

## SAUL'S PERSECUTION (8:1–3)

Though serving as an appendage of the sad incident presented in the preceding chapter, this section, however, attends to Luke's will to introduce important historical facts. The significance of the Christian movement receives a second impetus here after the Day of Pentecost. It is vitally important that we gain a clear understanding of this since church history during the first century is all dependent on the topics the author hints at here. The issues here are, first, an introduction of Saul, whose role would be critical for the larger part of the historical events and facts presented in Acts. Among those who persecuted, Saul is singled out as the leading figure in Stephen's death (Acts 7:58; 8:1, 3). Saul's assent rendered by *syneudokeō* (consent, 8:1)<sup>1</sup> is aptly useful in bringing this Pharisee to the fore as he might have been among those who were behind the scene to plot Stephen's death.<sup>2</sup>

Second, a preface of the radical transformation that would happen in Saul's heart and ministry is given. This particular passage of the pericope is as important for the author as the conversion story itself. It prepares the reader to appreciate the charges of the chief shepherd of the church to Saul (Acts 9:4).<sup>3</sup> Third, and last but not least, a forecast is given of the Christian church's expansion through Asia Minor and the world by the missionary introduced to the Gentiles. In spite of its somber note, the appendix is a clear premise that Stephen's death was God's will, by means of which the scattering of the disciples would not be a merely desperate seeking of refuge but a progressive unfold-

<sup>1</sup> The verb *syneudokeō* means "to join in approval, agree with, approve of, consent to, sympathize with." BDAG 970.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce 1988: 161 believes that this Cilician Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, who happened to be in Jerusalem during these days, might have been a member of the Jerusalem synagogue and that he could have been among those who tried to argue with Stephen, whose argumentation over the Scripture was overwhelming. While in the circumstance of Peter and John's arrest before the Sanhedrin council, the Pharisee Gamaliel was considerate of the prisoners' case, his student Saul, on the contrary, was not ready to tolerate the teachings of "the new way" at all. Bruce declares that Saul could see to the furthest horizon to realize the "fundamental incompatibility of the old and the new."

<sup>3</sup> Bock 2007: 317.

ing of the plan of the church growth predicted by the Lord years before (8:1).<sup>4</sup>

The question one must ask at this point is why the persecution against the disciples in the Jerusalem community of believers left the apostles unscathed.<sup>5</sup> Luke does not plainly state the answer, probably on purpose, but the answer still remains conspicuous throughout the narrative, especially if one considers the flow of events as presented from Acts 6 to this point. For example, one can easily recall the complaints voiced by the Greek-speaking widows who had been overlooked by the daily administration of shared properties and food—this resulted in the first general assembly of the believers. The joint effort of the apostolic leadership and the community members successfully solved the threats toward the division of the church into two denominations by selecting seven anointed men. Among them Stephen and Philip were first on the list, along with five more who probably came from Hellenistic backgrounds. However, as Luke reports, the tension between the confronting camps would very soon take a different shape. It grew into an aggression against outstanding Hellenistic believers by some outsiders the author describes as Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians, and Asians). It has been established that Saul, who came from Cilicia, was the commanding chief of the rise against Stephen. Another clue making the enigma much more understandable comes from the fact that Philip is mentioned to be the first of the many fugitives who escaped the tragedy that targeted the Spirit-filled and most remarkable ministers. Now, the observations above shed some light on the circumstances of the targeted victims of persecution. Thus, one can deduce from these two hints that Hellenists<sup>6</sup> were as much objects of persecution as the Jews were.<sup>7</sup> The tension that was centered on social and

<sup>4</sup> Harrison 1986 [1975]: 139.

<sup>5</sup> Some Western MSS make it clear that the apostles remained in Jerusalem by adding the phrase *hoi emeinan en Ierousalēm* ([apostles] who remained in Jerusalem) after the last word (*apostolōn*) of 8:1. Cf. Metzger 2000 [1971]: 301–11.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce 1972: 226–27 argues along this line when he says that Stephen’s death was not only a signal for a campaign against those who identified themselves with his way of thinking but also was a campaign that principally targeted “Hellenists in the Jerusalem Church” and that Philip had emerged as the next “outstanding man among the leaders of Hellenists” after Stephen. And Paul would later reveal that the believers in Judea first knew him as a “former persecutor” (Gal 1:22ff.), which serves as historical proof that even Hebrew fellows were not immune to this mistreatment.

livelihood issues (6:1) had slipped into theological differences or opposing perspectives on the Temple and Moses' law, according to the accusations against Stephen (6:13).

However, this popular view is not agreed upon by everyone. For example, Keener understands Luke's emphasis on **all** the church in Jerusalem and **except the apostles** to mean that the persecution did not spare anyone. The Hebraic believers also faced this persecution and some of them may have gone into Judea where Peter would later visit and minister. The tenor of apostles choosing to remain in Jerusalem could not have been a favor they received from the persecutors. Rather, it could have been a deliberate choice of not abandoning their post in Jerusalem. They were holding their post as brave witnesses of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem even if they had to go underground for the time being. The subsequent persecution that would target the main leaders indicates such a view.<sup>8</sup>

This educates for the reader how the early years of the early church were years of a multifaceted struggle. On the one hand, the new faith community would face internal uncertainties and financial strife in coping with, or rather maintaining, the new communal model of life in which possessions had to be shared. For example, Ananias and Sapphira had died so suddenly that it had caused a great deal of fear among the believers. Another challenge was a sincere consideration of the poor. On the other hand, the new movement had to face fomented charges by the political and religious leadership of the Sanhedrin and the imprisonment and death of witnessing heroes like Stephen.

<sup>8</sup> Keener 2013: 1467–69; Witherington 1998: 276. Cf. Bauckham 1995: 428–29.