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May 29th: Ezekiel 3 & Acts 6:1—7:16

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Ezekiel set up as a watchman. The Seven and Stephen.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 3, And he said to me, Son of man, eat whatever you find here, eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you, and fill your stomach with it.

Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And he said to me, Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel, not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language whose words you cannot understand.

Surely if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me, because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. Behold, I have made your face as hard

as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.

Like Emery, harder than Flint, have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. Moreover, he said to me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you, receive in your heart and hear with your ears, and go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, thus says the Lord God, whether they hear or refuse to hear.

Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake. Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place! It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, and the sound of a great earthquake. The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me.

And I came to the exiles at Tel-Abib, who were dwelling by the Kibar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there, overwhelmed among them, seven days. And at the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.

Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, You shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.

And the hand of the Lord was upon me there, and he said to me, Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you. So I arose and went out into the valley, and behold the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Kibar canal, and I fell on my face. But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, Go, shut yourself within your house, and you, O son of man, behold cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people.

And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God, He who will

hear, let him hear, and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house. Ezekiel chapter 3 continues and concludes the account of the ordination of Ezekiel as a prophet with which his book begins.

He saw the vision of the throne chariot in chapter 1 and was given his initial commission in chapter 2. At the end of that chapter he was instructed to eat whatever was handed to him and was given a scroll with words of lamentation, mourning and woe on both sides of it. The instruction for Ezekiel to eat the scroll is twice repeated in the opening three verses of chapter 3. The first command focuses upon the eaten word producing the spoken word. The second command upon the internal process of ingesting and metabolising it.

Ezekiel has to speak the word out but also to take it deeply in. The notion of feeding upon the word of the Lord is one that we encounter on various occasions in scripture. The words of the Lord are described as sweet as honey in verse 3, referring more specifically to the word of the prophetic message with which Ezekiel was commissioned.

Psalms 19 verse 10 speaks of the honey-like sweetness of God's law in a more general manner. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Perhaps a more similar instance to that of Ezekiel's eating of the word of the scroll might be seen in Jeremiah chapter 15 verse 16.

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart. For I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. Verses 4 to 11 replay and develop much of chapter 2 verses 3 to 7 and the initial charge given to Ezekiel there.

Perhaps from the repetition we are to infer some reluctance or reticence on Ezekiel's part in taking on the mission appointed to him. As in chapter 2 verse 7 he is told that he must speak God's words to them. It is important to consider how that ought to have emboldened Ezekiel.

The Lord is committed to his word and as the prophet speaks the word of the Lord his words won't fall to the ground. In Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 12 with the sign of the almond branch God declared that he was watching over his word to perform it. On other occasions in scripture the commission of the Lord has to address some impediment in the speech of the prophet.

Moses is likely a stutterer and the Lord gives him Aaron as his mouthpiece. Jeremiah's mouth is touched by the Lord in chapter 1 verse 9 in response to Jeremiah's claim that he was but a youth not knowing how to speak. Isaiah's cry that he was a man of unclean lips dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips was answered by the purging of his lips with a burning coal from the altar.

Daniel Frederick's suggests that the call of Ezekiel can be also seen to manifest this sort of pattern. Detailing some of the weaknesses of previous explanations given for the cumbersome grammatical style of the opening chapter of Ezekiel he proposes that we understand it as an expression of Ezekiel's own awkward vernacular speech. Ezekiel's impediment of speech is rectified by his swallowing of the scroll of divine revelation in chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. Frederick's writes, the contorted grammar and style of chapter 1 then is perhaps a rhetorical prop that gives the book a context in which to elevate and authenticate a prophetic message that transcends any deep lippedness or heavy tonguedness.

A cultic message must only be conveyed in the proper literary language. Eloquence is everything. Ezekiel is sent primarily to the elite of the people who would expect a prophet to adopt a more elevated style of speech.

