

## The Book of Acts - Chapter Seven

### III. Acts 6:1-12:25 - The Witness beyond Jerusalem (continues)

#### III.b. Acts 6:8-8:1a - Stephen bears the ultimate witness (continues/concludes)

##### Summary of Chapter Seven

When the Lord Protector of England, Oliver Cromwell, was outlining the education he thought necessary for his son Richard, he said: 'I would have him know a little history'. It was to the lesson of history that Stephen appealed, clearly believing that the best form of defence was attack, he took a 'bird's-eye' view of the history of the Jewish people and cited certain truths as condemnation of his own nation. They were clearly shocked and surprised at just how much of God's activities took place outside of the Promised Land.

Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, falsely charged with blaspheming against Moses (the Law) and against God (the temple). He would show that it was the religious leaders who were actually the guilty ones.

He gave an extended and detailed summary of Israel's history from the time that Abraham was first called out of the land of Mesopotamia, through Israel's time of slavery in Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, their arrival in the Promised Land up until the time of David and Solomon, who was the one who built the temple for God.

Stephen's purpose was to show that God never intended the Law to last forever, especially the ceremonial law, but that it was a pointer to the coming of the Christ, who would be the one to establish the eternal kingdom. Also, he showed that God did not need a special building, i.e. the Jerusalem temple, a special land, i.e. Canaan or even a particular people, i.e. the Hebrews, as he never intended to restrict salvation to such a narrow selection but to offer it to the whole world. Although he had chosen the Jews to be a special people through covenant promises, the Jews had forfeited many of the privileges he had given them but he had and would never abandon them.

Finally, Stephen linked his discourse to the present time, showing that the failings of the religious leaders from the past was reflected in them, as they had killed the Righteous One of God, Jesus the Christ, who had been long promised by the prophets, whom their fathers had persecuted and killed for such proclamations.

This angered the Jewish authorities, who then took him outside and stoned him to death, whether legally or not is disputed. Stephen had a vision of Jesus in heaven and died with words of prayer on his lips, both for himself and for his killers. The passage introduces a young man named Saul who would continue to persecute the church until his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus Road.

### III.b.ii Acts 7:1-53 - Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin

Stephen's defence is the longest discourse in Acts. It is a selective recital of OT history, including sections on Abraham (vv.2-8), Joseph (vv.9-16), Moses (vv.17-34), and Israel's apostasy (vv.35-50). It was cut short when Stephen applied his history lesson to Israel's current rejection of the Messiah (vv.51-53). Stephen responded to the charges by turning them on his accusers: they were the ones who were really disobeying God because they rejected his appointed leaders. All of Stephen's quotes are from the Septuagint, i.e. the Greek translation of the OT, as he had been a Hellenised Jew. Some of these quotes give rise to minor discrepancies compared with the Hebrew version and these will be explained as they occur.

**<sup>1</sup> Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"**

#### Acts 7:1

The date of this trial cannot be firmly established but most hold it to be around AD34-35 and so Caiaphas would still have been the High Priest.

These charges were false accusations of blasphemy against the Law (Moses) and against the temple, i.e. God, and were made in Acts Chapter 6.

**<sup>2</sup> To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. <sup>3</sup> 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'**

#### Acts 7:2-3

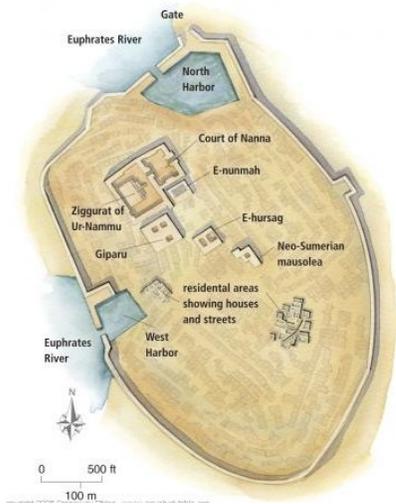
He addressed the court as 'Brothers and fathers', which is both respectful and endearing, showing he identified with them as a nation and people. They clearly did not see him in the same light but probably as an apostate of the Jewish church.

Mesopotamia was referred to as Ur of the Chaldeans in Genesis 11:32. Ur of the Chaldeans is unquestionably the ancient city in southern Babylonia, the remains of which are located at Tell el-Muqayyar in modern Iraq.

The story of Abraham, still known as Abram at that time, in Haran and his calling to Canaan are given in Genesis 12:1-5.

