

Stephen's Speech

Acts 7:1-8:4



Read Acts 7:1-53

As we read Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:1-53 we find three main themes. The first theme we discover through Abraham is that God cannot be tied down to one location, place or land. God's people are closest to him when they are a "pilgrim people" – a people on the move. The second theme reveals that Israel has a pattern of constantly resisting and rejecting its God and his appointed leaders. Israel's past points to the present: past rejections foreshadow the final rejection of God's appointed Messiah. While fulfillment of Israel's true worship is in the Messiah, by rejecting him Israel would reject ultimately what the Temple was all about – relationship with God. The last theme revolves around our merciful God who renews his promise despite constant failures of his people who reject his leaders

Acts 7: 2-8 The Promises to Abraham

Stephen responds to the Sanhedrin, "...the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran" (v2) reminding his hearers that when God called on Abraham, Abraham was not in the "Holy Land". He didn't even go to the "promise land" until after he departed Haran. Abraham was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, also known as Shinar, and later to become Babylonia. Babel was its capital – later to become Babylon. Haran was far to the north between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the region of Padan-aram. God seeking Abraham in Shinar reveals that God was in control of Abraham's destiny not only from the beginning, but from beyond the land eventually promised to Abraham's descendants. God revealed himself to Abraham in his full glory in a pagan land. God was not limited to a particular geographic area as was the common belief of pagans and their Gods. The Philistine god Dagon was limited in power to the region of Philistia. Ba'al-peor was limited to Mt. Peor. Ba'al-perazim was limited to Mt. Perazim. Even the gods of Egypt were limited to the geographic area of Egypt. For a God to have power over more than its adherents' geographic location was a novel concept.

Not only was Abraham not in the geographic region of the "promise land", he had no claim or possession of it. He had not conquered the land. His descendants wouldn't possess it until the time of Moses, and yet God was with him. Stephen tells the Pharisees, "...God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground." (Acts 3b).

Stephen goes on to say in verse 7 about Moses and Israel, "...they will come out of that country and worship me in this place." They will be coming out of the pagan nation of Egypt,

out of slavery to personal, as well as, religious freedom in the promise land. The real goal of God's promise was not the land per se; it was the *freedom* to render true worship and devotion to God. While enslaved in Egypt the Israelites were denied the right to worship their God, and had no way of coming to know him intimately. The sojourn in the desert wilderness was a period of coming to know the God of Israel. God dwelled among them for 40 years revealing himself and his way of worship, completely unique from the worship of the pagan gods of Egypt and Canaan. Stephen will go on to say the even the temple worship rituals do not fully realize this goal; it is fulfilled only in Christ with a personal relationship with Christ.

Verses 9-16 focus on deliverance of Israel through Joseph. Verse 9 says, *"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles."* Patriarchs refer to Joseph's brothers. God was with Joseph, even in Egypt. God will be with Joseph and will deliver the clan of Israel from famine, from outside the boundaries of the still future "promise land". In verse 16, Stephen goes on to say, *"Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought..."*¹ When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they took with them the bones of Jacob and Joseph to bury them in the cave Abraham had purchased. The burial place was not only outside the "holy" land, it was in Samaritan territory! The Jews of Stephen's day refused to even walk through Samaria believing it would contaminate them, yet it is in Samaria that the patriarchs were buried.

Stephen continues his discourse with Moses in verse 17-34. *"As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased."*(v.17). God was with them in Egypt and God blessed them by increasing their number. Verses 20-23 establish Moses as God's appointed leader and deliverer of his people. Moses' upbringing in "all the wisdom of the Egyptians" tells us that Moses, as adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter received the highest education possible as appropriate for a Prince of Egypt. Not only would his education have included reading, writing and arithmetic, but also history, science, architecture, and military strategy. God used the "wisdom of Egyptians" to prepare Moses as the deliverer of his people.

Verses 25-27 reveal the recurring theme that God's people reject God's anointed deliverer. *"Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not"*(v. 25) in fact in V27 they said to him *"Who made you ruler and judge over us?"* This is the first of many rejections of God's appointed leader by his people. The Israelite who mistreated his brother refused Moses' intercession and firmly denied that Moses had any right to serve as leader and judge over him. In fact, the Israelite's awareness of Moses' deed of killing the Egyptian first alerts Moses that his life was in danger and Moses flees to the land of Midian. Stephen connects this knowledge of the possibility of the Israelite handing Moses over to Egyptian authorities. Not only do the Israelites reject Moses, they put his life in danger.