The agrarian population would have been less offended by a prophet who spoke in a more vernacular dialect. This is an intriguing suggestion, although one that should be held more as an interesting possibility than as a certain interpretation, especially when we consider Ezekiel's priestly background. Would he really have been speaking in a vernacular dialect? The Lord's stealing of Ezekiel for his task also recalls the way that he prepared Jeremiah, for instance in the renewal of his commission in chapter 15 verses 19 to 21.

Therefore thus says the Lord, if you return I will restore you and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.

And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you. For I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord.

I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless. The Lord says that he will make Ezekiel's forehead like emery or corundite, an extremely hard rock, harder than any substance as known at the time. The people may vehemently oppose and resist him, but he will be able to withstand them, invulnerable to their assaults.

Ezekiel is specifically sent to the exiles rather than to the people more generally, many of whom still remained in Judah at this time prior to the final fall of Jerusalem. From his visions of God, Ezekiel is snatched up by the spirit with the sound of a great earthquake and transported to Tel-Abib by the Kibar Canal where he would begin his ministry among the exiles of Judah. Lesley Allen translates the end of verse 12 as follows, As the manifestation of Yahweh's glorious presence rose from where it was situated, the great roaring sound of the wings and the wheels is perhaps like that of an aircraft taking off.

Similar language is used to describe the noise of chariots elsewhere in scripture in places like Jeremiah 47, verse 3 and Nahum 3, verse 2. As Bloch notes, this reference to the Kibar Canal does raise a question as we were told earlier that Ezekiel was by the Kibar Canal in chapter 1, verses 1-3. However, as he observes, there are various ways of understanding the statement. Perhaps the location is a more general designation in one or both instances here.

Besides, it seems probable that Ezekiel and the exiles are in different places on the same canal. The rapid movement of Ezekiel from one location to another is the first of several such occasions within the book. We might also think of Elijah being taken up by the chariots of fire in 2 Kings chapter 2, or of Philip the evangelist being transported to Azotus by the spirit at the end of chapter 8 of Acts after the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Ezekiel describes himself as being in bitterness and angry in his spirit. This is connected with the hand of the Lord being heavy upon him. Perhaps we could understand this as the zeal that he is feeling for the Lord.

Alternatively, it may be his anger and resistance at the Lord's calling. When he comes to the exiles at Tel Abyd, he is so stunned and psychologically overwhelmed by what he has witnessed and experienced that he sits seemingly without communicating for seven days. One might perhaps compare this to the seven days and nights of silence that Job sat in with his three friends before he broke the silence in his curse and lament of chapter 3. Already we are seeing that the encounter with the Lord and his glory has transformed Ezekiel and in some sense has made him strange and alien to his own people.

He is now a participant in a reality that is foreign and inexplicable to them. As Bloch writes, physically he lived among his own people but spiritually he would operate in another realm, a zone governed by divine realities. In the end he emerges a conscript for the kingdom of Yahweh, a man totally possessed of the spirit of God.

Ezekiel's stunned silence lasts for seven days, after which the word of the Lord comes to him, appointing him as a watchman for Israel. This is a personal commission. In chapter 33 Ezekiel receives a similar word from the Lord as a message to the people and to their leaders, which expands upon what we see here.

In chapter 33 there is also more of an indication of the promise of life held out for the faithful and penitent persons. Bloch argues that this unit, with the repeated call and commission elements that precede it, represent Ezekiel as a resistant prophet who has to be sternly charged concerning responsibilities that he is reluctant to assume. Ezekiel is appointed as a watchman, bearing a peculiar responsibility for the security of the people, there to alert them of the approach of any danger.

He is established in this role by the Lord, but it is also about the Lord's judgement that he is responsible to warn the people. Like a sentry posted on the lookout towers on the walls of a city, he must raise the alarm whenever the people are in peril. We encounter a similar image of the guardians of the people in Jeremiah chapter 6 verse 17.

