

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 10

Acts 6:8-8:4

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Keener, Acts, Session 10, Acts 6:8-8:4, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Craig Keener's lecture analyzes Acts 6:8-8:4, focusing on the persecution and death of Stephen. He **explains the context** of Stephen's conflict with a Jerusalem synagogue of freed Roman citizens, highlighting the social and religious tensions involved. Keener **details the charges** against Stephen—blasphemy and challenging the temple—and analyzes Stephen's defense speech, which strategically uses Old Testament parallels to argue for a broader understanding of God's presence. The lecture **connects Stephen's martyrdom** to the subsequent spread of Christianity, emphasizing the ironic role of Saul (later Paul) in this expansion. Finally, Keener **examines the details** of Stephen's stoning and its significance within the narrative.

2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Keener, Acts, Session 10 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Gospels – Acts → Acts).



**Keener_Acts_Session
n10.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided excerpts of Dr. Craig Keener's lecture on Acts 6:8-8:4:

Briefing Document: Dr. Craig Keener on Acts 6:8-8:4

Introduction:

This document summarizes key themes, ideas, and facts presented by Dr. Craig Keener in his lecture on Acts 6:8 through 8:4. Keener focuses on the events surrounding Stephen's arrest, trial, and martyrdom, as well as the subsequent persecution and scattering of the early church. He emphasizes the historical, cultural, and theological context of these events.

I. The Conflict in Jerusalem:

- **Synagogue of the Freed Persons:** The initial conflict arises with the synagogue of the Freed Persons (Libertini), composed of former Roman slaves who were granted citizenship. These were Jewish people, many of whom had been enslaved by Pompeii in the 1st century BC.
- "These were freed persons of Roman citizen, who were Roman citizens...Well, thousands of Judeans were enslaved by Pompeii...They were brought to Rome and in Rome there were some other Jewish people and these Jewish people bought the freedom of their fellow Jews..."
- **Hellenistic Influence:** This synagogue was part of the Hellenist community, which was already a source of division, as some members of the community had become believers while others had not.
- "This is a Hellenist synagogue... So, it's related to the same group that the seven who are mentioned in chapter 6 and verse 5 come from, that the widows come from in chapter 6 and verse 1. And apparently some members of the Hellenist community who had not become believers were very unhappy about other members of the Hellenist community who did become believers."
- **Debates and Opposition:** Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, engaged in debates with members of the synagogue, and they were unable to refute his wisdom and the signs and wonders he performed.
- "Stephen is defeating them in debate after debate, full of the spirit and wisdom, and doing signs and wonders that they can't refute..."

- **Possible Reasons for Opposition:** The opposition might have stemmed from the internal division within their community as well as possible attempts by some to compensate for their foreignness by identifying with more conservative factions.
- "Also, they may have been compensating for their foreignness...by trying to identify with the most conservative faction that he could of the Jewish community."
- **Saul of Tarsus:** Keener suggests that Saul (later Paul) of Tarsus, a native of Cilicia, was likely associated with the Synagogue of the Freed Persons due to his geographic connection and that the synagogue attracted people from places such as Alexandria and Cilicia.
- "The locations that are mentioned where these people came from...Cilicia...the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus. And pretty much everybody in antiquity who knew anything knew that. And so somebody who was probably a member of this synagogue was Saul of Tarsus."

II. Stephen's Accusation and Defense:

- **False Accusations:** Unable to defeat Stephen in debate, they resort to false accusations of blasphemy against God, the Law, and the Temple.
- "they charge Stephen with blasphemy...The charges are that he has spoken against God by speaking against the law and against the temple, or as they put it, speaking against this holy place."
- **Blasphemy:** Keener clarifies that the term "blasphemy" could refer to disrespect for God in general, not just the technical Rabbinic definition of abusing the divine name. The irony being, they were the ones bearing false witness under oath.
- "the non-technical general use of blasphemous can mean any kind of reviling or mocking...Ironically, the prototypical way of desecrating a divine name was to swear a false oath."
- **Nationalism and Religion:** The conflict was not purely religious but was intertwined with nationalistic sentiments, making challenges to the Temple particularly volatile.
- "It was not only a religious issue. It was a nationalistic issue. It was something in that culture that they were so closely intertwined."

