The Audience as Fellow-Workers in the Rhetoric of Stephen's Speech (Acts 7:2-53)
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Stories like the one Luke relates in the book of Acts have been told for thousands of years. The language, the culture, the method of communication - all have varied as the centuries passed. One element, however, remains despite differences in time and culture: the audience—always there is a listener to receive the story. Audience-oriented criticism, while named only recently, is an ancient phenomenon as old as story telling itself.

Stanley Porter described the term audience as "a floating, perhaps an empty signifier."[i] Though references to "audience" may point to any number of possibilities, here we will focus our concern on the authorial audience. Peter Rabinowitz's theory provides our definition of the authorial audience: the author's hypothetical audience, the audience imagined by the author as those who would experience the text.[ii] As we deal with Stephen's speech in Acts 7, we will equate the authorial audience with the flesh-and-blood people who *heard* the narrative told.

Let me say from the beginning that recovering details about the authorial audience is difficult for those studying modern readers and texts;[iii] the task faced by biblical critics is compounded by the distance of both time and culture. One aspect of the authorial audience that begins to ease this difficulty, at least in the way we shall study this audience, is that the audience in question is a composite audience, not an individual. Luke's authorial audience is an abstraction, of course, but one that may be at least reconstructed based on knowledge of first-century culture, especially rhetoric and education.

Before looking to Luke's audience and the expectations the evangelist may have had for his hearers, we must look for evidence that ancient rhetorians – ancient authors and speakers –

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were concerned with their audiences. Not only that, but they were highly concerned with the level of participation they might elicit from their audiences.

While Aristotle did not have high expectations for the common audience, his entire philosophy of rhetoric is based on the idea that it is the hearer that determines a speech's end and object (*Rhet*. 1.1.10; 1.3.1). Aristotle writes that speeches are composed of three parts: the speaker, the subject, and the hearer (*Rhet*. 1.3.1).

Cicero writes that "a speaker can no more be eloquent without a large audience than a flute-player can perform without a flute" (*De Or*. 3.7.4-5). Like Aristotle, Cicero recognized the importance of assessing the audience. He likens the importance of gauging the identity of an audience to the task of "a careful physician who, before he attempts to administer a remedy to his patient, must investigate not only the malady of the man he wishes to cure, but also his habits when in health, and his physical constitution" (*De Or.* 2.44.186). A rhetor who delivers a speech to an audience without considering the audience's particular characteristics is as unlikely to succeed as a doctor who treats a patient without consulting the patient's medical history.

Quintilian wrote that the rhetor must practice, tap his inherent oratorical gifts, and assess the audience masterfully in order to succeed at his craft. To be successful, the speaker must, above all, be clear so that his works might "be approved by the learned [and] understood by the uneducated" (*Inst.* 8.2.22). Without the ability to be eloquent—to "bring forth what the mind conceives and carry it over to one's hearers"—the study of rhetorical theory is "as useless as a sword in its scabbard" (*Inst.* 8.preface.15). The author of *On the Sublime* went so far as to write that by activating the audience's imagination, an author moves toward the sublime.

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Concern with Audience Participation – Results and Tools Used

So we see that the concern with audience is not a modern development. Ancient theorists and practitioners acknowledged that not only the presence, *but also the participation*, of the audience was important, perhaps even central, to the art of rhetoric. Beyond mere existence, what sort of participation did speakers expect from their audiences?

Some expected results were almost negligible; others required more effort from the audience. Whatever the case, Cicero sought results based on comprehension of ideas, not merely on the showmanship of the rhetor.[iv] With this general guideline in mind, we will examine several results of audience participation mentioned by the rhetoricians.

Paying attention. Not all audiences pay close attention. This most basic desired result of audience participation deserves to be mentioned, if only because it is so often absent. Aristotle instructed his students to develop skills to secure this result: "engaging the hearers' attention is common to all parts of the speech, if necessary; for attention slackens everywhere else rather than at the beginning." (*Rhet.* 3.14.9-10). Commanding the audience's attention was part of delivering a speech. Rhetors were to be cognizant of audience members' reactions, and if need be, the rhetor should call their attention back to where it belongs.

