

## The Prophetic Significance of Stephen

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The historic-messianic interpretation of the seventy weeks<sup>1</sup> of Dan 9:24-27 had to wait a very long time for an exegetical defense of the event which closes the prophecy. Up until the end of the eighteenth century—following the tradition of most Church Fathers and Reformers<sup>2</sup>—many authors simply said that the 70<sup>th</sup> week, which had started with the baptism of Jesus, came to an end when the gospel started being preached to the Gentiles. The only hint in the prophecy for this conclusion was the introductory phrase, “Seventy weeks are cut off for your people and your holy city” (v. 24), which was assumed to mean the end of all Jewish privileges.<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation received sounder scriptural support when Stephen was introduced into that prophetic scenario. The first person to do this seems to have been the Irish scholar William Hales. In 1799, Hales published an anonymous volume in which he said that the last of the seventy weeks had ended “*about* A.D. 34 (*about* the martyrdom of Stephen).”<sup>4</sup> Nearly ten years later, in the first edition of his *A New Analysis of Chronology*, he was less hesitant in saying that

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<sup>1</sup> J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 383-389, points out that there are basically four different kinds of interpretation of Dan 9:24-27: the liberal, the traditional, the dispensational, and the symbolical. The traditional, also known as the historic-messianic interpretation, is characterized by applying to this prophecy the year-day principle and by holding that “this entire passage is Messianic in nature, and the Messiah is the leading character . . . the great *terminus ad quem*” of the central part of the prophecy, i.e. the 69 weeks (Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949], 209).

<sup>2</sup> For an exhaustive study of prophetic interpretation from the early Church Fathers until modern times, see LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington: Review & Herald, 1948).

<sup>3</sup> See E. B. Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1855), 193.

<sup>4</sup> [William Hales], *The Inspector, or Select Literary Intelligence* (London: J. White, 1799), 207 (emphasis supplied). Hales identifies himself as the author of this volume in his *Dissertations on the Principal Prophecies* (London: C. J. G. & F. Rivington, 1808), ix.

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the prophecy “ended with the martyrdom of Stephen.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, in the second and more definitive edition of this work, he not only confirmed his position but also elaborated a bit more. This edition did much to popularize his chronology among some prophetic writers of the next two centuries. Based on biblical, historical and astronomical evidence, he dated the crucifixion at A.D. 31, in the middle of the 70<sup>th</sup> week.<sup>6</sup> The baptism, therefore, which had occurred in A.D. 27, was the event that marked the beginning of “the first half of the Passion Week of years,” whose remaining half “ended with the martyrdom of Stephen, in the seventh, or last year of the week.”<sup>7</sup> Then he added:

For it is remarkable, that the year after, A.D. 35, began a new Era in the Church, namely, the conversion of Saul, or Paul, the apostle, by the personal appearance of Christ to him on the road to Damascus, when he received his mission to the Gentiles, after the Jewish Sanhedrin had formally rejected Christ by persecuting His disciples.<sup>8</sup>

During the next one hundred fifty years, however, the simple statement that the stoning of Stephen and consequently the conversion of Paul marked the end of the seventy weeks in A.D. 34 were accepted as fact. Hales, indeed, did not establish any single exegetical connection between Stephen and Dan 9:24-27, and those who came after him limited themselves to only reproducing the same argument, apparently unconcerned with demonstrating why Stephen’s death suffices as evidence for the end of that prophetic period. The only reason given was the traditional one that after his death, the gospel was taken to the Gentiles.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> William Hales, *A New Analysis of Chronology* (London: By the author, 1809-1812), 564.

<sup>6</sup> Under the influence of James Ussher, whose work *Annales Veteris Testamenti* (London: Ex Officina J. Flesher, 1650-1654) had been the standard for biblical chronology for nearly two hundred years, there were many scholars who placed the crucifixion at the end of the last week in A.D. 33, perhaps because Jesus’ death seemed much more relevant than anything else in closing the prophecy.

<sup>7</sup> William Hales, *A New Analysis of Chronology and Geography, History and Prophecy*, 4 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: C. J. G. & F. Rivington, 1830), 1:94-95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:100.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Carl A. Auberlen, *The Prophecies of Daniel and The Revelations of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1856), 140; J. N. Andrews, *The Sanctuary and Twenty-Three Hundred Years*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1872), 27; Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1903), 204-205; Philip Mauro, *The Seventy Weeks and the Great Tribulation* (Boston: Scripture Truth Depot, 1923), 112; George M. Price, *The Greatest of the Prophets* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1955), 257; J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 149; Charles Boutflower, *In and Around the Book of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 210; Robert M. Gurney, *God in Control* (Worthing: H. E. Walter, 1980), 115-119.

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When one talks about fulfillment of prophecy, however, the mere choosing of a particular event does not necessarily make the date correct,<sup>10</sup> no matter how important the event is. Without any hint in Dan 9:24-27 and Acts 6-7 that Stephen closes the 70<sup>th</sup> week, Harold W. Hoehner's conclusion that this interpretation "is pure speculation" would be correct.<sup>11</sup> Because of this, in the 1980s William H. Shea tried to develop this theme in order to explain in a more convincing way the following questions: "What was so significant about the stoning of Stephen? Why was his martyrdom more important than that suffered by others at that time?"<sup>12</sup> Then, for the first time, the exegetical connections between Stephen and the seventy weeks prophecy began appearing.<sup>13</sup>

Shea's starting point is the expression "to seal up vision and prophet," one of the six infinitival phrases which summarize what would happen by the end of the seventy weeks (Dan 9:24). According to him, the verb "to seal up" (*hatam*) may be understood here as either to validate or authenticate, to close up (until a later opening), or to bring to an end. The usual practice has been to apply this verb in one of the first two meanings. Shea, however, argues that this interpretation would only make sense if the second object to the infinitive ("to seal up") were "prophecy," which is not the case. The two objects are "vision" (*hazôn*) and "prophet" (*nabî#*), which suggest the third interpretation ("to bring to an end").

