

DIASPORA JEWISH FREEDMEN: STEPHEN'S DEADLY OPPONENTS

Robin G. Thompson

ABSTRACT

The question of who Stephen's opponents are in Acts 6:9 involves matters of syntax, historicity, and cultural identity. Attention to these matters leads to the proposal that all of Stephen's opponents were Diaspora Jewish freedmen who had relocated back to Jerusalem, which sheds light on why they so fiercely opposed Stephen.

IN HIS SECOND ACCOUNT TO THEOPHILUS, Luke traced the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment and growth of the new community of believers that followed in its wake. But almost from the beginning, those who proclaimed this gospel encountered opposition and persecution. And while the persecution began with the temple authorities opposing the apostles (Acts 4:1; 5:17), it turned deadly when Stephen encountered the wrath of his fellow Hellenistic Jews, at least some of whom were from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9). These Jews argued with Stephen, and when they could not refute him, they created false charges, stirred up the crowd, and brought Stephen before the council of the Sanhedrin. Stephen's speech in response to their allegations infuriated them and resulted in his stoning.

Who were these Jews and why were they so incensed by Stephen's message? While Luke specifically identified these opponents in Acts 6:9, this verse is notoriously difficult to understand. Commentators see either Jews from one Synagogue of the Freedmen with members from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia, or multiple synagogues representing two or more of these groups. All scholars identify these people as Diaspora Jews. And while com-

mentators explain that freedmen are freed slaves,¹ the identity of this group is then left to the side, with the focus shifting back to the general category of Diaspora Jews. However, Diaspora Jews who had been enslaved and later manumitted by their owners experienced a significantly different life than their fellow Diaspora Jews.

Before manumission, these Jewish slaves would have been bought and sold as property, with no regard for their personhood. Seneca (ca. 4 BC–AD 65) commented, “When you buy a horse, you order its blanket to be removed; you pull off the garments from slaves that are advertised for sale, so that no bodily flaws may escape your notice.”² Once they were sold into a household, they had no “independent social existence: they were the absolute property of their masters with no legal rights.”³ Slaves could be physically punished, and flogging was a common experience. They were physically violated in other ways, too: “enslaved girls, women, boys and young men were frequently sexual targets for their masters.”⁴ Slaves were dominated, alienated, and deprived of any dignity or honor. There was a veritable chasm between slave and free. So when Jews who had lived through the scourge of slavery were manumitted by their owners, they could once again embrace their Jewish heritage, practice the Law, and pilgrimage to the temple. In fact, some of these former slaves moved back to Jerusalem, to the people and the temple of Yahweh.

The goal of this article is to determine if the people listed in Acts 6:9 were indeed Diaspora Jewish freedmen, and if so, how the unique social and cultural background of such people might shed light on why they so fiercely opposed Stephen and his message.

THE TEXT

The text of Acts 6:9 contains multiple challenges. First, the syntax of this verse makes it difficult to determine how many synagogues

¹ For the sake of simplicity, the terms “freedman” and “freedmen” are used to refer to both male and female freed slaves.

² Seneca, *Epistolae morales*, 80.9, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 2:217.

³ Clarice J. Martin, “The Eyes Have It: Slaves in the Communities of Christ-Believers,” in *Christian Origins*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, *A People's History of Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 228.

⁴ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51.

and/or groups of people Luke was indicating. Second, there is a question of historicity. The reference to τῆς συναγωγῆς has sparked an ongoing discussion of whether this is simply a gathering of people or an actual building. If a building, then some scholars charge Luke with anachronism—reading what they see as a post-AD-70 phenomenon back into the time of Jesus and his disciples. Lastly, there is a question of cultural identity. The broader context of Acts 6:9, which begins in 6:1, introduces the Ἕλληνοῖσι and has prompted much discussion on the identity of these Jews and why they, in particular, opposed Stephen. Answers to questions of syntax, historicity, and cultural identity prepare for the question of how a better understanding of Jewish freedmen might inform understanding of the events that led up to Stephen’s martyrdom.