I set watchmen over you, saying, Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not pay attention. Commenting on the resemblances between the two prophets, Bloch observes the overlap in the period of their ministries and the fact that Jeremiah also corresponded with the exiles in Babylon.

Ezekiel was most likely aware of Jeremiah and his prophecies, and may even, given their common priestly background, as Bloch suggests, have known each other prior to Ezekiel's exile to Babylon with King Jehoiachin. The Lord presents four different scenarios in which Ezekiel's faithfulness as a watchman would be tested. The wicked person who is not warned and does not repent.

The wicked person who is warned but does not repent. The righteous person who turns from his righteousness and is not warned and does not turn back. The righteous person who is faithfully warned by Ezekiel and does not sin.

Throughout the Lord highlights the question of culpability. The sternness of the Lord's charge here might again suggest some sort of resistance on Ezekiel's part. The guardian of the people has a daunting task with immense responsibility.

He has to give an account for the lives under his oversight, ensuring that no one has been left ignorant of any danger that he is in. This is also the duty of the Christian minister, as we see in Hebrews chapter 13 verse 17. The final instance, where the righteous person faithfully heeds the faithful prophet's warning and does not sin, breaks the expected pattern.

We might have expected the fourth case to refer to the impenitent backslider, not responding to the faithful prophet's warning. In all of the other cases, the person addressed by the prophet does not repent. In the fourth case he does.

The hand of the Lord comes upon Ezekiel again and he is instructed to go out to the plain. There he once again sees the glory of the Lord as he had in the first vision. The Lord instructs Ezekiel to shut himself within his house.

In a perplexing and much debated passage he is told that cords will be placed upon him and his tongue will cling to the roof of his mouth. Elsewhere in Ezekiel we read of this dumbness, in places like chapter 24 verse 27. On that day your mouth will be opened to the fugitive and you shall speak and be no longer mute.

So you will be assigned to them and they will know that I am the Lord. Bloch also rated the possibility that Ezekiel is being restricted in his capacity to act as an intercessor for

the people. The prophet Jeremiah also experienced a restriction on this front in chapter 7 verse 16 of his book.

In Luke chapter 1 John the Baptist's father Zachariah was struck dumb as a sign for his unbelief. Ezekiel was silent for seven days after his vision and calling. Bloch wonders whether the silence that the Lord imposes on Ezekiel, a silence that ends up lasting for seven years, corresponds with the resistance silence that he has after his initial commission.

Perhaps the prophet's resistance should also be connected with the people's resistance. In the next chapter he will symbolically bear their exile. While he has denied the chance to plead for the people, he will occasionally have his tongue loose to declare a prophetic warning to them.

Because he was resistant to speak what the Lord gave him to speak, he will now only be able to speak what the Lord gives him to speak. Jeremiah also found speaking the word of the Lord a difficult and painful experience, but also found that resisting it was even more painful. In Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 9 he declares, If I say I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name, there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

A question to consider, how can the calling of Ezekiel help us to reflect upon the duties of the Christian minister? Acts chapter 6 verse 1 to chapter 7 verse 16. Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering.

And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him, and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses, who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, Are these things so? And Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, Go out from your land and from your kindred, and go into the land that I will show you.

Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.

And God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God, and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place. And he gave them the covenant of circumcision.

And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day. And Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt.

But God was with him, and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom before Pharaoh king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.

And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father, and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers.

And they were carried back to Shechem, and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. In Acts chapter 6 we are introduced to the most prominent figures in the immediately following chapters. We might see this as beginning a new section.

It is loosely paralleled with what preceded it, and it moves on and outward. Chapters 1-5

had Matthias being chosen. Now we have the 7 being chosen.

Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost and before the council. And now Stephen is preaching. The apostles were tried and beaten, and now Stephen is tried and killed.

The spirit came in Jerusalem, the spirit will later come in Samaria. The greed of Ananias and Sapphira was judged, and later we will see the greed of Simon the sorcerer being judged. We might also think back to the Gospel account, where the twelve were chosen, and then alongside the twelve, seventy or seventy-two.