**Abraham had both faith and the promise before he was circumcised.**

The ancient city of Ur lies 186 miles (300 km) southeast of modern Baghdad on a bend of the original course of the Euphrates River. Major excavations took place at the site in 1922-1934 under the direction of Sir Leonard Woolley. Ur became an important city in Mesopotamia near the end of the third millennium BC. The governor of Ur, a man named Ur-Nammu (circa 2113-2095BC), brought the city to great prominence. He took the titles King of Ur, King of Sumer and Akkad. Thus was founded the Third Dynasty of Ur (2113-2006BC). This period was one of great peace and prosperity, the high point of the city's existence. This diagram of the city represents the Third Dynasty of Ur, and it includes a central palace and a temple complex. The latter has as its centre the Ziggurat of Ur-Nammu that is dedicated to the moon god Nanna. Ur was the birthplace of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham (Genesis 11:27-32), and the plan represents the city as he would have been familiar with.



The illustration shows Ur in a layout that Abraham would have been familiar with.

**Leave your country:** The text: <<Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods>> (Joshua 24:2), indicates the level of faith that Abraham clearly had in order to leave everything behind him and follow God’s command. More importantly, from the perspective of Stephen’s argument, it shows how God can operate in lands of apostasy and, if he can

operate that far to the east, then he can do the same in the north, south and west as well. He isn’t tied to any particular place.

Presbyterian Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who served most of his life in India, once said: ‘Christians have no right to demand to know where they are going’.



**4 “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.**

**Acts 7:4**

According to the Kultepe Texts from the nineteenth century BC, i.e. texts composed by Assyrian traders, who clearly understood such matters, **Haran** was an important crossroads and commercial centre in the ancient Near East.

The narrative in Genesis Chapter 11 records **the death of his father** at the age of 205. If Abraham was born when Terah was 70 years old, see Genesis 11:26, and if Abraham was 75 years old when he departed for Canaan, as stated in Genesis 12:4, then Terah must have died 60 years after Abraham’s departure (70 + 75 + 60 = 205). However, Stephen stated that Abraham left Haran after the death of Terah. A simple way to resolve the chronological difficulty is to suppose that Stephen was following an alternative text, represented today in the Samaritan Pentateuch, which says that Terah died at the age of 145; or that he left his father alive in Haran to later die at 205 years old and Stephen made a simple error. Either way there is no doctrinal issue at stake nor problems with scriptural integrity.

**5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.**

**Acts 7:5**

Abraham himself was given **no inheritance** in the Promised Land, **not even a foot of ground**, thus supporting Stephen’s argument that God was working even when the temple did not exist.

**God promised him his descendants would possess the land**, even though his wife was barren and Abraham was already 75 years of age. God, as always, kept his promise about 25 years later when his wife Sarah bore him Isaac (v.8)

**<sup>6</sup> God spoke to him in this way: ‘Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.**

#### Acts 7:6

Four hundred years is the approximate duration that Israel spent in Egypt. Some calculate this from the time that Isaac was born to give an early date for the Exodus; others use the death of Jacob as the starting date, which gives the later date for the Israelite’s departure from Egypt.

**<sup>7</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’**

#### Acts 7:7

Combining Genesis 15:13-14 with Exodus 3:12, Stephen spoke of God’s assurances to Abraham that, even after a long exile, his descendants would come into Canaan and worship God in this place. Stephen’s emphasis was on how God revealed himself outside the Holy Land and how he promised a place of true worship to come.

**<sup>8</sup> Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.**

#### Acts 7:8

The covenant of circumcision was given when Abraham was 99 years old (Genesis 17:1), and that very day he underwent circumcision, along with his son Ishmael, who was borne by Sarah’s servant girl Hagar, and the rest of his male household. Circumcision was given many years after the promise in Genesis 12:3, and was to seal the promise God had made, providing the Hebrews abided by it: <<Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant>> (Genesis 17:9-14).

The twelve patriarchs are the sons of Jacob, named Israel, who were the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, after whom the tribes were named. A full list of these men, along with their respective mothers, can be found in Genesis 35:23-26.

**<sup>9</sup> “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.**

**<sup>11</sup> “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family.**

### Acts 7:9-13

We should note the length of time and the hardships that had to be faced: battles, famines, slavery, family feuds, etc. even before the land began to be settled. This shows the patience that we need to show when engaged in kingdom work: <<By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God>> (Hebrews 11:9-10), shows it is the heavenly Canaan that is the goal for them and us and not the earthly one.