THE QUESTION OF SYNTAX

The syntax of the phrase τινες τῶν ἐκ τῆς συναγωγῆς τῆς λεγομένης Λιβερτίνων καὶ Κυρηναίων καὶ Ἀλεξανδρέων καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ Κιλικίας καὶ Ἀσίας has been understood in primarily three ways. Some commentators see here one synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen, composed of people from four different areas of the Roman Empire: the cities of Cyrene and Alexandria, and the Roman provinces of Asia and Cilicia. These scholars reason that τῆς συναγωγῆς is singular, Λιβερτίνων (a transliteration of the Latin word for “freedman”⁵) serves as the name of the synagogue, and, since the other four references are to geographical locations, these groups made up the membership of the synagogue.⁶ Other scholars understand this verse to reference two synagogues, or at least two distinct groups,

⁵ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 594.

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 1:323; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 124; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 47; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 358; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. Bernard Nobel and Gerald Shinn (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 271n1; Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Luke–Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 812; and Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 253. Schnabel structures the verse in this way but then makes no decision on how many synagogues may be indicated (Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 342).

due to the repeated τῶν . . . τῶν: the Synagogue of the Freedmen comprised of people from Cyrene and Alexandria, and another group whose members were from Cilicia and Asia.⁷ Yet other commentators see five different groups referenced: a group called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, and four additional groups from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia.⁸ These last scholars argue that the people from each of these geographical areas would have distinctions determined by their locality, and these distinctions would naturally result in the formation of separate groups.

The syntax of the repeated τῶν does seem to point to two main groups. The cities of Cyrene and Alexandria are in Northern Africa, and the provinces of Cilicia and Asia are both located in Asia Minor, so these two geographical groups make sense. But “the Synagogue of the Freedmen” is obviously not a geographical reference. And as Richard Pervo notes, “‘former slaves, Cyrenians, and Alexandrians’ do not seem to make a logical grouping.”⁹ So here, as is often the case, syntax alone does not answer the question of who were Stephen’s opponents. Therefore, a clear understanding of “Synagogue of the Freedmen” seems necessary in order to address the question of how many groups Luke was identifying.

THE QUESTION OF HISTORICITY

Since Luke wrote of “the Synagogue of the Freedmen” in this verse, the implication is that there was at least one synagogue in the city of Jerusalem during the time of Jesus and his disciples. In fact,

⁷ Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 166; F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity: The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 4, *English Translation and Commentary*, ed. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 66; Howard Clark Kee, “Defining the First-Century C.E. Synagogue,” in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, ed. Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 17; Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 167; and Wolfgang Schrage, “συναγωγή,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 837.

⁸ Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, “Synagogue Communities in the Graeco-Roman Cities,” in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, ed. John R. Bartlett (London: Routledge, 2002), 71; Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; reprint, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 17; Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 53; and Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, new English version, rev. and ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:428.

⁹ Pervo, *Acts*, 166.

Luke mentioned synagogues often in his two volumes—much more often than any other New Testament author.¹⁰ However, some scholars find Luke’s references anachronistic. In the debate among scholars, two primary questions are raised: (1) When and where did the synagogue as an institution originate? and (2) Did synagogues exist prior to AD 70 in Jerusalem while the temple still stood?

The history of the synagogue has undergone great revision in the last fifty years due to the work of archaeologists.¹¹ In the past, the origin of the synagogue was usually placed either during the Babylonian exile when there was no temple (sixth-century BC)¹² or during the Second Temple period as a reaction to the Hasmonean Revolution (second-century BC).¹³ In other words, it was seen as a reaction to a religious crisis.¹⁴ But some scholars are now beginning to question the idea that the synagogue before AD 70 originated and served as a replacement for the temple for Diaspora Jews.

