

THREE NOTES ON FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:
INVERTED GUILT IN ACTS 7.55-60,
PAUL'S FIGURATIVE VOTE IN ACTS 26.10,
FIGURATIVE EYES IN GALATIANS 4.15

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Inverted Guilt in Acts 7.55-60

Ancient rhetoricians commonly turned accusers' own charges against them, a strategy both recommended in rhetorical handbooks and exemplified in preserved forensic speeches.¹ Writers also employed this inversion of guilt to provide irony in other literary forms as well, for example claiming that it was Socrates' accusers, rather than Socrates himself, who were truly guilty of the crimes of which they accused him.²

Stephen's speech clearly inverts accusations of law violation against his accusers (Acts 7.51-53), but it appears likely that Luke further accentuates this inversion in the ensuing narrative of Stephen's martyrdom. This additional inversion is suggested by the collocation of three independent but likely mutually supportive factors: the Son of man standing (7.55-56); the witnesses stripping off their own garments

1. See e.g. Lysias, *Or.* 3.1, §96; Aeschines, *Tim.* passim, esp. (and ironically) 179; *Fals. leg.* 3, 14, 56, 69; Thucydides, 3.61.1; *Rhet. Alex.* 36, 1442b.6-9; Cicero, *Or. Brut.* 40.137; *Verr.* 2.1.6.17; *Rosc. Amer.* 30.82-45.132; *Cael.* 13.31; 24.60; *Quinct.* 3.11-9.33 (the entire *narratio!*); *Scaur.* 13.29; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 753.

2. E.g. Xenophon, *Apol.* 29; *Mem.* 4.4.4; esp. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 3.8. For the moralist principle of judges' verdicts passing judgment on themselves, see e.g. Publilius Syrus, 698; Cicero, *Verr.* 2.5.69.177. Such reversals could generate irony (cf. Aeschines, *Tim.* 117-18; Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.8.9-10; Seneca the Elder, *Controv.* 6.5).

rather than Stephen's (7.58); and Stephen confessing their sins rather than his own (7.60).

The first of these factors is the least certain, since the Son of man 'standing' has generated numerous plausible interpretations.³ Two of the interpretations, however, that Jesus stands as judge or witness, are specifically forensic.⁴ Scripture commonly portrays God as rising to defend his people.⁵ If Jesus stands as the true judge, as witness, and/or as confessing Stephen before the Father (Lk. 12.8), then the narrative reverses the verdict of the unjust judges on themselves.⁶

The second feature is the most obvious of the three, in view of frequent reports of killings from antiquity. Ancient reports of lynchings and executions frequently mention that the accused person was stripped naked before being killed.⁷ Later Jewish descriptions of executions, which are probably idealized, also specify the stripping of a man before his execution.⁸

There are valid historical reasons why Stephen's accusers may have stripped themselves: those engaging in strenuous physical activity often stripped off their clothing or their outer garments.⁹ Nevertheless, that Luke chooses to report them stripping themselves, while neglecting to

3. For surveys of views, see C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994–1998), pp. 384–85; Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (JSNTSup, 12; Sheffield: JSOT Press/Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), pp. 222–24; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP, 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 139.

4. Speakers normally rose to speak in various settings, and this would include accusers (Zech. 3.1–8), intercessors or advocates (Jer. 18.20; Pliny, *Ep.* 1.23.2) and judges (Isa. 3.13; *t. Sanh.* 6.2).

5. E.g. as judge in Ps. 9.19; 74.22; 82.8; Isa. 3.13; as advocate in Ps. 109.31.

6. Others have suggested that Stephen is pronouncing judgment on his judges (cf. Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [ed. E.J. Epp with C.R. Matthews; trans. J. Limburg, A.T. Kraabel and D.H. Juel; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], p. 60; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* [AB, 31; Garden City: Doubleday, 1998], p. 392), which points in this same direction.

