

Chapter 17: As Your Fathers Did

Acts 7:1–53

At first glance, it is difficult to see what Stephen's speech has to do with the charges that are in view. Why doesn't he respond to the allegations against him? Why does he use his time to give a running narration of the Old Testament history? Then, why does he shift from a benign rehearsal of Old Testament history into a jarring, abrupt denunciation of his accusers in vv. 51–53? In fact, Stephen's speech is profoundly sophisticated as he subtly builds his case to respond to his critics and to charge them with an over-reliance on the land, the law, and the temple. Although the theme of this passage requires some work to uncover, Stephen's meaning resounds clearly to this day: *Jesus saves by faith, not by merely external religion.*

The Land (Acts 7:1–16)

In v. 1, the high priest asks Stephen to answer all the accusations raised against Stephen, before the Sanhedrin, as described in the previous passage (Acts 6:12–14). Specifically, Stephen will respond to charges of (1) “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (i.e., blasphemy against God and opposition to the role of Moses, God's prophet; Acts 6:11), (2) that he “never ceases to speak words against this holy place,” (i.e., denigration of Jerusalem and Judea as God's holy land; Acts 6:13a), and that (3) they “have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (i.e., insubordination and insurrection against the temple and the sacrificial worship carried out in the temple; Acts 6:14). That context is important, since the speech is notoriously difficult to interpret, particularly because of its great length¹ and the amount of Old Testament Scripture that Stephen weaves together, with “direct quotations from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos, and Isaiah, and allusions to these and other Old Testament books, including Leviticus, Numbers, Joshua, 1 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Jeremiah, and Hosea.”² While many have suggested that Stephen makes no attempt to respond to the charges against him, this is a mistake, as Lenski notes: “Apparently not making a special defense at all or with one syllable referring to his accusers and their false witnesses, he is yet utterly refuting them and making the most effective defense.”³ Beyond the case of Stephen specifically, it is also important since “This speech...is crucial to the book's development.”⁴

In the first major section of Stephen's speech, he begins to address the charges of blasphemy against God and denigration of Jerusalem and Judea as God's holy land. To begin, Stephen speaks of

¹ “This speech is the longest in Acts...” (Bock, *Acts*, 276.)

² Schnabel, *Acts*, 362.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 259.

⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 276.

God as “the God of glory” (v. 2a). As Lenski notes, “That does not sound like blaspheming God.”⁵ Subtly, Stephen also begins to address the charges against him related to the denigration of the holy land by noting that this “God of glory appeared to our father Abraham *when he was in Mesopotamia*” (v. 2b). Central to Stephen’s defense is the notion that God is not bound or limited to any location, whether to the promised land (and, to Jerusalem and Judea in particular) or to the specific place of the temple.⁶ He begins to make this point by observing that God first appeared to father Abraham when Abraham was far outside Canaan, Judea, Jerusalem, or the temple, when he was still in Mesopotamia.⁷

Notably, although God did promise Abraham the land of Canaan, Stephen emphasizes the fact that God did not fulfill those promises within Abraham’s lifetime: “Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child” (v. 5). Again, the point is subtle: Was God good and powerful for Abraham, in spite of the fact that Abraham did not possess “even a foot’s length” of the land during his lifetime? Without question, the answer must be *Yes!* Yet, if so, then God’s goodness and power are not tied to the possession of the land. Moreover, Stephen alludes to the faith that Abraham exercised in the absence of possessing the land.⁸ By this, Stephen is subtly opening a point that he will make throughout this sermon, regarding the necessity of faith in God and his promises in contrast to mere possession of external things.

As Stephen continues his rehearsal of Israel’s history, he recalls God’s promise that Abraham’s offspring would be enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, and then they will come to worship God “in this place” (v. 7; Gen. 15:14; Ex. 3:12). By “this place,” it is possible that Stephen meant the temple;⁹ Bock’s argument, however, seems stronger: “at this point in the speech, the issue is primarily the land promised to Abraham, not the temple per se. So a reference to land is more likely, although it could well be that land is noted so that the backdrop for how God came to the temple is made clear. God’s presence and activity are not limited to the temple.”¹⁰ Stephen will return to a discussion of the temple specifically in the last section of his speech.

