The Structure and Content of Stephen’s Speech compared to Old Testament Credos

Todd Penner has written an impressive book in which he provides an excellent rhetorical analysis of Stephen’s speech in Acts 7.2 He has advanced detailed scholarly backgrounds, having perused the speech from many rhetorical perspectives. He has not, however, considered the structure of the speech from the standpoint of similarly organized Old Testament credos. Such credos may be found in Deut 6:20–25; 26:5–9; Josh 24:2–13; 1 Sam 12:6–15; Neh. 9; Pss 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136; Jer 32:16–25; and Ezek 20:5–26; in the Apocrypha, Sir 44–50, Bar 1:15—2:35; and in the New Testament, Acts 7 and Acts 13:16–41. These texts reflect a template for recounting the mighty acts of God that is distinctly within Hebrew rhetorical practice, especially regarding discourse structure. The template is flexible since items may vary from credo to credo, and the purposes for reciting the mighty acts differ from praising God to condemning his people for their failure to react when God has acted.3

In this paper I extend my analysis of Stephen’s speech to see how this Hebraic “structural template” might shed light on the speech (sermon) in Acts 7, using this rhetorical approach. I initially assumed the speech drew creatively upon this Hebraic rhetorical credo background reflecting that tradition while

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1 I first met Stanley Porter in Heidelberg in the summer of 1992 at the first of several conferences on rhetoric analysis of the Scriptures that we convened at Pepperdine University’s international campuses, as well as at universities in South Africa and Sweden. Stan and I edited the first three volumes of the proceedings (Heidelberg, London, and Pretoria), which were published by the Sheffield Academic Press. I learned to appreciate Stan as a wonderful colleague and a prolific publishing scholar. It is a genuine privilege to present this essay in his honor. I am grateful to Carl R. Holladay for reading this essay and making a number of important suggestions and to Stanley N. Helton for editorial changes and additions.


3 For a detailed look at the structure and content of Pss 105 and 106, but also comparing their rhetorical approach to that of several of the other credos, see Olbricht, “Rhetoric of Two Narrative Psalms.”
not being bound by it. In the ensuing discussion, I will note both similarities and differences.4

1 The Unique Hebraic Structural Form

I propose that Stephen’s address rightly belongs to the perspective of a narrative structure unique to Hebrew rhetoric.5 Classical rhetoricians on narrative assigned speeches to primarily three social locations: the court room (forensic), the political assembly (deliberative), and the market place (or before palaces, and temples) (epideictic), but most commonly the courtroom. These rhetoricians did not scrutinize the lengthy historical narratives of Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, or Pliny. Nor were they interested in the narrative poetry of Homer and Virgil. In other words, these literary varieties were not within the purview of the social locations upon which the ancient rhetoricians focused. Although the ancient Greeks set out historical narratives in epideictic discourses regarding the founding of their city-states, they did not comment upon the manner in which Greek deities acted at various stages of their history. Rather, these authors extolled the merits of their ancestors’ perspectives regarding democracy, patriotism, and leisure.6

The most obvious locations for the Old Testament credos were liturgical or apologetic settings. For example, Pss 105 and 106 were uttered or sung in the temple at Jerusalem. As Artur Weiser argues, Ps 105 “was originally used in the festival cult of the Yahweh community.”7 Similarly, Mitchell Dahood maintains that Ps 105 was “probably composed for one of the major Israelite festivals.”8 I conclude, supported by these scholarly assessments, that only limited insights

4 This procedure lies within the purview of the whole discussion of rewritten Scripture. See Zsengellér, Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years.
5 For a lengthy bibliography on Jewish rhetoric, see Penner, In Praise of Christian Origins, 89n100. In my research in these bibliographies I have not found a discussion of the structural characteristics of the Old Testament credos as a rhetorical form. See the reflections of the classical rhetoricians on narrative in the essay presented in footnote 2 above. For additional bibliography, see Lightstone, Rhetoric of the Babylonian Talmud.
6 Examples are Pericles’s Funeral Oration in Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War (2.35–46); Isocrates, Evagoras; and Hyperides, The Lamian War. For additional perspectives on classical rhetoric and rhetorical bibliography, see Olbricht, “Rhetoric of Biblical Commentary.”
7 Weiser, Psalms, 673.
8 Dahood, Psalms III: 101–150, 51. See also Taylor, Psalms, 557.