Moral formation. If the purpose of rhetoric is persuasion for or against an idea or action, an important goal for rhetoric is the moral and cultural formation of the audience. Along with general alterations in the audience's opinion or world view, such formation includes education and religious experiences.

Longinus' *On the Sublime* focuses on effecting a positive change on the audience. He writes that

> the true sublime, by some virtue of its nature, elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud possession, we are filled with joyful pride, as if we had ourselves produced the very thing

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> we heard. If, then, a man of sense, well-versed in literature, after hearing a passage several times finds that it does not affect him with a sense of sublimity, and does not leave behind in his mind more food for thought than the mere words at first suggest, but rather that on careful consideration it sinks in his esteem, then it cannot really be the true sublime, if its effect does not outlast the moment of utterance. For what is truly great gives abundant food for thought: it is irksome, nay, impossible, to resist its effect: the memory of it is stubborn and indelible (*Subl.* 7.2-4).

Excellent rhetoric should not only engage the audience at the time of delivery but should leave them changed. Rhetoric should provide the audience with lasting and abundant food for thought. If the hearer is not engaged and changed by a speech, it is not sublime. The hearers were expected to be active to the point that "the teller and public are creating the tale together."[v]

Creation of story. Evidence from ancient treatises shows that an audience's activity may reach the degree of creativity—a final result of audience participation that will be the primary focus of this project.

Cicero includes a long list of figures of speeches in book three of *De Oratore*, one of which is "taking into partnership." He explains this figure as "a sort of consultation with one's audience" (*De Or.* 3.53.204). By the turn of the common era, Cicero considered the audience to be a partner in creating rhetoric. Sometimes it is best to leave a thing unsaid – to leave some creative work for the audience.

Remarkably, as implied by Cicero's figure, at times authors use silence to speak to their audience. A gap, an unexpected hole in the presentation, impels the audience to do more than merely receive the story. If not provided in the narrative, the missing information must come from elsewhere. The silence of intentional gaps invites the audience to speak, to engage the unfolding rhetoric, and to become part of the story themselves. The implied formulation or argument must, however, be understood. Gaps left by the speaker must be filled. This final step in communicating is left to the audience's creative ability.

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Plutarch devoted a section of *Moralia* to instruction on listening to lectures. He compared the relationship between the rhetor and the audience to dinner guests and to ball players. A well-bred guest, when invited to dinner, is not completely passive. He interacts with his host and other guests, taking an active part in the dinner. Plutarch writes that the hearer of a speech is in the same position "for he is a participant in the discourse and a fellow-worker with the speaker" (*Mor.* 1.45E). Unfortunately, the listeners Plutarch encountered were not always so attentive. He calls those who refuse to participate with the speaker lazy, and he urges them

> that, when their intelligence has comprehended the main points [of a speech], they put the rest together *by their own efforts*, and use their memory as a guide in thinking for themselves, and, taking the discourse of another as a germ and seed, develop and expand it. For the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for truth (*Mor.* 1.48B-48C).[vi]

Rhetoricians developed guidelines designed to produce this desired result of audience participation. Teachers of rhetoric in the ancient world allude to various tools speakers might use to encourage cooperation and co-workmanship between the rhetor and the audience. Successful rhetors cultivated these skills in order to better influence their hearers. For our examination of Stephen's speech, we will consider three of these tools.

Allusion. Often in the New Testament, the audience creates part of the mythological or social background of a narrative by following brief clues supplied by the speaker and expanding cultural and literary (including intratextual) allusions. A few words from the rhetor trigger a much larger flow of information provided by the audience members themselves. Rhetoricians urge caution when using this skill, especially because of different levels of audience social exposure and education.

