

## Sacred Spaces

Before the trial of Stephen, the disciples worshipped with the rest of the Jews in the temple, the most sacred place in the world of first-century Judaism. In those early days, even Jewish priests were joining the Church. What harmony there was after that first Easter, however, did not last long. The fragility of that peace is not surprising. Jesus' teaching radically redefined the three symbols which set the Jews apart from their pagan occupiers: the temple, the Torah and the promised land. These were central to Jewish cultural identity, and all three were the subject of Stephen's legal defense to the Jewish ruling council in chapter seven of Acts. This trial was the flashpoint which precipitated the first full-scale persecution of the Church in Jerusalem.

Stephen's speech is both peculiar and fascinating. He has just been chosen as one of the first deacons, and is a force to be reckoned with. Luke says such was Stephen's "grace and power" that those in the synagogues who opposed him were no match for his wisdom. Unable to match wits, his opponents trumped up charges that he was profaning the law of Moses and the temple. The stakes were high: Stephen certainly knew that this was the one offense for which the Romans allowed the Jews to use capital punishment.

Given this setting, one expects a clear and unequivocal rejection of the charges. Instead, Stephen's response appears as a long and confusing retelling of Israel's history. No wonder some have thought that Stephen wasn't even answering the charges! George Bernard Shaw—granted, not known for exegesis—called Stephen a "tactless and conceited bore" for repeating history the council already knew. Some more scholarly commentators have struggled to find relevance in his speech.

Other commentators see tremendous cleverness in his response. They point out that retelling portions of Israel's history to make a point is a technique with some pedigree, also found in Psalms 78, 105 and 106 and 1 Sam 12:7-12. Commentator Don Carson points out that this method allowed Stephen to build upon the common ground of their history. He needed considerable skill and subtlety to bridge the tremendous distance between his view and theirs. Yet Stephen doesn't pull any punches. As we will see, his goal wasn't to save himself, but to save them.

Since Stephen is drawing on history, let's look for patterns in his speech related to the charges. If you haven't read it recently, it's worth taking a glance at Acts 7. Three patriarchs are described: Abraham, Joseph and Moses. The first pattern you may notice is that Stephen is keen on geography. Location after location is mentioned, as if this were an ancient near-east travelogue. Stephen deliberately mentions places outside the temple and holy land where God manifests himself: his revelation to Abraham in Mesopotamia, his giving Joseph wisdom in Egypt, and speaking to Moses out of the burning bush in the desert (a "holy place", the same phrase his opponents use of the temple in 6:13). This is not a God confined to the temple.

Then Stephen's history lesson turns to Israel's treatment of two of their leaders. He recalls how Joseph and Moses are rejected by those God calls them to deliver. In Moses' case, one rejection involves the golden calf, which Stephen uses as a springboard to address the Torah and its sacrificial law. He does this by tying the calf to a passage from Amos condemning Israel for its idolatry—a passage in which Yahweh spurns Israel's offerings and assemblies, because they lack justice. Stephen uses this prophetic word about offerings to further address the temple. He contrasts the temple with the tabernacle, pointing out that the latter was built according to God's instruction, while even Solomon admitted that God does not need a house (Acts 7:48

calling to mind 1 Kings 8:27-30, where Solomon says just this). These words would have stung and angered the council, and probably called to mind passages like Jeremiah 7, where Israel is condemned for putting trust in the temple for safety, rather than in God.

Finally, having plotted the trajectory of Israel's rebellious history through Moses, he follows it straight to his listeners, accusing them of killing the prophets and resisting the Spirit. Craig Keener points out that "Jewish tradition had heightened Israel's responsibility for the death of the prophets beyond what was found in the Old Testament, so Stephen's hearers could not deny his charge." This is when the members of the council started grinding their teeth and reaching for stones. Stephen no doubt knew he would soon follow in the tradition of murdered prophets.

Observing these patterns—both geographical and in the stories of these patriarchs—it's clear Stephen *does* answer the charges: If he is accused of profaning the temple, they were guilty of believing God was confined to the temple. They say he's speaking against Moses, yet they are acting precisely in the pattern of those who rejected Moses himself. And in doing so, they have killed the Righteous One predicted by the prophets (v. 52), the very Prophet whom Moses himself foretold (v. 33).

More even than the Torah and the holy land, the temple is at the core of Stephen's speech. If we aren't careful, though, it's easy to miss his point. As modern Christians we are confident that God is confined neither to temple nor church building. In fact, the burning of our congregation's last church building undoubtedly drove this truth home for those of us who experienced it. God, we know, is everywhere; with the rending of the temple curtain, no location is elevated above another.

Isn't this a loss? If Israel once revered the temple as holy, now *no* place is holy. We may not have the burden of the Jerusalem pilgrimage, but neither do we have the knowledge that visiting the temple is visiting God. No place is holier than another—is this really what Stephen is saying?

If anything, his history shows that the holy place is wherever God chooses to act, whether in the mobile tabernacle or the desert or Egypt. The astounding vision at the end of Stephen's speech (7:55-56) demonstrates just this, as God is made manifest in the very presence of the council. Now remember what Jesus said about the temple: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (Jn 2:19). While John attests that he was referring to his resurrection, through the lens of Paul's letters we also rightly see that the Body of Christ, his Church, is also God's temple (Eph 2:21; 1 Cor 3:16-17).

We read in the Old Testament that to go to Solomon's temple was to visit a place of tremendous holiness. They entered his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise, mindful of the might and majesty all around them in the very house of God. In fact, one of the most heartbreaking passages in scripture, in Ezek 10, describes the departure of God's awesome presence from the temple.

Because of Christ's sacrifice, God's Spirit, in all his power and mercy, dwells with his people wherever we gather. That may be in a church building or a home-church meeting in someone's basement or with believers serving the homeless in a soup kitchen. What an incredible change! Let us approach our church—and our community—with the same excitement and expectation the Jews did the temple, not because he has chosen to dwell within our building, but because he has chosen to dwell among us.