initiative from

the (Jerusalem) apostles, who eventually give their apostolic approval.¹⁷ At every point in the narrative, the apostles (only once referred to as “the Twelve” after their completion in Acts 1) respond to developments that have already occurred. None of the apostles initiates this mission. Others do so. The apostles only verify these *divine initiatives* after the fact.¹⁸ In short, however, there is a major schism in Jerusalem—some flee, some stay. In the face of a tradition of schism over the terms of Gentile inclusion, the writer turns this incorrigible memory into an “apposite” virtue, with legitimation of Gentile mission occurring as “the will of God.”¹⁹ The apostles remain in Jerusalem while persecution has decimated the community. For much of the story, those who stay are checking up on those who have left concerning the movement’s spread to the Gentiles. What is

(*Acts*, 38) suggests two variables in the relationship between Acts and Paul: he describes Acts as “incomplete, fragmentary and misleading,” and yet pertaining to Paul that it is “almost impossible to put Paul and his work in a chronological and geographical setting.” The relationship between them does not amount to mutual explanation, but ineluctable relativity.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Acts*, 110-111.

¹⁷ Lüdemann, *Acts*, 30.

¹⁸ Either persecution or *divine initiative* precipitates expanding mission, not the Jerusalem church or the Jerusalem apostles (i.e. in Samaria and Antioch, 8:14; 11:22): Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*. Vol. 2, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 135, 142-143, 146-149. Also Johnson, *Acts*, 186-187.

¹⁹ Haenchen, *Acts*, 298.

happening implicitly in the story? What are these apostles still doing in Jerusalem after the violent murder and subsequent dispersion of *the* community through persecution (8:1b; 9:26-28; 11:1-2, 22, 27-30; 15:1-6; 16:4; 21:17-18)?²⁰ Sanders is unequivocal: “[w]e must remain incredulous in the face of an account that tells us that a persecution against the church took place that left the leaders untouched but drove the entire rank and file out of the city.”²¹ What are we to make of the apostles being in Jerusalem throughout the entire narrative? For example, late in the narrative, it is in Jerusalem that James informs Paul of his precarious reputation of speaking against the law and circumcision among Diaspora Jews, and encourages him to ameliorate his *compromised reputation* (21:21-26). What then are we to make of such persistent tensions in *Acts*? What are we to make of the *spectre of Stephen* that lingers over much of the narrative in the movement from Jerusalem to the nations, and the narrative’s explicit emphases countering the implicit theological horizon of Jerusalem apostles?

There are sufficient *loose ends* to tell an alternative story from *Acts*, which revolves around Jewish identity and the perceived threat of Hellenism. Memories of the “Maccabean crisis” nearly two centuries earlier, and the influence of Hellenistic culture in Palestine (1 Macc. 1),²² not to mention a memory of the temple’s defilement,²³ were always present. Hebraist *true believers*, whether from Palestine or the Diaspora, were suspi-

²⁰ Johnson’s explanation (*Acts*, 141) is unsatisfactory: apostles “whom the narrative has already established as untouchable,” are untouched by the persecution. Haenchen suggests (*Acts*, 268) that the Hebrew’s “immunity from the persecution shows that they did not adopt” the Hellenists’ kerygma. Dunn’s explanation (*Acts*, 103-104) is that “the apostles, by remaining in Jerusalem when all the rest of the church had been scattered, maintained the continuity of the new movement with Jerusalem and its beginnings there.”

²¹ Sanders, *Schismatics*, 2-3.

²² Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul: Paul and the Law,” in *The Romans Debate*, revised edition, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 303; Dunn, *Acts*, 82. For Dunn, “‘Judaism’ was coined as a title to express opposition to ‘Hellenism’ (2 Macc. 4.13)” (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998], 347, 348-352).

²³ Circa 167 BCE, Daniel 8-9; 1 Macc. 1:20-23; 2 Macc. 5:15-21a. Hengel (*Acts*, 73) observes, “The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians... remained more deeply rooted in the religious tradition of Palestine, which from the time of the Maccabees inevitably regarded any attack on Torah and Temple as sacrilege.” Howard Clark Kee suggests that “temple-oriented Judaism [was] concerned primarily to preserve Palestinian land and culture” (*Good News to the Ends of the Earth: The Theology of Acts* [London: SCM/TPI, 1990], 45).

cious of Hellenising *liberals* who were too ready to accept outsiders with less than rigorous requirements. Was Paul (Saul), a Diaspora Jew from Tarsus, commissioned to purge out these liberalising influences (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:6; Acts 7:58; 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:9-11)? This is feasible, given the absence of attention to Judean (Christian) believers (Gal 1:22).