7. Polybius 11.30.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Rhet.* 7.69.2; Josephus, *Apion* 2.53. Most relevant here may be the practice (for purposes of shaming) before illegal lynchings (Suetonius, *Vit.* 17.1; Herodian, 8.8.6).

8. *M. Sanh.* 6.3.

9. E.g. Apollonius of Rhodes, 1.364; Plutarch, *Cat. Maj.* 3.2; Dio Chrysostom, *2 Melanc. (Or. 28)* 6; Lucian, *Asin.* 8–9; *Anach.* 36; Diogenes, *Ep.* 37; Philostratus, *Hrk.* 15.9; 26.20.

mention any stripping of Stephen, is significant.¹⁰ The shame normally attached to the person being killed is transferred in this account to those who are performing the killing. This suggests an ominous reversal of roles: unknown to themselves, the accusers are the ones who will face true judgment.¹¹

Finally, Stephen prays for the forgiveness of those who have wronged him. This feature by itself would not necessarily indicate ironic reversal, apart from coinciding with the other features we have mentioned (Jesus did, after all, command prayer for persecutors, Lk. 6.28). Taken in conjunction with them, however, it is suggestive. Later Jewish tradition claims that it was conventional for a person being executed to pray, ‘May my death atone for all my sins.’¹² But whereas we might expect Stephen to pray for God to forgive his own sins here, he instead dies praying for the forgiveness of his persecutors.

Scholars regularly recognize that Stephen’s death evokes that of his Lord, so it should come as no surprise that some of these ironic elements echo those in Luke’s passion narrative as well. At his own trial, Jesus announced that he would soon reign as Son of man (Lk. 22.69); hence, he was their judge. Likewise, Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his accusers (according to the likeliest reading, Lk. 23.34).¹³ In Jesus’ case, however, it is Jesus who is explicitly stripped of his garments, and his garments are divided (Lk. 23.34); perhaps the image of stripping for exercise more naturally fit Hellenists, such as Stephen’s accusers and executioners presumably were (cf. 6.9-14; 7.58).

In any case, the collocation of these three features of the martyrdom narrative, together with the gist of Stephen’s own speech, suggests that Luke inverts the implied verdict of the hearing. The true judge supports

10. It so surprised F.C. Conybeare that he proposed an emendation to account for it (‘The Stoning of St. Stephen’, *Expositor* Ser. 8.6 [1913], pp. 466-70)! Acts 22.20 makes this emendation improbable.

11. I suggested this earlier in Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 343. Probably Acts 22.23 implies an analogous reversal.

12. *M. Sanh.* 6.3. Any person expecting death might pray thus (e.g. *t. Ber.* 6.17; *b. Ber.* 60a, *Bar.*; *y. Ber.* 9.4, §2).

13. The parallel does not suggest that Luke invented Jesus’ prayer; unknown to most of Luke’s audience and probably to Luke himself, Jesus’ words at this time fit a Jewish prayer that would have also been prayed at that time (Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and his Story* [trans. R. Winston and C. Winston; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960], p. 142).

Stephen; Stephen's accusers strip off their own cloaks, in contrast to the convention of stripping the person to be executed; and, contrary to convention, Stephen prays for the forgiveness of his accusers' guilt rather than his own.

Paul's Figurative Vote in Acts 26.10

Because Paul in Acts 26.10 claims that he 'cast his vote' against Jesus' holy ones in capital cases, scholars sometimes have thought that Paul was in the Sanhedrin.¹⁴ From this putative position in the Sanhedrin, they have even inferred that he may have been married¹⁵ (though they may as well have assumed that he was an elder, as most members of the Sanhedrin were, though this view contradicts Acts 7.58 and probably his continuing active longevity). Such inferences are, however, unwarranted. Ancient hearers would recognize that Paul was simply employing figurative language effectively.

