

13. Stephen's Defense and Martyrdom: Acts 7

At the close of chapter 6, Stephen was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin. There, false witnesses testified that Stephen spoke against the Holy Place [the temple], saying that **Jesus would destroy the temple**. They also testified that **Stephen taught against the law, saying that Jesus changed the customs Moses handed down to them** (Acts 6:12-14).

Those sitting in the Sanhedrin saw Stephen's face like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15). In this way the Spirit of God bore witness that Stephen spoke his word. By this miracle, the Sanhedrin has every reason to believe Stephen.

The defense that follows is detailed and complete. These notes will not paraphrase Stephen's words, for they speak eloquently in his defense. These notes will focus on the two charges: Stephen spoke against the temple, and Stephen taught against the law.

Jewish History and Background Undergirding Stephen's Defense

Acts 7:1

7 Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

God Calls Abraham

Acts 7:2-3

2 To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 3 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

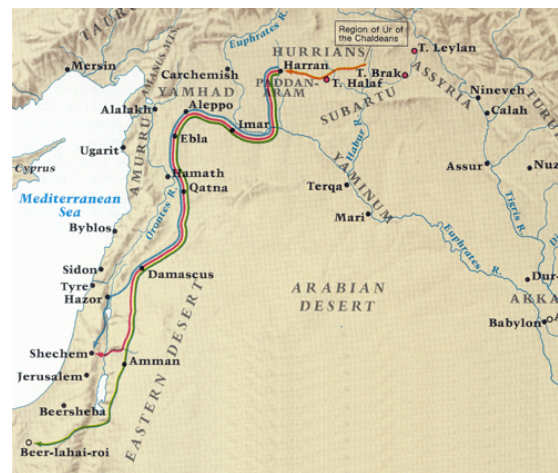
Stephen starts his defense with their father Abraham. This is the beginning of his refutation of their charge that Stephen taught against the law, saying that Jesus changed the customs Moses handed down to them. By beginning with Abraham, Stephen can argue that God promised Abraham the Christ as his seed. From this beginning with Abraham, Stephen traces the history of the Israelites, emphasizing the immutable fact that Jesus, the Christ, was promised to them and prophesied of by them.

The map traces the history of Abraham's travels as Stephen unfolds God's plan from Abraham to Moses.

God's Promise to Abraham

Acts 7:4-8 [Abraham's journey is the green line]

4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6 God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' 8 Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac



and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

The first point that Stephen makes from this historical evidence is that God promised Abraham, and that God made a covenant with Abraham. In Stephen's argument, God's land promise will extend to include the seed of Abraham as a blessing to all the nations of the earth. At this point, however, one can see the heads of the Sanhedrin nodding agreement.

Joseph Sold into Slavery and Famine Strikes

Acts 7:9-16

9 "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

11 "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. 16 Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

The recitation of how the patriarchs and the Israelites got to Egypt was commonly known Jewish history, known and agreed to by all of the Sanhedrin. Thus far, there is no tension in Stephen's defense in how he sees Jewish history and how the Sanhedrin sees it.

The Birth of Moses

Acts 7:17-22

17 "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. 18 Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

20 "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. 21 When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

Tension and focus begin to build in Stephen's argument as he says, "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham." This will be the fork in road for the Sanhedrin, Jews, and Stephen, a Christian. Stephen's travel down this road will take him to Jesus Christ the seed of Abraham.

The Israelites Reject Moses

Acts 7:23-29

23 "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. 24 He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. 25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. 26 The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

27 "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

Remember that part of the charges against Stephen was that he taught against the law, saying that Jesus changed the customs Moses handed down to them. As Stephen moves through the story of Moses, he is still reciting facts about Moses with which the Sanhedrin must agree. However, he makes two points that reveal Moses' attitude toward the Israelites and their attitude toward him. First, Moses, even at this early stage, thought of himself as a deliverer of the Israelites. Stephen said, "Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not." The Israelites view of Moses is negative: "27 But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?'"

Moses Returns from Midian

Acts 7:30-34

30 "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: 32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

33 "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

As Stephen continues, he is still saying nothing that would alarm the Sanhedrin.