Specific Omission. Points made by including specific omissions require audience participation in order to be successful. If the missing element is not supplied by the audience,

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the speaker's point simply does not exist. Though rhetoricians warn against abusing this tactic, hearers' pleasure at finding the "missing puzzle piece" encourages careful and active listening.

Question and Answer. Interchange between author or speaker and audience also takes place by means of question and answer. The audience's interaction with the speaker through question and answer creates a part of the rhetoric that did not exist before, making the audience a partner in the speaker's creative act.

One final note before turning to Stephen's speech: the impetus behind the technique of leaving narrative gaps (referred to in modern literary criticism as "literary gap theory" by Wolfgang Iser, Emil Towner, and others) is quite ancient. Demetrius refers to the advice of Theophrastus, a third-century BCE rhetorician who, in his lost work Περὶ Λέξεως, recommends that

> not all possible points should be punctiliously and tediously elaborated, but some should be left to the comprehension and inference of the hearer, who when he perceives what you have left unsaid becomes not only your hearer but your witness, and a very friendly witness too. For he thinks himself intelligent because you have afforded him the means of showing his intelligence. It seems like a slur on your hearer to tell him everything as though he were a simpleton (*Eloc.* 222).

In his section on narrative, Theon's progymnasmata implicitly addressed the expectations, however limited, that a rhetorician might have for the audience. He writes that "things that can be supplied (by the hearer) should be altogether eliminated by one who wants to compose concisely . . . . But there is need for care, lest from desire for conciseness one fall into an idiosyncrasy or obscurity without realizing it."[vii] The rhetor must not expect too much from the audience, but as Theophrastus suggested, the audience may be relied upon to provide some information.

Ancient orators, like modern authors, drew listeners into stories by involving them. I wish to demonstrate, using Stephen's speech, that at least three types of intentional gaps are

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used to involve Luke's audience. First, textual and intertextual allusion (that is, allusions within Stephen's speech to other material and allusions within Stephen's speech to material also contained in the speech). Second, a specific omission called an enthymeme (I will use Aristotle's definition: a syllogism that "is deduced from few premises, often from fewer than the regular syllogism" [*Rhet.* 1.2.13]. An enthymeme has at times been regarded as an imperfect syllogism.). And thirdly, question and answer – here in the form of rhetorical questions answered by the audience. These gaps in the narrative issue an invitation to the authorial audience: invest in this story; make it your own.

Examining Stephen's Speech

The basic accusations made against Stephen are that 1) he speaks "blasphemous words against Moses and God," 2) that he "never stops saying things against this holy place [the Temple] and the law," and 3) that Stephen says that "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us" (Acts 6.11-14). Interestingly, the charges in v. 11 involve Moses and God, but the charges in v. 13-14 are against the Temple and the Law/customs of Moses. One might assume that Moses is equated with the Law and that God, or at least God's presence, is equated with the Temple.

Stephen's defense is, perhaps, not what we would first expect. He launches into the story of Abraham. In fact, that Stephen's defense begins with a narrative about Abraham has led scholars such as Martin Dibelius[viii] (*Studies*, 167-169) to dismiss the narrative as an actual defense. To compound the strangeness of Stephen's mode of defense, the speech ends abruptly with an invective delivered against the Jews. William Willimon says that the speech "lurches" at this point (Willimon 62). V. 51-53 are somewhat jarring to hearers - Stephen has been giving a history of the Jewish people, when he suddenly launches into a tirade against the Freedmen:

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“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. [52] Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, [53] you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

For the participating listener, however, to the ones who hear with ears accustomed to the tools of ancient rhetoric, the closing lines of Stephen’s speech are not so surprising. They are affirmation of the story of Jewish history that the audience has been creating all along with Luke and Stephen. With the preceding narrative defense, Luke has been carefully laying the ground work, with the help of the audience, for this turning of the tables.