Next, Stephen recalls the institution of the covenant of circumcision as he moves to a discussion

⁵ “The genitive is qualitative: the God who is distinguished by the glory, not by glory in general, but by his own specific glory (note the article), the radiant revelation of his divine attributes, of any or of all of them as God permits them to manifest themselves.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 260–61.)

⁶ “The beginning and end of the speech, in particular, insist that the presence of God is not restricted to any one land or any material building. God revealed Himself to Abraham long before Abraham settled in the holy land; He gave His law to the people of Israel through Moses when they were wanderers in a wilderness. The people of God similarly should not be restricted to any one locality; a movable tent such as they had in the wilderness and in the earlier years of their settlement in Canaan was a more fitting shrine for the Divine Presence in their midst than the fixed structure of stone which King Solomon built.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 141.)

⁷ “God reveals himself outside Israel and the temple.” (Bock, *Acts*, 282.)

⁸ “It was all grand and good, but it all required faith, an immense faith on Abraham’s part. Not seeing, he yet believed.” ((Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 264.)

⁹ So argues Polhill, *Acts*, 190.

¹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 285.

of “the twelve patriarchs” (v. 8). This connection is important in Stephen’s overall defense, first as a subtle reminder that circumcision was given by God to Abraham as a promise and not as one of the “customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:14; see Jesus’ same point in John 7:22), and to observe that the sign of circumcision did not guarantee the faithfulness of the patriarchs, the earliest recipients of the sign of circumcision.¹¹

Instead, the patriarchs acted wickedly by selling Joseph into slavery (v. 9a). This is the first point where Stephen begins to develop his Scriptural argument that the Sanhedrin is behaving like their fathers—that is, *wickedly* like their fathers.¹² Yet, despite selling Joseph “into Egypt,” Stephen notes that “God was with him” (v. 9b). Just as God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, now we see God “with” Joseph in Egypt—i.e., outside the land of Canaan.¹³ Further, whereas famine fell upon the land of Canaan, the provision of grain came through Joseph in Egypt (vv. 11–16): “Significantly, Israel’s deliverance at this time did not occur in the ‘promised land.’ Indeed, only distress and famine were there....Indeed, all God’s special acts of deliverance in Stephen’s historical sketch take place outside the borders of Israel.”¹⁴ Beyond this point that downplays the essentiality of the land, Stephen emphasizes the fact that the patriarchs’ bodies were “carried back to Shechem...laid in the tomb...in Shechem” (v. 16). As Schnabel notes, “The reference to Shechem, mentioned twice, is significant since it is a Samaritan city at the foot of Mount Gerizim....Luke’s readers know from 1:8 that the good news must also be proclaimed in Samaria.”¹⁵ Overall, in addition to other points that Stephen begins to raise, the first section of his speech particularly emphasizes that God has been at work among his people beyond Jerusalem and Judea from the very earliest days of the patriarchs.

The Law (Acts 7:17–43)

Since the accusations against Stephen twice emphasize Moses specifically (Acts 6:11, 14), Stephen spends extensive time developing his historical lesson about Moses. Stephen’s points related to Moses emphasize two themes: first, that the Israelites opposed Moses (as, by implication, they are also opposing Jesus), and second, that Moses himself pointed forward to the Jesus whom the Sanhedrin is rejecting. Stephen begins by narrating the increase and multiplication of Israel in Egypt and the rise of a new king “who did not know Joseph” and who thus sought to destroy the infants of the Israelites (vv. 17–19). Then, Stephen narrates Moses’ birth, his time in his parents’ home, his upbringing by Pharaoh’s daughter “as her own son,” when Moses received instruction “in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (vv. 20–22a). Notably, Stephen concludes the summary of Moses’ childhood with the statement that Moses “was mighty in his words and deeds.” This description

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:259–60.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 268.