The expression does have a judicial context, and functions as good judicial rhetoric. In Roman provinces, only the designated Roman officials could execute people;¹⁶ the behavior Paul here confesses before Agrippa, Bernice and Festus, therefore, is technically illegal. Why would Paul confess illegal behavior at a trial? Paul's 'vote' to execute people (or Stephen, if it is a generalizing plural) suggests that he acted not purely on his own but participated in corporate decisions. That Paul locked up Jesus' holy ones because of 'authorization' from the high priests (26.10; cf. 9.14; 26.12) implicates leaders of the priestly aristocracy in Paul's crimes.

The very priestly class that insists on Paul's execution, now that he is in Roman custody, participated in assassinations! The difference between them and Paul in Paul's argument appears to be that they

14. E.g. Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*. III. *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 103; William Sanford LaSor, *Men Who Knew Christ* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1971), pp. 91-92. Granted, Paul apparently came from a family of means, but they may have been Hellenist immigrants (cf. Acts 6.9).

15. The rule requiring marriage in the Sanhedrin (*b. Sanh.* 36b) is probably not pre- 70 CE in any case.

16. See A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1963; reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 32-43.

supported his illegal activity, but now that he has long since turned from it and is ready to denounce it, they are eager to silence him. Luke's narrative also implies that they may be ready to continue to participate in such activity (cf. 23.14-15; 25.3).¹⁷ Returning charges against one's accusers was conventional forensic rhetoric.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Paul's 'vote' does not imply a democratic civic council or a jury court; it only indicates his consent and participation (cf. 8.1; 22.20). Paul does, to be sure, use the term for 'pebble',¹⁹ which could function as one among several kinds of ballots. But it could also function as a metonymy for other forms of corporate approval, and many scholars argue that it does not refer to literal voting here.²⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson points out several reasons why literal voting is not likely here; his strongest argument is that, despite Luke's frequent emphasis on Paul's high status, he fails to portray him as a member of the Sanhedrin—the one body that could have issued capital verdicts if anyone could have.²¹

There is, however, another important consideration rarely mentioned or documented that also supports the view of figurative ballots here, namely, the same or similar language is often used figuratively in ancient sources.²² Aelius Aristides employs the phrase figuratively for

17. Following rhetorical convention, Luke is ready to reverse the charges even within his narrative. But lest we immediately dismiss his narrative as too tendentious, Josephus reports plenty of intrigue and even complicity with assassins among some of the Sadducean aristocrats in precisely the years preceding the Judean–Roman war.

18. See e.g. Aeschines, *Fals. leg.* 3, 69; *Ctes.* 113, 156, 259; Thucydides, 3.61.1; *Rhet. Alex.* 36, 1442b.6-9; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Lys.* 24; Cicero, *Or. Brut.* 40.137; *De or.* 3.204; *Sest.* 37.80; Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 753.

19. E.g. Plutarch, *Alc.* 22.2; Iamblichus, *V.P.* 35.260.

20. Some thus allow its application to 'unofficial action' (Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity. IV. English Translation and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], p. 317; F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951], p. 443) or a figurative sense (Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], p. 742) such as siding with those so voting (Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 758).

21. Johnson, *Acts*, p. 434.

22. E.g. Xenophon, *Symp.* 5.8 (in a jest); figurative cooperation with God's decree in Musonius Rufus, frg. 38, p. 136.4-5 Lutz (using σύμψηφος, which has a broader semantic range [Liddell-Scott]); an analogy in Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 16.3-4; evaluating truth in Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 33.1. I am not at this point convinced

expressing an opinion.²³ After weighing various evidence on a matter, Dionysius of Halicarnassus notes a criterion that casts the final ‘vote’ (ψηφον).²⁴ Lucian tells his patron that regardless of others’ votes on his work, the patron’s will ultimately prove decisive.²⁵

As Johnson has noted, this figurative image is particularly apt here and may function as wordplay: while others were stoning Stephen to death, Paul cast his own pebble.²⁶ The idiom ‘cast’ does not indicate this by itself, since jurors ‘casting’ their pebbles was a conventional idiom.²⁷ It fits the context well, however. Some find the suggestion dubious because the context does not invite humor; but the ancients used puns less for humor than for wit, which might be appropriate when implicating accusers.²⁸