In his opinion, this third interpretation—to bring to an end—is preferred here for three reasons. First, occurring without the article, "prophet" might have in this passage a collective or corporate meaning, and the idea of bringing to an end would make perfect sense if it referred to prophets as persons instead of to their words. Second, the verb *hatam* also occurs three phrases earlier in this same verse with the clear idea of bringing to an end ("to put an end to sin"). Third, this interpretation fits the immediate context better because the text says that seventy weeks were decreed for Daniel's people and his holy city. Therefore, Shea concludes, "'vision' and 'prophet' are to come to an end by the time this prophetic period closes," and "since the final events of this prophecy appear to extend half a prophetic week or three and one-half years beyond the death of

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps because of this Young, 220, declares about the seventy weeks: "No important event is singled out as marking the termination." And Pusey, 193, says that the end of the prophecy "probably" marks the time when "the gospel embraced the world." Then he adds: "We have not the chronological data to fix it."

<sup>11</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 126.

<sup>12</sup> William H. Shea, "Daniel and the Judgment," a manuscript on the sanctuary and the judgment doctrine, Andrews University, July 1980, 366.

<sup>13</sup> Shea's thesis was finally published in "The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27," in *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy, Daniel & Revelation Committee Series*, vol. 3, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 75-118.

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the Messiah, we must look to the NT for an answer.” For him, Stephen fulfils the requisites for that answer.<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of this paper, however, is not only to show how Shea connects Stephen with the prophecy, but also to go a step further, developing some of the points of that connection and also exploring the role performed by Stephen in the context of the early church, which certainly makes his prophetic significance even stronger. However, because of space limitations, this paper focuses only on Stephen himself, his ministry, and his significance to the closing of the seventy weeks. This means that neither the other events and respective dates of the prophecy<sup>15</sup> nor the chronological validity of A.D. 34 itself as the year of Stephen’s death will be discussed here.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the organization of the material, priority is given to Stephen’s account as it appears in the book of Acts. The first section, therefore, rebuilds the historical and theological settings of Stephen: i.e., who Stephen was, how he became a preacher, what his theology was, and the changes that occurred in the apostolic church immediately after and as a result of his death. The following section then introduces the exegetical reasons why Stephen seems to fit as the end of the 70<sup>th</sup> week by analyzing the moment of his trial, namely the true nature of his speech and vision and its theological meaning relating to God’s covenant with Israel. At the end, a summary of the previous sections and a tentative conclusion follow.

### **Stephen as a Preacher**

Stephen has been described as one of the most “ambiguous” figures in the biblical account of the apostolic church.<sup>17</sup> There has been much discussion among scholars about his identity, his background, his theology, his influence on Paul and the mission to the Gentiles, his role in the theology and structure of Acts, and so on.<sup>18</sup> Luke’s account of Stephen in Acts 6-7 gives rise to numerous and diverse questions which are even more relevant when one attempts to connect his death with the seventy weeks prophecy. Because of this, this section

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<sup>14</sup> Shea, “The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27,” 80; cf. “Daniel and Judgment,” 73-75.

<sup>15</sup> For the most recent and exhaustive analysis of the seventy weeks chronology, see Brempong Owusu-Antwi, *The Chronology of Daniel 9:24-27*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs: ATS Publications, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> The dating of Stephen’s death is entirely dependent on that of Paul’s conversion, and the dating of Paul’s conversion has been the object of a lot of discussion among the scholars, who have postulated any date from A.D. 32 to 36, including of course A.D. 34, which represents exactly a median and a mean among the others suggested. For a recent and thorough discussion on Paul’s chronology, see Rainer Riesner, *Paul’s Early Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3-227.

<sup>17</sup> Martin H. Scharlemann, *Stephen: A Singular Saint*, *Analecta Biblica*, no. 34 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1968), 1. See also Marcel Simon, *St. Stephen and The Hellenists* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958), 1-4.

<sup>18</sup> See Günter Wagner, ed., *An Exegetical Bibliography of the New Testament: Luke and Acts* (Macon: Mercer University, 1985), 397-416.

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attempts to identify three basic elements about Stephen, namely, his community, his theology, and the influence of his theology on early church history.

**His Community.** Stephen appears for the first time in the context of the first dissension experienced by the early church. The problem was related to the supply of food being given to the Hellenists' widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1). The term "Hellenists" simply means people who spoke Greek as their mother language. In this case, it refers to Jews who had been born in Greco-Roman lands, had moved to Jerusalem, and then become Christians.<sup>19</sup> Stephen was one of them (6:5).<sup>20</sup> The "Hebrews," the other segment of the church, which the Hellenists complained against, were Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews who formed the original nucleus of the Christian community in Jerusalem. The Twelve belonged to this group (6:2).

The fact that the church was divided into two distinct groups in such an early period does not imply necessarily, as has been suggested, two virtually separate communities with different religious and doctrinal features.<sup>21</sup> Martin Hengel argues that the only reason for the separation was the language, which "necessarily and quickly" led the Aramaic- and Greek-speaking Christians to adopt separate worship services, just as in the Jewish synagogues (cf. Acts 6:9).<sup>22</sup> But it is also "inherently probable," as I. Howard Marshall says, that the Aramaic-speaking group was "more radical in its attitudes to Judaism" than the other group, which had gone much further than the latter in its interpretation of the gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Although Marshall reiterates that this difference should not be exaggerated,<sup>24</sup> it is not impossible that behind the problem involving the Hellenists'

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<sup>19</sup> The term "Hellenists" also appears in Acts 9:29 and 11:20 (for the textual problem of this passage, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1994], 340-342), and, according to the context, in each one of these passages it must refer to a different group. If in 6:1 the Hellenists are Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, in 9:29 they are only Greek-speaking Jews, and in 11:20, Greek-speaking Gentiles of whatever race who lived in Antioch. For a thorough analysis of the term "Hellenist," see Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 1-11.