The narrative opens a tantalising seam with the division between the *Hebraioi* and *Hellenistai* (6:1).²⁴ The presenting issue is a conflict over the daily distribution of resources to widows. However, there seems to be more to this, with Stephen's theology questioning and delineating the apparent failure of central tenets of contemporary Jewish religious identity—Law and Temple (6:13-14; 7:2-53). This appears to be at issue here.²⁵ The distribution of resources is always connected, however implicitly, to political issues. Specific and explicit social anxieties and conflicts usually mask more enduring tensions between mostly implicit social assumptions, expectations, and perspective.²⁶ The seven leaders appointed to ameliorate the tensions over resources, all with Greek names, suggests an alternative leadership. The seven are “full of spirit and wisdom” (6:3), and Stephen is an irrepressible theologian (6:8-10), suggesting that their leadership extends beyond the presenting task of distributing food. The writer attempts to ameliorate a memory of division by depicting continuities between the apostles (as

²⁴ Haenchen, *Acts*, 260, 267. The Hebrew–Hellenist issue reflects a “conflict” or “split” among Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (see Lüdemann, *Acts*, 78, 85).

²⁵ The most likely source of conflict between Hebrews and Hellenists was extreme differences over practice of the law: see Haenchen, *Acts*, 267-268. The two factors that unified Judaism in its diversity—Torah and Temple—were under threat by *Christian* rhetoric as early as the Hellenist split in Jerusalem, and articulated by Stephen, for “[t]o attack the validity of [temple and Torah] was to attack Jewish identity at its core...” (Sanders, *Schismatics*, 99, 95-99). Lüdemann suggests (*Acts*, 85) ‘historicity’ exists in the ‘hiatus’ over Law and Temple. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (London: SCM, 1990), 149. Esler cites “pro-Temple” (*Hebraioi*) and “anti-Temple” (*Hellenistae*) factions in the early Jerusalem community, the latter being expelled (8:1). The presence in Jerusalem of a messianic movement announcing eschatological inclusive possibilities (i.e., Gentile participation in the temple—Isa 56:7), would have been an attraction to *marginalised God-fearers* (Esler, *Community and Gospel*, 135-148, 154-161). Hengel suggests that the Jesus movement may have been attractive to Hellenist Jews because of its “affinities with the universalist Greek-speaking world and perhaps even with some themes in Greek thought” (*Acts*, 72-73). In this tradition, the Hellenists around Stephen were critical of the temple cult and Mosaic law.

²⁶ Polhill overlooks the rhetorical nature of narrative when he suggests that “[t]he Hellenist widows were being overlooked—*certainly not deliberately neglected but inadvertently left out*” (*Acts*, 179 emphasis added).

premier witnesses) and the *Seven* (as servants of the poor).²⁷ Is the Hebrew–Hellenist conflict over resources essentially an intransigent theological conflict that leads to a martyrdom and ensuing persecution?²⁸ The evidence for a major split within the Christian community is circumstantial but compelling, with the Hellenists being scattered after Stephen’s death, while *the* (Hebrew) *apostles remain* (unmolested) *in Jerusalem*. A large congregation, zealous for the traditions of Israel, also remains, inviolate, in Jerusalem throughout *Acts* (11:2-3; 15:1-2; 21:20-24).²⁹ These details belie the narrative’s *innocent* portrayal of Christian persecution at the hands of hostile Jews.³⁰

Stephen’s theological legacy

Stephen appears to be the Christian church’s first theologian of an alternative understanding of law (which he does not reject) and the temple,³¹ which might be more acceptable to Gentiles, sometime before Paul’s calling and mission. Further, Greek-speaking believers are depicted making the missional initiatives—they are porous to other groups, such as Samaritans and Gentile God-fearers (i.e. an Ethiopian eunuch, 8:26-40). Saul (Paul), it seems, seeks to root out this same group in Damascus (9:1-2). The Judean churches, however, were not a focus of Saul’s

²⁷ Haenchen, *Acts*, 266-267.