If Luke does include such a wordplay, he was not the only ancient writer to have thought of it. Thus a fragment of Hipponax decrees: ‘by public vote... Pebbled with stones she may die, an evil death to the evil.’²⁹ Likewise, when some accusers agree to drop their stones (admittedly not the term for pebbles here) and instead vote as jurors, the defendant urges, ‘Keep your stones [λίθους]...for you will need them presently at court.’³⁰

Other figurative uses of ‘vote’ in antiquity support the view that Paul ‘casting his vote’ simply portrays graphically his consent to and participation in a lynching or lynchings. This portrayal’s context implicates the class that now accuses him. If ‘casting his pebble’ also involves a wordplay (as a contrast to those who ‘stoned’ Stephen), it reflects the sort of wordplay that also occurred to some other ancient writers.

that the figurative usage was so pervasive as to have lost its figurative connotations; but it was a common image.

23. Aelius Aristides, *Defense of Orat.* 1, 1D.

24. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Lys.* 11. When weighing a decision, one could ask a friend to cast his vote (*calculam*, pebble; Pliny, *Ep.* 1.2.5). I use the accusative here because it so appears in the sentence to which I refer. The nominative is, of course, ψηφος.

25. Lucian, *Harmonides* 3.

26. With Johnson, *Acts*, p. 434.

27. E.g. Plutarch, *Cic.* 7.4 (φέρειν τὴν ψηφον); see *BDAG*.

28. E.g. *Rhet. Her.* 4.21.29–4.22.31; Suetonius, *Jul.* 50.2; Lucian, *Ver. hist.* 2.20; Ps.-Callisthenes, *Alex.* 1.35.

29. Hipponax, frg. 89 (LCL p. 61).

30. Lucian, *Pisc.* 11 (LCL 3.19).

Figurative Eyes in Galatians 4.15

Speaking of their earlier loyalty to him, Paul claims that during his first visit to them, the Galatians would have ‘dug out their eyes’ and given them to him (Gal. 4.15).³¹ Some scholars have argued that Paul here indicates that he suffered from an eye ailment, which the Galatian Christians sought to compensate. By contrast, I am arguing here that Paul was simply employing a figure of speech that the Galatians should have understood accordingly.

Because Paul has just remarked that a physical infirmity provided the occasion for that visit (Gal. 4.13-14),³² it might seem natural to infer that Paul’s ailment involved his eyes.³³ But the offer of their eyes would express their sentiment whether or not related to the occasion for his visit, and it is questionable why an eye ailment would have provided the primary occasion for his preaching to them.³⁴ (Granted, we do not have sufficient information to know why *any* particular ailment became such an occasion, although it is plausible that the Galatian hill country would provide a healthy respite from malaria or a similar sickness contracted in the lowlands.)³⁵

31. The tearing out of eyes is a particularly graphic image, sometimes applicable to penal torture and apt for generating pathos (e.g. Seneca, *Controv.* 1.4.10; *Sil. It.* 10.637).

32. It was not uncommon for letters to comment on health; e.g. Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 5.18 (33); 5.30 (65); 5.54 (69); 5.56 (71); *Ad Amicos* 2.2.

33. E.g. Ben Witherington, III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 309-10, among many others. Weak eyes, like any weakness, might provoke ridicule (e.g. Plutarch, *Inim. util.* 5, *Mor.* 88F).

34. If one must guess a connection, one might treat an eye ailment by staying away from unnecessary sunlight (Pliny, *Ep.* 7.21.1-2); incapacitation of eyes could keep one from work (e.g. Cicero, *Fam.* 14.4.6). Eyesalves were known (e.g. Pliny, *Nat.* 22.56.117; 25.95.153; *b. Shab.* 108b) and are sometimes associated with Phrygia, although not necessarily nearby (Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* [JSNTSup, 11; Sheffield: Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, 1986], pp. 196-99; G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri published in 1978* [vol. 3; North Ryde, NSW: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1983], §17, p. 56).

