

Perfect Martyr

*The Stoning of Stephen and the
Construction of Christian Identity*

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Introduction

Upon the martyrdom of Stephen came the first and greatest persecution of the Church in Jerusalem by the Jews [Γενομένον δῆτα ἐπὶ τῇ τοῦ Στεφάνου μαρτυρία πρώτου καὶ μεγίστου πρὸς αὐτῶν Ἰουδαίων κατὰ τῆς ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις ἐκκλησίας διωγμοῦ]

—Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*

The Church of the Gentiles was baptized in the blood of Stephen.

—J. B. Lightfoot, “St. Paul and the Three”

The Jerusalem section of Acts is closed by the story of the stoning of Stephen, the first Jesus believer to be killed by those who resist his testimony. The story connects the death of Jesus in the Third Gospel to the conversion of the Paul in Acts, for Stephen’s death is closely modeled on the death of Jesus and closely linked to the conversion of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. As with many martyrdom tales, the precise reason for Stephen’s rejection and death is not clearly stated. Stephen is charged with speaking against the law and the temple, the central institutions of the Jewish people. But Stephen’s defense speech reveals his reverence for the law; the precise nature of Stephen’s temple criticism is difficult to discern; and, in any case, the narrator marks those who make the temple/torah accusation as false witnesses. The angry reaction of the crowd to Stephen’s defense speech is prompted not by proof that Stephen is against the law and the temple but by Stephen’s counteraccusation that his audience

is implicated in prophet persecution and law breaking. The stoning takes place after Stephen has shared his vision of the Son of Man.

While the grounds for the martyr's death are not obvious, the identity of the persecutors is. They are Jews living in Jerusalem, who come from the far reaches of the earth. Saul/Paul is also implicated as one who receives the coats of those stoning Stephen, his pre-conversion presence at the stoning standing as a sign of the violence of his former life, when he persecuted the church to the utmost. That the death comes by stoning makes clear that the *Ioudaioi* who murder Stephen are despicable rabble-rousers since, from a Roman imperial view, stoning is the crime of the barbarous. The vile persecutors serve as a perfect foil to the innocent and generous martyr who, filled with the Holy Spirit, prays an extravagant prayer of mercy upon them.

The death not only marks the close of the Jerusalem section of Acts but also paves the way for the mission into Judea, Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth. At the death, a severe persecution breaks out against the church in Jerusalem, causing all but the apostles to scatter, with some traveling as far as Antioch, the place where the disciples were first called Christians.

Martyrdom is not an event but a discourse. Throughout the course of Roman imperial rule of the ancient Mediterranean, hundreds and thousands of subjects were killed in state-sanctioned violence.¹ Nearly all of these subjects met their deaths without the consolation of being named and memorialized in any historical record. While all these deaths are events that "happened," language is required, specifically a narrative told by those empathetic to the victim and the victim's plight, to create a martyr. As Daniel Boyarin puts it, "For the 'Romans,' it didn't matter much whether the lions were eating a robber or a bishop, and it probably didn't make much of a difference to the lions, either, but the robber's friends and the bishop's friends told different stories about those leonine meals. It is in these stories that martyrdom, as opposed to execution, or dinner, can be found."²

As a discourse that attempts to wrest meaning out of violence through inverting categories of strength and weakness, victory and loss, and life and death, martyrdom narratives can subvert hegemonic powers, providing a language of, and hence a means for, resistance to those facing similar violent circumstances. Recent scholarship has also shown the discourse of martyrdom to do other kinds of complicated work as well in constructing the subjectivity of those who circulate the martyrs' stories. Reciting martyrdom tales can be a form of culture making,³ a means of nation building,⁴ and a process through which ethnoracial identity is constructed.⁵ Paradoxically, the anti-judgment, anti-authority alignment of Christian martyrdom discourse can work in the

service of generating new sites of authority.⁶ In the first centuries of Judeo-Christian history, martyrdom tales work toward creating the very categories “Jew” and “Christian.”⁷ The primary focus of these studies has been on texts that might be considered full-blown martyrologies, such as those found in 2 and 4 Maccabees, in rabbinic literature, and in Christian martyrdom literature from the mid-second through the fourth centuries. This book contributes to the current conversation on martyrdom, memory, and identity by bringing the story of the stoning of Stephen in Acts into this conversation.

To be sure, Stephen is not a martyr according to recent typologies of martyrdom proposed by Jan Willem van Henten or Daniel Boyarin.⁸ While later Christian tradition gives to Stephen a privileged place—in some versions, the first space—in the company of Christian martyrs, one might say that his death is first narrated before the elements that will constitute Jewish and Christian martyr acts of Late Antiquity have coalesced (or, following van Henten’s typology, before Christian death narratives have more completely conformed to the framework established in the Jewish martyrdom narratives of Maccabees and Daniel). The trial proceedings are not formal enough, the ultimatum is not directly given so that the persecuted might directly resist or affirm, and erotic elements so common in later martyr texts are absent. A visionary element is present in Stephen’s cry, “‘Look’ . . . I see . . . the Son of Man” (Acts 7.56) but is not developed. Stephen is not persecuted in a “pagan” court but rather by his own people. Therefore, in some renderings, his death might fall more precisely under the taxonomy of the persecuted prophet or the noble death rather than the Christian martyr. Yet, I want to suggest that the story of Stephen occupies an important place on the path toward Christian martyrologies proper and hence is too compelling to overlook for those who recognize the identity work that such texts do.

Dating Acts

As a supporting plank in my argument that the Stephen story should be considered for its relevance to the developing second-century discourse on martyrdom, I note recent reappraisals of the dating of the canonical Acts. While this text has long been dated by common consensus to the 80s or 90s of the common era, a surge of scholarship has now converged in arguing that it is better understood as a product of the early second century.⁹ There is nothing in the reception history of Acts that precludes a dating to the second century rather than the first, as the first sustained and irrefutable witness to Acts is Irenaeus, ca. 180 CE. Recent and compelling reintroductions of the argument that Acts knows portions of Josephus’s *Antiquities*, as well as several Pauline Epistles, set

a *terminus a quo* for the narrative at 100 CE.¹⁰ Within this possible range of dates, I assume a date in the second or third decade of the second century as most probable.¹¹ As many have come to recognize, the political, social, and ecclesial issues of concern in Acts, and the rhetoric employed to address them, fit more squarely within debates of the third generation of the Jesus movement, rather than the first or second. In terms of its depiction of persecutory Jews, its defense of Christians in Romanized terms, and its understanding of proof from prophecy, Acts is a document that lies close to the thought world of Justin Martyr.¹² Its appropriation of Jewish symbols and Scriptures, its clear statement that the ministry of Paul is authorized by the Jerusalem apostles, and its solution to questions of divine judgment and mercy, and violence and peace, place the text within debates that might be considered “marcionite” in flavor.