Moses Prophesies the Coming of the Christ

Acts 7:35-36

35 "This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

It is interesting that Stephen covered Moses history in such few words, documenting his selection by God to be their ruler and deliverer and the power to do wonders and miraculous signs.

Acts 7:37-38

37 "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' 38 He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.

Stephen at this point increases the tension in his argument: "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'" The passage is from Deut 18:15 and adds a critical statement with which the Sanhedrin would have been familiar: "**You must listen to him.**" The argument will be that just as the Israelites refused to listen to Moses so the Jews of Stephen's day refused to listen to Christ, the one like Moses.

The next point is exactly that: the fathers refused to obey Moses:

The Fathers Refused to Obey Moses

Acts 7:39-43

39 "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt – we don't know what has happened to him!' 41 That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. 42 But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

*"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?*

*43 You have lifted up the shrine of Molech
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.*

Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

The heat comes into Stephen's defense when he turns to the negative history of the Israelites and their repeatedly turning away from God to Idolatry. The story of the golden calf is well-known, but what is not well known about the Israelites is they turned to worship of heathen gods and planets, especially in the later history of Judah. The quotation is from Amos 5:25-27. Molech was the national god of the Ammonites:

MOLECH

The name of a heathen divinity whose worship figures largely in the later history of the kingdom of Judah. As the national god of the Ammonites, he is known as "Milcom" (1 Kings 11:5,7), or "Malcam" ("Malcan" is an alternative reading in 2 Sam 12:30-31; compare Jer 49:1,3; Zeph 1:5, where the Revised Version margin reads "their king")..(from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Rephan was the name for Saturn:

REPHAN

(re'-fan): A name for Chiun, the planet Saturn.

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The Old Testament documents the infidelity of the Jews. For example, the Israelites turned repeatedly to Baal, plaguing such prophets as Jeremiah. In the New Testament, Christ indicted the Israelites for rejecting the prophets, saying that the leaders of his day would have participated in the sin of their forefathers in Matt 23:29-32:

29 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

Many of these contemporary leaders were of the same group in the Sanhedrin trying Stephen.

God Does Not Live in Houses Made by Men

Acts 7:44-50

44 "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

49 "'Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

50 Has not my hand made all these things?'

Stephen now turns to the second contrived charge: **that Jesus would destroy the temple.** After a brief history of the tabernacle, Stephen made his point by quoting Isa 66:1-2. Simply put God does not live in earthly buildings—not then and not now. A great contrast between the Jews and Christians is that God's temple is the church. This is the point of contention upon which the leaders were trying to convict Stephen. When the Lord added to the church daily such as were saved in Acts 2:47, he made a house not made with hands. In 1 Tim 3:15, Paul explains this house of God: "5 if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." Peter showed how the spiritual house of God is built in 1 Peter 2:4-8:

4 As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says:

"See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame."

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone,"

8 and,

"A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

What plays out in real time in Stephen's trial is the rejection of Christ and the spiritual nature of his house as compared to the temple of Jews. Stephen immediately turns up the heat.

Stephen's Concluding Argument

Acts 7:51-53

51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Stephen does not shirk from preaching the truth in no uncertain terms. Stiff-necked people, uncircumcised heat and ears, just like your fathers, resist the Holy Spirit—with these phrases, he convicted them of killing the Righteous One.

The Stoning of Stephen

Acts 7:54-60

54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

In Acts 2:36-37, Peter preached with similar vigor, accusing the Jews of murdering Jesus:

36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

On that day, they were cut to the heart, but they wanted to know what to do. Now Stephen confronts furious men, clenching and gritting their teeth, they were so mad. Stephen on the other hand, full of the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God and Jesus at His right hand. Heaven was open to him.

When they dragged him out and stoned him, they laid their clothes at the feet of Saul—a subject who returns in the next chapter.

One of the most charitable acts of all time is when Stephen said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

People respond to the gospel in many ways. Sometimes they obey, as on the day of Pentecost; sometimes, they become angry, even to the point of murder; and sometimes, they are indifferent, as was the case of Felix in Acts 24:25:

25 As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."