

The Meaning of the Phrase 'And the Witnesses Laid Down Their Cloaks' in Acts 7:58

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Abstract

The present article seeks to understand the statement 'and the witnesses laid down their cloaks' in Acts 7:58. This incident does not immediately stand out to the reader as being significant in the context of Acts 7 in any real way, and is often overlooked by commentators. However, based on other ancient episodes in which a cloak is removed, this article will call into question the meaning and function of the laying down of cloaks in Acts 7:58. It will be suggested that the gesture of shedding cloaks was a symbolic gesture which, on one level, signified impending violence or death. The conclusion will have implications for how we are to understand this gesture both in Acts and in the wider Greco-Roman world.

Keywords

Acts of the Apostles, ancient gestures, cloaks, death of Stephen, outer garments, stoning

Introduction

One of the fascinating and most often neglected features of the account of Stephen's murder is the enigmatic statement, 'And the witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul' [καὶ οἱ μάρτυρες ἀπέθεντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν παρὰ τοὺς πόδας νεανίου καλουμένου Σαύλου] (Acts 7:58).¹ This description has puzzled scholars for years. The act of laying items at the feet of Saul is itself suggestive of the placing of gifts 'at the feet' (παρὰ τοὺς πόδας) of the apostles in 4:35, 37 and 5:2, an act which, in those contexts, implies both veneration and submission. The author's report

of the removal of the witnesses' clothes, however, is somewhat odd.² Why do Stephen's

² On the role of the witnesses, see Deut 17:7 (cf. Lev 24:14). There is a debate concerning how Stephen's execution should be characterized. F. F. Bruce (*The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 158–60) defined it as a 'legal execution', carried out on account of Stephen's blasphemy, which is here characterized by his public announcement that Jesus stands at the right hand of God. Ben Witherington III (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 276) described it as nothing more than a 'lynching', since a proper judicial verdict is absent. Stephen G. Wilson

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¹ All translations of the Greek New Testament are my own.

murderers—the witnesses—take off their cloaks? What precisely does this gesture signify?

There are numerous, ancient accounts of persons being stripped of their garments prior to their own execution or punishment. Josephus, for example, reports that Ptolemy Physcon (182 BCE – 116 BCE) persecuted the Jews by exposing them naked and in chains, intending for them to be trampled to death by elephants (*Ag. Ap.* 2.53). Philo describes an event where thirty-eight members of the council of elders were led into a theatre, stripped of their clothes and scourged with whips, some having died as a result of their beating (Philo *Flacc.* 10.75).³ In the Mishnah, it is said that the male victim's clothes should be removed before he is stoned: 'When [the condemned man] was at a distance of four cubits from the place of stoning they stripped off his garments [...] A man is stoned naked but a woman is not stoned naked' (*m. Sanh.* 6.3).⁴ In Ezekiel, it is said that the adulterous ones will be stripped of their clothes and stoned by a mob (Ezek 16:39–40). In Acts, however, the witnesses remove *their* outer garments (ἱμάτια)—not Stephen's.

Symbolic gestures were common in the ancient world much like they are in contemporary culture, and it may well be the case that the action of the witnesses can be similarly

(‘The Jews and the Death of Jesus in Acts’, in Peter Richardson and David Granskou (eds), *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 1 [ESCSJ; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986], 155–164, here 161) raised the possibility that elements of both lynching and formal trial could have been combined. Wilson rightly states that, in whatever way Stephen's death is ultimately classified, one thing is certain: he suffered a Jewish punishment (stoning). Given the action of the witnesses in 7:58–59 (who are the false witnesses mentioned in 6:13), however, and its close agreement with the instructions for execution in Deut. 17:7 and in the Mishnah (*m. Sanh.* 6.1–4), and the fact that Stephen was before the Sanhedrin (6:12), it would seem to the present writer that Bruce's interpretation is more probable.

³ Cf. Suetonius *Vit.* 17.1; Acts 16:22. In Plutarch *Tim.* 34.6, the accused person throws off his cloak (ῥίψας τὸ ἱμάτιον) immediately before attempting suicide.