So when did synagogues emerge and why? One issue in the debate is the terminology found on inscriptions and in the literature. The most common terms are συναγωγή and προσευχή with geography tending to determine the usage: προσευχή is regularly used outside Judea and συναγωγή is used inside Judea.¹⁵ But there is disagreement about whether the references are to buildings or

¹⁰ The term συναγωγή is found fifty-six times in the New Testament: Acts–19; Luke–15; Matt.–9; Mark–8; John–2; Rev.–2; and James–1. This search was done using the computer software BibleWorks 9.0.

¹¹ Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book*, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 6.

¹² Rudolf Klein, “Synagogue,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit: Keter, 2007), 353; A. T. Kraabel, “Unity and Diversity among Diaspora Synagogues,” in *Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel*, ed. J. Andrew Overman and Robert S. MacLennan (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 29; and Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, 2:424.

¹³ Joseph Gutmann, ed., *Ancient Synagogues: The State of Research*, Brown Judaic Studies (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), x.

¹⁴ Joseph Gutmann, “Synagogue Origins: Theories and Facts,” in *Ancient Synagogues: The State of Research*, 4; and L. I. Levine, “The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 3 (1996): 425.

¹⁵ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 127–28; Rainer Riesner, “Synagogues in Jerusalem,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 182, 184; and Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 170.

simply to a gathering of the community.¹⁶ However, many inscriptions and ruins clearly indicate that a building is in view. The earliest known evidence of a synagogue building is an inscription found in Egypt dedicating a synagogue to Ptolemy III Euergetes (reigned 246–221 BC).¹⁷ There were other *προσευχαί* built in Egypt in Arsinoe-Crocodilopolis, Schedia, Nitriai, Xenephyris, and Athribis.¹⁸ Levine notes that there are “three major inscriptions from Cyrene, numerous inscriptions from the catacombs of Rome, and at least one of significance from first-century Asia Minor.”¹⁹ These discoveries have led Flesher to conclude that “the synagogue . . . arose in a region without access to the Temple cult (for example, in Egypt) and in a sense comprised a substitute for it.”²⁰ But the literary sources paint a slightly different picture, one of the Diaspora synagogues keeping close ties with the temple in Jerusalem. These synagogues collected and sent the temple tax to Jerusalem, envoys traveled there to offer sacrifices, and individuals made the pilgrimage for the special feasts.²¹ So while these synagogues functioned as community centers in general, with their primary purpose being the reading of Scripture on the Sabbath, they did not serve as a replacement for the temple in Jerusalem.²²

But is there evidence of synagogues in Judea before AD 70? Archaeologists answer this question in the affirmative. A building at Gamla appears to be the earliest synagogue identified in Pales-

¹⁶ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 255.

¹⁷ Klein, “Synagogue,” 354.

¹⁸ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 80.

¹⁹ Levine, “The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered,” 429.

²⁰ Paul V. M. Flesher, “Palestinian Synagogues before 70 C.E.: A Review of the Evidence,” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, ed. Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher, *Studia Post-Biblica* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1:8.

²¹ Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period*, SBL Dissertation (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 487–88; Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 14.227; 16.164, 168; Philo, *Legatio ad Galium* 156, 311; *De specialibus legibus* 1.76–78; and S. Safrai, “Relations between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1974), 1:188–99.

²² Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue*, 113, 123; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 3; and Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, 447.

tine, dated to the first century BC.²³ In addition there are buildings identified as synagogues in Masada (first century AD),²⁴ Herodium (AD 66–71),²⁵ Qiryat Sefer (early first century AD),²⁶ and most recently in 2000–2001, Modi'in (first century BC).²⁷ These structures show that the synagogue and the temple in Jerusalem existed at the same time. But most importantly for Acts 6:9, there is evidence of a synagogue in Jerusalem itself. An inscription found in a cistern on the slope of Ophel, now famously called the Theodotus inscription, details the founding of a synagogue. It reads in part, "Theodotus . . . built the synagogue for the reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments, and also the guest chamber and the upper rooms and the ritual pools of water for accommodating those needing them from abroad."²⁸ This inscription is dated before AD 70.²⁹

These archaeological discoveries support and augment the literary evidence for the existence of synagogue buildings before AD 70, not only in the Diaspora but also in Palestine. Besides Luke, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John provide references to synagogues in Galilee (Matt. 4:23/Mark 1:39), Nazareth (Matt. 13:54/Mark 6:1–2), and Capernaum (Mark 1:21/John 6:59). Jose-

²³ Lester L. Grabbe, "Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine: A Re-Assessment," *Journal of Theological Studies* 39, no. 2 (1988): 406; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 51; and Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 33.