¹ Exodus 13:19, Joshua 24:32

Like Abraham, God reveals himself to Moses outside the Holy Land. Verses 30-32 say “...an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush....he heard the Lord’s voice: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’” Stephen is reminding the Sanhedrin again that there was holy ground outside Jerusalem far beyond the temple. God renews his promise to Moses. God had told Abraham that his people would be in Egypt for 400 years, and would be enslaved, but that they would be brought out with their oppressors’ possessions (Gen 15: 13-14). Moses is God’s chosen leader to fulfill this promise. Moses was the one whom God had chosen as leader for Israel’s deliverance. The Israelites had already rejected him once and they would continue to do so.

The Apostasy of Israel (7:35-50)

Stephen is preparing a parallel of Israel’s rejection of Moses to the Sanhedrin’s rejection of Jesus, God’s anointed Messiah. Verses 35-36 read, “*This is the same Moses whom they had rejected...sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God...he [Moses] led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs.*” In Egypt and the desert Moses, empowered by God, performs miraculous signs and wonders. The Sanhedrin surely knew of and even witnessed Jesus’ signs and wonders, and they witnessed Jesus’ appointed apostles do the same. Stephen repeats Israel’s rejection of God’s appointed deliverer or redeemer as he begins to imply that Jesus is also God’s appointed deliverer or redeemer, rejected by the very Sanhedrin Stephen is addressing. Stephen quotes Moses’ prophecy (Deut 18:1) in verses 37-38, “...*God will send you a prophet like me from your own people...*” God would raise up a prophet. In Stephen’s day this prophecy was linked with a coming messiah. Stephen was linking the prophecy to Jesus, just as Peter had already done in his sermon in Solomon’s Colonnade (Acts 3:22). The very same Jesus whom the Sanhedrin had already rejected twice.

In verses 39-43 Stephen highlights Israel’s apostasy in the wilderness as illustrated by the golden calf. Israel rejects Moses’ leadership and instructs Aaron to build the golden calf. By rejecting God’s appointed deliverer, they are rejecting God himself. More than rejecting God, they are embracing other gods with their sacrifices. “*God turned away and gave them over to the worship of heavenly bodies. I will send you into exile beyond Babylon*” (v 42-43). God eventually did send Israel into exile in Assyria and Babylon for worship and devotion to Canaanite gods in the period of the Divided Kingdom. Stephen quietly implies that this may be Israel’s destiny if the Sanhedrin continues to reject Jesus.

In verses 44-50 Stephen changes his focus to the “tabernacle of Testimony” and takes up the theme of God’s dwelling place. “*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.*” In the wilderness Israel’s house of worship was a tent. It was provided by God and Built according to God’s specifications. It moved with them wherever God led them. This remained so until David desired to build a dwelling place. “*David who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him*” (v. 46-47). Is this a house for God to dwell in or is it for Israel to congregate to

worship within? *God did not ask for this house to be built.* (See 2 Samuel 7:1-17) What is God's response? He was content in the tabernacle and would be until Solomon would build his temple. The temple and its precincts were a place for Israel to gather to worship, pray and make sacrifices to the Lord. It was not a building in which God would dwell in the sense of being confined to one location. It was to promote the freed of worshiping the Lord, not to enslave the Israelites in a man-made system of religious rituals that would make approaching the Lord burdensome.

The theme of worshiping God in this place (i.e., in the Jerusalem temple, the site where Abraham received his revelation is the site where the temple resides and is in the holy land) is set forth positively in the beginning of Stephen's speech (v.7). The emphasis should be on worship, not on the "place" of worship. It was not the temple Stephen was rejecting, but the abuse of the temple which had become something other than a place for worshiping God. Think of Jesus overturning the money changers' tables charging them with turning his father's house into a den of thieves. The true purpose of the temple was to be a "house of prayer".

The tabernacle was designed and approved by God. It was a "dwelling place" for God, but not a "house" for God. Stephen was rejecting the concept of it being a "house", a man-made edifice to which God was confined. The temple being God's house meant He did not reside anywhere else, and it did not move anywhere else. This house was also "man-made". God did not provide the materials or the specifications for this temple as He did for the tabernacle. This wasn't even Solomon's temple which fell when Israel was taken into captivity in Babylon. This temple was built upon their return and then significantly rebuilt and expanded again by King Herod. It is called Herod's Temple. Stephen's description of "man-made" links it to the idolatrous golden calf implying a charge of idolatry. When a place of worship becomes a representation for God, it becomes a substitute for a living relationship with God. The man-made house is worshipped. The temple should have been a house for Israel to express their devotion to God, not a house for God to be confined and limiting access to the righteous few denying entrance to women, to the poor who couldn't afford the exorbitant sacrificial animals, to the lame, to all those whom Jesus reached out to during his ministry. The religious leaders of Stephen's (and Jesus') time had put in place a burdensome and legalistic ritual system from which they drew monetary, political and social power and position. The temple had become a means by which the religious elite oppressed the people of Israel and was no longer a place for Israel to come to worship in freedom and to build a personal relationship with God.