- **Stephen's Speech (Acts 7):** Stephen's lengthy speech is a defense against the accusations, but also a powerful critique of the religious establishment and a declaration of God's sovereignty beyond the Temple.
- "Stephen's speech, the two charges against him are that he's against the law, he's against Moses, and he's against the temple, against this holy place. He gives two major responses to this. First of all...he's going to respond to the temple by showing that God is not really limited to the temple."
- **Rejection of Deliverers:** Stephen highlights the pattern of rejection of God's appointed deliverers throughout Israel's history (Joseph, Moses), culminating in the rejection of Jesus.
- "Our ancestors rejected Joseph, who was sent to be their deliverer. They rejected Moses, who was sent to be their deliverer...God has done that and guess what? One of the ways he would be like Moses, he was rejected."
- **God's Presence:** Stephen argues that God's presence makes a place holy, not the place itself, challenging the traditional emphasis on the Temple as the only holy site. He references how God spoke to Abraham outside the holy land, and the location where Moses encountered God.
- "God doesn't speak just in the Holy Land...Any place where God is a holy place...It's God's presence that matters. It's the Holy Spirit that matters. It's not your traditional treatment...of saying, we have holy sites, we have holy places."
- **Parallels with Jesus:** Keener points out the parallels Stephen draws between himself and Jesus, utilizing Old Testament patterns and seeing himself as a rejected messenger.
- "Stephen does that here...the history of Jesus and the history of the early Christian mission. The point is that if we want to learn what Luke does, like when he's paralleling different characters, he's paralleling Jesus, Peter, and Paul, or paralleling Stephen in his execution with Jesus in his execution."
- **Climax of Stephen's Speech:** Stephen accuses his audience of resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets, and ultimately killing the "Holy and Righteous One" (Jesus), mirroring the actions of their ancestors. This was a peroration, or emotionally rousing ending to his speech.

- "He returns charges against his accusers...Verse 51, you're stiff-necked and spiritually uncircumcised, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You don't hear or heed the word of the Lord...your ancestors persecuted the prophets...you have killed the holy and righteous one."
- **Key Old Testament Figures:** Stephen's speech connects the stories of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses to each other and highlights their roles as rejected deliverers.

III. Stephen's Martyrdom and the Scattering of the Church:

- **Stephen's Vision:** Stephen sees a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, a position not usually associated with Jesus being 'seated.' Keener notes that this is likely a picture of Jesus as either a witness or judge of Stephen's trial.
- "Normally you would expect him to be seated at the Father's right hand...But a witness or a judge could stand. Jesus is either Stephen's witness, or Jesus is portrayed here as the true judge."
- **Parallels with Jesus' Death:** Stephen's death mirrors Jesus' death in that he commits his spirit to the Lord and prays for the forgiveness of his executioners.
- "Jesus in Luke 23:46 says, Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. Stephen in Acts 7, 59 says, Lord, I commit my spirit to you...Jesus in Luke 23:34 prays, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. Stephen in Acts 7:60 says, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."
- **Ironic Narrative:** Keener points out the ironic way the narrative portrays the guilty, with Stephen's accusers now being the ones on trial and the ones deserving of the penalty they have imposed on Stephen.
- **Stoning:** Stephen is stoned outside the city, as was the custom for those considered blasphemous.
- **Saul's Role:** Saul is present at Stephen's stoning and is now in a leadership position within the movement to persecute Christians. He is described as a "young man" which in that context would likely have been someone in their twenties and often associated with a person who is strong, but who might be rash.
- "They lay their robes at Saul's feet...The terminology that's used here for young man could be used for anybody from their teens to their thirties. Most often, it was used for somebody in their twenties...Positively, it was associated with strength. Negatively, it was associated with rashness..."