Or maybe thinking back even further to the selection of the seventy elders in Numbers chapter 11. The numbers of the disciples are rapidly growing, and with this there needs to be a spread of the gift of the spirit for leadership within the church. There are tensions within the early church that arise in part from cultural and linguistic differences.

There are Hellenists and there are Hebrews. These two groups seem to be divided primarily by language and also to an extent by culture. Diaspora Jews would live in Jerusalem, but they would not be speaking Aramaic as their first language.

They probably had some Aramaic, but they would usually be speaking in Greek as their daily language. The Hebrews on the other hand, while they would be able to speak in Greek, would generally be conversing in Aramaic. In chapter 2 on the Day of Pentecost we read about a great number of Diaspora Jews who were in Jerusalem.

Some may have been just there for the feast, but a great number actually lived in Jerusalem. It is this group that is likely referred to by the term Hellenists here. Craig Keener notes that 10-20% of people in Jerusalem at the time would probably speak Greek as their primary language.

Almost 40% of inscriptions from Jerusalem in the period are in Greek. The numbers of Jews in the Diaspora greatly exceeded the number that actually lived in Palestine at the time, but many immigrants of the Diaspora would have returned to live in Jerusalem. These are the sorts of people mentioned in chapter 2. They would have been faithful Jews, but acculturated to Greek over Judean culture in various respects.

In the early church there seems to have been a special concern for widows and great honour given to them. Without the support of a husband and perhaps lacking a family network, a widow was a very vulnerable character and so having a community that would stand in and support such a person was very important. Throughout the Old Testament a lot is said about God's concern for the widows and the fatherless.

For people who have no man to support them and could easily be victimised or denied justice, they were quite vulnerable to mistreatment. It is possible that the Hellenist widows would have been more vulnerable than the Hebrew widows. As immigrants they might not have had the same strong local kinship networks.

Wider disparities in age between marriage partners in the Greek world might have meant that there were more widows of the Hellenist than of the Hebrews. However the task of overseeing the daily distribution was something that was distracting the apostles from their primary tasks, prayer and the ministry of the word. As we've seen to this point in the Book of Acts, prayer was absolutely integral to what the apostles were doing.

They prayed constantly in the temple. Their ministry was also driven by prayers for boldness as we've seen in the preceding chapters. Beyond this they have the task of proclamation.

They are presumably teaching daily in the temple in Solomon's portico, reasoning with others and trying to persuade them of the truth of the gospel of Christ. Perhaps, as those who are entrusted with the word, they're also concerned to write things down at this point. They are the appointed witnesses and if they're going to communicate their message it's important to have it in a solid and enduring form.

They need people to oversee this process of administration. The seven need to be gifted administrators, people with a good reputation, people that would be trusted implicitly by those that they were ministering to. It also is important that they have the spirit.

They have to have the same anointing of the spirit that the apostles have and they need wisdom. This isn't going to be a straightforward task. There are some tensions between these communities, elements of distrust that need to be addressed and they need to act with the transparency and trustworthiness that places the process beyond reproach.

If the church is really going to have things in common, trustworthy administrators could not be more important. According to Josephus, councils of seven govern towns and some commentators have seen a connection between this and the seven that are chosen here. Others have seen connections with the seven that were appointed to oversee the almsgiving of particular towns.

Once again, as in the case of the apostles in chapter 1, it seems to be presumed, if not required, that the candidates will be males. The task of these men seems to go beyond what is traditionally thought of as diaconal. They are not just responsible for works of mercy in a very narrow sense.

As we see in the cases of Philip and of Stephen, these are ministers of the word and they seem to oversee the congregation in a broader sense. I think it is appropriate to see these not as deacons but as elders. And their ministry differs from that of the apostles.

The church is formed around the table and those who are administering the table are overseeing something central to the life of the church. The apostles themselves explicitly deny that this is their task, it is not their responsibility. The apostles are not actually appointing the seven.

