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The death and the autopsy of the northern kingdom. Stephen's martyrdom.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 17. In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea the son of Elah began to reign in Samaria over Israel, and he reigned nine years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, yet not as the kings of Israel who were before him.

Against him came up Shalmaneser king of Assyria, and Hoshea became his vassal and paid him tribute. But the king of Assyria found treachery in Hoshea, for he had sent messengers to sow king of Egypt, and offered no tribute to the king of Assyria. As he had done year by year.

Therefore the king of Assyria shut him up and bound him in prison. Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Hela and on the Hebor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. And the people of Israel did secretly against the Lord their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city.

They set up for themselves pillars and asherim on every high hill and under every green tree. And there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the Lord carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the Lord to anger.

And they served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, You shall not do this. Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, Turn from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets. But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God.

They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they abandoned all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves, and they made an asherah, and worshipped all the hosts of heaven, and served Baal.

And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and omens, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only.

Judah also did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced. And the Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel, and afflicted them, and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until he had cast them out of his sight. When he had torn Israel from the house of David, they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king.

And Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them commit great sin. The people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. They did not depart from them, until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets.

So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day. And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avah, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them

in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria, and lived in its cities.

And at the beginning of their dwelling there, they did not fear the Lord. Therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them. So the king of Assyria was told, The nations that you have carried away and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the God of the land.

Therefore he has sent lions among them, and behold they are killing them, because they do not know the law of the God of the land. Then the king of Assyria commanded, Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there, and let him go and dwell there and teach them the law of the God of the land. So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the Lord.

But every nation still made gods of its own, and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived. The men of Babylon made Succoth-Benoth, the men of Cuthah made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Eshema, and the Avites made Nibhaz and Tartac, and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adramalek and Anamalek, the gods of Sepharvaim. They also feared the Lord, and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places.

So they feared the Lord, but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.

The Lord made a covenant with them and commanded them, You shall not fear other gods, or bow yourselves to them, or serve them, or sacrifice to them. But you shall fear the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm. You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice.

And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear other gods, and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the Lord your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies.

However they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the Lord and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children, as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

2 Kings chapter 17 is the death and the autopsy of the northern kingdom of Israel. A

nation that did not depart from the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat discovers the place to which those ways finally lead. Although Judah is not here taken into exile, they do not escape the condemnation.

Judah has followed Israel in its ways. A number of the sins for which Israel has drowned in the abyss of exile are sins of which Judah is no less guilty. The indictment of Israel serves as a powerful warning for the southern kingdom, as its sister, the northern kingdom, being taken into exile, is a warning about its own potential fate if it does not repent.

Especially under Ahaz, Judah is walking in the same direction, stepping towards that precipice that Israel has just fallen over. Indeed Judah's doom has already been determined. It's just going to be a longer time until they get there.

Israel here loses everything. It loses its land, it loses its national life, its peoplehood, and the favour and the special presence of the Lord. Uprooted by the king of Assyria, they will be scattered and lost.

Unless they hold fast to the word of the Lord, they lose their identity entirely. Israel was defined by the covenant of their liberation at Sinai. They were defined by the land that gave them a common rootedness.

And at the very heart of it all, they were defined by common worship, by the worship of the Lord their God, who had brought them out of Egypt and brought them into the land. He had formed that covenant with them. However, when they reject the covenant, and when they reject the true worship of the Lord, everything else will start to unravel.

The nation is divided in two after Solomon. Jeroboam leads the northern kingdom into idolatry. And as they proceeded down that path, they gradually lost the things that made them distinct in the first place, until they are indistinguishable from the nations, and are finally scattered among them, like the ashes of a once great people that have ceased to exist.

Hoshea is the last king of Israel. He comes to power through a conspiracy against Pekah the son of Ramaliah. And there is a switch under him in the foreign policy towards Assyria.

He becomes the vassal of Assyria. Under Pekah the son of Ramaliah, Israel had tried to form an anti-Assyrian coalition with Syria and other nations in the region. They had besieged Jerusalem, intending to establish a puppet king and to force Judah to join the anti-Assyrian coalition.

That plan had come to nothing, and Hoshea had conspired against Pekah and taken the throne in his place. Hoshea's intention was to reverse this policy towards Assyria. However, a little while into his reign, he changes his mind and turns to Egypt for aid

against Assyria.