⁴ Translation is from P. Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, 2nd rev. ed. (Gateshead [Durham]: Judaica Press, 1983), 262.

classified. There is no shortage of such gestures in Biblical literature. To take just one example, in the missionary discourse in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against those who do not receive them (Mk 6:11; Matt 10:14; Lk 9:5). The same gesture is present in Acts 13:51, and the sense seems to be congruent with the Gospels: to signify God's judgment on those who reject God's messengers and his message.⁵ Other common gestures occur elsewhere in Acts, such as throwing dust up in the air (22:23), shouting (7:57; 14:14), tearing garments (13:51), and shaking out garments (18:6), although the meanings of these gestures are seemingly dissimilar from the one being discussed.⁶ But, if the gesture in Acts 7:58 is to be seen as ‘symbolic’, what then does it symbolize?

Modern Interpretation

The meaning of the shedding of cloaks in Acts 7:58 has been interpreted in a variety of ways, which I will summarize here.

F. C. Conybeare argued that the reference to *their* cloaks in 7:58 does not make sense, and should therefore be conjecturally emended to *his* garments in light of ancient customs and the instructions in the Mishnah.⁷ This conjecture would indeed bring the behavior into agreement with standard practice (cf. Acts 16:22).⁸ However, this emendation is dubious, since the same description of this specific incident is mentioned a second time later in Acts (22:20), where Paul explicitly says he guarded ‘the cloaks of the ones who killed him’ (φυλάσσω τὰ ἱμάτια τῶν ἀναιρούντων αὐτόν). It is in both

⁵ See T. J. Rogers, ‘Shaking the Dust off the Markan Mission Discourse’, in *JNT* 27 (2004): 169–92.

⁶ L. T. Johnson (*The Acts of the Apostles* [SacPag; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992], 391) calls these ‘apropaic gestures’.

⁷ F. C. Conybeare, ‘The Stoning of St. Stephen’, in *Expositor Ser* 8.6 (1913): 466–70.

⁸ Note that Ψ Maj gig altogether omit the personal pronoun, probably in order to eliminate the confusion.

cases clear, then, that the witnesses remove their own cloaks before stoning Stephen.

Joseph Fitzmyer argued that ‘the piling of cloaks at the feet of someone seems to have been a symbolic act, whose meaning escapes us today’.⁹ Fitzmyer finds nothing in the context of Luke-Acts which might provide meaning to the piling of cloaks at Saul’s (Paul’s) feet, and so he concludes with a partial and dissatisfying judgment.

F. F. Bruce argued that the laying down of cloaks has no symbolic function within the narrative. According to Bruce, the act merely signifies the ridding of the outer layer of clothing in order to make the physical procedure of stoning much easier.¹⁰ I will return to Bruce’s judgment below.

Luke Timothy Johnson argued that the gesture identifies Saul (Paul) as the leader of the ones who stoned Stephen.¹¹ This observation is quite possible, since Paul later notes that he approved of the murder:

καὶ ὅτε ἐξεχύνετο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρός σου, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤμην ἐφειστώσ και συνευδοκῶν και φυλάσσων τὰ ἱμάτια τῶν ἀναιρούντων αὐτόν. (Acts 22:20)

And when the blood of Stephen your witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving while guarding the cloaks of the ones who killed him.

Whether the laying down of cloaks at Paul’s feet is explicitly and only meant to identify Saul (Paul) as the leader of the mob is a question that will be taken up below.

Craig Keener suggested that the removal of the witnesses’ cloaks is significant.¹² He argued

that the ‘shame normally attached to the person being killed is transferred in this account to those who are performing the killing’.¹³ According to Keener, the shift from the normal practice of stripping the prisoner to that of the accusers ‘suggests an ominous reversal of roles: unknown to themselves, the accusers are the ones who will face true judgment’.¹⁴ Keener’s theory of the reversal of shame is not completely convincing, however, since it is unlikely that there would be any shame associated with the removal of an outer garment (ἱμάτιον).¹⁵ There is no indication, intratextually or otherwise, that would suggest the witnesses became naked. Moreover, Keener states that Acts 22:23 (on which more below) ‘implies an analogous reversal’, but this view is likewise groundless.¹⁶ Keener’s theory, while clever, represents an inaccurate attempt to explain why Luke excludes any reference to Stephen’s clothes being removed, and is based on the presupposition that it was uncommon for accusers to remove their outer garments before participating in violence.