They oversee the appointment but the congregation are the ones that appoint them. It is because the congregation's task is to engage in this daily distribution that they need to be the ones that appoint representatives to perform it for them. The laying on of hands confers a task that belongs to one party or group to a person or group of persons who will act on their behalf.

Laying on of hands is used in sacrifices, it is used in ordinations and it has a similar meaning. Numbers chapter 27 verses 22 to 23 is a very good example of this. And Moses did as the Lord commanded him.

He took Joshua and made him stand before Eliezer the priest and the whole congregation. And he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses. Moses then confers his own authority to Joshua.

Moses makes Joshua his representative before the whole congregation. Israel has representatives of the congregation within itself but Joshua is a representative of Moses. As Matthew Colvin observes in his discussion of this passage, the apostles are the plenipotentiary representatives of Christ.

They represent Christ himself. We might notice the differences between this appointment and the appointment for replacement for Judas. Many people come to this passage looking for an absolute system of church government.

But church government in the New Testament seems to be a lot more organic than people tend to think. It arises out of natural problems that the churches face to which responses are given from the natural structures that exist within human communities. Church government is more a matter of wisdom and prudence than a matter of absolute law.

However, as in the book of Exodus where elders are appointed in Exodus chapter 18 and in chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, the overseeing and administration of the life of the people of God in a way that is just and wise is a matter of great importance and of interest to the text on its own terms. One of the results of this response to this problem within the early church is that the church grows. It's fruitful, it multiplies, it's like the growth of the infant Christ that's described in the book of Luke.

Many priests are converted. Luke begins his gospel with a priestly family and here we still see a number of people who are associated with priestly backgrounds who are drawn to the gospel. Priests were dependent upon the support of the people and perhaps as many of them might have lived in poverty, what we have in the support of the church in this community of goods is something that is of great appeal to them, a sign of the way things really ought to be where the Levite and the priest are welcomed in and supported by a community that's faithful to the word of God.

Immediately we see Stephen standing out as someone who's faithful and powerful in his witness to the word of God. He has great wisdom and no one can withstand it. In Luke chapter 21 verse 15 Christ has spoken to his disciples saying, He has this argument with those of the synagogue of the freedmen and they cannot withstand his wisdom or the spirit with which he is speaking.

Perhaps we should imagine a public dispute in which Stephen clearly outwits and outmatches his opponents, demonstrating from the scriptures that Jesus really is the Christ. Accusations are brought against Stephen, accusations that might remind us of those that were made against Jesus. Accusations are instigated, then the people are stirred up and the elders and the scribes with them and then there's the setting up of false witnesses.

It's very similar to the story of Christ. Stephen is walking in the path of his master. In Matthew chapter 26 verses 59 to 61, that they might put him to death.

But they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, There is some measure of truth to the accusations of the false witnesses. The accusations have enough resemblance to the message of Christ and the early Christians that it would seem that they were based on some measure of truth.

The temple in Jesus' indictment of it had been treated as a den of robbers, a place for wicked people to retreat to, to find refuge, rather than as a house of prayer for the nations. Jesus has spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. And so these false witnesses still had some element of truth to what they were saying.

The people of the council gaze upon Stephen and they see his face like the face of an angel. This is of course reminiscent of the story of Moses, whose face shone when he had been with the Lord. It's another sign of having been with Jesus.

Stephen also goes on to reference angels on several occasions in his speech that follows. And concludes with a polemical application. Stephen tells the story of Israel here in a very particular way.

And by telling the story in the way that he does, the characters are reframed. The ways that stories are told are of great importance. By telling stories in different ways, certain characters can be brought to the foreground and others placed in the background.

Certain themes can be foregrounded. Heroes and villains can be switched. This is especially true when you're telling a story of a nation.

For instance, you can tell the story of America in a number of different ways. You can tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of faith and religious liberty, with the Mayflower pilgrims coming to America in 1620. Or maybe you can tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of oppression and slavery, with the story of 1619 being

foregrounded.