²⁴ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 58–59; Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 55; and James F. Strange, "Ancient Texts, Archaeology as Text, and the Problem of the First-Century Synagogue," in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, 41.

²⁵ Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 35; and Strange, "Ancient Texts, Archaeology as Text, and the Problem of the First-Century Synagogue," 43.

²⁶ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 65–66; and Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 65.

²⁷ Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 57.

²⁸ L. Robert, M. N. Tod, and E. Ziebarth, eds., *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (Leiden, 1932–1949; reprint, Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1984), 8:170; and Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.*, 53.

²⁹ Robert, Tod, and Ziebarth, *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, 8:170. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 17; and Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2:1306–307. Not all scholars accept this dating (Howard Clark Kee, "The Transformation of the Synagogue After 70 C.E.: Its Import for Early Christianity," *New Testament Studies* 36, no. 1 [1990]: 7–8).

phus (AD 37–ca. 100) speaks of synagogues in Dora (AD 40–41) and Caesarea (AD 65–66).³⁰ So both archaeological and literary sources show that Luke's portrayal of synagogues within Palestine itself during the time of Jesus and of his disciples is historically accurate.

THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Stephen is first mentioned as one of seven men appointed to address a complaint raised by the Ἑλληνισταί against the Ἑβραῖοί (Acts 6:1–6). Many commentators identify Stephen as a Ἑλληνιστής himself, as well as the people listed in verse 9 who disputed with him. Later, the Ἑλληνισταί debated with Paul and wanted to kill him also (9:29). So understanding the identity of this group of people who opposed the message of Stephen and Paul is important.

The word Ἑλληνιστής is found only in Acts (6:1; 9:29; 11:20); it does not occur anywhere else in either the New Testament or the Septuagint. The lexical definition of Ἑλληνιστής indicates a person who speaks Greek.³¹ A Ἑβραῖος, in this context, is then a Jew who speaks Aramaic/Hebrew.³² However, by these definitions, Paul could be a Ἑλληνιστής, but he identified himself as a Ἑβραῖος (2 Cor. 11:22, Phil. 3:5).³³ In fact, Paul was from Cilicia, one of the locales mentioned in Acts 6:9. He too was a Diaspora Jew, but he apparently did not identify himself as a Ἑλληνιστής. This led C. D. F. Moule to suggest that the term indicated Jews who spoke Greek but not Aramaic or Hebrew.³⁴

Most translations render Ἑλληνιστής in these verses as “Hellenist” (NASB, ESV, NIV, RSV, NKJV). But the term “Hellenist” has a potentially broad connotation. Even as early as the fifth century BC, Isocrates wrote that “the name ‘Hellenes’ [Ἑλλήνων] suggests

³⁰ Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 2.14.4–5; *Antiquitates judaicae* 19.6.3. Dates provided in Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 63–64.

³¹ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 319; and H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 536.

³² Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 270; and Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 467.

³³ Graham Harvey, “Synagogues of the Hebrews: ‘Good Jews’ in the Diaspora,” in *Jewish Local Patriotism and Self-Identification in the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. Sian Jones and Sarah Pearce, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement* (Sheffield Academic, 1998), 143; Longenecker, “Acts,” 803; and C. F. D. Moule, “Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?” *Expository Times* 70, no. 4 (1959): 100.