Thus, Acts may be considered as a document near contemporary with 4 Maccabees (ca. 100 CE) and the Letters of Ignatius (ca. 110 CE); as a close relative of the Apocryphal Acts of Paul, both in terms of genre and dating; and not so distant from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (ca. 150 CE), the text that is often recognized as the earliest Christian martyrdom narrative. Without making arguments for textual dependency among all these texts in which martyrdom figures, I note the usefulness of considering them as products of the same thought world, possibly the same geographic region, written under similar social circumstances.¹³ Viewing Acts as an early second-century text not only prompts reassessment of its relationship to these texts but also raises questions about what the canonical Acts does and does not say about the fate of revered figures of the first generation of Jesus believers. If Acts is located in the second century, its silence concerning the fate of its own hero Paul—to say nothing of its silence concerning the deaths of James, the brother of Jesus, and of Peter—is especially curious. Some sixty years after their deaths, it is difficult to explain this silence as owing to paucity of source material. Because Acts contributes to the shaping of second-century discourse of martyrdom, the silence concerning the deaths of these early Christian leaders, Peter, Paul, and James, as well as the prominence of Stephen’s death require explanation.

Stephen in Acts’ Construction of Categories

As is now commonly recognized, identities do not emerge whole and contained at fixed points in time but rather are constructed over time through social and linguistic processes.¹⁴ This construction requires the imposition and continual maintenance of boundaries among social groups whose identities would otherwise remain in flux. The work of Daniel Boyarin especially has enabled

scholars to understand the development of identities from the time of the Jewish Jesus movement to the time in which Christianity came to be spoken of as a religion that was not-Judaism, not as the birth of a religion at a fixed point in time but rather as a massive unwieldy construction project. This construction involved constant negotiation across a number of sites where struggles played out over the precise architectural nature of the edifice and required the concurrent construction—over the same centuries, with related elements of contest and struggle—of Judaism as something Christianity was not.¹⁵

Adopting the model and terminology employed by Boyarin, one might say that the author of Acts is an early border agent working to fix barriers and hence to construct two unified and distinct social/religious entities called Judaism and Christianity (or better, working to fix barriers between his version of Christianity, with Judaism on the one side and heresy on the other). But he is an early player, laying bricks in his particular region of the ancient Mediterranean for the “borderline” between Judaism and Christianity that will not be firmly and broadly erected for some centuries.¹⁶

While Acts lays foundation stones for the edifice of a version of Christianity that is not-Judaism—a version so like that of many of our Protestant Christianities that is naturalized and nearly unquestionable—it should also be noted that its author is not in full possession of the categories that later constructors of Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism will eventually possess. That is, Acts does not own the fully stocked semantic toolbox available to later constructors of Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism, one that would enable him to confidently name fellow believers as “Christians/not Jews.”¹⁷ This leads to the conceptual awkwardness evident in passages such as Acts 18.24–28, where “the Jew Apollos” (Ἰουδαῖος τις Ἀπολλῶς) is noted for powerfully and publicly “refuting the Jews” (εὐτόνως τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις διακατηλέγχετο δημοσίᾳ). It could be said that the rupture enacted by “the Jew” upon “the Jews” in this particular passage—Ἰουδαῖος τις εὐτόνως τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις διακατηλέγχετο—captures precisely both the split Acts asserts and the confusion the narrative has in naming it. Acts is a book in which individual Jews—Stephen, Apollos, Peter, and, quintessentially, Paul—“vehemently refute the Jews” by proving Jesus is Christ (cf. Acts 9.22). While asserting two distinct groups, Acts has still not embraced unequivocally the name by which Jesus believers will come to be named.¹⁸

Boyarin, along with scholars including Jan Willem van Henten, and Judith Lieu have come to recognize that martyrdom narratives are key sites for identity construction among Jews and Christians. Readers of these narratives of men and women who choose to die rather than compromise their identities are instructed in what makes one Christian, what makes one Jewish. It is my

contention that Acts' story of the martyrdom of Stephen participates in both a peculiar and a pernicious construction of Christian and Jewish identities. It is peculiar because it stands at odds with numerous martyrdom traditions concerning the earliest believers of Jesus. It is most obviously pernicious because of its anti-Judaism.¹⁹ An analysis of both its peculiarity and its anti-Jewish edge occupies a large portion of subsequent chapters. To introduce the problem here, I identify a number of overlapping themes by which the Acts narrative, in general, and the Stephen story, in particular, tell a story of Christian origins that is problematically framed and ethically troubling.

The Swift, Linear, and Violent Break

In the past several decades, scholars of ancient Jewish-Christian relations have compiled a number of arguments demonstrating that, the angry rhetoric of the *Adversus Judaeos* literature notwithstanding, Jews and Christians in the ancient world did not always live in enmity. To name a few, Wayne Meeks and Robert Wilken have read John Chrysostom against the grain to find Christians in Antioch keeping kosher, meeting with Jews in the synagogue, and fixing their Easter celebrations according to Passover;²⁰ E. Leigh Gibson argues that Jews in Smyrna invited Christians into their synagogues at the time of Pionius (ca. 140 CE), noting that shelter there might have been extended as “an alternative to the grim choice between martyrdom and execution”;²¹ Daniel Boyarin argues that rabbinic literature hints at Rabbi Eliezer's pleasure concerning the teaching of Jesus;²² and Annette Yoshiko Reed speaks of the irenic tone of the fourth- and fifth-century redactions of the Pseudo-Clementines, in which the Jewish Christians acknowledge both the Torah and Jesus as distinct but legitimate paths to salvation.²³

These recent studies highlighting porous boundaries, common alliances, and occasional irenic relations cut deeply against the grain of the Acts narrative. Both the chain of succession established in Acts—from Jesus, to Stephen, to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles—and the geographic progression of “the Way”—from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and unto the ends of the earth—have served to support linear models of Christian origins by which Christianity *emerges* and *diverges* from Judaism quickly and decisively. To be sure, Acts' view of Jews and Jewish symbols contains complications of its own, which will be subject to considerable analysis below. Here, I note in brief that, in spite of the narrative's repeated loops back to Jerusalem, where Paul's mission to the Gentiles receives the blessing of Jewish Jesus believers (15.1–29) and where myriads of such believers are said to reside (21.20), Paul's final speech to the Jews in Rome suggests a decisive break between Jews and Gentile followers of the “Way” within the lifetime of Paul himself (28.25–28).