Ancient Parallels

The removal of the accusers’ cloaks in Acts 7:58 is the only such occurrence in all of Biblical literature. Former scholarly treatments of the present subject, which are quantitatively slim, have hitherto yielded little in the way of comparative evidence from the wider, ancient world that might have implications for the

Figurative Eyes in Galatians 4.15’, in *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 5 (2008): 42–50, esp. 43–45.

¹³ Keener, ‘Three Notes on Figurative Language’, 44.

¹⁴ Keener, ‘Three Notes on Figurative Language’, 44.

¹⁵ See BDAG, 475: ‘The outer garment was laid off in order to leave the arms free Ac 7:58; 22:20’. See also Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 187: ‘The outer garment is certainly intended where the reference is to the laying down of the cumbersome ἱμάτιον, as in the account of Stephen’s stoning (Acts 7:58; 22:20)’.

¹⁶ Keener, ‘Three Notes on Figurative Language’, 44.

⁹ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 394.

¹⁰ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 158.

¹¹ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 140.

¹² C. S. Keener, *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 343; idem., ‘Three Notes on Figurative Language: Inverted Guilt in Acts 7.55–60, Paul’s Figurative Vote in Acts 26.10,

divesting of cloaks in Acts, so a fresh look seems warranted. Keeping Acts 7:58 in mind, in what follows I shall provide a few samples from ancient Greek literature that are apropos.

- (1) ἀμέλει δὲ κἄν που κληθῆ εἰς Ἡράκλειον, ῥίψας τὸ ἱμάτιον τὸν βοῦν αἴρσθαι ἵνα τραχηλίση.
(Theophrastus, *Characters* 27.5)

And if he is called to a shrine of Heracles somewhere, he will throw off his cloak to raise up the bull in order to twist its neck.

Theophrastus describes a person throwing off¹⁷ his himation (ἱμάτιον) for the purpose of, it would seem, freeing up his limbs for aggressive movement. Such performance appears to have been quite common. A similar situation can be seen in the mysterious story of the youth who shed his cloak in Mark 14:51–52, who apparently divested of his outer cloak (either intentionally or unintentionally) in order to escape swiftly from those apprehending him. Howard Jackson has demonstrated that ‘[a]ncient cloaks...were regularly wrapped or draped around the body without any belt or fasteners of any kind to hold them on;’¹⁸ even in the best of circumstances, consequently, they were likely to slip off with the normal movements of the body.¹⁹ According to Jackson, the ridding of the outer cloak of the young man in Mark was expressive of every day life, but that it also served as a ‘virtual ekphrastic topos’, by which he means an event that is characteristically

¹⁷ The verb here for ‘throw’ (ῥίπτω/ῥιπτέω) is the same verb used in Acts 22:23 where the people ‘throw off their garments’ (see below).

¹⁸ It should be noted, however, that cloaks were sometimes fastened. For example, Lycurgus mentions that men were hastening around the city with their cloaks (ἱμάτια) pinned double around them (*Ag. Leo.* 1.40).

¹⁹ H. M. Jackson, ‘Why the Youth Shed His Cloak and Fled Naked: The Meaning and Purpose of Mark 14:51–52’, in *JBL* 116.2 (Sum 1997): 273–289, here 280. See also R. A. Culpepper, ‘Mark 10:50: Why Mention the Garment?’ in *JBL* 101.1 (Mar 1982): 131–32.

dramatic and emotionally charged.²⁰ The text from Theophrastus illustrates one way of understanding the shedding of a cloak—to relieve its constraint upon the body. Still, it is not to be ignored that violence is a component of this passage.

- (2) λάβετε με ταίματια, κόψω Βουπάλου τὸν ὀφθαλμόν.

(Hipponax, fr. 70)

Take my cloak; I am going to punch Boupalos in the eye.

This witty one-liner from the sixth-century poet Hipponax illustrates well the kind of action one would take in order to free up the body. The notable difference here from the example of Theophrastus, however, is the attack of a person instead of an animal. The allusion to the cloak also functions as an amplification of the intensity of the impending act of aggression—to punch Boupalos in the eye. The vivid image of the aggressor removing his cloak stresses the urgent need for assault, creating a meaningful, rhetorical effect.