¹³ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 251.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 192. Polhill also raises this intriguing idea: “One is strongly tempted to see here [vv. 12–13] a reference to the two ‘visits’ of Christ. The Jews had rejected him on his first coming. Would they now accept him when confronted by Christ through Stephen’s preaching? In his temple sermon (3:17–23) Peter had made a similar appeal on the basis of Christ’s two comings, and Stephen could have been implicitly drawing the same parallel with his references to the two visits to the Israelites by their former deliverers, Joseph and Moses.”

¹⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, 372.

draws a subtle comparison between Moses and Jesus, who had been characterized in Luke's Gospel with almost identical words, as "a prophet mighty in deed and word" (Luke 24:19).¹⁶

Next, then, Stephen continues by narrating the crisis that drove Moses away from Egypt. At points, Stephen's description of this period of Moses' life goes beyond the bare text of Exodus, such as when Stephen states that Moses "supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand" (v. 25). Observing this expansion of Exodus's narrative, Peterson comments that it is nevertheless "a reasonable assumption from the text and highlights the theme of ignorance noted earlier in connection with the Joseph story (7:12–13)...Such a failure to recognise that...‘God was giving them salvation by his hand’ [ESV]) anticipates the reaction of many in Israel to Jesus (cf. 3:17–18; 7:51–52)."¹⁷ Then, when Stephen recounts how Moses tried to stop two Israelites from quarreling, Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin of their rejection of Moses' leadership: "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" (v. 27). This is an important point within Stephen's overall argument: "Just as clearly as Stephen established the role of Moses as God's emissary, he depicted also the rejection of his leadership by the Israelites."¹⁸ As the patriarchs had rejected Joseph, so the Israelites had rejected even Moses (see also v. 35). He leaves the implication of this point unstated for the moment, but it is unmistakable: "So far is [Stephen] from blaspheming Moses that he views Moses as a type of Christ. Both were denied, both were thrust away by Israel, and God made both the deliverers of Israel but he made Christ such in a far higher sense."¹⁹

Stephen then narrates the next forty years of Moses' life, when he lived in exile in the land of Midian. Here, "an angel appeared" to Moses on Mount Sinai, in the figure of a burning bush (vv. 29–30). As Moses approached, it was the "Lord" who spoke to him, declaring himself to be "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob" (v. 32). Significantly, the Lord instructed Moses to "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (v. 33). In light of the accusations that Stephen "never ceases to speak words against this holy place" (Acts 6:13), Stephen offers this point in his own defense in that it establishes the fact that "holy ground is where God is."²⁰ The Sanhedrin limited God's presence to the temple, and yet God had appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, had been with Joseph in Egypt, and now had appeared to Moses in Midian. Again, he holds back his comments about the temple specifically until the final section of this material. In a conversation in Midian, the Lord restates his promises to care for his people by sending Moses once again to Egypt (v. 34).

In v. 35, Moses makes his point about Israel's reaction to Moses' leadership more pointedly: "This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush" (v. 35). Starting in v. 35, Stephen describes Moses five times as "this Moses/one," "as if to emphasize that it was this one whom God had singled out to deliver God's people...and prepares a reference to another—Jesus

¹⁶ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 255.

¹⁷ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 255.

¹⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, 196.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 279.

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 294.

—like him.”²¹ Lenski draws out clearly the specific point Stephen is making:

The trouble lay not with Stephen and his treatment of Moses, it lay with the treatment Moses received from Israel at the beginning and continued to receive, yea, was receiving right now from Stephen’s accusers and judges. Stephen’s defensive is turning into an offensive. Not he is on trial, but his judges are. Stephen, however, is not judging them, he is letting God’s Word, Moses himself, do that just as Jesus did in John 5:45–47.... This repudiated Moses who was made the old covenant mediator is the very type of Jesus who was also repudiated by the Jews and yet was made the everlasting Mediator.²²