The break is not only swift but also contingent on violence for, as I will demonstrate in greater detail in another chapter, the parting is ignited by Stephen's death at the hands of the riotous mob of Jews. Eusebius reinscribes Acts' narrative by which originary martyrdom is linked to the creation of two distinct social groups by noting that Stephen's death ignites the "first and great" persecution of one distinct social group, the Jerusalem *ekklēsia*, by another, "the Jews" (*Hist. eccl.* 2.1.8).²⁴ While recent scholars of early Jewish-Christian relations, adopting images used also by the rabbis and the church fathers before them, have invoked a story of gestation and birthing to speak of the origins of and contests between Judaism and Christianity—the rivalry of Jacob and Esau begun in the womb of their mother—Acts tells a more deadly story: the parting is ignited by bloodshed. Thus, in J. B. Lightfoot's nineteenth-century study of Acts, the significance of the parting is not captured by imagery of an actual birth but rather by sacramental language fusing the imagery of birth and death. "The Church of the Gentiles," he notes, "was baptized in the blood of Stephen."²⁵

Polarized, Uncomplicated Identities

As exemplified in the violent murder of Stephen and its connection to the persecuting-Saul-turned-persecuted-Paul, Acts constructs Jewish and Christian identity along a simple binary: to be a nonbelieving Jew is to be an agent of violence; to be a Christian is to suffer.²⁶ The extreme polarity between these two subject positions is heightened by Stephen's dying forgiveness prayer for his persecutors. This extravagant prayer of mercy uttered by the dying victim on behalf of the villainous Jews marks the martyr as bound by a new and superior ethic. In Acts' construction, this distinctively merciful response is the inverse of the merciless deeds of the *Ioudaioi*; the peaceful Christian and the violent *Ioudaioi* are constructed in tandem.

Owing to the reinscription of the violent Jew-violated Christian binary in modern scholarship, the assertion that the first killers of "Christians" were "Jews" is one of the fundamentals of the master narrative of Christian origins, standing largely uninterrogated into the twenty-first century. The influence of the lurking violent Jew, so distinctive to Acts' account of Christian beginnings, helps to explain the numerous modern histories of early Christianity in which scenarios of widespread Jewish violence against Christians seem otherwise gratuitous. One thinks of the understanding of the Jew as the *fons persecutionis* articulated in the influential works of Adolf von Harnack and W. H. C. Frend.²⁷ This sentiment has been echoed recently by H. W. Tajra, who, in spite of not being able to cite any specific textual evidence in support, imagines that the execution of the Apostle Paul in the Roman capital owes chiefly to influential

Jews in the Roman synagogue who desire his death and who manipulate Roman officials to sate that desire.²⁸

The reflexive reliance on this binary is problematic on a number of grounds. For one, it erroneously reduces the multiplicity of first-century Jewish experience under empire—a complex of alliances, negotiations, and antipathies—to a simple tale of conflict between two opposing sides. A related problem in depicting first-century “Jews” and “Christians” in this polarized way is that it forecloses the possibility of imagining that belief or disbelief in Christ was only one of many identity markers among first-century Jews. In the following pages, I will suggest that a better historical narrative than the one offered by Acts would evoke some of that multiplicity, imagining, for instance, situations in which Jesus believers and other Jews formed alliances, marshaled resistance, and/or faced common suffering from imperial overlords. Such an alternative narrative might also make space for imagining that a particular Jew’s assent to messianic claims for Jesus need not have been a singular identity marker, adversely affecting every interaction with other, nonbelieving, Jews.²⁹

The Masking of Imperial Violence

In contrast to legendary accounts of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, where Roman officials assume the central villainous roles, the death of Stephen takes place outside of any Roman interest or agency. In large measure, Romans are bracketed from the violence animating the entire book of Acts. Tellingly, in Acts’ version of Paul’s trials and imprisonments, the Romans serve to *rescue* Paul, not to inflict harm upon him. The message that “Romans do no harm” occludes the role of this ancient imperial power in the violence enacted upon colonized peoples of the Mediterranean, including Judeans. Another way to name this problem is to note that Acts makes claims of agency in Stephen’s death that have long been made about Jesus’ death—the Jews alone are the agents of death. While post-Holocaust scholarship on Gospel passion narratives has underscored Roman agency, whether through Pontius Pilate or the grinding wheels of the “Roman imperial system” as the first cause of Jesus’ death, the Acts narrative has not been subject to the same scrutiny.

Further Authorizations and Reinscriptions

I have already made some reference to the manner by which anti-Jewish rhetoric in Acts is reiterated by subsequent interpreters. Because of the highly charged significance of the “Hellenists” in modern constructions of Christian origins, I conclude this section by considering at greater length how the

anti-Judaism of the Stephen pericope is authorized and reinscribed in the racially inflected discourse of the nineteenth century concerning Hellenists and Hebrews.

The great conundrum at the heart of nineteenth-century supersessionist Christian self-understanding is the inescapable fact that the earliest Christians were Jews. Susannah Heschel has demonstrated with acuity the anti-Jewish racism and anxiety infusing many premodern and modern Christian attempts to grapple with that conundrum, especially as it pertains to Jesus' Jewish identity.³⁰ An explanation is needed for how the Savior of the West is born into an inferior racial group. As Heschel notes, attempted solutions to the problem of Jesus' Jewishness range from arguments that Jesus, born of "the virgin womb of the God of Judaism," comes into the world detached from and unscathed by the "Pharisaic Judaism" of his day, to arguments that Jesus was racially Aryan.³¹

Nineteenth-century scholarship on Acts attempts another way out of the conundrum, through a particular racial/religious coding of the Stephen narrative. A key interpretive move of this reading is the superimposing of nineteenth-century constructions of the (Western)Christian and the (Eastern)Jew onto the terms Hellenist (*Hellēnistēs*) and Hebrew (*Hebraios*) that appear in the Stephen narrative (Acts 6.1). To be sure, the author of Acts himself is also attempting to work his way out of a Jewish/Christian conundrum, and these early modern interpreters are responding to markers in Acts suggesting both that believing Gentiles have replaced nonbelieving Jews as the rightful heirs to the promises of Israel and that Stephen plays a pivotal role in that replacement. However, by racially inflecting the categories Hellenist and Hebrew, and by imposing them *even upon Jesus believers who are Jews*, modern interpreters have inscribed the distinctions and boundaries between Jews and Christians more starkly than the author of Acts himself. That is, in the Acts narrative, there is an interstitial category and an interim period in which one can be coded positively both as a Jew and as Jesus believer. In contrast, nineteenth-century interpreters of Acts, through coding Jewish Jesus believers as either Hebrews or Hellenists, the former trapped in Judaism and the latter liberated into Christianity, collapse the interstitial space.