- (3) δ’ ὁ Ἀλκιβιάδης...τῇ δ’ ἀριστερᾷ χειρὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ χλαμύδα περιελίξας, τῇ δεξιᾷ σπασάμενος τὸ ἔγχειριδιον ἐξέπεσεν...καὶ τοὺς βαρβάρους ὀφθεις δισκοῦδασεν.

(Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 39.3)

Then Alcibiades, rolling his cloak around his left arm, and drawing his sword with his right, dashed out and, after he appeared, scattered the Barbarians.

In this episode, Alcibiades’s cloak is a χλαμύς, ‘a loose outer garment worn by men’, which was most often worn by soldiers.²¹ Although contextually disconnected, this incident comes closer to the description we find in Acts. Alcibiades wraps his cloak around his arm

²⁰ Jackson, ‘Why the Youth Shed His Cloak and Fled Naked’, 280.

²¹ BDAG, 1085.

before dashing out to attack his enemy. He does not throw away his cloak like the witnesses do in Acts, but rolls it around his left arm. The result, however, is still the same: the cloak is removed prior to attack.

- (4) καὶ ὁ Ω Σώκρατες, ἔφη, τοιοῦτον ἐκβέβληκας ῥῆμά τε καὶ λόγον, ὃν εἰπὼν ἡγοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ πάνυ πολλοὺς τε καὶ οὐ φαύλους νῦν οὕτως οἶον ῥίψαντας τὰ ἱμάτια γυμνοὺς, λαβόντας ὃ τι ἐκάστῳ παρέτυχεν ὄπλον, θεῖν διατεταμένους ὡς θαυμάσια ἐργασσομένους.
(Plato, *Republic* 5.473–74)

And then he, ‘Socrates’, he said, ‘after casting such a word and statement, you must expect to be attacked by a great multitude of our men both many and not slight, who will, so to speak, throw off their cloaks and strip, taking the first weapon that comes to hand, prepared to do dreadful deeds’.

This instance from Plato provides the best parallel to our biblical passage. Not only does the language agree, but also the contexts are analogous. In Acts 7:54, the religious spectators are enraged at the words of Stephen, and more still in 7:57 following Stephen’s declaration that Jesus stands at the right hand of God. The result is that the false witnesses remove their cloaks, apprehend Stephen, and ultimately stone him to death. In the *Republic*, an attack is presumed to follow the oration of Socrates. It is further predicted that the attackers will throw off their cloaks (ῥίψαντας τὰ ἱμάτια) then take up arms ‘to do dreadful deeds’. It should be noted that the description here of the removal of the outer garments is *predicted* to happen; not what actually happened. This conscious awareness of the practice likely to ensue indicates *prima facie* that the removal of a cloak before a violent incident was a custom already in place at this time.

Conclusions

The shedding of cloaks in Acts 7:58 can be understood in two ways. My final remarks will be carried out in conversation with Bruce’s and

Johnson’s conclusions, which I have stated briefly above.

On one level, the laying down of cloaks in Acts 7:58 has been, according to Johnson, purposefully placed in the narrative of Acts at this particular juncture because it designates Saul (Paul) as the ring leader of the mob. This conclusion is most probably correct, since the author and Paul himself say he consented to Stephen’s murder while guarding their cloaks (8:1; 22:20). Richard Pervo’s idea that Saul was merely a ‘hat-check boy’ undermines the importance of Saul’s role in the incident.²² The background information following the stoning of Stephen (8:3) states that Saul was ravaging the church and dragging both men and women to prison, which implies that Saul was in a position of authority and leadership. The cloaks were laid at Paul’s feet, perhaps because the order to have Stephen stoned originated with him.²³ Luke has previously described people who brought gifts and laid them at the feet of the apostles, which, as I have already mentioned, suggests both veneration and submission. So, Johnson’s suspicion that Luke is using the gesture consistently is valid and probably correct.²⁴

However, the inclusion of the shedding of cloaks in the context of Stephen’s murder for the sake of designating Saul as leader was apparently not the only motivation. The shed-garment motif is prevalent in ancient literature. As in our first two examples above, we see that the loss of a garment could be associated with motion and the freeing up of the upper torso. According to Bruce, that is the only thing that it could possibly mean in Acts 7:58.²⁵ But, the examples of the removal of a garment in other contexts suggest

²² R. I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 200.