³⁴ Moule, “Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?” 100.

no longer a race but an intelligence, and that the title ‘Hellenes’ is applied rather to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood.”³⁵ And so C. K. Barrett states, “The question that is left open is the extent to which Ἑλληνιστοί had adopted with the Greek language also Greek ways of thinking and habits of life.”³⁶ And here Barrett offers a wise caution, stating that there would be great variety among the Diaspora Jews.³⁷ In fact, there was probably great variety among Palestinian Jews, depending upon where they lived (for example, Tiberius versus Jerusalem). As Joseph Gutmann observes, “It is now realized that all the Jews of Greco-Roman antiquity, no matter whether they spoke Aramaic or Greek, were subject to the process of Hellenization.”³⁸

Diaspora Jews have often been characterized as more Hellenized than Palestinian Jews, but this characterization may need revision. Andrew Overman asserts that “we must begin to study these tremendously diverse Judaisme according to their locale and region, not according to the broad, and now effectively empty, categories of Diaspora and homeland.”³⁹ And so while some assume that Diaspora Jews were less scrupulous, having to maneuver life as a minority, the fact that many of them continued to send their temple tax to Jerusalem and even make pilgrimages there speaks of a continued, and costly, commitment.⁴⁰ Ben Witherington makes the observation that “Saul [Paul] is proof, if any were needed, that Diaspora Jews, *as a group*, should never be categorized as necessarily more liberal or broad in their views of things like the temple and Torah.”⁴¹ The “Hellenists” who debated Stephen and then later Paul were apparently Diaspora Jews who had returned to Jerusalem to live.⁴² It is understandable that these Jews who used to live

³⁵ Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 50, trans. George Norlin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 1:149.

³⁶ Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:308.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:309.

³⁸ Joseph Gutmann, “The Synagogue of Dura-Europos: A Critical Analysis,” in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, 83.

³⁹ J. Andrew Overman and Robert S. MacLennan, *Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 77.

⁴⁰ Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 33.

⁴¹ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 254.

⁴² Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 12; Keener, *Acts*, 1260.

away from the temple and among the Gentiles and their gods might be more zealous concerning the Law of Moses and the institution of the temple than even the native Jewish population.

These Ἕλληνοῖται then were very likely Jews who spoke primarily Greek and probably little, if any, Aramaic or Hebrew. But what set them apart was their life situation: they were Diaspora Jews who had maintained their distinctives, and their zealousness had compelled them to relocate to Jerusalem.⁴³ It was their cultural identity that put them at odds with Stephen and his message, though Stephen may have shared this same cultural identity. Maybe that is why he continued to engage them—even to the end.

THE UNIQUE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF JEWISH FREEDMEN

But did Stephen really share the cultural identity of the people listed in Acts 6:9? In that he was probably primarily a Greek-speaking Jew, yes, most likely. Was he a Diaspora Jew? If the assumption that Jews who spoke Greek but not Aramaic or Hebrew were most likely Diaspora Jews, then he may very well have been.⁴⁴ Was he a freedman? There is no way of knowing. But at least some of the people listed in Acts 6:9 were apparently freedmen. Who were these freedmen and why does it matter?

To answer this question, the groups listed in this verse must be considered once more. As mentioned previously, Luke wrote of the Synagogue of the Freedmen and then four geographical locations. Some scholars, noting that Λιβερῖνος is the Roman designation for a freedman, see this group of people as freedmen from Rome or Italy.⁴⁵ This would then provide five geographical locations.⁴⁶

⁴³ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 272.

⁴⁴ Keener argues that Stephen's name itself indicates that he was a Diaspora Jew: "Stephen' was a very common Greek name, but it was rare in Palestine and is never clearly attested for Palestinian Jews" (Keener, *Acts*, 1281–82).

⁴⁵ Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 356; Fitzpatrick-McKinley, "Synagogue Communities in the Graeco-Roman Cities," 71; Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 17; Pervo, *Acts*, 167n18; Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, 428n8.

⁴⁶ Keener suggests five different synagogues. He contends that it is difficult to suppose "that large numbers of Jewish slaves of Roman citizens would have settled in other, non-Jewish Eastern cities before moving here [Jerusalem]" (Keener, *Acts*, 1302).