I summarize the contours of this nineteenth-century reading here, with primary focus on the foundational work of F. C. Baur on Acts. This is not to deny that Baur had at least as many detractors as disciples in the nineteenth century, particularly among those who resisted his reading of Acts as a compromise document hammered out between Gentile and Jewish factions of Christianity. Yet, as a number of recent monographs have demonstrated, Baur's foundational work, heavily influenced by Hegel's racially inflected notions of

the gradual self-revelation of Spirit in human history, sets the parameters for the debate on Stephen's significance and holds enduring influence.³²

Stephen is first introduced in Acts among a group of seven appointed to serving tables as a means of solving the dissension that has broken out within the church between factions named Hellenists and Hebrews (6.1–6). The narrative does not specify what makes (Jewish)Hellenists distinct from (Jewish) Hebrews, nor does it explicitly identify Stephen himself as a Hellenist.³³ Yet, because Stephen bears a Greek name, because he argues in a synagogue with members of the Greek-speaking Diaspora, and—most crucially—because he speaks with wisdom and the Spirit against the temple and the law, he is coded as a Hellenist. Likewise, though the narrative does not explicitly indicate that the apostles are “Hebrews,” majority nineteenth-century Acts scholarship assumes that the Twelve are representative of the “Hebrew” outlook, one that is Jerusalem located, temple focused, law abiding, and Aramaic speaking. Since the question of Gentile believers is not introduced in Acts until the Gospel spreads from Jerusalem into Samaria and beyond (Acts 8.1ff.), it is clear that both the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews” in Acts 6.1–6 are Jesus-believing Jews. But nineteenth-century commentary generally elides this fact, reading Hellenist as Christian and Hebrew as Jew.

Stephen's position as Hellenist makes possible a bridge between (the Hebrew) Jesus and (the Hellene) Paul, thus enabling Christianity's escape from the shackles of fleshy Judaism into the Spirit of freedom. In Baur's schema, Stephen receives the higher consciousness first possessed by Jesus and then confronts Paul with it, making possible Paul's conversion from Jew to Christian, a conversion of a full 180 degrees:

in Stephen, whom [Paul] had persecuted he had been confronted with the idea which to a Jew was most of all intolerable, which set aside the Jewish particularism, and substituted for it a universalism, in which Jew and Gentile stood with equal privileges side by side, *he could now in the revulsion of his consciousness adopt without any further mediation the exact opposite of all that he had hitherto clung to with a true Jew's feelings and instincts.*³⁴

Though Baur wavers over the question of whether Stephen or a later hand is responsible for the speech as recorded in Acts 7.2–53, he nevertheless finds it a fitting reflection of Stephen's higher religious consciousness. Stephen's speech lays bare “the grossness of the people's perversity, ingratitude and disobedience, with that overwhelming bias towards materialism which the people had always manifested”³⁵ and levels a scathing critique against temple worship, which signifies the coarse materiality and inflexibility of Judaism. The temple

stands as a place in which “the external, visible, and tangible machinery of worship assumed an overwhelming preponderance, and ceased to be a living and flexible expression of that invisible Ideal.”³⁶

Against the Hellenist Stephen and his championing of the Spirit of freedom stand not just the hostile and nonbelieving Jews but even the apostles themselves. The Twelve, as “Hebrews,” prove as moribund as the rest of their race. Stephen stands alone, “[waging] this fresh and so momentous battle against the enemy; and while he considers the Temple worship, with all its outward forms, as a thing already antiquated and in ruins, *the Apostles always remain immovably true to their old adherence to the Temple.*”³⁷ Through attributing to the Jerusalem apostles themselves this state of lethargic imprisonment to the flesh, Baur moves significantly beyond the schema of Acts in his denigration of the Hebrew/Jew, for however much Acts privileges Paul above the Twelve, these Jerusalem apostles yet hold authorizing roles in the Acts narrative.³⁸ Baur elides this authorizing function, so that Christian Spirit transfers from Jesus directly to Stephen to Paul, avoiding the taint of the Hebrew apostles altogether.

Another way in which nineteenth-century readings inscribe the Jew-Christian divide even more starkly than the Acts narrative itself concerns the question of the “severe persecution” arising against the Jerusalem church at Stephen’s death (8.1). As already noted, key to Acts’ own construction of the two distinct social groups, Jews and Christians, is the sculpting of the former as persecutors and the latter as persecuted. To be a nonbelieving Jew is to inflict violence upon Christians; to be a Christian is to be subject to Jewish violence. This distinction already inscribed in Acts between the murdering Jew and the victimized Christian, coupled with the tendency to read “Hebrews” in Acts as Jews and “Hellenists” as Christians, results in a widespread exegetical consensus that the severe persecution following Stephen’s death affected only the Hellenist wing of the church and not the Hebrew. The thin thread of text on which this very large scenario unfolds is one phrase in 8.1: “That day [of Stephen’s death] a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all *except the apostles* were scattered throughout the countryside” (emphasis added). That is, the clause in which it is reported that the apostles remain in Jerusalem, while the rest of the church scatters, is taken to mean that no part of the “Hebraistic” church was persecuted in the first place.³⁹ In Acts’ construction of the persecutor-persecuted binary, a Jew may fall within the category of the persecuted so long as that Jew believes in Jesus as the apostles obviously do (cf. the persecution of Apostles in 5.17–40, 12.1–5). But the widespread acceptance of the “Hellenist-only” persecution scenario in modern biblical criticism suggests among scholars a strong inclination to withhold from the Hebrews the privilege

of being counted among the persecuted—that is to say from the authentically Christian—subjects.

To summarize up to this point, the Acts narrative, in general, and the Stephen story, in particular, participate in an anti-Jewish construction of Christian origins. Owing to the wide-ranging influence of the Acts narrative, this anti-Judaism has been reauthorized and reinscribed in much modern biblical scholarship. One aim of this book, therefore, is to draw attention to the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the narrative and its continuing effects. A further aim is to decenter this narrative of Jewish violence, free from Roman involvement, by considering alternate models for writing the history of violent encounters among Jews and Christians under empire. But this is a difficult task—indeed, in the end it might be considered a quixotic undertaking—owing to the tenacious hold of the Acts narrative on collective Christian consciousness. It is to the question of this collective Christian consciousness that I now turn.

Stephen, Cultural Memory and the Limits of the Historical-Critical Project

As Boyarin, Lieu, and van Henten underscore how martyrdom narratives work in *constructing* Jewish and Christian identity, Elizabeth Castelli demonstrates the potential of cultural memory to *fix* these identities. Elaborating and refining the work of Maurice Halbwachs on cultural memory, Castelli argues that individuals, owing to their adherence to larger social groups, “lay claim to a much wider and deeper past than the one constituted by their own personal or historical experience *and* that they discern meanings of that past through the group’s accounting of it.”⁴⁰ In Christian cultural memory, martyrdom texts are especially relevant because of the relationship of suffering to Christian subjectivity. As Castelli notes, “Christian identity was indelibly marked by the collective memory of the religious suffering of others.”⁴¹ Owing to this indelible marking, the privileged place of the Stephen story in Christian collective imagination is understandable (especially in Protestant circles, where canonical texts hold considerably more sway than the extracanonical lives of the saints). But, here, I wish to raise the question of the relationship of Christian cultural memory to the historical-critical project undertaken by Biblical scholars in their analysis of the Stephen story.