²³ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 143: ‘Certainly the fact that the stoners of the prophet lay their clothes at Saul’s feet suggests, in Luke’s index of symbols, that Paul is the author of the plot against him’.

²⁴ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 140.

²⁵ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 158.

that the gesture signified an impending act of violence and, many times, death. The above examples reinforce this theory. The character in Theophrastus removes his cloak in order to twist the neck of a bull, which presumably means he intended to kill it. In Hipponax, the attacker tells a bystander to hold his cloak while he punches Boupalos in the eye. Alcibiades presumably removes his cloak and wraps it around his arm before descending on his enemies with sword in hand. Plato tells of an anticipated attack in which the men were expected to throw off their cloaks before doing damage to Socrates. The reference to the removal of cloaks may, therefore, be described as what Jackson called a 'virtual ekphrastic topos', but more specifically, a virtual ekphrastic topos of violence. The message to the reader or the observer is clear: 'The coats are off; it's about to get messy'!

As a result of the foregoing analysis of Acts 7:58, we can safely reject Fitzmyer's claim that 'the piling of cloaks at the feet of someone seems to have been a symbolic act, whose meaning escapes us today', because there is meaning on more than one level which can be ascertained.²⁶ We can maintain further that the dismantling of the cloaks carries meaning beyond what Bruce suggested, namely, that it was done solely for the sake of convenience. Johnson's contention that the placing of garments at Saul's feet symbolizes Saul's authority and leadership, especially in the case of Stephen's murder, is probably not incorrect. However, scholars have stopped short of finding any meaning with the practice. Other ancient texts indicate that it was expected that one would remove one's cloak before a violent deed, especially when the intent was execution.

The examples stated above throw fresh light on the shed-garment motif, and have implications for how we might understand other references to cloaks in contexts of violence, not least the ones in Acts. One example will suffice. In Acts 22, Paul delivers a defense which lands him in a near-death situation similar to

Stephen's. The people respond to Paul's speech in anger and throw off their cloaks:

καὶ ὅτε ἐξεχύνητο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρός σου, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤμην ἐφεστῶς καὶ συνευδοκῶν καὶ φυλάσσων τὰ ἱμάτια τῶν ἀναιρουμένων αὐτόν [...] Ἦκουον δὲ αὐτοῦ ἄχρι τούτου τοῦ λόγου καὶ ἐπῆραν τὴν φωνὴν αὐτῶν λέγοντες, Αἶρε ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς τὸν τοιοῦτον, οὐ γὰρ καθήκειν αὐτὸν ζῆν. 23 κραυγαζόντων τε αὐτῶν καὶ ῥίπτουσιν τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ κονιορτὸν βαλλόντων εἰς τὸν ἀέρα [...] (22:20, 22–23)

And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I was standing by and approving, while guarding the cloaks of the ones who killed him [...] and they listened to him until this word and lifted up their voice saying, 'Away with such a one from the earth, for it is not fitting for him to live.' And when they cried out and threw off their cloaks and cast dust into the air [...]

The 'people', who in 21:30 dragged Paul outside the temple to kill him, are here outraged at his words, and the author tells us that they threw off their cloaks (*ῥίπτουσιν τὰ ἱμάτια*). One new way to read Acts 22:23 in light of the symbolic import of the new perspective is that the hostile Jews, having ridded themselves of their cloaks, would have presumably executed Paul at this juncture, had it not been for the tribune's order to have Paul carried away to the barracks. Expositors have hitherto claimed that the removal of cloaks in Acts 22:23 was a symbolic gesture of protest and/or excitement,²⁷ but we can now say that the seriousness associated with the removal of a cloak and the significance of its placement within the narrative have apparently been overlooked.

²⁷ H. J. Cadbury, 'Dust and Garments', in Kirsopp Lake and H. J. Cadbury (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. 5 (London: MacMillan, 1933), 275–77; W. Neil, *Acts* (NCBC; London Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1973/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 225; Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 711; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 1046; Pervo, *Acts*, 568.

²⁶ Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 394.