²⁸ A comparison of James’ position (21:17-26) and Stephen’s speech (7:2-53) indicates that tensions around Torah and customs of Moses remain incorrigible throughout the *Acts* narrative.

²⁹ Johnson suggests (*Acts*, 141, 143) that the persecution marks a close to the “Jerusalem section,” and the next phase of the narrative’s fulfilment of the commission to be witnesses (1:8). However, Jerusalem continues to dominate the rhetorical pitch of the story (cp. 11:1-3; 15:1-6; 21:17-24); and the commission is not sustained by Jerusalem beyond Jerusalem. Further, Hengel notes (*Acts*, 74) that the writer nowhere indicates “a return of those who had been driven out and scattered” from Jerusalem.

³⁰ Haenchen alludes to a *gloss-over* in the face of dissonance between memory and rhetoric in “a cleavage in [the writer’s] ideal picture of the primitive community...” (*Acts*, 266). Concerning the apostles remaining in Jerusalem while others were persecuted, Haenchen suggests that “the author must be following a line imposed on him by a tradition concerning Stephen.” That is, the narrative *speaks* against the writer’s rhetoric (*Acts*, 266, 273). Sanders cites temple and law as the “most likely causes of bitter conflict between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Jews” (*Schismatics*, 95). Equally, this conflict could be inter-Christian.

³¹ Stephen speaks of non-observance of the law (7:53), but not its rejection: Lüdemann, *Acts*, 81-82.

persecution. After his (*Acts*) *conversion*,³² Saul joins the disputes alongside the Stephenite dispersion against the pro-Jerusalem Hellenists.³³ Dispersed Hellenistic Jews initiate the Gentile mission (notwithstanding *Acts*' portrayal of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, and the latter's conversion). *Acts*' unfolding story gets ahead of its missional rhetoric—others are already there.³⁴

The Samaria mission is led by a Hellenist (Philip), which is given legitimacy after the fact by apostles still resident in Jerusalem (8:14-17). Philip and the Ethiopian make the link between Jerusalem and the “ends of the earth,” a commission given to *the Twelve* at the beginning of the narrative.³⁵ The Damascus church was there before Saul's persecution. Judean Christians eventually recognize the validity of Gentile inclusion in the church with Peter's vision, in the face of reluctance (*Acts* 10:9-16).³⁶ Not everyone is happy, however, for there is Judean

³² Paul “did not think of it [Christianity] as a different religion. Even as an apostle to the Gentiles, he still remained Paul the Jew, Paul the Israelite” (Dunn, *Paul*, 717-718). Paul never ceases to be a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5; Rom 9:1-5; 11:1), belonging to a remnant in Israel, which had always sought to maintain covenant faithfulness to the gracious calling of God—after Isaiah's universal vision (Rom 11:1-5, 13-16; 15:7-13). Paul's description of his revelatory experience (ὄφθη 1 Cor 15:8 [5-8]; ἀποκαλύψαι... ἐν ἐμοί Gal 1:16) is elusive as to its precise nature. His *conversion* is frequently read from *Acts*, not his own correspondence. The three versions of Saul's conversion in *Acts* appear to be at odds in their detail (9:1-22; 22:3-21; 26:4-20).

³³ There is dissonance between the virulent deposes with Hellenists (*Hellenistas* 9:29) and the declaration of pervasive peace (9:31), reflecting an irrepressible memory of schism (6:1-2) contesting the writer's eirenic portrayal. Haenchen alludes to a *gloss-over* in the writer's sudden shift from “Hellenistic Jews” to “Saul” as persecutor after the death of Stephen— “he is the persecution *in person*,” whose “conversion brings immediate peace . . . (9.31)” (*Acts*, 298).

³⁴ By the writer's admission, the persecuted dispersion (8:1 non-apostolic) precipitated a mission among the Gentiles (11:19-21) in contrast to the dramatized event in which Peter introduces the Gospel to the Gentiles (10:1-48; 11:4-17) (Achtmeier, *Quest for Unity*, 37-38). “Hellenists were the first to take the step to the Gentile mission, and not Peter through the conversion of Cornelius” (Lüdemann, *Acts*, 85, 136-137). Among the Hellenist believers, it appears that some were expelled because they were Hellenists, but who nevertheless identified with the Jerusalem resistance to more liberal perspectives of gospel (11:19).