Castelli distinguishes between Halbwachs’ use of cultural memory as a means to analyze early Christianity, on the one hand, and traditional methods of historical analysis employed by biblical scholars, on the other. While the latter methods focus on questions of how best to adjudicate “what really happened,” the former asks instead “what meanings are produced?” and “what

ideological impulses are satisfied?” through a particular narration of a story. As she underscores both through examination of ancient martyr texts and through the study of how the tragic murder of a high school student in the Columbine massacre becomes a late twentieth-century martyrdom, cultural memory is deeply intertwined with the project of mythmaking. The workings of cultural memory, she suggests, are so disparate from the modern project of historical analysis employed in biblical scholarship that one might say in some respects that historical criticism is a form of “resistance to the predominance of memory as a governing value in these texts.”⁴²

But to what extent does the historical-critical approach to Acts really subvert the memory preserved by this narrative? Biblical scholars employing methods of historical criticism do recognize that the coherence of various aspects of Acts is ahistorical, imposed by Luke upon his sources because of his theological concerns, his apologetic tendencies, and/or his aim to delight his audience. For more than two hundred years, historians of Christian origins have approached the book of Acts presuming that its author’s intrusive hand can be pulled away, freeing his sources to bear unencumbered witness to the historical events that occurred in the earliest decades of the church. Applying methods captured by metaphors of winnowing and digging, they have attempted to distinguish Acts’ redactional/theological/fictional elements from the actual history presumed also to reside in the text. From these “kernels of history,” from this “bedrock,” scholars have then constructed their own versions of a coherent narrative of Christian origins understood to correspond with events that happened in history. In principle then, the historical-critical method when applied to Acts should produce different results than the project of cultural memory/mythmaking.

It is my contention, however, that scholarly conclusions concerning the Stephen pericope owe much more to the influence of the Acts’ narrative on collective Christian consciousness than to the historical-critical method. While I will not ultimately situate my own work within the bounds of this method alone, I argue here that, were the historical-critical method applied rigorously in the case of the stoning of Stephen, at the very least, the result would be some question concerning the event’s historicity. I suggest here in brief what I will demonstrate in greater detail in upcoming chapters: According to the ground rules of historical criticism, it is as reasonable to argue that Luke is constructing a symbolic character as to suggest that he preserves within his narrative a reliable record of the actual event of the violent death of a Jesus believer named Stephen. And yet, rather than acknowledge where the historical-critical method leads, biblical scholars have with near unanimity asserted that this death lies among the bedrock events of early Christian origins. I turn here to a

consideration of the disciplining influence upon Biblical scholars of Acts, in general, and the Stephen story, in particular.

The Sure and Certain Martyr

In the preface to the two-volume work Luke-Acts, the author promises a *coherent* narrative—a narrative with a precise order—written to provide the most excellent Theophilus with certainty concerning the events that have been fulfilled in their midst.⁴³ On his promise to deliver a coherent narrative of divinely ordained events that could reassure his elite patron, the author of Luke-Acts succeeds mightily. Readers are met repeatedly with demonstrations that the events narrated unfold providentially—according to the plan of God, in fulfillment of prophecy.⁴⁴ Coherence is also underscored by the numerous thematic doublets and parallels within and across the two volumes, as well as between these volumes and Jewish Scripture. Consider the male–female pairings found in nearly every chapter of the Third Gospel and spread across the Acts narrative as well; or, the thickness of the list of thematic and verbal parallels between persecution narratives of Moses, Jesus, Stephen, Peter, and Paul. As with the explicit attribution of events to the providential plan of God, so also these multiple symmetries, these foreshadowings and echoes, and precedents and antecedents, serve to reassure that nothing in the narrative happens by accident.⁴⁵ Other signs of the stabilizing function of the book of Acts include the narrative’s assertion of continuity over disruption, of unity over divisiveness, and of deference to political order over *stasis*.⁴⁶

Theorists of history such as Keith Jenkins have noted that historical narratives, through their coherence, function to discipline the past.⁴⁷ It might be said that the Acts narrative functions not only to discipline the past by providing a coherent ordering of events for Theophilus but also that the narrative has disciplined the subsequent emplotments of early Christian origins by historical-critical scholars, in spite of scholarly efforts to resist Acts’ framing.⁴⁸ Thus, though critics since the time of F. C. Baur have called into question various aspects of Lukan harmonizing, suggesting, for instance, that Peter and Paul did not speak with univocity or that Paul did not speak *first* in the synagogue and then to the Gentiles, the basic geographical sequencing of events—from Jerusalem origins and unto the ends of the earth—as well as the web of relationships—from the Hebrew apostles, to the Hellenist Stephen, to the apostle-to-the-Gentiles Paul—has remained largely in tact.

Lying at the bedrock layer of unquestioned Lukan narratives is the story of the stoning of Stephen at the hands of an unruly Jewish mob. Strong confidence in the historical truth of this event is expressed not only by biblical

scholars who read large swaths of the Acts narrative as historically reliable but also by those whose skepticism concerning Luke as historian is widely recognized. This is as true for the principal early nineteenth-century critic of Acts, F. C. Baur, as it is for Gerd Lüdemann, a contemporary scholar famously known for questioning Christian orthodoxy.⁴⁹ After sifting through the chaff, Baur identifies the kernel in this way: “that Stephen was seized and stoned in a tumultuous insurrection is indisputably the fact which we have to regard as the nucleus of the story. What remains is then that Stephen fell a sacrifice to a popular tumult which suddenly arose on account of his trenchant public utterances.”⁵⁰ Up unto the present day, it is near impossible to identify a biblical scholar who departs from this historical judgment.⁵¹

While Baur insists more than once in his work on Acts that the martyrdom of Stephen wears the “indubitable stamp of historical reality,” he does not provide a rationale for this judgment. It is often assumed that his son-in-law Eduard Zeller does. Zeller argues in his nineteenth-century commentary on Acts:

The death of Stephen is *beyond dispute the clearest point* in the history of Christianity before Paul. With this event we first find ourselves on *undeniably historical ground*. Evidence for that would already be the one decisive fact which was occasioned by the persecution of Stephen, namely the conversion of Paul, *if any further proof were needed* of the fact of an event which according to all sides had such a visible effect on the development of the Christian cause.⁵²

