

THE ADDRESS OF STEPHEN (7:2–53).

7:2–53. This is the longest recorded message in Acts, which shows the importance Luke attached to it. Stephen, a Grecian Jew, by his life and words prepared the way for the gospel to reach outside the pale of Judaism.

In this discourse three ideas run like cords through its fabric:

1. *There is progress and change in God's program.* God was creative and innovative in His dealings with humans and particularly with Israel. Stephen developed this thought in five points: (a) The promise to **Abraham** (vv. 2–8). From working with the entire human race, the Lord sovereignly called Abraham, father of the Jews, from **Mesopotamia** to the land of promise, and gave him **12** great-grandsons who became the progenitors of Israel's 12 tribes. (b) The sojourn of **Joseph** (vv. 9–16). This move to **Egypt** was the fulfillment of God's prediction recorded in verses 6–7. It too was a radical change for Jacob's descendants. (c) The deliverance under **Moses** (vv. 17–43). A major portion of Stephen's discourse pertained to **Moses** and the Exodus, another important aspect of Israel's history. (d) The building of the **tabernacle** (vv. 44–46). Constructing the tabernacle so that it was portable implied it was temporary. (It was called the **tabernacle of Testimony** because it testified to God's presence among them.) (e) The construction of the temple (vv. 47–50). Even the temple was to be a symbol of God's presence and not the very home of God.

If God changed so many things in Israel's history, who is to say that the Law and the temple were permanent?

2. *The blessings of God are not limited to the land of Israel and the temple area.* Some of Israel's greatest favors were bestowed apart from the temple and the land.

Stephen gave four examples: (a) Israel's patriarchs and leaders were blessed *outside* the land. **Abraham** was called in Mesopotamia and given promises **before he lived in Haran** (vv. 2–5). In **Egypt ... Joseph** found favor with **Pharaoh** because **God was with him** (vv. 9–10). **Moses** was commissioned by God in **Midian** (vv. 29–34). To substantiate the fact that God blessed Moses while he was in Midian, Stephen carefully recounted that **two sons** were born to Moses there. (b) The Law itself was given outside the land: Moses **was in the congregation in the desert** (v. 38). (c) The tabernacle was built in the desert. The tabernacle was **with them in the desert** (v. 44). In fact the Jews **brought it with them when they took the land** (v. 45). (d) Even the temple, though in the land, was not to be limited in its theology. How could the temple be God's dwelling place when the Scripture declares, **Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool?** (v. 49; Isa. 66:1)

3. *Israel in its past always evidenced a pattern of opposition to God's plans and His men.* This is the main point of Stephen's discourse, as its climax affirms (Acts 7:51–53). **You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!** This theme is seen throughout the message, but there are some definite specifics. (a) Instead of going directly from Mesopotamia to the Promised Land, **Abraham** tarried **in Haran** (vv. 2–4). (b) **Joseph** was **sold** by his brothers into slavery in **Egypt** (v. 9). (c) **Moses** was rejected by the **Israelites** (vv. 23–29). It is highly significant that both Joseph and Moses were not accepted until their *second* appearances (vv. 13, 35–36). The parallel with Christ could not have escaped Stephen's hearers. (d) Israel rejected true worship by turning to idols (vv. 39–43). Her blatant unbelief was seen in idolatry, a sin which the Jews of the Apostolic Age particularly abhorred. As a result God judged the nation by sending her **into Exile in Babylon** (v. 43). (e) The people of Israel missed the point of the temple (vv. 48–50). The strong and clear assertion of Stephen (v. 48) implies that the Jews believed the temple was God's dwelling place on earth, the Jewish counterpart to Mount Olympia. Indeed the temple was to be a place of worship and prayer; but it was not God's home (cf. 1 Kings 8:23–53).

Stephen's three main points in this discourse fit together. Since there is progression in God's program and since His blessings are not limited to the temple, Israel had better be careful not to "resist" (Acts 7:51) His workings as they had in the past. They would withstand God's purpose by refusing to see His work in the church and His blessing outside the borders of Israel. This defense related specifically to the accusation made against Stephen in 6:11–14.