<sup>20</sup> For the thesis introduced by Abram Spiro, "Stephen's Samaritan Background," in Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 285-300, that Stephen was a Samaritan, see F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 120.

<sup>21</sup> Simon, 12-14, who interprets the word "Hellenist" as "Hellenism," declares that the Hellenists in Acts are people who "under the influence and contamination of Greek thought, strayed from the ways of strict Pharisaic orthodoxy and could therefore be labeled as 'paganizing.'" He also states that this idea is not totally clear in the context simply because Luke "could not, or did not want to, see that something more was implied in the word."

<sup>22</sup> Hengel, 14-16. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 62, even suggests that the Hellenists must have lived together in their own district or quarter in Jerusalem, where they had their synagogues and guesthouses.

<sup>23</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 125, 128.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

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widows there were also some theological concerns.<sup>25</sup> There was within Judaism a historical tendency to consider those under the influence of the Greek culture religiously liberal (cf. 1 Macc 1:10–15; 2 Macc 4:7–20).<sup>26</sup> The Hellenists had no roots in the Palestinian Hebrew traditions. Most of them were not able to read the Hebrew Scriptures, and they did not attend the Hebrew synagogues. Proselytes, inferior to Hebrews born and bred, would naturally associate more with the Hellenists (cf. Acts 6:5). What is more, their embracing of Greek customs and their intense previous contact with Gentiles in their native countries would certainly feed the suspicion that they were lax in their observance of the law. Whatever the precise facts, the subsequent events—i.e. the election of the Seven, the judgment and death of Stephen, and the persecution that came thereafter—indicate that theological differences played an important role in that dissension and that the Hellenists’ complaint, as James D. G. Dunn says, was only the symptom of a deeper problem.<sup>27</sup>

**His Theology.** The apostles’ solution for the Hellenists’ complaint was to choose seven men from the Hellenistic community itself to assume the duty of serving their poor.<sup>28</sup> As Hengel suggests, the choice may have fallen on those who were already the leaders of the Hellenistic Christians.<sup>29</sup> In this case, their election simply meant the recognition of their leadership, especially Stephens’, the first name on the list (cf. 6:5).

This idea is confirmed by the activity they performed immediately after their election, which does not fit the traditional understanding that they were deacons. In fact, they are never referred to as “deacons” (*diakonoí*) in the book of Acts,<sup>30</sup> and the same verb used to describe what they should supposedly do in 6:2 (*diakonéō*) is also used for the preaching of the word by the Twelve in 6:4. It

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 63, 454; Clayton K. Harrop, “Stephen and Paul,” in *With Steadfast Purpose*, ed. Naymond H. Keathley (Waco: Baylor U, 1990), 182; Hengel, 1-29, 48-64; Martin Hengel, *Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM, 1986), 71-80; Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), 44-50; William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 27, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 12.5.1-5. On the controversies during the time of Herod, see *The Antiquities of the Jews* 15.8.1-5.

<sup>27</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1990), 269.

<sup>28</sup> The conclusion that the “Seven” were also Hellenists is based on the following evidence: the problem was related to the Hellenists’ widows (6:1); all seven had Greek names (6:5); Stephen’s opposition came from a Hellenistic synagogue (6:9); the persecution which followed Stephen’s death did not affect the apostles (8:14).

<sup>29</sup> Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> In the NT, the Seven are not mentioned outside the book of Acts. None of them, including Stephen and Philip, are named by the Apostolic Fathers. Even when the latter comment on the office of deacons, they quote the Pastoral Epistles instead of tracing this institution back to the time of the Seven. The first specific reference to them as deacons in later church literature seems to be Irenaeus’ remark that Stephen was both the first deacon and the first martyr (*Against Heresies* III, 12, 10; IV, 15, 1).

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is also noteworthy that when Luke wishes to distinguish Philip from his namesake, the apostle, he does not call him “Philip the deacon,” but “Philip the evangelist” (21:8). This helps explain why the Seven appear as preachers and doers of wonders and signs immediately after their election (6:8-10; 8:4-8, 26-40). Their preaching must have been powerful, for it is reported that not only “the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly” (6:7), but also that their activity called forth a strong opposition from the Jews (6:9).

But what exactly did Stephen preach? Probably the charges made against him give some clue. He was accused of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (6:11). Some people were secretly induced to say: “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us” (6:13-14). Based on the reference to “false witnesses” (6:11), however, P. Double argues that Luke intends to indicate that the charges against Stephen were not true.<sup>31</sup> But the charges in fact could not be totally false. It is possible that Stephen had said something which had been twisted by his opponents, just as the charges made against Jesus (Mark 14:58) appear to have some foundation in fact.”<sup>32</sup>

According to those witnesses, the words spoken by Stephen suggested that Jesus Himself would destroy the temple and alter the Mosaic tradition. Jesus in fact had said: “I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58). The Fourth Gospel gives the immediate application of these words as referring to Jesus’ bodily resurrection (John 2:19-21). Stephen, however, seems to have applied them, or part of them, to the temple itself in order to emphasize that it had lost its cultic meaning. His words “the Most High does not dwell in *houses* made by *human* hands” (Acts 7:48) could be interpreted not only as a protest against the idolatrous relationship that Israel maintained with the temple,<sup>33</sup> but also as a statement of the definitive end of the entire ceremonial system, for the temple was never intended to become a permanent institution,<sup>34</sup> except in its doxological function (see Isa 2:1-4). It is noteworthy that the only biblical reference that there were many conversions—even among the priests—appears in the context of Stephen’s preaching (cf. 6:7).

Stephen’s words, however, may still have what Marshall calls an “unspoken implication,” which is that God does dwell in a temple not made by hands.<sup>35</sup> In light of the book of Hebrews, such an implication is not a surprise. In He-

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<sup>31</sup> P. Double, “The Son of Man Saying in Stephen’s Witnessing: Acts 6:8--8:2,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 71-72.