I have added emphasis to the Zeller quotation to underscore phrases that strike me as suggesting a shrillness of tone belying the supposed objectivity of this Enlightenment critic. Zeller protests too much. Yet, while these two assertions—that Stephen’s death must be historical because of the effect it had on the development of Christianity and that the historicity of Stephen’s death is proven by Saul’s subsequent conversion—may be considered nothing more than *prima facie* arguments, they continue to circulate. In his late twentieth-century commentary that systematically divides each Acts pericope into “redaction,” “traditions,” and the “historical,” Gerd Lüdemann reaches for this precise quotation from Zeller as his only argument for placing Acts 7:54–8:3 within the category of the “historical.”⁵³ As another means of illustrating the impasse at which historical critics find themselves when trying to probe the Stephen pericope for its historical kernel, consider a recent article by N. H. Taylor. In his introduction to the article, Taylor indicates that one aim of his argument is to demonstrate that the historicity of Stephen can be affirmed. Rather than developing such an argument, however, Taylor merely asserts this historicity as the consensus reading, by offering a long footnote to a line of scholars who have

also affirmed that there is a historical kernel to the story.⁵⁴ To support my argument that in spite of this reflexive certainty, there is no indisputable core event concerning Stephen, I identify here a number of points at which biblical scholars wedded to the historical-critical method might find themselves questioning the narrative's historicity.

First, there is the matter of external evidence.⁵⁵ The external sources that might be mined for traces of a Stephen tradition are uniformly silent about him. The silence is most pronounced in the Pauline Epistles. Several of the persons known from these epistles do become woven into the Acts narrative—for example, Peter, James, Prisca, Aquila, and Apollos—but Paul never acknowledges that he owes his conversion to a martyr named Stephen.⁵⁶ It is also the case that early Christians who invoke the martyrs' witness are silent on Stephen. Both Clement of Rome and Polycarp write at the turn of the first century to exhort imitation of earlier Christian martyrs, but neither of them will push the chain of Christian martyrs from their own time back beyond the time of Paul. Clement cites the examples of the "pillars of the Church" Paul and Peter, who were "persecuted and contended unto death," due to "jealousy and envy" (1 *Clem.* 5.1–6.2). Polycarp's chain of martyrs goes no further than "Paul and the other apostles" (*Pol. Phil.* 9.1–2). Outside of the Acts account, there is no further mention of Stephen's martyrdom until the time of Irenaeus and it is clear that Irenaeus relies on Acts for his information.⁵⁷ Because it is quite close to the martyrdom of Stephen in structure and content, the martyrdom of James as preserved in Hegesippus also bears on the question of Stephen's historicity. But here the results are also negative, for this companion story suggests that while the *motifs* concerning the way the first martyr dies are crucial to the construction of group identity for early Christians, the precise identity of the first martyr is fungible.⁵⁸

Since there are no outside sources that might be invoked to support the argument of the historicity of the Stephen story, the method of necessity for those aiming to reach a historical conclusion concerning it has been to separate redaction from source, with "source" understood to correspond in some way to historical event. It is fair to say that there are more than a few bumps along the road from Acts 6.1 to 8.2 and that therefore one might reasonably assert that Acts here is working over earlier materials. These earlier materials are recognized as somehow submerged in the dispute among Hellenists and Hebrews in 6.1–6 in which Stephen is introduced: the charges against Stephen in his trial (6.11–14), the actual murder itself (7.54–8.1), and possibly within Stephen's lengthy speech (7.2–53).

A broad-brush sketch of the scholarly consensus concerning the history preserved in these traditions would include the following elements:⁵⁹ (1) There

seems an obvious breach between the prescribed role for the Seven in Acts 6.1–6 and the actual role of Stephen in 6.8–7.53. The earlier passage underscores a strict division of labor between the Twelve devoted to the word and the Seven, among whom Stephen is numbered, charged with serving tables. The assignment of Stephen to “table service” in 6.1–6, however, is followed immediately by a narrative in which Stephen’s ministry is clearly linked not with table but rather with miracles, signs, wisdom, and a very long speech (6.8–7.53). Luke’s hand, then, is seen in the imposition of this later ministerial division upon a source that knows the historical Stephen not as deacon but as Spirit-filled missionary.⁶⁰ (2) The conflict over the neglect of the widows abruptly introduced and then discarded by Luke seems to many a trace of some quarrel Luke himself has not invented. (3) The roster naming the Seven is regarded as having an aura of facticity about it. The identification of Nicolaus as an Antiochene in this list, along with subsequent connections between Stephen and the city of Antioch at 11.19 and 11.26, was famously part of Adolf Harnack’s argument for an Antiochene source in Acts, a hypothesis that lives on, if in modified form, in many quarters.⁶¹ (4) The anti-law and anti-temple charges (6.11, 6.13–14) are an exegetical thorn, in part, because the speech of Stephen apparently contradicts the former but not the latter and also because Luke explicitly brands the charges as false. Yet, consensus remains that hostility against Stephen owes to some combination of anti-law, anti-temple provocation on his part. (5) The impenetrable core of the bedrock remains the actual martyrdom account buried in 7.54–8.1. While traces of a formal legal trial in these verses are regarded as Lukan framing, the frame is built around a firm tradition: Stephen, the follower of the Way, was killed by a riotous mob of Jews who opposed his religious allegiance.

Part of the difficulty with this barebones sketch of what happened (martyrdom) to whom (Stephen), by whom (a mob of riotous Jews) for a certain reason (religious disagreement centering around temple and torah), as has been quite persuasively argued by Todd Penner, lies in the fact that upon careful scrutiny each decision about what is kernel and what is chaff seems in the end arbitrary. This is not to deny the existence of sources for Luke but to suggest the impossibility of pinpointing them.⁶²

Given, for instance, the centrality of the temple/torah charge in the Synoptic Gospels, it is at least as reasonable to suggest that parallels in the Stephen episode owe to the motif of *imitatio Christi* than to a historical referent.⁶³ Or, consider the name itself, *Stephanos*, or “Crown.” How remarkably coincidental for the first of the Christian martyrs to have borne the name that comes to be identified as the reward for those whose testimony to Christ results in the death. Eusebius recognized this coincidence as owing to the firm hand of

Divine Providence.⁶⁴ Given Luke's penchant for symbolic names—Lydia, the dealer in purple dye from Thyatira; Theophilus, the esteemed lover of God who functions as Luke's ideal reader—a historical critic might conceivably argue that the name Stephen signals Luke's hand at play.⁶⁵ Even if one assented for the sake of argument to the assertion that the list of names in which Stephen is mentioned provides a secure piece of historical data, it would be possible to emplot more than one relationship between that name and the martyrdom story. It would be as reasonable, for example, to imagine that the name "Crown" on the list inspired the invention of the subsequent story as to imagine that the name proves the historicity of the martyrdom.