Before inviting the audience to participate in this section of his story, Luke establishes that Stephen is in the right by giving the audience some inside information. The audience knows from Acts 6:5 that Stephen is “full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” and from Acts 6:8 that he was “full of grace and power.” Additionally, the audience knows from Acts 6:13 that Stephen’s accusers have used false witnesses to speak against him, and that as he began to speak before his accusers, Stephen’s face was like the face of an angel.

As chapter 7 begins, Stephen’s own words establish his connection with the history of the people of God. He tells the story of Abraham, called by God and sustained by God’s promise. He tells the story of the patriarchs who betrayed their own brother, Joseph, who was rescued and favored by God. As he beings recalling the history of the people of God, Stephen addresses his audience as “Brothers and fathers,” and through the retelling, he refers to “our fathers,” establishing a sure connection – Stephen is an inheritor of the promises God made to the ancestors.

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In addition to providing assurance of Stephen's character and place in the story of God's people, Luke also invites his audience to participate in beginning to set the trap for the Freedmen. Luke has already dropped several clues – if we are paying attention – to the location of God and the setting of God's promises. God appeared to Abraham when he lived in *Mesopotamia* (v. 2); God was with Joseph in *Egypt* after the patriarchs sold him (v. 9); a boy, beautiful in God's sight – Moses – was born in *Egypt* and benefited from the wisdom of *Egypt* (v. 20, 22). F.F. Bruce points out that "a major theme of the speech is its insistence that the presence of God is not restricted to any one land or to any material building" (Bruce, 130).

God is the focus for the Abraham and Joseph stories, but as the account of Moses begins, Stephen shifts the focus to Moses. It is here that Luke begins to use allusion to invite the audience's participation. In Acts 7:22, Luke describe Moses as δυνατὸς ἐν λόγοις καὶ ἔργοις αὐτοῦ ("powerful in his words and deeds"). Only seven chapters earlier, in the final verses of the Third Gospel, the disciples on the way to Emmaus in Luke 24:19 described Jesus as δυνατὸς ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ.

Having made the first connection between Moses and Jesus, Stephen continues the narrative. Vv. 35-37 bring the climax of the Moses story into focus as Luke uses repetition of the near demonstrative pronoun οὗτος to drive home the facts that *this* Moses the Hebrew people rejected whom God sent as a <u>ruler</u> and <u>redeemer</u> (v. 35); *this* one led them out of slavery and performed <u>wonders and signs</u> (v. 36); *this* Moses promised that God would raise up a prophet like Moses from among God's people (v. 37); *this* one received the living words – the <u>Law</u> – on Mount Sinai (v. 38).

These are the points Luke wants his audience to recall… and if they have paid attention, if they are willing participants, perhaps they do recall the opening narratives of the Third Gospel

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and the angel's message to the girl Mary that her son, Jesus, would be a ruler, would "be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, [33] and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). Perhaps also, the audience would recall Zechariah's prophecy that God had visited and redeemed God's people by raising up salvation from the house of David (Luke 1:68-69).

The audience has also heard from the Peter's Pentecost sermon that Jesus of Nazareth was commended by God with miracles and wonders and signs (Acts 2:22). The audience places their finger aside of their nose as they hear their guess at the allusions confirmed by Stephen's reference to Deuteronomy 18:15 – God had promised a prophet like Moses.

And finally, the audience hears the connection to the Law, and to the accusations leveled against Stephen in chapter 6. Understanding the connection – completing the enthymeme found in v. 38 – though, takes significant participation from the audience. Given the three allusions in v. 35-37, the audience understands that Moses is a type for Jesus. For the purposes of setting up our enthymeme, the audience now assumes that "Moses = Jesus." Moses received the living words on Mount Sinai – the Law. Therefore, the audience also assumes that "Moses = Law." To reject Moses is to reject the Law. To reject Jesus is to reject Moses. Therefore, the audience provides the missing premise to the syllogism: *to reject Jesus is to reject the Law*. The stage is being set for the turning of the tables in v. 51ff.

