

## Acts 7: The First Martyr

1. Far from all commentators have found Stephen's speech a clear response to the charges brought against him. As Marshall says,

...the purpose of this speech is still much disputed. In form it is a length recital of Old Testament history, discussing in detail what appear to be insignificant points and culminating in a bitter attack on the speaker's hearers. What is the speaker trying to do?

Many, however, discern three themes. What is the evidence for each of the following in the text?

- a. **The activity of God is not confined to the geographical land of Israel**
  - b. **Worship acceptable to God is not confined to the temple**
  - c. **Israel has a history of rejecting saviors**
2. Does Stephen successfully refute the two charges brought against him? Does he intend to? If not, what's his goal, and does he succeed (cf. 8:1-3)?
  3. What is Stephen saying regarding holy spaces? Are all places "holy," or none? *Bonus application:* Is it right for a Christian to refer to a church as a "house of God?"
  4. Long before Israel had a temple, the prophets sought God on mountaintops. This is one of many ways in which our "incarnality," our embodied nature, can help heart and mind in seeking God.<sup>1</sup> What places (nature, cathedral, prayer closet, walks/rides/runs, etc.) are numinous for you? Where have you encountered God?
  5. Esau McCaulley, in his *Reading While Black*, presents a Black-Christian reading of Scripture, a third voice alongside the dominant White Evangelical and Mainline liberal voices. McCaulley argues,

The **social location** of enslaved persons caused them to read the Bible differently. This unabashedly located reading has marked African American interpretation since... It is not the case that Blacks *uniquely* emphasized certain passages and read other Scriptures in light of them; what was unique was *what* enslaved Black people emphasized. They emphasized God as the liberator and humankind as one family united under the rule of Christ whose death for sins reconciles us to God. [emph. added]

McCaulley presents many examples of the way in which Black American history has given them eyes for themes minimized or overlooked by European and White-American traditions. For example, where the dominant White reading often defines God in terms of "omnis," the Black reading recognizes that God consistently identified himself as the one who "brought up Israel out of Egypt" (e.g. 1 Sam 10:18; note also the centrality of Passover in Jewish identity). Another example McCaulley gives is the experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth, which resonates particularly with Black readers given the hope they nurtured living under oppression by Rome.

What does this have to do with Stephen? We know from Acts 6 that Stephen, both a Hellenistic Jew and a member of the synagogue of the freedmen (6:9), represented a minority voice in Jerusalem,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a central tenet of the sacramental traditions. Examples include of course the sacraments, but also sabbath observance, posture during prayer or worship, etc.

part of the diaspora, viewed with condescension by the Judean community, a community with a history of refugees who have had to find their God apart from temple and holy land.

- a. How does Stephen's history bring out for him elements of Israel's story which the Jerusalem Council might have easily missed or minimized?
  - b. Has anything happened in your life which has impacted the way you read Scripture? How might your "social location" blind you to patterns in scripture and bring into sharp relief others?
6. Stephen, whose last words are those of forgiveness for his murderers, addresses the Sanhedrin with the face of an angel (6:15). However, shortly before his end, he condemns his accusers in harsh terms. Fernando writes of this,

After all, when we think of an angel, we think of a sweet, gentle person who has no place for wrath and judgment. This idea, however, does not come from Scripture for some of the angels in the Bible are agents of judgment [Gen 19:1-13; 2 Sam 24:16-17; 2 Kings 19:35; Acts 12:21-23].

If we allowing that Stephen was both angelic and angry, what is Luke describing? What *did* Stephen look like? What point is Luke making? (Also, when did a prominent figure from Stephen's speech also have an altered visage?)<sup>2</sup>



**Fun fact:** "Some later teachers even insisted that God spoke only in the holy land—aside from biblical cases dismissed as exceptions (*Mekilta Pisha* 1.35-105)" [Keener, 236].

**Fun quote:** George Bernard Shaw called Stephen a "factless and conceited bore" for repeating history the council already knew.

**Fun understatement:** "It is possible that Stephen has to end his talk abruptly at this point because his audience has become so restive." (Fernando)

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<sup>2</sup> Cue here the scene from *The Fellowship of the Ring* I which Galadriel resists taking the ring of power.