Israel and Judah were caught between kingdoms in the north and the south, great empires and powers. The region of Israel and Judah and the nations surrounding them was like the centre of a chess board. The back-ranked powers of Syria and Egypt lay behind them.

While manipulated by these great powers, the kingdoms in between fought like pawns in the middle of the board. After Israel stops giving tribute to Assyria and turns to Egypt, Assyria invades the land and comes to Samaria, besieging it for three years. It finally falls, Israel is deported and is then lost in exile.

Hoshea and Israel are largely lost in captivity. This will not be the case with Judah. Judah will be spared in part on account of the Davidic king and also as they look to the words of the prophets.

Hoshea's name is the same as Joshua's original name, as we see in Numbers chapter 13. There is a sort of irony here. Israel was brought into the land under Hoshea and now it is removed under Hoshea.

Verses 7-23 are the autopsy report for Israel. It begins with a summary statement in verses 7-8. Not only did they reject the Lord, they followed the practices of the nations, the very practices for which the other nations were cast out.

Israel was supposed to be distinct from the Canaanites. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9-14 they are warned against following in the pattern of the nations. Whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord.

And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. For these nations which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune tellers and to diviners.

But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. They have also walked in the ways of their wicked kings, Jeroboam in particular. More specific sins of Israel are given in detail in verses 9-12.

All these sins of idolatry, all these sins in which they walked in the ways of the Canaanites that had preceded them. Throughout the book of Kings there is an emphasis upon the ministry of the prophets. God gives warning after warning.

But Israel stubbornly refused to listen. Far from being distinct from the Canaanites that had preceded them, they follow in their ways and have committed all of their sins. The two golden calves in Bethel and Dan established by Jeroboam following the pattern of the rebellion of Israel at Sinai sets the course for what follows.

Israelite king after Israelite king does not depart from the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the ways in which he caused Israel to sin. And this all provokes the Lord to anger. The gross ingratitude and the brazen offence of Israel's sin should be apparent from these verses.

The Lord rejects the descendants of Israel, more generally in verse 20. Judah's being left is only temporary. Both nations will be given over to plunderers.

If we are to understand the cause of death, we look back to the event of Jeroboam. Jeroboam's sin is the key event. One man's sin set the destiny of the nation.

Once he had established that pattern, Israel did not depart from it. Once the path had been set, they never left it. This should be contrasted with their attitude to the way of the Lord, which they abandoned so quickly.

Peter Lighthouse notes some of the poetic justice. Israel's breach of covenant is evident in the ten violations listed in chapter 17 verses 15-17, numerically matching the ten words of Moses that summarise the original covenant in which Israel receives the land. The book of Kings is theodicy, justifying God's ways with Israel by showing that Israel and Judah both sinned in the face of Yahweh's persistent mercy and repeated warnings.

As Israel is removed from the land and scattered among the nations, there is the strange situation of exiles being brought in. In the book of Leviticus, the land is described as if it had a life of its own in executing the covenant, a witness of the covenant and of the word of the Lord that enacts sanctions against those who are rebellious. And here the land and its creatures rise up against the new inhabitants.

Lions eat them in judgement. Lions have been used to judge unfaithful persons on a couple of earlier occasions in the books of the Kings. There are also the bears that eat the 42 lads in chapter 2 of 2 Kings.

As the lions afflict the new inhabitants, they figure that it must be a failure in worship. They see the Lord as a local or a regional deity that must be appeased. Ironically, they look to a priest from the deported Israelites to teach them how to be faithful to the Lord.

This priest is set up at Bethel, a place of great sin and idolatry. The new inhabitants are syncretists, like Israel had been. They worship the Lord but alongside their own gods in the shrines of the high places.

They make priests from all the people, rather than just from the Levites. They're like Israel, but now the nation has reverted to a sort of pre-conquest condition, brought in under Hoshea and brought out under Hoshea. It is as if the whole history of Israel had been thrown into a reverse, and little evidence now remains that they had ever inhabited the land.

All of this comes down to their failure to remember the word of the Lord and their failure to listen. The book of Deuteronomy, given just before they were entering into the land, had emphasised these two things, their need to remember and their need to listen. If they do not remember the word of the Lord, if they do not learn the lessons of the wilderness, if they do not learn the works of the Lord in the Exodus, they will suffer all the curses of the covenant and will ultimately be expelled from the land.

This is what happens to Israel, and it is a sign of what will later happen to Judah. A question to consider. Jeroboam and his sins set the course for the entire history of the nation of Israel.