As with the temple/torah charge, and the name itself, so could be said for every one of the elements that have been identified as "core historical events." Given Penner's convincing observation that verisimilitude is the coin of ancient historiography, it is difficult to insist that one aspect of the narrative or another is the deal breaker, the point that the author of Acts simply could not have invented.⁶⁶

To summarize briefly my argument thus far, the book of Acts, in general, and the Stephen pericope, in particular, participate in an anti-Jewish trope by which Jews are constructed as vile killers and Christians as merciful victims. In spite of both the detrimental effects of the story and the fact that historical-critical methods could easily lead to questions concerning the historicity of the narrative, biblical scholars continue to evoke the martyrdom of Stephen as part of the *indubitable reality* of Christian origins. It appears that this reflexive insistence on the certainty of the martyrdom owes more to the vice-like grip of the Acts narrative on Christian collective consciousness than to the results of a traditional historiographical method rigorously applied. This confluence of circumstances leads to my argument for subjecting the book of Acts to an alternate method of historical analysis.

History, Narrative, and Ideology

This study resists the notion that there are authentic kernels of history to be winnowed from the chaff in the book of Acts or that there is a bedrock of historical truth that can be unearthed within its pages. Rather, it is situated within conversations taking place both among modern theorists and scholars of antiquity concerning the constitutive nature of language in creating the past and the formal similarities between historical and fictional narratives. That is, my work is framed by understandings of the relationship of language to events commonly categorized as "the linguistic turn." As metahistorians and ideological

critics have argued, the “raw events” of life are to be distinguished from historical narratives about such events. While events undoubtedly happened, events in themselves do not speak. There is no singular and necessary correspondence between these events and any narrative about them; there is no singular and necessary way to frame these events. Three historiographical principles deriving from this view of the relationship of event to discourse are as follows: (1) The shape of the historical narrative is contingent on the perspective of its author. (2) Because historical narratives are perspectival, and furthermore because they deal with issues of law, legality, and legitimacy, it is also the case that they are inextricably bound up with issues of authority and the social order.⁶⁷ Historical writing, then, can be understood as an ideological act, with regnant historical narratives serving to “justify the exercise of power by those who possess it and . . . to reconcile others to the fact that they do not.”⁶⁸ (3) It must also be noted that the language that creates the past—historical narrative—shares formal similarities with the language of myth and literature. Events in themselves do not possess the qualities of coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure. These formal qualities are imposed upon events by historical narratives (and mythic narratives and fictional narratives). In this sense, as metahistorians and ideological critics (as well as some ancient historians) have noted, all histories are in fact literary fictions.⁶⁹

In the field of Acts scholarship, the broadest and most significant engagement with issues of history after “the turn” is Todd Penner’s *In Praise of Christian Origins*.⁷⁰ Situating Luke’s second volume within a discussion of the ancient generic classification, *historia*, Penner argues that for ancient historiographers, the criteria of suitability, plausibility, and persuasiveness—rather than “accuracy”—form the superstructure upon which their historical narratives are built.⁷¹

Penner’s study of ancient texts resonates with those of modern theorists not only in his recognition that historical narratives are fictions but also in his underscoring of the ideological work these narratives do. An explicit and conscious awareness that the project of *historia* was the construction of identity and the inculcation of values for the benefit of the ruling classes—present already in ancient Greek authors—was especially honed among later Roman authors. Penner offers up a useful catalogue of instances to illustrate that, at the time of Luke’s writing, Roman historians are considerably more concerned with narrating history as it should have been rather than history as it really was. For example, Polybius faults Timaeus’ disparaging of Demochares because “as everyone knows” Demochares was of honorable lineage, and honorable men simply cannot be depicted otherwise (*Hist.* 12.13.4–6); Plutarch dismisses large sections of Herodotus because Herodotus is “pro-barbarian” and does not

flatter Greeks consistently (*Her. mal.* 857A–858F); and Lucian, while not knowing the actual cause of a certain Severianus' death, can construct the dying scene anyway since a man of his nobility "must" die in a "manly" or "virtuous" way (*Hist.* 25–26). What most distinguishes these accounts of ancient *historia* from the traditional model of the historical-critical method, which aims for objectivity, is the open acknowledgment among the ancients that their histories are not disinterested. These ancient authors know that they write in the service of regnant elite cultural values. As Penner notes:

. . . while it is one thing to suggest, as Haydn White does, that all histories are in fact literary fictions, it is another to appreciate the cultural and social climate of antiquity that makes this not so much an unconscious truism but a conscious and compulsory literary exercise every time an ancient writer sat down to write *historia*. For in each record of the past, writers from Herodotus to Ammianus Marcellinus were aware that their present was being shaped and molded as a result, and that at stake was one's perceived status within either the empire more generally or the local community more specifically.⁷²

This observation that historical narrative, for ancient authors, has an obvious ideological function bears crucially on my reading of the two-volume work of Luke-Acts. The author of Luke-Acts begins with a preface in which his stated desire is to write an orderly account so that his patron the most excellent Theophilus might find "surety" or "truth." Through this preface, the author signals that he too is constructing an account of Christian origins that conforms quite closely to what an elite male Romanized reader would wish such origins to entail.⁷³

Working from the premise of the impossibility that the proper or "true" account of what happened could be ascertained, and from the acknowledgment that historical narratives, both ancient and modern, are often pressed into the service of dominant ideologies, shifts my study of Acts' story of the stoning of Stephen in the following ways.

First, the question of establishing the precise genre of Acts, frequently a central question in understanding Acts' relationship to Christian origins, recedes in priority. Once it is conceded that the rhetorical categories of suitability and verisimilitude govern ancient historical narrative, the assigning of Acts to a particular genre—whether a historical novel, an epic, an ancient scientific treatise, or historiography in the manner of Polybius and Thucydides proper—no longer serves as a standard by which one might judge the scope of Acts' historical reliability.⁷⁴ More crucially, the ontological and epistemological

questions—did it happen and how can we know for certain—give way to questions of rhetoric and ethics.

Here, my work is to be distinguished from the conclusions of Penner's study, as he finds himself at the end of his monograph on Stephen and the Hellenists at something of a historiographical impasse. In his conclusion concerning the historicity of the entire pericope of Acts 6.1–8.3, he asks, "Could the narratives be historically accurate and true? Absolutely. Could they be completely fabricated? Absolutely. Could the truth rest somewhere in between? Absolutely. The problem of course is that it is impossible to prove any of these premises."⁷⁵ While conceding the impossibility of precise and certain answers to these questions, I do not view that impossibility as an obstacle to writing historical narrative but rather as a reason to frame historical questions differently. Compelling questions by which to frame a study of the Acts narrative of Christian origins include the following: What is it that historians claim to know about what happened? What frames of reference are utilized for situating these historical narratives? What are the proper names assigned to persons and social groups? And what causal links and explanatory relationships are emplotted? Because the choice to privilege one historical narrative necessarily involves the suppression of other possible tellings, the question arises whether and how one might do justice to submerged voices and alternate versions of past human experiences and events. Because historical narratives are written in the service of the present and have material effects, it seems important to ask who benefits from a particular telling of history and who might be harmed by it; does it inspire people to struggle or promote the status quo.⁷⁶