The story of Joseph contrasts how the patriarchs were blessed by the brother whom they had rejected through petty jealousy. But when he became leader they then feared what he might do to them, but Joseph had been given grace and wisdom, stating: <<You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives>> (Genesis 50:20). His wisdom was to always trust in God and faithfully undertake each and every task that was given to him to fulfil. Israel's rejection of God's chosen leaders is a theme that runs throughout Stephen's speech, culminating in the rejection of Jesus as the Christ.

God was with him. God's presence with Joseph in Egypt shows that God can bless those outside the Promised Land, and therefore a physical temple is not crucial for the purpose of salvation.

**<sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.**

### Acts 7:14

When Stephen cites the number of Jacob's whole family at seventy-five in all, he is following the Septuagint rather than Hebrew text for Exodus 1:5, which follows a different calculation and arrives at the number 70. The different texts were apparently based on different decisions regarding whether to include Jacob and his wife, and the additional descendants born to Ephraim and Manasseh in Egypt.

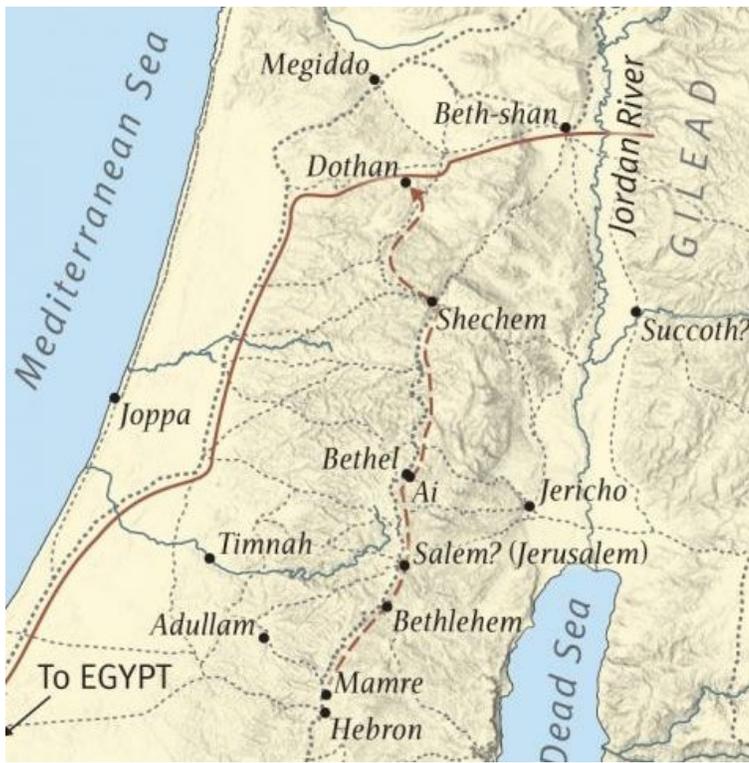
**The main point is not whether there were 70 or 75 living in Egypt at the time but how they prospered under God's care to be around one million just a few generations later when it was time to move to the land he had promised to their father Abraham.**

**<sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died.**

### Acts 7:15

Israel's presence in Egypt for 400 years (v.6) again indicates that the Lord is with his people even when they are not in the Promised Land and when they are not with him.

**<sup>16</sup> Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.**



A map of the Promised Land from OT times showing the location of Shechem.

Acts 7:16

The tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. The OT shows that it was actually Jacob who had bought the tomb from the sons of Hamor in Shechem (Genesis 33:19), and this is where Joseph was buried: <<And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants>> (Joshua 24:32).

It seems that Stephen was using the name Abraham to refer to all of Abraham's family or descendants, including Jacob, as indicated by this text: <<one might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor>> (Hebrews 7:9-10). This text was an analogy showing that the Levitical priesthood received the tithe from the people of Israel, yet their ancestor had paid a tithe to the priest and King of Salem, Melchizedek. Jesus was later to become: <<a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek>> (Hebrews 7:17b), and thus superseding the Levitical priesthood and the ceremonial law.

Another possible explanation is that Abraham had earlier bought the same piece of land when he built an altar in Shechem (Genesis 12:6-7), but Jacob later had to repurchase it just as Isaac had needed to renegotiate his rights to a well that Abraham had earlier bought in Beersheba, compare Genesis 21:27-31 with Genesis 26:23-33.

**17 “As the time drew near for God to fulfil his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. 18 Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.**

Acts 7:17-19

He dealt treacherously because his predecessor had welcomed the Hebrews into the land as a way of thanking Joseph for saving the nation, although in reality it was God working through Joseph that had achieved this as part of his providential plan. This **king** or Pharaoh feared that the numerous Hebrews might join forces with one of Egypt's enemies and so he put them into slavery, a yoke of bondage that forced them to cry out to God for their only hope of salvation, just as it is today.