What makes this argument from Scripture devastatingly powerful is when Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin of the prophecy Moses had made: “This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers’” (v. 37). Stephen is not simply making a free-association analogy, but he is pointing to the prophecy that Moses himself made.²³ These Israelites claim to defend Moses, but they ignore what Moses himself told them about the coming of another, greater Prophet. Just as Moses had led “the congregation [ἐκκλησία; *ekklēsia*; ‘church’] in the wilderness,” so now Jesus, the Prophet whom Moses had prophesied, is again leading “the church in the wilderness.”²⁴

More than rejecting the leadership of Moses at the beginning of his life, Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that the Israelites had continued to reject Moses’ leadership in the wilderness: “Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’” (vv. 39–40). Not only did they make a golden calf, but their rebellion was so severe that “God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven” (v. 42a).²⁵ Stephen quotes the prophetic “commentary” on the wilderness wanderings of Israel from Amos 5:25–27.²⁶ The Israelites had the “customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:14) indeed, but they instead worshiped the golden calf, Moloch, Rephan, and “the images that you made to worship” (v. 43). As Bruce comments, “What Stephen means is that the idolatry which began in the wilderness with the worship of the golden calf found its climax under the monarchy with the worship of the planetary powers, for which the nation lost its freedom and suffered deportation.”²⁷ Although the Sanhedrin is accusing Stephen of betraying his nation, their prophet, and their God, Stephen is connecting the actions of the Sanhedrin with the rebellious examples of their fathers:

²¹ Bock, *Acts*, 296.

²² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 284.

²³ “More than a foreshadowing of Christ took place with Moses. He predicted the coming of Christ, the prophet like himself whom God would raise up (v. 37).” (Polhill, *Acts*, 199.)

²⁴ “As Moses was with the old ἐκκλησία, Christ is with the new, and it is still a pilgrim ἐκκλησία, ‘the church in the wilderness.’” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 152n53.)

²⁵ “...they wandered farther in their froward errors; so that that first fall of theirs was unto them as it were an entrance into a labyrinth.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:293.)

²⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 298.

²⁷ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 155–56.

“Here is the ultimate source of Stephen’s defense; in the end, Israel’s own Scripture condemns Israel.”²⁸

The Temple (Acts 7:44–53)

Although Stephen has already pointed to multiple places in the Old Testament where God’s power, presence, and redemptive activity has expanded far beyond Judea, Jerusalem, or the temple, he now addresses the charge that the Jesus whom he proclaims would “destroy this place” (i.e., the temple; Acts 6:14).²⁹ He begins by talking about the “tent of witness” (the tabernacle), and to remind the Sanhedrin that the Israelites had originally worshiped God throughout the wilderness, as they moved around for the forty years of their wilderness wanderings (v. 44). Even when Israel entered the land, the tabernacle moved about from place to place, so that not until David’s time did the tabernacle come to a final resting place in Jerusalem (vv. 45–46). Furthermore, it was not until Solomon that the impermanent, transient tent of the tabernacle was replaced with a fixed house (v. 47). Thus, Stephen contends that the temple *as the temple* was a rather late development, since God dwelt in the midst of his people by a moving tabernacle with the “congregation in the wilderness” for some time (v. 38).

Next, Stephen carefully shows that the Scriptures themselves were careful to avoid limiting God to the building of the temple: “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ‘“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?”’ (vv. 48–50). By this, Stephen is countering the charges against him regarding the temple with counter-charges against the Sanhedrin: “The particular abuse that Stephen addressed was the use of the temple to restrict, confine, and ultimately manipulate God.”³⁰ Importantly, we should neither make too much or too little of this point: “Stephen criticizes the temple, but not for what it is; rather, he is finding fault with how it is viewed.”³¹ It is true that God dwelt in a special way in the temple; however, we should not understand that to mean that the temple contained him, or that he was limited to the temple. God is the Creator, and even the fine materials from which the temple was constructed were merely the creatures of God’s act of creation. Therefore, the Creator cannot be limited to the creations he has made.³²

Before we consider Stephen’s rebuke of the Sanhedrin, we should pause to summarize all that has gone beforehand. Stephen has worked through an extraordinary amount of Scripture to make a number of points that lie behind that criticism. First, Stephen has shown that God has never been limited to Judea, Jerusalem, or the temple in the outworking of his power, covenant faithfulness, and redemptive work. Second, Stephen has demonstrated that Israel has acted wickedly to oppose God’s appointed redeemers from the very beginning, when the patriarchs rejected Joseph, and even in the

²⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 299.

²⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 292.

³⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 203.

³¹ Bock, *Acts*, 302.

³² “The rhetorical question in verse 50 is in fact a statement. God has made all these things, and so a human temple cannot contain God.” (Bock, *Acts*, 304.)

rejection of Moses' leadership. Third, Stephen has reminded the Sanhedrin that Moses himself prophesied the future coming of a prophet like him, so that failure to obey that prophet like Moses would also be a failure to obey Moses. Fourth, Stephen has pointed out how ancient Israel rejected the "customs that Moses delivered" by worshiping a golden calf and eventually the host of heaven. Fifth, Stephen has noted that God met with his people in the past in a moving tabernacle, and that even when the temple was built, God was never able to be limited to that temple. In each of these points, Stephen is making the claim that the Sanhedrin has failed to understand God's redemptive plans and purposes, and that they have wickedly rejected God's appointed leader—just as their fathers had done.

While these points have been unstated until this moment, Stephen has fully laid the foundation for what he says next:³³ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (v. 51). Not only does Stephen apply Old Testament rebukes of sinful Israel ("stiff-necked," "uncircumcised in heart and ears"), but Stephen makes the connection explicit: "As your fathers did, so do you."³⁴ As their fathers had persecuted and killed the prophets who had "announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One," so now these religious leaders "have now betrayed and murdered" that Righteous One, Jesus Christ (v. 52). Although they had "received the law as delivered by angels," they "did not keep it" (v. 53). On this, Bruce writes, "By rejecting their Messiah, then, they had filled up the measure of their fathers.... In its earliest days as a nation, it rejected the law of God, although it had received that law by angelic mediation. And now in these last days, when God had spoken to them through no angel but by the promised Messiah Himself, it had with even greater decisiveness rejected *Him*."³⁵ On a surface reading, Stephen's accusations seem to come out of the blue; however, a careful reading of his defense shows what an extraordinary speech this is in its careful handling and application of the Scriptural history to those who had rejected Jesus in his own day.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the charges against Stephen (Acts 6:11–14)? How does Stephen respond to the charge of blaspheming the "place" of the holy land? How many locations outside Canaan does Stephen mention as places where God appeared or worked redemption for his people? How does Abraham's lack of possession of "even a foot's length" (v. 5) of Canaan relate to God's goodness and power in relation to the land?
2. How does Stephen respond to the charge of blaspheming Moses and God? In what ways did God work in Moses' life outside the land of Canaan? How did the patriarchs first reject Joseph, and then reject Moses? How did the rejection of Moses anticipate the coming Righteous One for whom

³³ "The final portion of Stephen's speech could be described in classical rhetorical terms as the 'peroration,' where the speaker applies the lessons learned from the previous material in his speech in a direct, frequently emotional appeal to his hearers to act. The aim was to secure their awareness of their own culpability in these matters and motivate them to take remedial action." (Polhill, *Acts*, 205.)

³⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, 386.

³⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 163.

Moses was only a type? How did Israel's rejection of Moses extend into a rejection of God through idolatry?

3. How does Stephen respond to the charge of blaspheming the temple? How does Stephen emphasize God's presence among his people in the "tent of witness in the wilderness" (v. 44)? How did the tabernacle move around outside of Jerusalem in the days of Joshua (v. 45)? Why is it significant that David may have moved the tabernacle to Jerusalem, but did not build the temple? What makes Solomon's temple incapable of containing or limiting God?

4. How does this whole speech compare Stephen's contemporaries with their fathers in ancient Israel? How might we see their insistence upon the land, the law, and the temple as grasping on to external religion rather than to serve the Lord through living, vibrant faith? In what way does Stephen's charges against the Sanhedrin expose their need to repent and to believe in Jesus? Overall, do you think this speech was effective? Why or why not?