This line of inquiry is inspired especially by the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who has long advocated for the acknowledgment of the rhetorical, ideological (and kyriarchal) nature of all historical narrative, both ancient and modern, in arguments that are often comparable to those articulated in Penner's book on Acts.⁷⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, however, moves from that argument to a consequent call for biblical scholars (and by extension, all modern historians) to be ethically accountable for their interpretive practices. "If texts are polysemous and have an oppressive history of effects," she notes, "their interpretation always requires judgment and evaluation."⁷⁸ Denise Buell has also argued compellingly for the historian of ancient sources to acknowledge the ethical consequences of their interpretive choices. While noting that it is now relatively common to accede the complex interplay between the interpreter and interpreted—the inevitable role the interpreter plays in shaping interpretation—she argues further, in line with feminist and postcolonial critics, "it is possible not only to acknowledge the specificity and limitations of one's interpretation, but also to advocate for it—even provisionally—on the basis of its particular, contingent implications for the present and future."⁷⁹

From my own (provisional) awareness of the implications of reconstructing ancient Jewish–Christian relations for present and future relations among Jews and Christians, I analyze the Stephen story, advocating for a better model for understanding Jesus followers in their relations with other Jews under empire than this singular story allows. By situating the text within the context of empire, and setting the canonical version against related but noncanonical texts, my aim is to complicate our understanding of early Jewish–Christian relations, as well as to add more voices to the story. By underscoring the violent effect of the text’s rhetoric—including the violent effects even of its most merciful rhetoric—my hope is to call those who regard this text as sacred Scripture to greater awareness of the power of this sacred text, and how that power might be employed for ill as well as for good. Such awareness might then become a step toward accountability and conciliation.⁸⁰

Plan of the Book

In chapter 1, I analyze the general orientation of Luke–Acts⁸¹ in terms of its anti-Jewish polemic, its appropriation of Roman imperial values and frameworks, and its usefulness in emerging second-century heresiological contests. I draw attention to the violence of the rhetoric by which Acts depicts nonbelieving Jews and note that the author appropriates Roman categories in shaping those depictions. Differently from the other Gospels, and in line with later Christian apologetic, the Third Gospel explicitly affirms that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem owes to Jewish rejection of Jesus. Subsequently, Acts constructs unbelieving Jews as villainous and savage, cut off from salvation, in part, through employing Romanized stereotypes of barbaric behavior. Through focus on this vilifying and vengeful rhetoric, and its conformity to Roman imperial values and frameworks, I call into question scholarly arguments that Acts holds an irenic view of unbelieving Jews, as well as arguments that the text is best understood as a form of “resistance literature” serving to challenge the *Pax Romana*. Finally, I address the recent argument of Joseph Tyson that Acts, along with the first two chapters of the Third Gospel, serves to counter emerging marcionite theology. Tyson’s work focuses on how Luke’s appropriation of Jewish symbols in these chapters responds to marcionite renderings of Christian distinctiveness. I add a supporting plank to Tyson’s argument by noting how the martial imagery of these chapters provides swift rebuttal to any marcionite assertion that divine violence is the exclusive preserve of the Old Testament God.

While chapter 1 offers an argument for the general orientation of the two-volume work, chapter 2 focuses more specifically on the rhetorical function of

the Stephen pericope within the book of Acts. Here, I note how the depiction of Stephen's stoning by a riotous and barbaric mob of Jews conforms perfectly to Acts' rhetorical attempt to bracket Romans from violence against Jesus believers, on the one hand, and to implicate Jews who do not accept messianic claims concerning Jesus as essentially murderous, on the other. I argue further that Stephen's typological function as the perfect martyr goes far to explain Acts' silence regarding the deaths of prominent early Christian figures at Roman hands, and especially its silence concerning the death of Paul.

As a means of challenging Acts' version of events as "natural" or "obvious," in chapter 3, I consider a set of related death narratives concerning James, the brother of Jesus. The chapter begins with the narrative of the death of James preserved in Hegesippus—a text with remarkable structural similarity to Acts' story of Stephen. It then takes up two texts that diverge considerably from the Stephen story: the death of James as recounted in Josephus' *Antiquities*, and the story of violent conflict between James and Paul in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*. The chapter ends with an assessment of the various merits of these texts in evoking and explaining first-century violence among Jews.

Having considered the "perfection" of Stephen in chapter 2, in terms of the rhetorical fittingness of the pericope, I turn in chapter 4 to the question of the traditional reason that Stephen is hailed as the "perfect" martyr: In early Christian thinking, the sign of the martyr's perfection is the dying forgiveness prayer he utters on behalf of his persecutors. Because the Stephen prayer is closely linked to the dying forgiveness prayer of the Lukan Jesus, both of these iterations are considered here. Against those who argue that the dying prayer conforms perfectly to Jewish scriptural precedent, and those who argue that it signals a clear break between Christianity and Judaism, I argue that the dying forgiveness prayers are part of a complicated rhetorical balancing act. Through these prayers, the author of Luke-Acts both attempts to assert Christian difference from Jews on the basis of their superior ethic of mercy while also challenging marcionite notions that this ethic overrides divine judgment against unrepentant sinners.

I draw on the discourse of Roman imperial clemency to account for how an early Christian text can both mark its heroes as extremely merciful, all the while engaging in the unmerciful act of depicting Jews villainously. Acknowledgment of the violence adhering to the "manly" virtue of Roman clemency helps to clarify the violence of merciful rhetoric in early Christianity. I also consider the Roman discourse of pardon to account for the ambiguity of the reception of the dying forgiveness prayers. In questions of appropriate pardon, the possibility exists that any purported assertion of the virtue of clemency might in actuality prove to be an instance of a more "womanish" vice, such as pity or softness that

owes to weakness of mind. Pardon owing to such softness or irrationality is a breach of justice. I shall show that while some Christians hailed the forgiveness prayer as a sign of the martyrs' perfection, others were much more troubled by them since, standing alone, they might suggest just this breach of justice—an inappropriate use of the dying forgiveness prayer conjures an eschatological moment in which the evildoers do not receive the divine punishment which is their due. Here again are raised not only questions of Roman imperial framing—how do these prayers measure against Roman articulations of the manliness of clemency, the womanishness of pity; the justice of the former and the despicable nature of the latter—but also questions of a “macionite” sort—what is the nature and extent of divine mercy? Is divine judgment with its hell of fire and brimstone to be dismissed as the preserve of the Old Testament God? And finally, might those who answered yes to this question have embraced a version of enemy love and non-retaliation that prevented them from participating in the ancient prejudicial practice of condemning Jews to just that place.