

Stephen – The First Christian Martyr Part II

In Defense of His Cause

(Acts 7:1-53)

Introduction:

1. The accusation of “blasphemy” against Stephen has been made (Acts 6:11, 13) and he will now set out to answer those charges.
 - His answer is a rather lengthy address (a sermon if you will) in which his defense is less of a legal defense of his own actions and more of a recital of Israel’s past history in which he will use to vindicate the truth claims of Christ and His followers.
 - In answering those charges his primary defense is the very history of the ancestors that his hearers (the Jewish people) were so proud of. How could they dispute the very claims that they themselves believed in and loved to hear about?
 - In addition to reciting Israel’s history he will remind the hearers (just as Peter did) that they rejected the Messiah.
 - 1) In fact he will state that their rejection of Jesus parallels the same rejection of their forefathers, who rejected Moses and Joseph; both of whom were types of Christ.
 - 2) Thus, Stephen was not the blasphemer, they were!

2. This is one of the longest recorded messages in Acts and the fact that Luke records it for us reveals its importance.

- This may be a good time to address a few of the “alleged” discrepancies or chronological problems in Stephen’s sermon:

- 1) A possible chronological problem is raised in Acts 7:6 where Stephen says that Israel would be enslaved for 400 years. Yet in Galatians 3:17; Paul implies the period was 430 years. It seems that Paul was including the entire Patriarchal period and not just the bondage itself. This seems to explain the additional period of time.
- 2) Another apparent discrepancy is found in Acts 7:14 where Stephen claims that there were a total of 75 family members from Jacob’s family who came to live in Egypt. In the Hebrew text it claims there were 70 (Genesis 46:27, Exodus 1:5). The Septuagint records the number in both places as 75. Although some conclude it to be an honest mistake in that Stephen may have quoted from the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew; the fact remains that both numbers can still be correct depending on how one tallies the body count. I’ll spare you the details of how the researchers make it work and just rely on what Paul states in II Timothy 3:16 and also on the understanding that we are operating with a lack of complete information. This may shake some people up but it shouldn’t be a deal breaker!
- 3) Acts 7:16 contains another possible discrepancy in that Stephen implies that Jacob was buried at Shechem but the Old Testament records he was buried in the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron (Genesis 49:29-50:13). The best conclusion here is to realize that Stephen is not talking about Jacob but is talking about Joseph and probably his brothers. We know that Joseph’s dead body was removed from Egypt and re-buried in Shechem.

4) The seemingly most difficult of all “alleged” discrepancies is the claim that Abraham bought the plot of land from the sons of Hamor in Shechem in Acts 7:16. We know from Joshua 24:32 that it was Jacob who bought the plot of land in Shechem. One possible explanation is that Abraham did in fact originally purchase it and Jacob re-purchased it from the sons of Hamor (this would have been his own tribe or family). We know that Abraham built an altar there (Genesis 12:6-7) but never settled there. Over time the site may have reverted back to the occupiers of the land (the people of Hamor) and then Jacob re-purchased it back later. There may be other reasonable explanations but we are just not able to ascertain everything with our limited scope of knowledge and in the end either we believe the Scriptures are infallible and inerrant or we don’t.

- The lack of debate from the Sanhedrin clearly shows that there are no real discrepancies in what Stephen claims but in fact his words actually seal their fate for they are the true blasphemers in that they reject Christ who is the fulfillment of the Law!

3. Stephen’s life and words will be the catalyst that will connect the Gospel (the Good News of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection) to the Old Testament and cause it (the Gospel) to spread beyond Jerusalem into the outer regions of the world.

4. This will be accomplished by citing three very important concepts (These are taken from The Bible Knowledge Commentary):

- “There is progress and change in God’s program”
- “The blessings of God are not limited to the land of Israel and the temple area”
- “Israel in its past always evidenced a pattern of opposition to God’s plans and His men”

“There is Progress and Change in God’s Program”:

1. This is shown first by his reference to the promises made by God to **Abraham** (Acts 7:2-8)
 - By the time that God called Abraham there were thousands of people that God could have chose but He sovereignly selected Abraham to be the father of His chosen people.
 - 1) He called him from his home located in Mesopotamia (Ur of the Chaldeans)
 - 2) He told him to leave his country and relocate to a land of promise.
 - 3) His descendants (beginning with Isaac, Jacob, and the 12 sons of Jacob) would become a nation of promise.
 - Stephen’s focus on Abraham obedience and faith was irrefutable evidence in the sovereign work of God.
 - 1) Even though Abraham was given a promise of land his only real possession was a burial plot.
 - 2) Even in spite of knowing that his descendants would suffer, he still believed and trusted God.
2. The next phase of progress and change is the “**patriarchal period**” (Acts 7:9-16)
 - This of course is the story (very familiar to the hearers of Stephens sermon) of how the descendants of Abraham (12 tribes of Israel) ended up in Egyptian bondage.
 - Can you see a parallel between Joseph’s brothers (Acts 7:9) and the Jews who were listening to Stephen? Explain.....