However, understanding Λιβερτίνοϲ to be freedmen from only Rome is an assumption that needs to be examined. Philo (ca. 20 BC–AD 50) spoke of a settlement of Jews in Rome who were brought there as captives and later manumitted.⁴⁷ Tacitus (ca. AD 56–118) wrote that four thousand Egyptian and Jewish freedmen of military age were banished to Sardinia (an island off the coast of Italy), while the rest of the Egyptians and Jews were made to leave Italy unless they recanted their religious views.⁴⁸ So there is evidence that Jewish slaves and freedmen were in Rome. These Jewish slaves probably came to Rome as a result of Pompey’s defeat of Judea in 63 BC or the siege of Jerusalem by Sosius in 37 BC.⁴⁹ In addition, in 4 BC, Varus put down an uprising where two thousand were crucified and many others were taken captive.⁵⁰ But were these Jewish captives taken only to Rome? Gideon Fuks comments that “our sources never state specifically that these captives were brought to Rome. On the contrary; on a number of occasions we are led to suppose that Jews were sold into slavery in the markets of non-Jewish Palestine, or in those of Syria and especially Egypt.”⁵¹ J. Albert Harrill explains that “opportunistic markets formed around frontier army camps . . . [and] these ‘camp followers’ (*canabae*) worked deals with the military to operate wholesale bazaars to auction off the always plentiful war captives.”⁵² So while there were multiple conflicts in which Jews were enslaved, many surely ended up, not just in Rome, but scattered across the Roman Empire. With this in mind, it seems very likely that there could be Jewish freedmen from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia.⁵³

⁴⁷ Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 155.

⁴⁸ This occurred in AD 19. Tacitus, *Annals* 2.85.

⁴⁹ Gideon Fuks, “Where Have All the Freedmen Gone? On an Anomaly in the Jewish Grave Inscriptions from Rome,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36, no. 1 (1985): 25–27; Kraabel, “The Roman Diaspora,” 13; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 54.

⁵⁰ Fuks, “Where Have All the Freedmen Gone?” 27; Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 2.66–79.

⁵¹ Fuks, “Where Have All the Freedmen Gone?” 27.

⁵² J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie* 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1995), 37.

⁵³ While it is beyond the scope of this article, one way to confirm the presence of Jewish freedmen in these other areas would be to research the funerary inscriptions from these regions. Freedmen in particular engaged in the creation of tombstone inscriptions, and there are large numbers of such inscriptions throughout the Roman Empire (Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 127–28).

This analysis suggests then that in Acts 6:9 Luke gave the name of the one synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen, and then listed the various places these freedmen had relocated from.⁵⁴ This suggestion that the people arguing with Stephen were not simply those of the Jewish Diaspora, but Jewish freedmen in particular, brings some light on why Jews from these several geographic areas were named together. They had something much deeper in common than locality; they had experienced the scourge of slavery and the restored gift of freedom.

But why would Jewish freedmen as a group have so adamantly opposed Stephen's message? Little work has been done to explore this question. Harrill touches on these Jewish freedmen in an excursus, as does Keener,⁵⁵ but most others simply mention what a *libertini* is and then return to speaking of the opponents as Diaspora Jews.⁵⁶ While the freedmen topic itself is beyond the scope of this article, there are some specifics that bear on the issue at hand.

As has been mentioned, a freedman is a slave who has been manumitted by his owner. Some scholars go on to say that the term "freedman" is also used for a freed slave's descendants. While the sons of freed slaves were called freedmen before 217 BC, the term after that time referred only to the freed slave.⁵⁷ Any child of a freedman who was born after his parent was freed was born as a free person, not a freedman. This is an important clarification. Legally, there was a distinction between a freedman and a freeborn person.⁵⁸ There was also social stigma attached to a freedman, for "despite his legal transformation the freedman still possessed his

⁵⁴ Harrill comments that "the fact that a synagogue could have been composed entirely or mainly of freedmen/women and their descendants is interesting in itself and parallels the phenomenon of *collegia tenuiorum* made up solely of *liberti*" (Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 61–62).