Another apparent discrepancy in Stephen's discourse is in Acts 7:14. Stephen stated that **75** persons were in Jacob's **family**, but the Hebrew text has "70" in both Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5. In both places the Septuagint has 75. It is commonly said that Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, would have used the

Septuagint and therefore was making only an “honest” mistake. This difficulty, however, can be resolved in other ways. One of the most widely accepted solutions is to recognize that the Hebrew text includes Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (a total of 70), but that the Septuagint omits Jacob and Joseph but includes Joseph’s seven grandchildren (mentioned in 1 Chron. 7:14–15, 20–25). This is supported by the Hebrew in Genesis 46:8–26 which enumerates 66 names, omitting Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s two sons. Another solution is that the Septuagint’s 75 includes the 66 plus the 9 wives of Jacob’s 12 sons (Judah’s and Simeon’s wives had died and Joseph’s wife was in Egypt).

Acts 7:16 contains another apparent discrepancy. Stephen’s words imply that **Jacob** was buried at **Shechem** whereas the Old Testament clearly affirms that he and his wife Leah (and his parents Isaac and Rebekah and his grandparents Abraham and Sarah) were interred in the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron (Gen. 49:29–50:13). However, the bodies buried at Shechem did not include Jacob but did include those of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was buried first in Egypt but was reburied in Shechem (Gen. 50:26; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32). True, Joshua 24:32 refers only to Joseph’s bones, but evidently his brothers were also buried at Shechem (though Josephus states otherwise). The pronoun **their** (Acts 7:16), then, does not include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but looks back to the words **our fathers** in verse 15 and refers to Joseph and his brothers.

Stephen’s phrase, **the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem** (v. 16), presents another problem. Actually Jacob, not Abraham, bought the plot of ground (Gen. 33:19). This may be explained by saying that Abraham in a sense did purchase the property in the person of his grandson. Abraham would be given title to Shechem through Jacob.

This favorable allusion to Shechem, the “capital” of the Samaritans, would not please Stephen’s audience. But his reference to Samaria prepares readers for the next step in the outreach of the gospel (Acts 8).

3. THE ATTACK ON STEPHEN (7:54–8:1a).

7:54–56. The response of the religious authorities to Stephen’s message was easily predictable: **They were furious** (cf. 5:33) **and gnashed their teeth at him**.

Instead of being intimidated, **Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit** (cf. 6:3, 5, 10), **saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God**. The Lord Jesus normally is seated at the Father’s right hand (Ps. 110:1; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). The standing position may imply that the Lord Christ was standing to welcome Stephen.

Acts 7:56 is a climactic verse in this chapter for several reasons. First, it repeats the claim Christ made at His trial before the high priest (Mark 14:62). Just as His claim resulted in His being accused of blasphemy, so also these words brought a violent response toward Stephen. Second, the term **Son of Man** is filled with significance. This is the last time it is used in the New Testament and it is the only time in the Gospels and Acts when it is not spoken by the Lord Jesus. This expression, Son of Man, shows that Jesus is the Messiah for it comes from Daniel 7:13–14. It is definitely eschatological. (See additional comments on “the Son of Man” at Mark 8:31.) Third, Acts 7:56 combines two great messianic passages—Daniel 7:13–14 and Psalm 110:1. Daniel 7:13–14 emphasizes the universal aspect of the Lord’s rule. He is not simply a Jewish ruler; He is Savior of the world. Psalm 110:1 presents the Messiah as being at God’s **right hand**. Besides stressing power and position, this also shows acceptance. Christ is therefore the Mediator (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5), thus proving that people have access to God by means other than the temple and its priests.

7:57–58. The response of the Sanhedrin was immediate and violent. They quickly saw the theological implications of Stephen’s doctrine—Israel was guilty; the Law was temporary; the temple must be done away—so they **dragged him out of the city and began to stone him**. Blasphemy was to be punished by death (Lev. 24:16). The Jews’ martyring Stephen is ironic because their forefathers, having worshiped “Moloch” (Acts 7:43), should have been put to death, according to Moses (Lev. 20:2).

A young theologian named Saul agreed that Stephen should be stoned. **The witnesses laid their clothes at his feet**. This meant Saul was giving his approval by guarding their clothes (Acts 8:1; 22:20).

7:59–60. In words reminiscent of the Lord’s, **Stephen** committed his **spirit** to the **Lord** and **prayed** for his enemies (cf. Luke 23:34, 46). Luke recorded the fact of his death by simply writing, **he fell asleep**. For a Christian, his body (not his soul) sleeps in death (cf. John 11:11; 1 Thes. 4:13, 15).¹

¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 369–371.