In order to decrease the population, it was decided that all newborn Hebrew males were to be killed at birth by the midwives, who failed to comply with this instruction because, quite correctly, they feared God more than they feared Pharaoh (Exodus 1:17). Thus Moses survived.

<sup>20</sup> “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father’s house.

### Acts 7:20

Stephen’s recital of the story of Moses is in three parts, each covering 40 years: his birth and the years in Pharaoh’s court (vv.20-22), flight from Egypt and time spent as a shepherd in Midian (vv.23-29), and his divine commissioning at Sinai, encounters with Pharaoh, and finally the wilderness years (vv.30-43).

<sup>21</sup> When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son <sup>22</sup> Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

Stephen’s recounting of Moses’ early life showed the high esteem in which he held him. This would continue throughout his discourse and shows how unlikely it was that he would blaspheme Moses for which he now stood trial, along with blaspheming the temple and, therefore, God himself.

### Acts 7:21-22

Placed outside refers to Moses being placed in a small basket and floated on the river near to the place where Pharaoh’s daughter would bathe. She found him and took him as her own (Exodus 2:5-10).

Apparently, Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, which is not mentioned in the OT but was well established in Jewish tradition. Stephen emphasises that the one who delivered Israel was educated in a secular setting and not in a rabbinic school. Hence God accomplished salvation in an unexpected way, as he has now done through Jesus of Nazareth.

Powerful in speech and action refers to his position, intellect and status, as he had a stammer, and would later use his brother Aaron to speak for him on major occasions.

Josephus recounts a tale from Jewish folklore that says one day Pharaoh’s daughter took Moses to her father and asked him to name Moses as his successor to the throne. Pharaoh agreed and for a joke, took the crown off his head and placed it on the young child Moses, who immediately snatched the crown and cast it to the floor. One of the wise men said that if the child was not killed immediately that he would one day bring disaster to the crown of Egypt, which of course came to pass at the Red Sea. What is believed to be more accurately recorded is that Moses was a great military leader in his youth and successfully led a campaign for the Egyptians in Ethiopia. Whatever the truth of Moses first forty years of life, living as a member of the richest and most powerful dynasty in the world at that time, he would give that all up when he decided to become involved again with his own people.

<sup>23</sup> “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites.

### Acts 7:23

Stephen highlighted Moses’ middle years by relating his avenging of an abused Israelite and the subsequent rejection of his attempt to reconcile two quarrelling Israelites (Exodus 2:11-15). The 40-year period was spent primarily in Midian (v.29), but Stephen chose to emphasise the single incident because it illustrated Israel’s constant rejection of its God-sent leaders (see v.35).

<sup>24</sup> He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defence and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> Moses thought that his own people would realise that God was using him to rescue them, but they did

not. <sup>26</sup> The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

<sup>27</sup> “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’ <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ <sup>29</sup> When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

<sup>30</sup> “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai.

### Acts 7:24-30

After spending the middle forty years of his life in exile in Midian (v.23 and v.29), Moses began his final forty years, which is covered in vv.30-43.

A burning bush. Many explanations have been offered as to how this bush could burn and not be consumed. The best way to understand it is to accept it as a miracle of God (Exodus 3:1-4).

Mount Sinai is also known as Mount Horeb. Scholars have long debated the location of Mount Sinai, with a favoured location in the Sinai desert in southern Egypt and a competing one at Jabal al-Lawz in Saudi Arabia.



Traditional site of Mt Sinai with St Catherine's Monastery at its base.



Jebel el-Lawz in Saudi Arabia is held by some to be the site of Mt Sinai.

<sup>31</sup> When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

### Acts 7:31-32

I am the God of your fathers not only clearly identified who was speaking but the use of the present tense also underlines the truth of the resurrection of the dead and for everlasting life, as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had long since departed this life, and it is said of God that: <<He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive>> (Luke 20:38).

<sup>33</sup> “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’

#### Acts 7:33-34

The place where you are standing is holy ground (Exodus 3:5) indicates that the land in Midian as well as Judæa is holy. It is God that sanctifies the ground, not the location.

<sup>35</sup> “This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

#### Acts 7:35-36

Stephen continued the story of Moses, emphasising Israel’s rejection of his leadership. He implicitly presented Moses as a type of Christ: both were men whom God sent, both served as a redeemer: <<but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel>> (Luke 24:21a), and both performed wonders and signs: <<Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know>> (Acts 2:22).

Miraculous signs in Egypt included the ten plagues (Exodus 7:14-12:30) that finally convinced Pharaoh of the power of God and persuaded him to release them from bondage.