³⁵ Lüdemann suggests (*Acts*, 105) that the writer could not have the Ethiopian *come on stage* as a “Gentile” convert, because the Peter-Cornelius sequence is central to the unifying pitch of *Acts*. In an attempt to sustain the writer's primacy of the Peter and Cornelius sequence, Tannehill suggests that “[t]he conversion of the Ethiopian was a private and isolated event that had no effect” (*Acts*, 137). For Dunn, the eunuch is “arguably the first full Gentile conversion...” (*Acts*, 103).

³⁶ Yet according to Paul's memory, Peter, along with Barnabas, was necessarily rebuked after baulking at commensality with Gentiles in the church, and plays no part in the Gentile initiatives (10:1-48; Gal 2:1-14). Peter becomes the spokesperson for this new Gentile phase of mission (10:34-43; 11:4-17; 15:7-11)

displeasure over the Gentile mission as Jerusalem Christians take issue with Peter over the Cornelius incident (11:1-3). Having the Jerusalem Church “praise God” for the Gentile mission in response to Peter’s speech (11:18) and to the issue of commensality with the uncircumcised (11:3), is clever narrative rhetoric. *Acts* has played down the *Greek speaking* mission to the Gentiles in order to make a significant point about Peter’s seminal mission to the Gentiles (10:1-11:18).³⁷ This creates an *ecumenical impression* in which Jerusalem always takes the initiative, with equal roles attributed to Peter and Paul in the mission to the Gentiles. Meanwhile, the narrative plays out its other story with a mission initiated by Hellenic Jewish believers fleeing the Jerusalem persecution, which occurs among Greeks at Antioch,³⁸ which in turn initiates further mission to the Gentiles (13:1-3). Sent by the Antioch church, the mission of Paul and Barnabas precipitates the Jerusalem council, which officially approves of the Gentile mission (15:6-29).³⁹ This mission is symbolised by Paul reaching Rome, the *apostolic* mission extending to “the ends of the earth”— the dominant story for the remainder of the narrative (Acts 16-28). The *Acts*’ memory depicts Jerusalem responding to *divine initiative*, while Jerusalem also appears resistant to Gentile inclusion, except as Jewish

in contrast to the impressions given by the Jerusalem meeting (Gal 2:1-10) and Antioch conflict (Gal 2:11-14). *Acts* creates an *ecumenical* portrait of Christian origins by reconciling Jerusalem and Antioch over Gentile mission, and Peter and Gentiles over the issue of commensality with unclean Gentiles. The Cornelius story portrays Peter in opposition to a Gentile mission for which he must receive divine prompting, however. Tannehill notes (Acts, 134, 143-144) that within Luke-Acts tradition Peter has already been exposed to this commission (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8), and articulates it in speeches (2:39; 3:25-26)—yet this comes as a new, disturbing and perplexing revelation (10:9-17, 34b-36). Peter’s speech in Jerusalem (11:4-17) functions as *Jerusalem* verifying this next phase of mission in the face of objections over the issue of table fellowship (commensality) with unclean Gentiles (11:3). According to Galatians, Peter’s Gospel “to the circumcised” (NRSV) (“of circumcision” τῆς περιτομῆς Gal 2:7) is “the gospel which includes circumcision” (Frank J. Matera *Galatians* [Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992], 76).

³⁷ Dunn, *Acts*, 153.

³⁸ While “Hellenists” (6:1) are Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora (Ἕλληνοιστοῖ), “Greeks” (11:20) are Greek-Gentiles (Ἕλληνας), the latter being used to delineate ethnic distinction between Jews and Greeks on several occasions (14:1; 16:1; 19:17; 21:18; 17:12). Johnson, *Acts*, 105, 203. Dunn also makes this distinction for 11:20, referring to 14:1; 18:4; 19:10; 20:21 (*Acts*, 154).