<sup>32</sup> Harrop, 183. See also Marshall, 128; Scharlemann, 13.

<sup>33</sup> So Gerhard A. Krodel, *Acts*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 150-151.

<sup>34</sup> Manson, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Marshall, 146.

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brews there is the same emphasis that the temple of Jerusalem had already lost its meaning and function as a place of expiation (Heb 8:7, 13; 10:1-2), and for this reason it had been replaced by another temple, a superior temple not “made with hands” (9:24; cf. 8:1-2).<sup>36</sup>

The apostles and other Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, as devout Jews, were probably not yet ready to follow the Hellenists’ understanding of this particular issue. They were still somewhat attached to some of the temple services and even to some ceremonial aspects of the law (cf. Acts 3:1; 21:17–26; Gal 2:11-14). Martin Hengel declares that “they 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.”<sup>37</sup> Stephen, however, as well the other Hellenistic Christians, may have quickly understood that the mission of Christ involved the abrogation of the whole temple order and its being superseded by a new edifice not made by hands. The fact that they had been born abroad, had lived closer to the Gentiles, and spoke another language could have made them both more flexible in their religious traditions than the Hebrews and at the same time more open to the gospel and its worldwide dimension.<sup>38</sup> The gospel meant the end of all the ceremonial laws, including the sacrificial cultus. These external and visible symbols of Jewish particularism were not compatible with the universality of the Christian message of an already accomplished salvation.

**His Influence.** Finally, it should be noted that only the Hellenistic Christians were scattered from Jerusalem in the persecution against the church after Stephen’s death. The apostles were able to stay there (cf. Acts 8:1, 14), as were the other Hebrew Christians (cf. 11:1, 18, 22).<sup>39</sup> This persecution, however, had a positive influence on the church’s missionary activity. “Those who had been scattered went about preaching the word” (8:4; cf. 8:5-8; 11:19-21). The Hellenists, therefore, “became the real founders of the mission to the Gentiles, in which circumcision and observation of the ritual law were no longer required.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In fact, the similarities between Stephen’s speech and Hebrews are not limited to this point. Manson, 36, lists many others, including: the attitude to the Jewish cultus and law; the sense of the divine call to God’s people being called to “go out”; the ever-shifting scenes in Israel’s life, and the ever-renewed homelessness of the faithful; God’s word as “living”; the allusion to Joshua in connection with the promise of God’s “rest”; the idea of the “angels” being the ordainers of God’s law; and the directing of the eyes to heaven and to Jesus. C. Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952), 1:202-203, adds some others: predilection for the same OT characters as heroes and saints; condemnation of the desert generation of Israelites; typological use of the OT; construction of the tabernacle along the lines of a heavenly model; and the citation of Scripture as “God said” or “Moses said.” William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), cxlvii, states: “The writer of Hebrews was a profound theologian who appears to have received his theological and spiritual formation within the Hellenistic wing of the church.”

<sup>37</sup> Hengel, *Earliest Christianity*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Dunn, 272.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 13. See also Hengel, *Earliest Christianity*, 76-80.



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Furthermore, it is not mere coincidence that Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, is introduced by Luke at the exact moment of Stephen's death (cf. 7:58). It is generally agreed that Paul attended the Hellenistic synagogue referred to in Acts 6:9, and so was one of Stephen's opponents.<sup>41</sup> Paul describes himself prior to his conversion as a "Pharisee" (Phil 3:5) and "extremely zealous" for the Mosaic law and ancestral tradition (Gal 1:14). As such, he could hardly bear an attack upon the law and the temple cult, two of the three pillars upon which, according to Pirke Aboth 1:2, the world rests (the last being good works). To him, Stephen and the other Hellenistic Christians had proved themselves apostates. Because of this, he persecuted them (Phil 3:6). A little later, however, he was being accused of preaching the same theology which he had attempted to destroy (cf. Acts 21:21). This fact has caused Hengel to state that the Hellenists of Jerusalem were "the real bridge between Jesus and Paul."<sup>42</sup>

But in addition to the theological similarities,<sup>43</sup> an apparently meaningless event helps to clarify the intimate connection between Paul and the Hellenists. When he returned from his third missionary journey, Paul arrived at Jerusalem and found lodging with a person called "Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple" (Acts 21:16).<sup>44</sup> Being "an early disciple," his conversion probably went back to the first years of the Jerusalem church.<sup>45</sup> Being from Cyprus, he was certainly a Hellenist, and therefore may have taken part in the episodes of Acts 6-8.<sup>46</sup> Considering that most of Paul's eight companions on that part of the trip were uncircumcised (cf. 20:4), Jon Paulien points out that a Hebrew Christian would hardly be prepared to "gladly" (21:17) lodge them. But as a Hellenist, it would not be a problem for Mnason.<sup>47</sup> Whatever the case, the fact that in Caesarea they had stayed in the house of Philip, "who was one of the seven" (21:8), is sufficient to show the proximity between Paul and the Hellenists.

So the martyrdom of Stephen occupies a position of extreme importance in the history of the apostolic church. It was the last event which took place while the actions were still confined to Jerusalem and the Christians still lived practically as Jews. At the same time, it was the event which first involved Paul and which initiated the Christian message being taken to the Gentile world. One can agree with J. C. O'Neill that "so much significance is attached to one event," but his conclusion that "Luke is schematizing the history and attributing to one

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<sup>41</sup> See Dennis Gaertner, *Acts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Joplin: College Press, 1995), 123.

<sup>42</sup> Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 341, states categorically that Paul inherited his theology about Jesus from the Hellenistic Christians whom he had persecuted. See also Manson, 42-44.

<sup>44</sup> For the textual problem involved in this passage, see Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 607.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce, 402.

<sup>46</sup> Munck, 209, suggests that Mnason may have been among the Cypriots who left Jerusalem after Stephen's stoning and preached the gospel directly to the Greeks of Antioch (Acts 11:19-20).

