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THE DEATH OF STEPHEN

The prominent position given by Luke to Stephen's speech in Acts vii is acknowledged by all. So is its connection with Saul's conversion, which is hinted at in vii. 58. But it is possible that the formal connection made in viii. 1 between ch. vii and the events of ch. viii covers a very much deeper and larger conception in Luke's mind than is generally realised: that these two chapters with their continuation in ch. ix and onwards draw out the full significance of the death of Christ for all men, not simply as a forecast of the future but as a practical reality.

The starting point of this investigation must be the charge preferred against Stephen. In vi. 11 the suborned men accuse Stephen of speaking against the Law; in vi. 13 f. the charge is expanded, and the parallel with Jesus made explicitly: (R.S.V.)

"This man never ceases to speak words "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy against this holy place and the Law." this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

The whole "frame up" against Stephen is highly suggestive. Why is it that in the Gospel story (Lk. xxii. 66 ff.) no mention is made by Luke of the testimony of the false witnesses, although their presence is implied rather inconsequentially in v. 71? Both Matthew and Mark make much of them at the trial (Mt. xxvi. 59 ff. Mk. xiv. 56 ff. and cf. the taunt of the bystanders at the crucifixion—Mk. xv. 29 and Mt. xxvii. 40) even though the witnesses were inconsistent and apparently did not succeed in establishing their accusation. Luke omits the false witnesses in the Gospel but introduces them in Acts, not simply to condemn Stephen for his own assertions, but to condemn him as quoting Jesus' declaration against the Temple and the Law. Surely this is not accidental. I suggest that this is the first implicit declaration by Luke of his understanding of Stephen's death and the expansion recorded in Acts viii. Looking back from beyond Pentecost, after the Church had extended throughout the world, Luke sees that Jesus' words quoted by false witnesses were not substantiated till later—he therefore holds over this part of the narrative because the words were to be re-enacted and fulfilled in Stephen's trial and its sequel. For this, I suggest, is the significance of Acts vii and viii:—Luke sees in them the working out of the prophecy which Jesus himself made, and so the realizing of what was implicit in His death from the start.

One or two more close parallels between Stephen's death and Jesus' death may now be noted.

1. Stephen's accusation against the Jews (vii. 51-53) is very reminiscent of Jesus' woes against the Lawyers (Lk. xi. 45-52)

(a) The persecution of the Prophets--the attitude of the Jews compared with that of the fathers.

(b) The charge of not keeping the Law.

(c) The hint in xi. 49-51 of the yet greater murder about to be laid to their charge—made explicit in Acts vii. 52.

It may be argued that the Gospel passage, placed as it is in the "Travel Document", has little outward connection with the Passion; but the words following this section (Lk. xi. 53) and the setting of the parallel passage in Mt. xxiii suggest such a connection. The attitude of the Pharisees in these verses is very similar to what must have been underlying the attack on Stephen in Acts vi. 10 ff.

The reference to the blood of the Prophets being required of this generation must be a prophecy of Jesus' passion. The idea is surely taken up again in the Jews' own acceptance of this prophecy in their cry: "His blood be upon us..." In Mt. this is recorded in the trial before Pilate, Mt. xxvii. 25. Luke does not record it here--but he does record a very similar saying in Acts v. 28 from the mouth of the High Priest in his injunction to Peter. It is possible that this is another instance of Luke deliberately withholding an idea from the Gospel story because it is to come in Acts in consonance with his plan of showing the fulfillment of the implications of Christ's death in the life and expansion of the early Church.

2. The well-known parallel of Acts vii. 56 with Lk. xxii. 69

3. Stephen's two prayers cf. the two words from the Cross which Luke records xxiii. 34 and 46 (accepting the former as authentic).

4. (?) Slight similarities in diction: *dikaïos* Acts vii. 52 cf. Lk. xxiii. 47 reburial: Acts viii. 2 and Lk. xxiii. 50 f.

My suggestion would be, then, that there is in Luke's mind a connection between Stephen's death and Jesus' death much closer and deeper than is immediately apparent from the well-known similarities (2) and (3) above. This connection is explained more fully in Stephen's speech with its treatment of the Temple and the Law. In the speech Luke sees the underlying rebellion of the Jews throughout their history. Jesus passed through vicissitudes similar to those which Abraham, Joseph and Moses endured. He is their Successor and Superseder, so that implicit in His coming is the rejection of the religious exclusivism and legalism of the Jews. But even after Jesus' death the break out is only latent. The death of Stephen makes it effective, as is symbolized in ch. viii with the mission to Samaria and the conversion of the Eunuch. This is necessarily but a brief sketch, but some pointers have perhaps been given.