³⁹ In Paul’s account of the Jerusalem council (Gal 2:1-10), he makes no mention of the decree to Gentiles that was made in the *Acts*’ version (15:28-29). For discussion on this point, see Achtemeier, *Quest for Unity*, 89-91.

proselytes (15:1-2).⁴⁰ The *Acts*' rhetoric, it seems, is not a memory of "what happened," but rather, a memory of "what should have happened,"⁴¹ thereby creating ineluctable tensions in the text.

Memory as anticipation

Memory is never *objective* because it is always mingled with interested interpretation and anticipation. According to Gadamer, we can never separate ourselves from the effects of our tradition, these effects, in the form of contemporary issues, and questions, shape our evaluation of tradition. Because we are always in a context of time, we cannot step out of our own horizon into another, without projecting our presuppositions, prejudices, and perspectives into this other horizon. Hence, our reading of the past is modified by a contemporising effect in interpretation, as issues and questions of our contemporary context are addressed. Hence, a "fusion of horizons," past and present inevitably occurs.⁴² Memory also has the extraordinary capacity to suppress difficulties experienced, focussing on aspects from the past that justify present actions and consolidate specific anticipation for the future. In this way, memory might also include denial, but this does not erase the difficulties encountered. Memory is a desire for the idyllic—a cogent and unified past, retrieved in order to be invoked for the future. More than half a century later, *Acts remembers* the idyllic scenario of church origins as the outward triumph of the Christian movement from Jerusalem. Paul has told us about some of the difficulties in being an apostle to the Gentiles.⁴³ The *Acts* writer simply remembers that they happened, with all the Apostles on one side

⁴⁰ This is a central issue in *Paul's letter to the Galatians*.

⁴¹ Johnson, *Acts*, 270. Rhetoric is prescribing *the way things should be*, through a guise of describing *the way things are*. See Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 156-177.

⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975/1989) 277-307, 369-379.

⁴³ Paul saw nationalist zealotry among *messianists* (with its adherents pejoratively described as "dogs," "Judaisers" Phil 3:2-6) as a threat to this Isaianic gospel—Israel's destiny being fulfilled eschatologically (after the prophetic "the days are coming") in God's representative One—for Israel, and (after Isaiah) for the nations (Rom 15:7-13).

and resistance from various anonymous characters on the other.⁴⁴

The writer makes no reference to sources throughout the narrative, and is closely involved with the story.⁴⁵ The peculiar weave of a story, with several implicit stories in the *Acts* narrative, is told to give hope for the future,⁴⁶ for how the past is remembered is significant in shaping the future. What problems and issues might a fledgling movement face and successfully negotiate? If certain issues precipitated factions, how might the stories of origins be retold? How might they be remembered and written up if the writer or collator is seeking to reconcile factions that dated back to these issues? How might the success and failure of its heroes be remembered? In these dynamics, too, we have some ingredients to begin to comprehend a possibility, a spectre that haunts the narrative—the murder of Stephen—with the complicity of some in the Christian community. While a division between Christians and Jews has been sustained within a long history of supersessionist sensibilities, the diversity of both Jewish and Christian movements and communities at that time, makes such a neat division in complicity most unlikely. The ease with which this divide occurs, however, can be seen when Esler's observation of "conflict within the Christian community" (6:1) shifts to "a conflict between Jews and Christians which culminates in the martyrdom of Stephen..."⁴⁷ This constitutes a haunting *of Acts* (double genitive) in contemporary engagement: *Acts* is haunted by stories other than the story that is explicitly presented (objective genitive), and in turn, *Acts*' rendering of Christian origins is a haunting story for those cognisant of the complexities of Jewish Christian origins (subjective genitive).

That *Acts* is a literary work depicting *an idealised* memory of Christian origins is widely recognized.⁴⁸ That it is also a haunting *ideological* work might not be so acceptable. *Acts* is a theological

⁴⁴ *Acts*' *ecumenical* development of Peter does not indicate the intensity of conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christian movements reflected in Pauline correspondence (e.g., Antioch conflict). The *ecumenical* Peter is depicted by the later *Acts* writer as having forged the ground for Jewish-Gentile commensality (Esler, *Acts*, 105-109). Is the writer, however, seeking to ameliorate the memory of Peter's stance on ambivalent commensality with Gentiles at Antioch?

⁴⁵ Mark A. Powell, *What are they saying about Acts?* (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991) 81.