<sup>47</sup> Jon Paulien, "Mnason," *ABD* (1992), 4:882.

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cause what probably should be attributed to many,"<sup>48</sup> is speculative and devoid of evidence. The best alternative, therefore, is to take Luke's narrative as it stands and acknowledge the significance of Stephen in the development of the apostolic church.

As much significance as he had, however, it does not suffice to make him the fulfillment of the seventy weeks. But if the phrase "to seal up vision and prophet" (Dan 9:24) applies to the end of that prophetic period and means to bring to an end the prophetic ministry on behalf of Daniel's people, and if Stephen matches these criteria chronologically as well as historically, then his role in early church history may be added to the picture to strengthen even more his prophetic significance. This is the subject of the following section.

### **Stephen as a Prophet**

The question we face now is: was Stephen a prophet? If so, then we must also ask: does he match the criteria required by Dan 9:24-27 for the end of the seventy weeks period? Based on Acts 7:52, F. F. Bruce states that "Stephen placed himself in the prophetic succession by attacking" the Jews on the same point that the Old Testament prophets had, i.e. "Israel's perverted notions of the true worship of God."<sup>49</sup> Shea argues that the vision Stephen had at the end of his trial (7:55-56) made him "by definition" a prophet, since "it is to prophets that God gives visions of Himself like this."<sup>50</sup> That being so, Shea concludes, "he may have had the shortest ministry of any prophet known in the Bible," for he was stoned shortly thereafter.<sup>51</sup> However, it is not the length of a prophetic ministry that makes it important, but the historical moment of such ministry and the message communicated. Because of this, this section focuses on the structure and meaning of Stephen's speech and the real object of his vision.

**His Speech.** The significance of Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2-53) can be noted, firstly, from its length. It is the longest speech in the book of Acts, and this fact by itself has been sufficient to retain the attention of many scholars.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, this speech has also been described as "perhaps [the most] perplexing address in Acts,"<sup>53</sup> because of its complexity and the problems of interpretation it raises.<sup>54</sup> One of the problems is related to the nature of this

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<sup>48</sup> J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1961), 72.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce, 152. Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pagina Sacra Series, vol. 5 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 112, also says that because Stephen is described as "full of the Spirit and wisdom" (6:3) and because he worked "great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8), he was a prophet, "and like the prophets before him, he generates a divided response."

<sup>50</sup> Shea, "The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27," 81.

<sup>51</sup> Shea, "Daniel and the Judgment", 367.

<sup>52</sup> Marshall, 131, declares: "If length is anything to go by, Stephen's speech is one of the most important sections of Acts."

<sup>53</sup> Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 58.

<sup>54</sup> See Simon, 39-77; Scharlemann, 22-89; Simon Légasse, *Stephanos* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992), 17-94.

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speech, and in this particular issue the interpretation provided by Shea is very insightful. According to him, Stephen's speech "should be understood in connection with the covenant of the OT,"<sup>55</sup> that is, the way in which the covenant between God and Israel was formulated and the way the prophets used that formulation.

Shea's interpretation is grounded principally on an important study published in 1954 by George E. Mendenhall,<sup>56</sup> who identified the structure of the Sinai covenant with the suzerainty treaty utilized by the Hittite kings in 1450-1200 B.C.,<sup>57</sup> a period which corresponds exactly to the beginnings of the people of Israel. The Hittite king was the great king or suzerain who had under his control a number of vassals, from whom he expected faithfulness and strict obedience. The covenant, which was designated by the expression "oaths and bonds," had basically six elements: (1) the preamble, which identified the suzerain, (2) the prologue, which described the previous relations between the suzerain and the vassal, (3) the stipulations or obligations imposed upon the vassal, (4) provision for deposit in the temple and periodic public reading, (5) the witnesses to the covenant, and (6) the blessings and curses which would come to the vassal as a result of his obedience or disobedience.<sup>58</sup>

Although Mendenhall states that "only two" biblical covenants fall into this pattern, Exod 20-23 and Josh 24,<sup>59</sup> Shea has successfully demonstrated that Deut, 1 Sam 12, and Mic 6 can also be organized along this same structure.<sup>60</sup> And for him, the value of this identification is in the fact that it shows that "when the prophets came as reformers to call Israel back to the Sinai covenant relationship, they did so by applying the covenant formulary to situations current in their times."<sup>61</sup> In doing so, Shea argues, the prophets sometimes used the Hebrew word *rîb*, whose best translation is probably "covenant lawsuit," to express the idea of God bringing before a court an action against His people because of

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<sup>55</sup> Shea, "The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27," 81.

<sup>56</sup> George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *BA* 17 (1954): 50-76.

<sup>57</sup> Up until that time, there was no agreement among scholars concerning the origin of the OT covenant concept. Some assigned it to the work of Moses (so W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion, Its Origin and Development* [London: SPCK, 1937], 156-159), while others thought it had been developed by the prophets during the eighth and the seventh centuries (so Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885], 417).

<sup>58</sup> Mendenhall, 58, stresses that the Hittite covenant form was not so rigid. There could be variation in the order of the elements as well in the wording. Occasionally, one or another of the elements could be lacking.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>60</sup> See Shea, "Daniel and the Judgment," 369-371. In his formulation, Shea does not include the fourth item of the Hittite covenant structure, though Mendenhall (p. 64), probably referring to texts like Deut 31:24-29, declares that "the tradition of the deposit of the law in the ark of the covenant is certainly connected with the covenant customs of pre-Mosaic times."

<sup>61</sup> Shea, "The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27," 81.

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their violation of the covenant.<sup>62</sup> In Mic 6:1-2, for example, which parallels the preamble and the witnesses sections of the original covenant, the word *rîb* occurs three times:

Hear what the Lord says: Arise, plead your case [*rîb*] before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy [*rîb*] of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy [*rîb*] with His people, and He will contend with Israel.