## Background and Leader's Notes:

This passage has elicited a wide range of responses. Some find it almost nonsensical, others masterful. The latter comes with an understanding of what Stephen is drawing out of Israel's history (a technique which can also be found in Ps 78, 105, 106, and 1 Sam 12:7-12). He's been accused on violating law and temple. So S. points out that the patriarchs experienced God without the temple (or, largely, the law), undermining the idea that God only dwells in the temple. Furthermore, the examples demonstrate that these patriarchs offered acceptable worship without the temple. Stephen goes so far as to point out that the temple was itself made of human hands, and neither requested by nor needed by God—the implication being that the temple itself has become a sort of idol. Stephen would not be the first prophet to suggest an inappropriate reliance on the temple.

Finally, he draws out the fact that these patriarchs were rejected by the very people they were sent to save, and in this he draws a parallel of course with Jesus.

The first-order understanding of this text is simply this: in response to the charges, Stephen demonstrates that the temple itself is secondary. Presumably Stephen was drawing on Jesus' teaching:

- Jesus made the statement in John 2:19 that “this” temple if destroyed would be raised up in three days
- in Luke 21:5 prophesied the temple destruction
- in John 4:20 asserted that the days were coming when it will know longer matter where you worship the Father.
- Given that the temple was where the Spirit dwelt and where God and man came into contact, Jesus fulfilled the temple rather than abolishing it (Mt 5:17).

Is Stephen rejecting the charges, which Luke made clear were false? Yes and no; he is not speaking against law or temple but he *is* undermining their view of the temple. He is not going as far as a he could, perhaps given the time and audience, and Jesus actually figures minimally in his speech and is never mentioned by name.

Stephen's speech uses standard rhetorical methods by building on common history, but of course departs at the end by accusing his judges. This shows that he is not intending to exculpate himself. He realizes the charges are trumped up and his only choices are to recant his faith or to deliver the gospel message in the hope of saving those listening. In fact we learn from Luke that Paul is listening, and while this doesn't convince him, seeds are planted.

Other important elements: First, we see parallels between Stephen himself and Moses, and between Jesus and Moses. Second, it is not evidence in the English, but Keener lists a vast number of instances in which Stephen/Luke uses relevant OT phrases in this speech. Third, Keener, in a separate article, finds three ways in which the expected is inverted—a favorite technique of Luke's: (a) the Son of Man is seen standing; (b) the witnesses strip off their own garments (whereas typically the condemned was stripped); (c); Stephen confesses *their* sins rather than his own. [See Keener, “Three Notes on Figurative Language..”, JGRChJ 5 (2008) 41-49.]

Finally, we should not forget what is not explicitly said: Christians no longer were dependent on temple sacrifice—another element of Jesus' new covenant enacted at the last supper which would have been seen as undermining the temple and the law.

So at the very least we should take away these applications:

First, Stephen highlights the universality of God's presence. While Christians don't worship in a temple, many have been known to refer to the church as “God's house,” a phrase almost guaranteed to lead to misunderstanding.

Second, it is a cautionary tale. After all, at face value the Sanhedrin could hardly be blamed for adhering to tradition. Furthermore, it was commonly understood that the elements which kept Israel together included at a minimum the holy land, the temple, and the law (esp. but not limited to the kosher laws). Jesus undermines each of these in different ways (by of course fulfilling them). The question is what otherwise good elements of tradition do we elevate inappropriately, considering them to be indispensable?

A final application is one I have not seen elsewhere: What's often overlooked is that Stephen is not just a Jew among Jews. Esp. given Acts 6, we know Stephen to be a Hellenistic Jew, and if a member of the synagogue of the freedmen, may also be a freed slave or the descendant of a freed slave. As a Hellenistic Jew he represents the tradition of the Jews of the dispersion, a very different tradition from the Jerusalem Jews. We have in Stephen a minority voice, one looked down upon by the Jerusalem Jews as having succumbed to acculturation, and one with a story of immigration, for whom "resident alien" (7:6) would certainly apply.

So it should hit us hard that Stephen's speech is not just one calculated to show a new view of the holy land, the temple, and the law. It is further a pattern from the history of Israel which would resonate particularly with the Hellenistic Jews.

Why is this important? Because it points to the way in which our "social location" (to use the language of Esau McCaulley) informs our reading of Scripture. Conversely, the different history of the Jerusalem Jews made them effectively blind to the patterns which were so clear to Stephen. It invites us to ask how our own stories open our eyes to some things while blinding us to others. And it calls us to look to minority community voices.