⁴⁶ Kee, *Acts*, 95.

⁴⁷ Esler, *Community and Gospel*, 136. Esler suggests that only the (Christian) Hellenists were expelled, but also suggests that "Jews" expelled them (139).

⁴⁸ Various registers of *Acts*' literary impetus are cited by Powell, *Acts*, 9-13.

story of the paradigmatic birth of the church and its providential success in the world, but with difficult (apostolic) memories suppressed. Gentile ascendancy within the church is depicted as a smooth, and therefore providential transition, and not as a sustained conflicted issue. There is always an efficient resolution of conflict over the Gentile mission, and the story is a commendation of the church's legitimacy in the wider political world. In short, *Acts* provides a theological prism for the historical transition from Judaism to Gentile Christianity (the refrain of *turning to the Gentiles* also marks Jewish rejection—13:46; 18:6; 28:28). Ancient Israel finds its *true* destiny in *empire friendly Christianity*, with *Acts* projecting an image of a church on good terms with the Roman administration, while “the Jews”—and this is the particularly disturbing feature of *Acts*—are frequently depicted as the real troublemakers. These idealised and ideological images are haunting from a contemporary ecumenical stance. Disturbances, riots, opposition, and persecution are created by “the Jews” against Christian proclaimers of the Word (6:12; 13:44-51; 14:1-7; 17:5, 13; 24:17-19; 28:19). The rhetorical implications of the narrative are clear—Christians do not cause these riots: first, they are the result of “Jewish jealousy” and underhandedness—inciting others to stir up riots; and second, they are also the result of Jewish misconception and an inability to argue a cogent case. That is, since the leaders of the *messianist* community debate their case with superior skill and justification, “the Jews” have to resort to unlawful, underhand tactics against Paul and other leaders.⁴⁹

Acts sustains an idealised *memory*, in order to establish an ideology of unified mission for the future—with factions ameliorated, and a consolidated central message (*kerygma*) of the church in the face of diversity—hence the *Acts*' speeches are all *one kind*.⁵⁰ The speeches function to create a homogenous story

⁴⁹ See Powell, *Acts*, 68-72; Augusto Barbi, “The Use and Meaning of (*Ho*) *Ioudaioi* in *Acts*,” in *Luke and Acts*, Gerald O'Collins and Gilberto Marconi, eds. (New York/Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1991), 123-142. Sanders notes that *Acts*, “with its general tendency to make Jews the enemies of Christianity..., gives the picture of universal Jewish persecution, stonings, and scheming against the church” (*Schismatics*, 9). Dunn notes that the “message for Greeks as well as Jews... offends the majority of the Jews in many centres (12:3, 11; 13:50; 14:2, 4, 19; 17:5; 18:6, 12; 19:9; 20:3, 19; 22:30; 23:12)” (*Acts*, xx). What was the composition, however, of these centres in terms of Jewish (Christian) believers?

⁵⁰ Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville, Kentucky: W/JKP, 1994), 3. Nearly one-third of *Acts* consists of speeches, providing a homogenous theological perspective through which all the apostles speak (see Powell, *Acts*, 30-32). For example, chapters 1-7 are virtually

throughout *Acts*, out of the *loose ends* that always emerge in human movements, however well marshalled toward a particular purpose.⁵¹ The story depicts a proclamation that triumphs in the face of pagan religion, magic, and philosophy.⁵² It also depicts Christian heroes in a world of heroes and hero gods—essentially two apostles and several evangelists as heroes of the faith, who, seeking to survive the threat of persecution—are depicted as peace-loving, not trouble-makers.⁵³ This has implications for the church enduring in the world of empire politics amid the apocalyptic fervour of some groups at that time.⁵⁴ Finally, the narrative reflects traces of an early traumatic schism *within* the Christian church, interpreted through Stephen's speech,⁵⁵ which provides a theological explanation for the eventual emergence of a Christian identity distinct from contemporary Judaism, even if it acknowledges its roots in ancient Israel. The *far* relationship is assimilated favourably, while the *near* relationship presents unassimilable difficulties, and is therefore rejected through incremental stages in the narrative. Stephen's speech is a prism through which a negative portrayal of Jews is to be read in the remainder of *Acts*.⁵⁶ At the conclusion of *Acts*, the ancient Isaianic *apoca-*

comprised of speeches. Without access to verbatim transcripts, the writer of *Acts* has significantly created these speeches, which, in turn, have the effect of providing an authorised "commentary on the narrative" (see Johnson, *Acts*, 4-5, 53).