Next (vs. 3-5), in the corresponding prologue, the prophet reminds the people of God's mighty acts on their behalf in the past. The stipulations and violations are listed in the following verses (vs. 6-12), which culminate with the curses (vs. 13-16).<sup>63</sup>

According to Shea, this Old Testament background is necessary for a better evaluation of Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Without that background in mind, he writes, "this speech might seem to be a strange, perhaps even boring, sermon in that he droned on and on and on about the history of Israel." But in light of the use of the covenant formulary and specially the *rîb* pattern in the Old Testament, the speech "takes on a deep meaning." What Stephen did in Acts 7:2-50 was to parallel the prologue section of the original covenant in the same way the Old Testament prophets did when they brought God's *rîb* against Israel.<sup>64</sup>

**His Verdict.** The prophetic mission carried out by Stephen in his trial also clarifies his attitude regarding the charges leveled against him. Some scholars have referred to his speech in terms of a defense or apology,<sup>65</sup> but he actually made no effort to defend himself, in contrast to Peter's case some time earlier (cf. Acts 4:8-12). In this sense G. A. Kennedy is right when he says that Ste-

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<sup>62</sup> The word *rîb* also appears in the covenant lawsuit of Hosea (4:1). Malachi (3:5) and Ezekiel (5:8) use a different word, *mispāt*, which means "judgment." For additional discussion on the covenant lawsuit, see Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *JBL* 78 (1959): 285-295; Julien Harvey, "Le 'Rîb-Pattern,' Réquisitoire Prophétique Sur la Rupture de l'Alliance," *Biblica* 43 (1962): 172-196; James Limburg, "The Root byr and the Prophetic Lawsuit Speeches," *JBL* 88 (1969): 291-304; Kirsten Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge, JSOT Supplement Series 9* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978).

<sup>63</sup> Shea, "Daniel and the Judgement," 370-371.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 371. The solution that many scholars have found for the apparently unnecessary length of the speech is to speculate that Luke had expanded the original speech by combining different traditions (see Krodel, 137-140).

<sup>65</sup> So J. Cantinat, *L'Église de la Pentecôte* (Paris: MAME, 1969), 105; Cecil J. Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955), 109; Delbert Wiens, *Stephen's Sermon* (Ashfield: BIBAL Press, 1995), 11. Although Wiens uses the word "apology," because for him "this speech is a reasoned defense of his cause by an advocate," he states that the expression "prophetic proclamation" would be even better.

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phen's speech is rhetorically incomplete,<sup>66</sup> for instead of refuting the falseness of the charges, it in fact consists of a message of accusation and condemnation. Simon Légasse describes Stephen's attitude in terms of "an inversion of roles," that is, from accused he became an accuser,<sup>67</sup> for after his long recital of Israel's history, he announced his verdict:

You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and *yet* did not keep it (Acts 7:51-53).

The tone of these words is clearly climactic<sup>68</sup> and must be understood as an explicit statement of condemnation. By killing the Messiah, those people were not only identifying themselves as sons of their "fathers" but also completing the great amount of rebellion and iniquity initiated by them,<sup>69</sup> or to use the biblical language, "they had filled up the measure of their fathers."<sup>70</sup> If their fathers were guilty of slaying the prophets, they were even more so for murdering Jesus. As Marshall says, they had gone to the limit of Israel's opposition to God.<sup>71</sup>

Gerd Lündemann rightly points out that "the call to repentance" which features in other speeches in Acts is missing here.<sup>72</sup> It seems, therefore, that what Stephen was bringing to the Jewish leaders was not only another of God's covenant lawsuits, but the final one,<sup>73</sup> as if their time for repentance had definitively come to an end and they were found guilty. They had failed in keeping the covenant (cf. v. 53), and because of this they were no longer the people of the covenant. The change of the pronoun from "our" (vs. 11, 19, 38, 44, 45) to "your fathers" (v. 51) perhaps means more than a simple breakage in Stephen's solidarity with his audience, as Gehard A. Krodel suggests.<sup>74</sup> It may also imply the definitive end of the covenant relationship between God and Israel as a na-

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<sup>66</sup> G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1984), 121-122.

<sup>67</sup> Légasse, 23.

<sup>68</sup> There is no doubt that the aorist *egénesthe* (v. 52) must be classified as culminative. The adverb *nūn* reinforces this idea.

<sup>69</sup> Floyd V. Filson, *Pioneers of the Primitive Church* (New York: Abingdon, 1940), 75.

<sup>70</sup> Bruce, 152.

<sup>71</sup> Marshall, 147.

<sup>72</sup> Gerd Lündemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 88.

<sup>73</sup> Shea, "Daniel and Judgement," 372.

<sup>74</sup> Krodel, 151-152.

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tion. The reference to Jesus in 7:52 makes it implicit that now the true covenant people were those who believed in Him and followed Him.<sup>75</sup> In other words, the people who belonged to God's covenant were no longer defined by ethnic or political terms as Israel had been, but in terms of discipleship to Jesus Christ (cf. 11:26).<sup>76</sup>

**His Vision.** The conclusion above may appear somewhat radical, but as a matter of fact it is confirmed by the vision of Jesus that Stephen had next. When he finished speaking, "being full of the Holy Spirit" (7:55), he said: "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (vs. 56).

First of all, it should be noted that this vision is a clear reference to the Messiah's exaltation referred to in Ps 110:1.<sup>77</sup> In this passage, there is no question that the "Lord" to whom God said "sit thou on my right hand" was believed to be the Messiah. It is confirmed by the well-known incident recorded in Mark 12:35-37 (cf. Matt 22:41-46; Luke 20:41-44). David could not be, for he had not ascended to heaven; he still lay buried in his tomb (cf. Acts 2:29, 34). Thus, this passage could only point to the Messiah, and according to the apostles it had found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth (cf. vs. 34-36).

