Within the narrative of Luke-Acts, the (golden) calf is mentioned only once, in Stephen’s famed speech in Acts 7, where it plays a pivotal role in Stephen’s recounting of Israel’s story. In this chapter, I will argue that Stephen uses the calf episode in a programmatic way to counter the charges brought against him and, indeed, to redirect those charges on to those who sit in judgment over him. This will require that I attend to the nature of the indictments on the basis of which Stephen is brought before the Jerusalem council and then to the overall development of his speech. I will then be in a position to urge that Stephen uses the calf incident to speak to both charges, the one concerning his position vis-à-vis Moses and the law and the other concerning “this holy place,” the temple (Acts 6:13).

Stephen Indicted

In his twofold introduction of Stephen, Luke presents him as someone who is “endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom” and “with exceptional faith” (Acts 6:3, 5) and who is “endowed with grace and power”—a missional leader who “was performing great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8). Luke thus characterizes Stephen in ways that are reminiscent of both the apostles and of Jesus himself (e.g., Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12). Moreover, with this phrasing we may hear echoes of the exodus story (e.g., Exod 7:3; Deut 6:22; 26:8; Ps 135:9) in anticipation of that key section of Stephen’s speech devoted to Moses (7:17–44), wherein we read that Moses had “performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for forty years in the wilderness” (7:36). Additionally, according to Luke, as Stephen stood before the Jerusalem council, his face was like that of an angel’s (6:15), a description that recalls the portrait of Moses in Exod 34:29–35 (cf. 2 Cor 3:13) and that envelops Stephen in
an almost incomparable divine endorsement. Contrasting sharply with these positive credentials is the opposition Stephen experiences—first from his own people, so to speak, Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem synagogues (6:9), and then from the Jerusalem elite and “the people” (6:12), who are responsible for delivering him to the Jerusalem council. Luke heightens the developing drama, first, by recounting how rapidly the opposition against Stephen is mobilized; and second, by having others report the substance of Stephen’s persistent message sans any direct speech from Stephen himself. On this latter point, we simply have no basis for judging firsthand the content of Stephen’s words until he is finally asked to address his accusers in Acts 7. It is important that we not forget what we do know, however, namely, that Luke has thus far endorsed Stephen with impressive bona fides.

The charges brought against Stephen are represented in different ways three times: “We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God” (6:11); “This fellow speaks against the holy place and the law” (6:13); “We have heard him saying that this Jesus the Nazarene will demolish this place and amend the customary practices that Moses handed down to us” (6:14).² It is easy enough to trace the connection between Moses and the law in Luke-Acts, and Stephen Wilson has demonstrated further the correspondence between the law and “the customary practices Moses handed down to us” (e.g., Wilson 1983, 3–11). Overall, Luke’s narrative is positively inclined toward maintaining Moses’s law (e.g., Luke 2:22–23; 16:29–30; cf. Jervell 1996, 54–61), though the reference to Moses may recall for the reader even more directly the association of Moses and Jesus, the prophet like Moses, in Acts 3:22–26 (cf. 7:37). In Second Temple period Judaism, blasphemy against God might include blasphemy against the temple (see Bock 1994, 184–90); accordingly, the association between God and the temple in the charges against Stephen is also warranted. That is, given the correlation between Moses, the law, and “the customary practices Moses handed down to us”; and between God, “the holy place,” and “this place,” we should understand that the charges against Stephen reduce to two: he speaks against the law and against the temple (pace Fitzmyer 1998, 354–61). Insofar as Stephen is a representative of Jesus’s witnesses in their relationship to these mainstays of Jewish theology, identity, and practice, these charges and Stephen’s response to them are crucial. The stakes are high, since they have to do with the basic question of what constitutes faithfulness to Israel’s God. With the high priest’s question “Are these things so?” (7:1), the stage is set for Stephen’s speech, the longest address recounted in the entire Lukan narrative.

² Translations are those of the author.