⁵⁵ Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves*, 56–66, specifically p. 61; and Keener, *Acts*, 1304–306.

⁵⁶ See especially Hengel and Keener, who both expertly explore why the Hellenistic Jews would have so strongly opposed Stephen. They come to the same basic conclusion as this article, but they focus on these Jews being simply Diaspora Jews, not Diaspora Jewish freedmen, and so do not consider the implications of this difference (Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 1–29). Keener has an excursus on freedmen, but he too returns to speaking of these Jews as Diaspora Jews (Keener, *Acts*, 1304–310).

⁵⁷ A. M. Duff, *Freedmen in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928; reprint, Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2007), 50–51; and Evan W. Haley, "Suetonius 'Claudius' 24,1 and the Sons of Freedmen," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 35, no. 1 (1986): 120–21.

⁵⁸ Duff, *Freedmen in the Early Roman Empire*, 36–49; and Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 66–119.

‘servile ingenium,’ and he would always remain inferior to those untainted by servitude.”⁵⁹ A descendant of a freedman would in every way be a freeborn person, with no legal or social disadvantages. So anyone who was not a freedman would not want to be identified as one.⁶⁰ But the question arises, if a Jewish freedman returned to live in Jerusalem and was a member of this synagogue, would his descendants continue to attend it even though they themselves were not freedmen? There is no way to know. But if they did, it would indicate that they still closely associated themselves with this group of people.

Another misconception concerning freedmen is that most Roman slaves were eventually manumitted. Some who have studied Roman slavery and manumission have worked to dispel this false idea. Keith Hopkins asserts that “most Roman slaves were freed only by death.”⁶¹ It is important to note that of all the Jews taken in war and enslaved, only a small percentage would have become freedmen. However, some authors have written that owners often manumitted Jewish slaves because they were difficult, due to their religious scruples.⁶² But as slaves, Jewish persons would have no right to their religious views and practices. Fuks responds, “We know that Roman masters tended to send such obdurate people to their agricultural estates, where work was much harder and the chance of being manumitted quite slim.”⁶³ The attitude that in fact appears to have set slaves on the path to manumission is not one of

⁵⁹ Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 66.

⁶⁰ Contra Keener who argues that, “although the title might apply strictly to first-generation children of freedpersons . . . , those for whom it was a high-status term might preserve it longer” (Keener, *Acts*, 1303). He assumes that “freedman” was a high-status term because freedmen were Roman citizens. However, a freedman received citizenship only if his owner/patron was a Roman citizen. And even if the owner/patron was a citizen, the freed slave did not become a Roman citizen if he was freed informally (Matthew J. Perry, *Gender, Manumission, and the Roman Freedwoman* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 65). In fact, informal manumission may have been the more common and preferred manner of manumission by slave owners (Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 189, 238).

⁶¹ Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Sociological Studies in Roman History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 118; see also Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 194.

⁶² Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 1:259; and E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian: A Study in Political Relations* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 131.

⁶³ Fuks, “Where Have All the Freedmen Gone?” 30.

obduracy but of faithfulness to do what the master required.⁶⁴

This raises an important question: What was life like for a Jewish slave? In most regards, slavery was the same, regardless of a person's origins. Slaves were bought and sold as property.⁶⁵ They were "deprived of a past and a future, unable to claim natal family or legitimate offspring."⁶⁶ Slaves could be physically punished, sometimes brutally, without recourse.⁶⁷ They could also be branded, tattooed, and shackled.⁶⁸ If all this were not enough, slaves were often used sexually by their masters.⁶⁹ Slavery would have been, for most, a miserable existence. Publius Syrus (first century BC), a freedman himself, wrote, "It is beautiful to die instead of being degraded as a slave."⁷⁰