But Stephen's vision also consists of a reference to the heavenly court mentioned in Dan 7:9-14. In his vision, Stephen referred to Jesus as "the Son of man," and this title goes back to its original usage in Daniel,<sup>78</sup> where the context is clearly of judgment.<sup>79</sup> It is important to note, however, that Jesus Himself had already used the same title in connection with the idea of His exaltation. Before the same Sanhedrin He had said: "From now on the Son of man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69), and this statement in particular may be the key to understand Stephen's vision. By combining the idea of His exaltation with the allusion to the heavenly court, Jesus may in fact have implied that He was now standing in judgment before the Jewish leaders, but "the time was coming when He would be judge as they stood before Him."<sup>80</sup> In this sense

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<sup>75</sup> See Wiens, 223.

<sup>76</sup> For the meaning of the term "Christians" in Acts 11:26, see Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 31.

<sup>77</sup> Haenchen, 292.

<sup>78</sup> See Scharlemann, 15.

<sup>79</sup> Arthur J. Ferch, *The Son of Man in Daniel Seven*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 6 (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1979), 148, argues that the role of the Son of man in Dan 7:9-14 is not of Judge who takes His seat alongside God. According to him, what this passage depicts is a scene of investiture, in which the Son of man receives "domination, glory and kingdom" (pp. 172-174, 183). There is no question, however, that in the latter Judaism, as well in the NT, the Son of man comes to perform a judicial function (see I Enoch 62:2-3; 69:26-29; Matt 25:31-46).

<sup>80</sup> Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 322. See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 850; C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM, 1990), 837; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, The

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Stephen's vision could indicate that this time had arrived, for he saw Jesus "standing" (*estōta*) at God's right hand instead of "seated" (*kathémenos*) as Jesus Himself had said He would be.

This verbal change has divided scholars, and at least five different interpretations have been proposed. C. H. Dodd, for example, denies that the participle *estōta* has any special meaning. According to him, it means quite generally "to be situated" without necessarily any suggestion of an upright attitude.<sup>81</sup> William Kelly, in turn, says that Jesus was standing because "He had not taken definitely His seat" yet, i.e., that was a transitional period in which Jesus "was still giving the Jews a final opportunity."<sup>82</sup> H. P. Owen, on the other hand, proposes that what Stephen received was a kind of proleptic vision of "the glory of the *parousía*." For him, Jesus was standing in preparation for His second advent.<sup>83</sup> Marshall thinks that Jesus was standing to welcome the dying Stephen into His presence. In his opinion, the implication of the vision is that "as Jesus was raised from the dead, so too His followers will be."<sup>84</sup> A slightly different idea is given by Bruce, who believes that Jesus was standing at God's right hand as Stephen's witness. Stephen had confessed Jesus before men, and now he saw Jesus confessing him before God.<sup>85</sup>

But although Kelly's interpretation may hardly be accepted because of its clear dispensational formulary,<sup>86</sup> the idea that Jesus was standing to judge Israel cannot be totally rejected. It should be noted, first, that the entire context of Stephen's speech actually establishes the fact that it was not Stephen who was being judged by the leaders of Israel, but Israel was being judged by God by means of Stephen's prophetic ministry. Stephen addressed the Sanhedrin not as a defendant, but as a prophet who brought God's final *rîb* against those people. Because of this, he finished his speech with a strong statement of condemnation. They had failed in keeping the covenant; therefore they were no longer the people of the covenant.

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New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 587; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:1800.

<sup>81</sup> C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 35. See also Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 311.

<sup>82</sup> William Kelly, *An Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: G. Morrish, 1952), 102-103. John N. Darby, *The Collected Writings* 28, ed. William Kelly (Oak Park: Bible Truth, n.d.), 283, declares: "He does not sit as it were till Israel has formally rejected the testimony, when the cry of Stephen reached His ear. He took His place, sitting down until His enemies are made His footstool, after their refusal to hear the Holy Ghost's testimony. Stephen being received to Christ in heaven, Israel as Israel must wait outside."

<sup>83</sup> H. P. Owen, "Stephen's Vision in Acts vii.55-6," *NTS* 1 (1954): 224-226.

<sup>84</sup> Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 149.

<sup>85</sup> Bruce, 156.

<sup>86</sup> For a recent discussion of dispensationalism, see Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995). See also Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1983).

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It is important to note that some time earlier, Peter had said to the same audience that Jesus had been exalted by God “to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). Commenting on this passage, Krodel declares that through the apostolic proclamation God was offering “a second chance to Jerusalem and its leaders.” If the opportunity were accepted, then repentance and forgiveness would be received as God’s gift, mediated by the same Jesus they had killed.<sup>87</sup> Now, however, Jesus did not seem to be waiting for their repentance anymore. It was a time of judgment. In addition to this, it is noteworthy that there are some texts in the Bible where God rises in order to judge (cf. Job 19:25; Isa 3:13; Dan 12:1).<sup>88</sup> What Stephen saw in vision, therefore, could be Jesus rising to pronounce His judgment

The second point that should be noted is that the covenant which God had with Israel was not in itself synonymous of salvation, but a provision by which God’s salvation could be taken to the entire world (cf. Gen 12:1-3).<sup>89</sup> In other words, the covenant must chiefly be understood in terms of mission. So to state that the Jews are no longer the people of the covenant does not mean that God has rejected them, as sometimes has been suggested<sup>90</sup> (cf. Rom 11:1–10), but only that God has chosen another people to execute His missionary plan. It should be remembered that God’s covenant with Israel was established on a corporate basis—i.e., it involved the entire nation as an entity.<sup>91</sup> To speak about the end of the covenant with Israel, therefore, does not imply the end of God’s interest in the Jews as individuals. Because of this, the gospel was still preached to them even after Stephen’s death (cf. Acts 28:17-28).<sup>92</sup> But the privilege of being “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own

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<sup>87</sup> Krodel, 128.