- **Scattering of the Church:** The persecution led by Saul causes believers to scatter from Jerusalem and spread the message of Christ throughout Judea and Samaria. This is ironically an effect that goes against Saul's intent.
- "through Saul, persecution scatters the believers...Ironically, Saul is responsible in a way for spreading the movement even before he becomes a follower of Jesus."

IV. The Ministry of Philip and the Expansion of the Gospel:

- **Philip's Ministry:** Philip, one of the seven deacons, begins preaching in Samaria and is successful. Then, God leads him to meet the Ethiopian eunuch, furthering the spread of the gospel. This expansion shows the church reaching a variety of ethnic and geographic boundaries.
- "Acts 8:5-25 narrate Philip's ministry in Samaria. Acts 8.26-40 narrate his ministry to an African court official...it's a foretaste of going to the ends of the earth...Ethiopia was considered the southern end of the earth."
- **Persecution and Divine Sovereignty:** The persecution, though a great hardship, is used by God to fulfill his mission.
- "notice it took persecution to get the church to begin to do what Jesus had commanded them back in chapter 1 and verse 8. And yet God is sovereign. God can use even things that to us look like disasters. God can sometimes use those things to spread his gospel to people who don't have it."
- **Believers as Missionaries:** Keener notes that the spread of the Gospel was not limited to the apostles but was carried out by all believers.

Conclusion:

Keener's lecture provides a detailed analysis of Acts 6:8-8:4, emphasizing the historical context, the theological implications, and the literary features of the text. The conflict, persecution, and martyrdom of Stephen act as catalysts for the expansion of the early church and the fulfillment of Jesus' command to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. The ironic role of Saul, who initially opposes the church but later becomes its greatest missionary, is a central theme. The suffering of the church and those committed to Jesus are also highlighted.

4. Acts Study Guide: Session 10, Acts 6:8-8:4

Acts 6:8-8:4 Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What was the significance of the synagogue of the freed persons in Jerusalem, and who were its members?
2. Why were some members of the Hellenist community upset with Stephen, and what did they accuse him of?
3. According to the lecture, what were the charges brought against Stephen, and why were they significant in that historical context?
4. How did Stephen respond to the charges brought against him, particularly regarding the law and the temple?
5. How does Stephen's speech in Acts 7 relate to the Old Testament narratives about figures like Joseph and Moses?
6. What is the significance of Stephen's claim about holy places in his speech, and how does he back it up with scripture?
7. How did Stephen's stoning mirror events in the life and death of Jesus, and what literary device does Luke employ here?
8. What role did Saul of Tarsus play in Stephen's stoning, and what was his position in the community at the time?
9. How did the persecution of the church, initiated by Saul, paradoxically lead to the spread of the Christian message?
10. According to the text, how was the gospel spread, and what does that say about the nature of early Christian ministry?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The synagogue of the freed persons was composed of former Roman slaves who had become Roman citizens. This gave the synagogue a higher status than many other Hellenist synagogues.