Luke further involves his audience in accusing the Jewish Freedmen by using an intertextual allusion involving the word χειρός. In v. 41, Stephen recalls the idolatry of the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai when they worshiped an idol in the form of a calf, celebrating ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τῶν χειρῶν αὐτῶν "in the work of their hands." As Stephen turns to

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the topic of the Temple, the building of which follows in the narrative, he is careful to allude to the words of Solomon the Temple-builder himself who recognized that God did not live in houses χειροποιήτοις "made by human hands" (Acts 7:48 and I Kings 8:27).

Stephen's defense ends with three questions – the tool of question and answer. The questions are voiced by God: "What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not ἡ χείρ μου – my hand – make all these things?' (Acts 7:49-50). The only answer the audience can provide is that human hands cannot build a house to contain God, cannot provide God with a place of rest. The only answer to be given is that, yes, God's hand has made all these things. The attentive listener will hear the intertextual allusion that links the idol at the foot of Mount Sinai and the expectation of the Freedmen of the first century that the Temple is the dwelling place of God[ix] (see Pohill, 200). The χειρός that should concern all people – Stephen, the Freedmen, Luke, and the authorial audience – is the all-powerful χειρός τοῦ θεοῦ.

The "lurch" from narrative to invective is smoothed by an active audience. Nowhere does Stephen explicitly state that Moses is a type for Jesus… but an explicit statement is not needed if the audience is willing to participate. In fact, an explicit statement would detract from the power of the allusions. The hearers are the ones who lay the ground work for equating the rejection of Jesus to the rejection of Moses and the Law, and for revealing the Jews' misunderstanding of the function of the Temple. Luke leaves it to the authorial audience to smooth the "lurching" between the narrative in 7:2-50 and the accusations in 7:51-53.

Recognizing the role the narrative section of Stephen's defense plays in encouraging the participation of the audience, we can agree with Ben Witherington who suggests that the aforementioned assumption that the first 49 verses of Stephen's speech is irrelevant is "basically

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wrong." Indeed Stephen does, as Witherington suggests, defend himself by criticizing "those Jews who down through the ages have rejected God's prophets and messengers and their messages." With this carefully crafted narrative, John Pohill notes that Luke allows a "definite 'slant' in Stephen's interpretation of Jewish history. Stephen was leading his Sanhedrin audience in a definite direction."[x]

But at the same time, Luke is leading his own audience in a definite direction. Not only that, but Luke is using the narrative to make co-creators of attentive listeners. Luke leaves gaps in the form of textual and intertextual allusion, specific omission in the form of enthymeme, and question and answer in order to encourage his audience to participate in laying the ground work for the powerful accusations Stephen levels against the Jewish Freedmen in v. 51-53. As accusations fly, with stones soon to follow, Luke has transformed his audience's role from that of passive observer to "fellow worker" – the audience has helped unveil the fundamental misunderstandings that were to divide Christian Jews from the rest of the Jewish community. Having been co-creators of the speech of Stephen, Luke's hearers in the first century and in the centuries to follow are formed by the story they helped create. Active listeners, co-laborers, are more likely to be convinced of what Luke already believes: that God sent Jesus of Nazareth to be the ruler and redeemer who would fulfill the Law of Moses (Luke 24:44), and that this same God would not be contained by houses – or temples or traditions – made by human hands.

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[i]James E. Porter, *Audience and Rhetoric: An Archaeological Composition of the Discourse Community* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1992), x.

[ii]Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences" in *Narrative Theory* (ed. David H. Richter; White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers, 1996), 126.

[iii]Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction," 126, note 13.

[iv]Cicero recalls a speech made by the tribune Gaius Carbo that brought a great shout of applause from the crowd simply because of the fancy ending (*Or*. 214).

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[v]Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 34.

[vi]Emphasis mine.

[vii]Theon, *Exercises*, 5.84 [Kennedy, 33].

[viii] Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 167-169.

[ix] John B. Pohill, *Acts* (The New American Commentary 26; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 200.

[x] Pohill, *Acts*, 200.

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