⁵¹ Soards notes that "diverse personalities, ethnic groups, communities, geographical regions, and historical movements are *unified* in *Acts* largely through the repetitive occurrence, form, and contents of the speeches" (*Speeches*, 15).

⁵² Recall the *terrorist miracles* (5:5:1-11; 12:20-23; 13:5-12; 19:11-20).

⁵³ For example, Gallio's position *vis-à-vis* Christians is a perspective the writer commends to the Romans—noninterference, because Christian theology is outside imperial jurisdiction (18:12-17). Is the incremental understanding of Paul by a Roman centurion (21:33-34, 38; 22:24-30; 23:28-29) an allegory of general "education" of the Roman administration about Christians (Tannehill, *Acts*, 227, 273-274)? The *Acts* narrative is heavily nuanced towards a portrayal of the Christian community as law abiding (in harmony with *Pax Romana*), and able to trust Roman protection: see Kee, *Acts*, 65-69, 92-93.

⁵⁴ Compare the relationship between church and empire reflected in *The Apocalypse of John*.

⁵⁵ Stephen's speech functions to cast the rejection of the Jews as the culmination of a long history of rejection going back to Moses (see Tannehill, *Acts*, 85-97).

⁵⁶ The writer's speech, delivered by Stephen, hinges on two main points of critique: first, *God gave the law, but your ancestors disobeyed it*; and second, *God did not need nor ask for a house* (6:13-14, 7:38-39a, 47). Stephen's speech amounts to charging the nation with idolatry for its allegiance to the temple (7:41-50), by equating the golden calf with the temple as "the works of their hands"—neither being wanted by God (see Dunn, *Acts*, 90-91). Stephen cites Isa 66:1-2 to

lyptic rationale is invoked and directed against contemporary Judaism (28:25b-28).

The writer of *Acts* tells an idealised story of the past from an ideological perspective, in order to galvanise unity for the future. Yet in doing so, the text is in tension with itself, with the explicit claims of the story being contested by seemingly anomalous, innocuous factors within the text. These factors betray at least one alternative perspective that is eclipsed in the text's production. A text is always haunted by its other—and other stories it has not told, which nevertheless, cannot be extricated from the seams of a text. Reading does not need to eschew contradictions or ambivalence in a text, but rather, can allow these to unsettle solidified interpretations, introducing the possibility of alternative readings (*pace* Derrida above). The rhetorical world of a text is therefore under review, not an *objective world* it might be addressing, for such a *world* is now inseparable from a text's theological overtures.⁵⁷ Theological rhetoric is inevitable, but one must question whether the presenting rhetoric is the complete story of the circumstances and *world* it seeks to depict. The textual representation of a slice of human experience or communal life can never fully gather all the relevant threads in its attempt to represent that experience. It is always haunted by traces of otherness that are not represented.

The spectre of Stephen

The article has proposed that at least two uncomfortable memories emerge from the *Acts* writing: first, an uneasy memory for contemporaries of the writer—the murder of Stephen, and second, an ineluctable memory concerning some early Christian evaluations of Judaism. The *spectre of Stephen* lingers over many explicit and implicit debates of New Testament writings, and *Acts* has retained a haunting memory of internal schism, culminating in murder and persecution—one faction (at least by complicity) of the church by another. That the story is later written up, with Stephen being a *victim of Christian versus Jewish conflict*, is a quest to ameliorate a terrible memory of an early internal schism and its enduring tensions, with an implicit plea for unity and cohesive identity nearly a century

delineate God's "transcendence" beyond human temples (Tannehill, *Acts*, 93). The charge of profaning the temple is also raised against Paul (21:28).

⁵⁷ *Pace* Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 2-6, citing Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, AS (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 18.

later, in an ever expanding movement in society. The plea for unity, however, comes at the cost of casting all the apostles on one side—despite their historical differences, with a *rabble* of anonymous Jewish characters and positions—aligned against the divinely inspired, guided, and prevailing church, on the other.