But for a Jew, the experience must have had an extra measure of hardship. Since slaves were property and had no individual rights, a Jewish slave, unless he or she had a particularly benevolent master, could not adhere to the Mosaic Law. While all Diaspora Jews were separated from the temple, in a very practical sense, Jewish slaves were also separated from the Law. So for the very fortunate few who were eventually manumitted by their owners, becoming a freedman must have been particularly significant. No longer under the absolute will of another, they could now worship as they desired. They could follow the Law with no obstacles. And some of these liberated Jews, probably the most devout among them, made the journey back to Jerusalem, to live among the chosen people and worship in the temple of their God. Surely, they more than any other group of Diaspora Jews, coveted the temple and the Law. They had received back what they had lost. So when Stephen began to tell them things that sounded like a threat to the

⁶⁴ S. Scott Bartchy, *ΜΑΜΜΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21*, SBL Dissertation (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 119; Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 200, 242; and Susan Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen During the Late Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 15.

⁶⁵ Philo, *Special Laws* 2, 8.34; Seneca, *Epistles* 80.9.

⁶⁶ Carolyn Osiek, "Family Matters," in *Christian Origins*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, *A People's History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 1:209.

⁶⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum* 28.4.16.

⁶⁸ Richard A. Horsley, "The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars," *Semeia* 83–84 (1998): 43.

⁶⁹ Musonius Rufus, *Fragment 12*.

⁷⁰ Publius Syrus, *Sententiae* 480, trans. J. Albert Harrill, in *The Manumission of Slaves*, 1.

temple and to the Law, it becomes more clear why they so vigorously opposed him.

CONCLUSION

In Acts 6:9, Luke identifies a group of men who began to argue with Stephen, and these men ultimately orchestrated the events that led to Stephen's stoning. Luke specified the Synagogue of the Freedmen and four geographical areas. While the Greek in this verse is admittedly ambiguous, an understanding of first-century history and culture leads to more clarity. It is historically possible for a building and community called the Synagogue of the Freedmen to have existed in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus and his disciples. Military defeats suffered by Judea had resulted in many thousands of Jews being taken as war prisoners and sold as slaves—not just in Rome but throughout the Empire. Some of these slaves were eventually manumitted by their owners and granted freedom. Because slavery would have in most cases deprived these Jews of the ability to adhere to the Law, freedom brought a restoration of their religious customs. This background of slavery, manumission, and restored freedom to worship is what these Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia shared. These freedmen surely valued their Jewish heritage and customs more than Diaspora Jews who had never had them entirely taken away. Those who then migrated back to Jerusalem were probably some of the most devout Jews in the city.

These then were Stephen's opponents—not simply Diaspora Jews, but Diaspora Jews who were freedmen. Luke did not specify what they argued with Stephen about, what in particular they found threatening or offensive. But in his speech before the council, Stephen spoke not only to the council, but to these, his accusers. He repeatedly accused them of being descendants of a disobedient people. When they were slaves, these freedmen could claim no ancestors, their heritage was stripped from them, and they had become simply bodies to be used by their masters. When their freedom was restored, in a sense, so was their heritage. But Stephen was rehearsing the disobedience of these very ancestors. And then he directly accused them: "You people who are stubborn and uncircumcised in hearts and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). They were stubborn, uncircumcised, resisting God? They who had endured slavery, who had worked hard to earn their masters' favor, who had become some of the fortunate few to taste freedom again, who had made the effort to return to Jerusalem? How could they be the ones resisting God? But when Stephen said,

“Look! I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56), their building fury erupted. They covered their ears in reaction to what they perceived as blasphemy,⁷¹ dragged Stephen out, and silenced him forever. In the most fundamental way, the declaration of Jesus’s resurrection and ascension threatened their concept of God, his Law, and his temple—the God, the Law, and the temple they had worked so hard to return to.

It may not be possible to fully understand why this group of freedmen could not accept that Jesus was the Messiah. But perhaps their reaction is more understandable in light of their background as not just any group of Diaspora Jews but Diaspora Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen.

⁷¹ Bock, *Acts*, 313; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 276.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.