Or perhaps the story is to be told as a story of nation building, focusing upon 1776 and the founding of a new nation. Or maybe it's a story of empowerment of the marginalised, the story of Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall. While they can work with the same historical material, these different ways of telling the story can lead to very different understandings of who the heroes are, who the villains are, how contemporary Americans fit into the story, and how to continue the story appropriately.

When reading Stephen's speech then, we need to be very alert to the themes that he has brought to the foreground, who his heroes are, what his emphases are, what events he misses out, what events he brings to the foreground. All of these will help us to understand how he sees the different parties in the current conflicts fitting into the story, and how he believes people should move forward. Stephen, in the way that he tells the story, presents himself and other Christians as being fundamentally loyal to the story of Israel, and his opponents as being disloyal to it.

The early Christians also read the scriptures in the light of Christ, and what Stephen provides here is a typological and Christological reading of the Old Testament. We're supposed to see resemblances between the characters presented here and the character of Christ. The story begins with Abraham.

Jeff Myers remarks upon the relationship between the leader and their kindred. Each one of the great leaders that Stephen picks out is set apart from, or has to leave their kindred in some sense. The story of Israel begins with a promise, a promise given to Abraham, and it also begins promisingly.

This is common ground also with a typical Jewish reading. One can imagine that many of Stephen's readers will be tracking with him, agreeing with him, and then as the speech progresses, subtle themes that Stephen has introduced and highlighted, things that they can agree with in principle in their original context, will be brought to bear upon the current situation in a manner that will put them in a difficult position. Stephen is reading the tension of the present time back into the narrative.

The narrative of Israel, as Stephen tells it, is a narrative of rejection of those appointed by the Lord. It is also a narrative of outsiders. Abraham must leave his inheritance, he is dislodged from his kindred.

He is a man without inheritance who must operate by promise. From an initial focus upon Abraham, he moves to the character of Joseph. Joseph was initially rejected by his brothers, but later he was raised up by God and had influence with the Gentiles.

One can also imagine that the character of Joseph would have invited comparisons with the story of Christ. Joseph was betrayed for silver by his brother Judah. Jesus was

betrayed for silver by Judas.

Both Jesus and Joseph were cast into a pit. Both of them were associated with two criminals. Both of them give bread and wine.

Both of them were raised up to the height of power. In both cases, their brothers must bow before them. Looking through Stephen's speech, we'll also see a double visitation paradigm, as Luke Timothy Johnson has identified.

Within this double visitation paradigm, the leader comes the first time and he is rejected. And then the second time he comes, he is rejected either to the doom of those who reject him or he is accepted to their salvation. Stephen includes a number of surprising details in the way that he tells the story.

He is clearly joining the dots of the narrative in various ways. And some of these might initially give the impression of carelessness. For instance, he seems to have allied the purchase of the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, which was bought by Abraham in chapter 23 of Genesis, with the purchase of the land near Shechem that was bought by Jacob in chapter 33.

Jacob was buried in the cave of Machpelah, but Joseph was buried in Shechem at the end of the book of Joshua. Stephen, however, seems to conflate these two things, apparently confusing them. However, I think that this sort of elision is a thoughtful one.

Stephen is very aware of the fact that it is the burial of Joseph that truly leads to the people being brought back to the land. At the end of the book of Genesis, it's Joseph's bones that must be brought up. In the book of Exodus, it's Joseph's bones that they carry back with them.

And then at the very end of the story of the Exodus, at the very end of the book of Joshua, it's Joseph's bones that are buried at the same time as Joshua is buried. While Jacob and others are brought back to the land and buried there prior to the Exodus, the true restoration to the land, the true carrying back to the land, occurs when Joseph is buried, and that occurs in the burial plot in Shechem. A question to consider.

How might this way of telling the story have helped the early Christians in thinking about their relationship with Jerusalem and Palestine?