<sup>88</sup> George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*, Harvard Theological Studies 26 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972), 27, identifies Dan 12:1-3 as a “description of a judgment scene.” And for him, one of the constitutive elements in this scene is exactly the standing position of Michael (see also p. 12). Gordon E. Christo, “The Eschatological Judgment in Job 19:21-29, An Exegetical Study,” Andrews University Seminary Ph.D. Dissertation (Berrien Springs: Andrews U, 1992), 129-134, provides an interesting analysis of the juridical connotation of the word *qum* (“to take to stand”), which occurs in Job 19:25, and then concludes: “Whether to accuse or to defend against accusation, whether as a witness (either for or against), or whether as a judge to pronounce the verdict, the individual had to stand in order to speak.”

<sup>89</sup> Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 107, 129, defines God’s covenant with Israel as a “sovereign administration of grace and promise,” by which God elected Israel for Himself and conferred to them a series of privileges, such as the multiplication of their seed, the gift of the land, and His own presence in blessing and protection, in order to enable them to be the channel for His blessing to the nations.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Jack T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 80-83, 297-299, 317.

<sup>91</sup> VanGemeren, 158-159.

<sup>92</sup> Cf., for a critique on Sanders’ position (cf. p. 28 n. 4 above) see James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London: SCM Press/Philadelphia: Trinity P International, 1991), 149-151.



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possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9) was no longer exclusively theirs.<sup>93</sup> The people of the covenant now were no longer defined by bloodline, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:26-29; cf. Rom 11:25-32).<sup>94</sup> Thus, the ministry of Stephen, his speech and his vision, seems to be an appropriate explanation and fulfillment of the prophecy that “seventy weeks are cut off for your people and your holy city” (Dan 9:24). Shea concludes:

Stephen was the last true prophet whom God called to that office to speak particularly to the people of His election. When their leaders stoned him they silenced the voice of the last in a long line of their prophets. His death brought an end to the function of the prophetic office on their behalf as a people. The vision that he saw just before he died was the last vision that a prophet who ministered especially to them was to see.<sup>95</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

In light of the previous sections, the traditional interpretation that the seventy weeks of Dan 9:24-27 reached their fulfillment with the stoning of Stephen seems to be much more than a mere possibility. Although Hale’s choice of this event was based more on a chronological coincidence than on an exegetical conviction, it does not mean that he was wrong; neither were those who for one hundred and fifty years used the same argument without attempting to justify it exegetically. The fact is that if understood as bringing to an end the prophetic ministry on behalf of Israel (“your people and your holy city”), as argued by Shea, the phrase “to seal up the vision and the prophet” finds a plausible fulfillment in Stephen. First because the role he played in early church history—which although quite brief, was decisive and significant—can hardly be exaggerated. Stephen literally represented the beginning of Christianity as a universal religion, though it cost him his own life. His death was unjust and violent. The stones silenced his voice, but they were not able to change the course of history. On the contrary, “a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58), also a Hellenist, who observed and apparently approved the execution, in the end became the great continuer of the work began by Stephen.<sup>96</sup>

Without question, Stephen was more than a deacon as this term is understood today. He was a preacher, and because of his Hellenistic background, he

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<sup>93</sup> See Gurney, 116-119.

<sup>94</sup> See Dunn, 248-251.

<sup>95</sup> Shea, “Daniel and the Judgment,” 372-373.

<sup>96</sup> In an interesting passage, Martin Luther, *Lecture on Psalm One Hundred Eighteen, Luther’s Works*, Amer. Ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955-1976), 11:412, describes the conversion of Paul as the “vengeance” of Stephen, for Paul stopped being what he was and became what Stephen himself was.

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“seems to have been the first Christian to realize that Christianity meant the end of Jewish privilege, and the first to open the way for a mission to the Gentiles.”<sup>97</sup>

Norman J. Bull declares:

The stoning of Stephen began a new stage in the history of the infant Church. Up till then Christianity had been a sect of Judaism. Christians had lived as Jews, by the Jewish law. They could still be regarded as forming a separate synagogue, as many groups of Jews did. Now there was a distinct change. No longer could Christian Jews be regarded as orthodox Jews; they were a distinctive and heretical sect. No longer was the Jewish law the heart of their religion. The preaching of such men as Stephen set them apart.<sup>98</sup>

The prophetic significance of Stephen, however, is not only related to the definitive separation of the church from traditional Judaism, and her orientation towards the Gentiles. To the Christians Stephen was a preacher and even a reformer,<sup>99</sup> and to the Jews he was a prophet, the last prophet called by God to speak directly to Israel as the covenant people. As such, his message was a message of condemnation. They had broken the covenant, and because of this God called him to bring His final *rīb* against them. At the exact moment in which Stephen was condemning them on earth, Jesus was judging them in His heavenly court. Stephen’s vision, therefore, was not a vision of a martyr close to death, but a vision of a prophet performing his mission. So the Jews’ privileges as the covenant people came to an end. The final seventy weeks that God had given for His people were finished; the prophetic ministry on their behalf were also finished, and they were now no longer the people of the covenant. By faith in Jesus Christ, however, they could still retake their status and mission, but no longer as a nation.

Israel’s last hope as a nation ceased to exist with Stephen. The stones that the Jewish leaders threw at him forever sealed their fate. But Stephen did not die without first revealing a nobility of character typical of a true martyr. In the last moment, he still prayed: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60). These words, however, were much more than a prayer. They were the genuine expression of God’s will in relation to those people. For Israel, the time was finished, yet there is still hope for the Israelites on an individual basis. “If they

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<sup>97</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1955), 86.

<sup>98</sup> Norman J. Bull, *The Rise of the Church* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 49-50.

<sup>99</sup> Filson, 52, describes the movement led by Stephen as “almost a revolution” in the early Christian church.

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do not continue in their unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again” (Rom 11:23).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Richard M. Davidson for his kindness in reading this paper, and for some helpful suggestions, though responsibility for the conclusions reached rests with the author.