The Rejection of the Messiah (7:51-53)

Stephen, who is full of the Holy Spirit, finishes off his speech to the Sanhedrin by turning the tables and charging his persecutors with their own crimes against God. His entire speech illustrates the guilt of the Sanhedrin in these charges. Just as Israel has consistently rejected God's appointed leaders and prophets, the Sanhedrin has so done, and more in killing God's appointed messiah. The Sanhedrin has permitted the perversion of the true purpose of the House of God. They were apostates and idolaters who constantly transgressed the first commandment.

Enraged by Stephen's accusations the Sanhedrin, in fury, "gnashed their teeth" at him. In verse 54, the Sanhedrin is described as "furious" (NIV), "infuriated" (NAB), and "enraged" (NRSV). While these words do encapsulate the meaning of the text, the Greek reveals an idiomatic phrase rendered as "cut to the heart". According to Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, "[t]he heart, as lying deep within, contains 'the hidden man,' the real man. It represents the true character but conceals it"². Stephen's words cut right to the heart of these men revealing their true characters by their response of self-righteous anger and fury, manifesting itself in the feral "gnashing of teeth." Their anger portrays them as wolves ready to devour Stephen. Stephen's response on the other hand is all together different than that of the Sanhedrin. We are told that he is filled with the Holy Spirit gazing into heaven receiving the beatific vision of the heavenly throne room with Jesus standing at the right hand of God! No doubt Stephen's face reflected the glory of his vision and appeared much as it was described in Acts 6:15: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." The serenity of Stephen likely enraged the Sanhedrin further as he was dragged from the city and stoned. No doubt empowered by the Holy Spirit, Stephen's final words were a pray of intercession on behalf of those killing him. In words that echo the final words of Christ on the Cross, Stephen prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (v.60). He pleads that the Lord will not hold their sin of rejecting the Messiah yet again against them. Stephen then "falls asleep".

The result: Acts 8:1-4

The final verses of Chapter 7 tell us that among those present at Stephen's stoning was Saul. According to 8:1, Saul was there "giving approval to his death". Saul was present to give his approval and consent for Stephen's stoning – the sentence mandated for blasphemy. "Approval", translated from the Greek *syneudokeō* meaning "to approve of" with pleasure or of "consenting" in doing evil; "consenting" to evil things."³ We know Saul (later Paul) was a Greek speaking Jew from the region of Cilicia, it is *possible* he may have been a member of the Hellenist synagogue in Jerusalem where Stephen debated his beliefs with those members who sought his destruction.

The final results of Stephen's trial and death resulted in a wave of persecution sweeping through Jerusalem. "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." (Acts 8:3) As the persecution commences in Jerusalem we see the Hellenist believers fleeing to Judea and Samaria. Likely at this point it was only the Hellenists who were being sought because the Hebraic believers were likely more in-line with the beliefs surrounding the Law and the Temple held by the non-believing Jews in Jerusalem. The Hellenist believers may have been more easily recognized by the religious leaders due to their association with Stephen and the Hellenist church. At any rate, the persecution of the Hellenists rapidly spreads as Saul seeks to "destroy the church". Luke's

² J. Laidlaw, in Hastings' Bible Dictionary

³ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

choice of word to describe Saul's action connects with another occasion in the Old Testament Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the Hellenists). The word translated "destroy" comes from *elymaineto*, and is used only this one time in the New Testament. It is found in the Old Testament in Psalm 80:8-18 where it describes the destruction of a vineyard being ravaged by wild boars.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.

¹¹ It sent out its boughs to the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.

¹² Why have you broken down its walls
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?

¹³ Boars from the forest **ravage** it
and the creatures of the field feed on it.

¹⁴ Return to us, O God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!

Watch over this vine,
¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted,
the son you have raised up for yourself.

The word "destroy" takes on the connotation of "ravage, lay waste or wreak havoc". God's chosen nation is often symbolized as a vineyard, and here it is being destroyed by the "unclean" wild boar! Saul was "ravaging" the church like a wild board tearing through a vineyard.

While Saul savagely tears through Jerusalem in persecution of Jesus' followers, the Hellenists are forced to flee the city. As we work through this coming week's homework, we will discover that the Hellenists take the gospel with them into Samaria and beyond. The next step of the Lord's command to carry his word will be fulfilled. Jesus had told them, "*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).