2. Some Hellenists were upset with Stephen because he defeated them in debates with wisdom and signs, causing internal division within their community. They accused him of blasphemy against God, the law, and the temple.
3. Stephen was accused of speaking against God, the law, and the temple. These charges were significant because they touched on both religious and nationalistic sentiments, closely intertwined in that culture.
4. Stephen did not directly challenge the charges but instead affirmed the law by citing it and used scripture to show that God is not limited to a specific place. He reframed the accusations by turning them against his accusers as lawbreakers and blasphemers.
5. Stephen draws parallels between Joseph and Moses as rejected deliverers. He uses their stories to illustrate a pattern of how God works in history and how His messengers are often rejected by their people.
6. Stephen argued that God is not limited to the temple. He referenced the burning bush and Mount Sinai to demonstrate that God's presence makes a place holy, not the place itself.
7. Stephen's death mirrors Jesus' death through his prayers for forgiveness and the declaration that he commits his spirit to God. Luke's literary device of paralleling them highlights the theme of the rejected prophet and teacher.
8. Saul was present at Stephen's stoning and took charge of the situation by holding the coats of the executioners. His zeal and position within the religious community made him a leader in persecuting Christians.
9. Saul's persecution scattered the believers from Jerusalem, leading to the spread of the gospel to Samaria and beyond. This ironic outcome shows how God used persecution to fulfill His purpose and spread the word.
10. The gospel was spread through believers who were scattered by persecution. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem, and other believers, including Hellenists, took the message wherever they went, reflecting the nature of an organic, decentralized ministry.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the socio-political and religious factors that contributed to the conflict between Stephen and the synagogue of the freed persons. How do these factors illuminate the tensions within early Jewish society and the nascent Christian movement?
2. Compare and contrast Stephen's speech in Acts 7 with other examples of historical recounting in Jewish literature of the period. What specific rhetorical and theological strategies does he employ, and why are they significant for the overall narrative of Acts?
3. Discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in Stephen's ministry and how it connects to the themes of wisdom and power within the narrative. In what ways does the presence of the Spirit inform Stephen's actions and theological claims?
4. Evaluate the significance of Stephen's death as a turning point in the narrative of Acts. How does his martyrdom parallel the death of Jesus, and how does it propel the plot forward in terms of the expansion of the early church?
5. Explore the complexities of Saul's involvement in the persecution of the early church. What factors might explain his zeal and actions against Christians, and how does this portrayal contribute to the overall message of Acts?

Glossary

- **Blasphemy:** The act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God, or sacred things. In the lecture, it refers both to technical (misusing divine name) and general (disrespect) meanings.
- **Diaspora Jews:** Jewish people living outside of Judea or Israel. In this lecture, they're also often Hellenized.
- **Freed Persons (Libertini):** Former Roman slaves who had been freed, and often became Roman citizens themselves. In this context, they were Jewish individuals or descendants of those formerly enslaved by Romans.
- **Hellenist Synagogue:** A Jewish synagogue established by Greek-speaking Jews, or those of Greek culture, particularly diaspora Jews. These synagogues also usually differed in some social or religious practices from the Judean synagogues.
- **Hermeneutic:** A method or theory of interpretation. In this context, it refers to how Stephen interprets the Old Testament and what that tells us about Luke's own method.
- **Peroration:** The concluding part of a speech, intended to be persuasive or emotionally rousing.
- **Proselytes:** Non-Jews who converted to Judaism.
- **Sanhedrin:** The highest Jewish council in Jerusalem, composed of religious and political leaders.
- **Septuagint:** The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that was widely used by Greek-speaking Jews.
- **Soteria:** Greek word for salvation or deliverance, used in both Christian and broader ancient contexts.
- **Stiff-necked:** A biblical term indicating obstinacy or resistance to divine commands or correction.
- **Uncircumcised in heart and ears:** A metaphor referring to a spiritual condition of being unreceptive to God's word and lacking spiritual understanding.

5. FAQs on Keener, Acts, Session 10, Acts 6:8-8:4 Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Acts 6:8-8:4 Based on Dr. Craig Keener's Lecture

- **What was the Synagogue of the Freed Persons, and why was it significant in the events involving Stephen?**
- The Synagogue of the Freed Persons was a community center for Jewish people in Jerusalem who were formerly enslaved by Roman citizens, specifically those enslaved by Pompey in the 1st century BC. These individuals, having been freed, became Roman citizens and often returned to Judea with a higher social status than many in the Greek-speaking parts of the empire. This synagogue was a prominent Hellenistic synagogue, likely attracting individuals from various locations, including Alexandria and Cilicia. The internal conflict within this synagogue between believers and non-believers in Jesus, particularly regarding Stephen's teachings and miracles, was a key cause of the events that led to Stephen's persecution. This conflict was exacerbated by the perceived "foreignness" of the members and their efforts to identify with the most conservative factions of the Jewish community.
- **How did Stephen's defense against the charges of blasphemy and disrespect for the Temple function, and what were the key points of his speech in Acts 7?**
- Stephen's defense was not a denial of the charges, but a reinterpretation of them. He affirmed the law but argued that the true worship of God was not limited to the Temple in Jerusalem, drawing on examples from throughout the history of Israel. He highlighted that God had spoken to figures like Abraham, Joseph, and Moses in locations outside the Holy Land. He emphasized that God's presence is what makes a place holy, not the other way around. His speech in Acts 7 is a historical overview with a pointed argument, recounting the rejection of previous deliverers by their own people, drawing a parallel to their rejection of Jesus. He concluded by accusing his accusers of being stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, and ultimately of resisting the Holy Spirit just as their ancestors did.