35. Cf. William M. Ramsay, *A Historical Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1900; reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 424. Some areas were known to be healthier than others (e.g. Cicero, *Quint. frat.* 3.1.1; Plutarch, *Cic.* 3.4-5; Pliny, *Ep.* 6.4.1); for knowledge of sickness

In fact, however, Paul is probably merely employing a familiar hyperbolic figure for an expression of sacrificial devotion. Reinforcing this likelihood is the fact that some other ancient writers employed the same sort of figure.³⁶ In Petronius, for example, some rhetoricians appeal to pathos by crying that they have sacrificed their eyes (*oculam*) in defense of the people.³⁷ In a tannaitic midrash, a rabbi could portray Abraham's devotion to God in terms of his willingness to give even the pupil of his eye, or his very life.³⁸

Treating another as dearer than one's eyes expresses love in other texts. Thus Catullus 3.5 invites lament for his lady's pet sparrow, newly deceased, 'whom she loved more than her very eyes';³⁹ Catullus applies the same expression to Calvus: 'If I did not love you more than my own eyes'.⁴⁰ He urges another that if he wants Catullus to owe him his eyes or anything more precious (if Catullus has anything more precious, he adds), he should not deprive Catullus of what is more precious to Catullus than his eyes.⁴¹ In another author, we read of Artemis loving Odysseus' mother 'even as your eyes'.⁴²

Other metaphors of sacrificial devotion convey the same idea. Thus, for example, Fronto assures the emperor that Rusticus would happily die to preserve the emperor's little finger.⁴³ A soldier could likewise appeal to his wounds to prove his devotion to the state or to others on whose behalf he had suffered, sometimes also generating pathos.⁴⁴

Such evidence from ancient usage suggests that Paul's audience would have understood his reference to their giving him their eyes as a hyperbolic expression of their devotion to him. This usage also fits well

around lowland marshes, cf. Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* 7.27-29; Heraclitus, *Hom. Prob.* 11.5.

36. I mentioned this in passing in Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 240 n. 273.

37. Petronius, *Sat.* 1.

38. *Sifre Deut.* 313.1.4. In *Gen. R.* 55.4, Isaac is willing to cut off a limb at God's command.

39. *Plus illa oculis suis amabat* (Catullus, 3.5; LCL pp. 4-5).

40. *Plus oculis meis amarem* (Catullus, 14.1-3; LCL pp. 18-19).

41. Catullus, 82.1-4.

42. Callimachus, *Hymn. Dian.* lines 210-11.

43. Fronto, *Ad Antoninum Imp.* 1.2.2.

44. Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 7.62.3; Livy, 45.39.17; Quintus Curtius, 4.16.31-32; Dio Chrysostom, frg. 1; Arrian, *Alex.* 7.10.1-3; see other sources in Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 1202.

the common observation that Gal. 4.12-20 emphasizes pathos.⁴⁵ Some have suggested Paul's eye problems based on other texts,⁴⁶ and it is not our purpose to comment on such proposals here. But Gal. 4.15, at least, does not offer strong support for the hypothesis of Paul's eye ailment.

45. E.g. Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, p. 305; Troy W. Martin, 'The Voice of Emotion: Paul's Pathetic Persuasion (Gal 4:12-20)', in T.H. Olbricht and J.L. Sumney (eds.), *Paul and Pathos* (SBL Symposium Series, 16; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), pp. 181-202.

46. E.g. T.J. Leary, "'A Thorn in the Flesh"—2 Corinthians 12:7', *JTS* 43.2 (1992), pp. 520-22. Some appeal to Gal. 6.11; eye inflammation could in fact affect writing (Cicero, *Att.* 8.13; 10.14), although in my opinion there are more plausible interpretations of Gal. 6.11.