Why was Jeroboam's sin so decisive for its course? Acts 7.35-8.3 He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make for us gods who will go before us.

As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets, Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tender Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.

Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favour in the sight of God, and asked to find a dwelling place for the god of Jacob.

But it was Solomon who built a house for him, yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? You stiff-necked people, and circumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels, and did not keep it.

And when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

But they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city, and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women, and committed them to prison. The end of Acts chapter 7 tells the story of Stephen's martyrdom, the first martyr in the history of the church.

Stephen has been accused, and he is brought before the council. He stands accused of speaking blasphemous words against God and Moses, seeking to change the customs and also the holy place of the temple. In response to these charges, Stephen retells the story of Israel.

He particularly focuses upon the characters of Joseph and Moses. He tells the story of Moses as a periodized narrative. He is delivered as an infant.

Then he visits Israel for the first time as a 40 year old. And then at the age of 80, he leads the people out of Egypt. There is a sort of parallel within the biblical narrative between these different deliverances or events.

In his childhood, he is drawn out of the water, taken from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. At the age of 40, he has a deliverance at the wells. He fights off the false shepherds, and he delivers the bride.

And then on a second occasion, leading a flock to Mount Sinai, there is another deliverance at the water. The nation now is drawn out of the water at the Red Sea. The Sea of Reeds would remind us of the fact that Moses himself was drawn out of the reeds.

Stephen wants us to recognize the symmetries, the symmetries within the story of Moses, but also greater symmetries. Stephen is especially concerned that we appreciate the themes of rejection that run throughout the story of Scripture. Those appointed by the Lord for the deliverance of the people are rejected by those people.

Joseph is the first one that is told, and then Moses. Moses was called at the burning bush, and he had been rejected at his first visitation, and now he is sent to them again. Christ is returning to Israel in the message of his apostles.

They have a chance to listen this time and to repent. There's a contrast between Israel's rejection of Moses and God's sending of him. God had chosen this one, and yet Israel turned their back on him.

There's also an emphasis upon the role of the angel. The angel appears to Moses at Sinai in the burning bush. The angel also accompanies Moses in the wilderness, and angels are the means by which the law is given.

Much as with Joseph, Stephen is likely telling the story in a way designed to help and encourage people to notice the resemblances between Jesus and Moses. Daryl Bock notes a number of these. Moses is rejected, but he becomes ruler and judge.

Moses is a deliverer. He performs signs and wonders. Moses is a prophet and a prototype of the coming prophet like Moses.

He is a mediator. He receives and gives the words of God. This is not a flattering telling of Israel's story.

There's a parallel drawn between their past behaviour and their current condition, and this is going to be only heightened at the end of Stephen's speech as he gives his indictment upon the nation. We're used to telling the stories of our peoples in flattering ways, in ways that present us as the heroic protagonists of the narrative. This is not, however, how Stephen tells his story.

In his telling of the story, Israel constantly rejects the ones that are sent to them. This way of telling the story is not novel to Stephen. We find the same thing as Christ tells the story of Israel in the parable of the wicked vine-dressers, whereas he speaks over Jerusalem in chapter 23 of Matthew.

He talks to his disciples in Matthew chapter 5 and the Beatitudes of how they persecuted the prophets that went before them. Christ's people stand facing a tradition of rejection of the word of God. They are not the first to be rejected in this manner.

This brutally honest and non-hagiographic telling of the story is possible because forgiveness is extended to Israel. When forgiveness is extended, it is possible to tell the truth about what has happened. Indeed, forgiveness requires confession, the honest admission of our sins.

For forgiveness to be received, there must be an act of telling the truth. In telling the brutal truth of Israel's actions in this way, Stephen is inviting the people to repent. On the day of Pentecost, a message concerning Israel's sinful rejection of their Messiah had been accepted and it had led to forgiveness and repentance, but it does not have the same effect here.

Stephen summarises the whole story of the Exodus in verse 36. His concern seems to be

to get to the point of the parallels between Christ and Moses. Moses had foretold the coming of a prophet like him in the future.

In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15-19 And he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. This is not a promise that terminates upon Joshua.

It looks forward to something greater still. And this was an important promise for the early church. In Acts chapter 3 verses 22-24 And all the people who have spoken from Samuel and those who came after him also proclaim these days.

We should remember that part of the accusation against Stephen was that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses. Now Moses is absolutely integral to Stephen's defence. He is turning the accusation back on them.

In rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting Moses just as they rejected Moses in the past. Israel rejected Moses when he was sent to them the first time. They rejected him the second time too.

Moses mediated the law and brought about their deliverance. But Israel wanted a golden calf as a replacement for him. Moses is also rejected or resisted on several occasions in the book of Numbers.

The golden calf though was the great act of rebellion in Exodus chapter 32. In consequence of their rejection of Moses and turning to worship idols, the works of their hands, God gave them over to the worship of the host of heaven. There is a reference to Amos chapter 5 verses 25-27 here.

It is similar to Romans 1 where people are given up to idolatry and perversion as they reject God. Again one of the accusations against Stephen was that he taught that Jesus would destroy the temple. And indeed Jesus had taught that he would destroy the temple.

However Stephen wants to challenge the way that they regard the house. They have turned the house of God into a sort of idol. It is treated as something that gives them a way of containing and controlling God.

But God cannot be contained by such a building. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me says the Lord? What is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? Stephen tells the story in a way that makes the wilderness experience paradigmatic.

When they feel rooted in the land it can be easy for them to forget that they are always strangers and sojourners before the Lord. The temple itself as a symbol of God's dwelling with them can always turn into a sort of false idol. Something that they presume upon.

We might remember the words of Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 following. Will you truly amend your ways and your deeds? If you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known? And then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations. Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer. Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. Stephen, like Christ, is presenting a similar condemnation to that of Jeremiah.

They have put their trust in this building. It has become an idol to them, but no building can contain the Lord of hosts. He ends with a powerful denunciation.

Their stiff-necked rebellion, their rejection of the messengers of the Lord, these have been consistent features of their behaviour throughout their history. Israel's history is not a glorious history of accepting the messengers of the Lord. Rather, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed the ones who foretold Christ.

It is not surprising that they have killed Christ himself. They accuse Stephen of rejecting the customs. They received the law from angels and did not keep it.

They accuse him of blasphemy against Moses, but they have rejected the prophet like Moses, just as their forefathers rejected Moses when he was sent to them. Stephen's speech is a stunning defence. It is also a window into how deeply the early church reflected upon Scripture and the way in which it was fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus had foretold such persecution to his disciples in Luke 21, verses 12-19. He had also foretold that they would be given the words to speak when the time came. But before all this, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.

You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. This is all being fulfilled for the first time in the story of Stephen.

He is the first of the martyrs. And in this he is following his master. Christ himself had a very similar trial.

The accusations faced by Christ are very similar to those faced by Stephen. And the events of Stephen's trial also fulfill something that Jesus spoke of in his, in Matthew chapter 26 verses 63 to 64. But Jesus remained silent, and the high priest said to him, I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus said to him, You have said so, but I tell you from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. In his trial Stephen declares, Behold I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Most of the people in Stephen's trial would have been present at the trial of Christ.

They would have recognized the significance of these words. But their response is to shut their ears. They stop their ears and they run at him.

In this response we see them willfully closing themselves off to the message of Stephen and of the apostles. And not just closing themselves off, but taking the position of utmost hostility to it. Stephen, on his part, commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus.

There is a parallel between Jesus cast outside and Stephen cast outside. Both cry with a loud voice, both call for forgiveness for their enemies. And Stephen, when he is killed, falls asleep.

When he had foretold that some of them would be martyrs, Jesus had told his disciples, But not a hair of your head will perish. The description of Stephen falling asleep in such a violent form of death is a manifestation of the fact that they cannot really harm Stephen. They may be able to destroy Stephen's body, but they cannot kill his soul.

Ever since Luke chapter 19, Jerusalem was the stage on which all of these events were taking place. And now there is going to be a shift. As Jesus entered Jerusalem in the triumphal entry, people removed their garments and placed them before him.

Here they remove garments again to drive Stephen out. And the apostles are scattered

to the four winds of heaven. They are scattered like a dandelion clock being blown.

And as they are scattered they bring the message with them wherever they go. We also have another character introduced here. Those putting Stephen to death put their garments at the feet of a man named Saul.

This man named Saul becomes the instigator of great persecution for the church. A question to consider. Stephen's speech comes at a decisive moment in the narrative.

From this point onwards the narrative will move away from Jerusalem and out into the wider world, to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. How could we read Stephen's speech as a speech summing up the early stage of the mission and a verdict being declared upon people's response to it?