- **What was the significance of Stephen's stoning, and what parallels are drawn between his death and the death of Jesus?**
- Stephen's stoning was a direct consequence of his powerful speech and the way he reversed the charges against his accusers. The manner of his execution, being dragged outside the city and stoned, aligns with the custom for blasphemers and was carried out by a mob. Parallels between his death and that of Jesus are numerous and significant. Both were falsely accused, both committed their spirit into the hands of the Lord, and both sought forgiveness for their persecutors. These parallels serve as a deliberate literary technique by Luke, showing how the early church understood its connection to Jesus' life and ministry.
- **How does Dr. Keener's lecture relate the themes of nationalism and religion in the story of Stephen?** Dr. Keener points out that the events around Stephen were not just religious in nature but were fueled by nationalistic fervor as well. The Temple, seen as a symbol of national identity as well as religious significance, became the focus of those who felt that Stephen's message was a direct attack on their cultural and religious traditions. Keener uses the example of the modern day US to show that religious pronouncements on national issues can cause a strong reaction from the populace, and this dynamic can also be seen in the story of Stephen.
- **What was the role of angels in the events surrounding Stephen, and how do they connect to the theme of divine intervention in Acts?**
- Angels feature prominently in the narrative of Acts, serving as a tangible symbol of divine intervention and guidance. In Stephen's case, his face is described as shining like an angel. The connection between angels and the law, which Stephen mentions, highlights the divine origin of the law but also serves as a critique of those who are "stiff-necked" and resist God's will. Angels also feature in the stories of delivering Peter from prison and directing Phillip to his ministry with the Ethiopian, highlighting that God's influence is actively at work among his people.

- **How did the persecution following Stephen's death inadvertently contribute to the spread of Christianity?**

The persecution of believers in Jerusalem, sparked by Stephen's death and Saul's participation, led to the scattering of the church. Ironically, this scattering resulted in the very spreading of the Gospel that the persecutors sought to stop. As these scattered believers moved, they continued to preach the word. This includes Philip's journey to Samaria and then his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch which led to the spread of the gospel to new lands. Thus, the actions of the persecutors inadvertently caused the spread of their very target.

- **Who was Saul (later Paul) in the context of Stephen's stoning, and what does it say about his role in the persecution of the early church?**
- Saul of Tarsus, later known as the Apostle Paul, was a young and zealous leader in the persecution of the early church. He is introduced in Acts as a young man at whose feet the cloaks of the stoners of Stephen were laid, suggesting he was in a position of authority or leadership within the anti-Christian faction. His zeal and participation in this persecution, even in detaining women as well as men, highlights his role as a key orchestrator of the opposition against Christianity in Jerusalem before his conversion. His presence and activity in these events is a key to understanding the later impact he would have on the early church once he was converted.
- **What does Dr. Keener say about the significance of the inclusion of the Old Testament and history in the book of Acts?** Dr. Keener makes the case that the inclusion of Old Testament stories and history in the book of Acts (and specifically in the narrative around Stephen), serves a purpose beyond simply being a historical retelling. He states that this connection is made to establish theological points, showing parallels between the story of Jesus and previous people in the Old Testament. Stephen's defense utilizes this technique to make the case that his life and message fits well into the existing narrative of divine messengers who were ultimately rejected by their own people. These linkages are a sign that Luke (the author of Acts) uses scripture to tie together events in the old testament with the emergence of the early church.