3. The third significant change is the period known as the **deliverance from bondage**. (Referenced here in Acts 7:17-43)
 - The mention of **Moses** as the deliverer and God working through him to move them from Egypt (The Exodus) to the Promised Land shows the progress and moving of God in the lives of His people.
 - This is a milestone in the history of the people known as Hebrews (Israelites) and Stephen's reference to this period reveals God's continued hand in their lives in spite of changed circumstances.

4. The building of the **tabernacle** (Acts 7:44-46) shows the progression of God's work in their lives.
 - The "tabernacle of Testimony" was a portable and temporary dwelling place and allowed God to be among them.
 - This progression shows that God was moving them towards a permanent state of worship.

5. The next stage of progression that Stephen uses is the construction of the **temple**. (Acts 7:47-50)
 - Clearly a hallmark in Jewish history and considered by most Jews as the peak of their glory.
 - But Stephen reminds the hearer that this was a mere **symbol of God's presence and not his "literal" home**. (Acts 7:48)
 - Why is the temple that Solomon built not God's physical home? (Acts 7:49-50)

6. In concluding this section ("There is Progress and Change in God's Program"); answer this question; If God changed so many things in Israel's history, who is to say that the Law and the temple were permanent?

“The Blessings of God are not Limited to the Land of Israel and the Temple Area”

1. There are many instances where Israel’s patriarchs and leaders were blessed outside of the “Promised Land”
 - Where did Abraham receive his call and where was he when God gave him the promise of a land and people?
 - Joseph found favor from Pharaoh while living in _____
 - Where did Moses receive his calling from God? (Acts 7:29-34)
2. Even the Law was given outside the Promised Land (Acts 7:38)
3. The Tabernacle was built in the desert and traveled with them during their period of wandering. (Acts 7:44-45)
4. The temple was the only thing that was inside the land, but yet it was still not a permanent dwelling place for God; “Heaven is My throne and the earth is my footstool” (Acts 7:49, Isaiah 66:1)
5. Where is the temple today? (I Corinthians 3:16, 6:19, Ephesians 2:21)

“Israel in its past has always evidenced a pattern of opposition to God’s plans and His men”. (Acts 7:51-53)

1. Even Abraham after leaving his home in Ur made a stop (a rather lengthy stay) in Haran before going to the Land of Promise. (Acts 7:2-4)
2. How did Joseph’s brothers respond to him when he shared his dream? (Acts 7:9)
3. How did the Israelites initially respond to Moses? (Acts 7:23-29)
 - It wasn’t until the second appearance by Joseph and Moses that they were accepted by the people. (Acts 7:13, 35-36)
 - Do you see any parallels between Joseph and Moses to Jesus?
4. Even after receiving the Law; how does Stephen describe the response of their fathers? (Acts 7:39-43)
5. The Jews even missed the whole point of the temple (Acts 7:48-50) which was designed to be a place of worship and prayer not the physical home of God Himself. (I Kings 8:23-53)
 - This of course is the kicker.....by rejecting Christ they place their own form of worship above God and become blasphemers themselves! (John 4:21-24)
 - In many ways the temple was their focus of worship instead of God. They merely copied the other heathen nations.

Concluding Thoughts:

1. Stephen's sermon makes complete sense and his words were not blasphemous as his hearers claimed.
 - It is true that there is a progression in God's plan (Galatians 2:24-29, 4:4-5) and that progression is intended to lead us to faith in Christ – not away from it.
 - God's blessings are not limited to the temple for we learn that He wills that we worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. (John 4:21-24)
 - To reject what Stephen claims which is the fact that Jesus is the Messiah is to place oneself in jeopardy of being labeled as “stiff-necked people” and ultimately outside of the covenantal blessings of God.
2. Stephen's words are true and his defense is 100% accurate – unfortunately his words will fall on deaf ears.
3. Who is the real blasphemer in this passage?