At the Red Sea refers to the parting of the Red Sea for the Israelites to cross and then subsequently restoring the waters to normal, destroying Pharaoh and his entire army in the process (Exodus 13:17-14:31).

Forty years in the desert. Following the lack of faith shown by 10 of the 12 spies sent into the Promised Land, who reported that taking the land would be too difficult for them and the majority of the Israelites accepting this, led God to decree that they would spend the same number of years as the forty days the spies had spent in the land of Canaan, wandering the wilderness, so that all the adults who were born in Egypt would die without entering the Promised Land and that it would be a new generation could be prepared, who would have that privilege (Numbers 14:33-34).

<sup>37</sup> “This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’

#### Acts 7:37

Jesus is the prophet whom Moses predicted: <<the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him>> (Deuteronomy 18:15). God confirmed his choice of prophet, yet much more than a prophet, indeed a son and a king, in Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration: <<While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “ This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!>> (Matthew 17:5).

<sup>38</sup> He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.

## Acts 7:38

Received living words to pass on to us refers primarily to the ten commandments but also includes aspects of the law. Anything that is living can also die and thus the ceremonial law died along with Jesus.

The Greek word for congregation is *ekklēsia*, the characteristic NT word for church, and it provides a comparison between Moses' presence with the Israelites, and Christ's presence in the church. The word refers to an assembled group. The idea that the law was mediated by angels was well established in Judaism and is repeated in v.53 and also by Paul in **Galatians 3:19** <<What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator>>, and by the author to the Hebrews: <<For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment>> (**Hebrews 2:2**). **Stephen employed the Moses/Christ typology to show how both were God-sent deliverers and how Israel rejected the message of both.**

<sup>39</sup> **“But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.**

## Acts 7:39

Their hearts turned back to Egypt is often used as a description for those who would rather accept the bondage of sin rather than choose freedom in the ways of God. It is something that remains an issue in the church today and probably always will, as people fail to comprehend the need to remain faithful and obedient to Jesus' teaching and his calling on their lives; a misunderstanding of what it means to make Jesus Lord of our lives.

There are similarities between Moses and Jesus: both faced death as infants due to royal edict (**Exodus 1:22, Matthew 2:13**); both had to flee the land, one from Egypt (**Exodus 2:15**), and one to Egypt (**Matthew 2:13**); and both were rejected as leaders sent by God (**Exodus 2:14, Mark 11:28**). Had both rejections prevailed then the outcome would have been continued slavery in both cases, and eternal damnation added for the rejection of Jesus. But we must be thankful that he went also to the Gentiles (**Matthew 23:38-39**).

<sup>40</sup> They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt – we don't know what has happened to him!’

<sup>41</sup> That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honour of what their hands had made.

## Acts 7:40-41

The golden calf incident illustrates Israel's continuing rejection of Moses' leadership: <<we don't know what has happened to him!>> (**Exodus 32:1**), and their sinful idolatry.

Stephen, far from blaspheming Moses, indicated a similar view to that of Jesus in **John 5:46** <<If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me>>, and he knew that: <<the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ>> (**John 1:17**). **They should have known differently for:** <<Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven>> (**John 6:32**). **As the writer to the Hebrews would later state:** <<The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship>> (**Hebrews 10:1**).

They hankered after the food of Egypt (Numbers 11:5) rather than the milk and honey of the Promised Land (Exodus 3:8), especially the Bread of Life (John 6:33-35). They worshipped the religion from their traditions rather than in spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

<sup>42</sup> But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings  
forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?  
<sup>43</sup> You have lifted up the shrine of Molech  
and the star of your god Rephan,  
the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

#### Acts 7:42-43

Stephen carried the accusation of Israel's idolatry on down to their occupation of the Promised Land, when they began worshipping heavenly bodies. To establish this he quoted the Septuagint, i.e. the Greek version of Amos 5:25-27. Molech was the Canaanite sun god. The identity of Rephan is uncertain, but it possibly refers to Repa, the Egyptian name for Saturn.

Stephen reminded them of their fathers' lust to serve the heavenly host and all the other gods of the Gentiles: <<And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven>> (Deuteronomy 4:19), and: <<They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens, which they have loved and served and which they have followed and consulted and worshiped. They will not be gathered up or buried, but will be like refuse lying on the ground>> (Jeremiah 8:2).

The ten northern tribes were taken away beyond Babylon starting in 740BC by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:6), with the other two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, following some years later into Babylon itself in 587BC: <<He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah>> (2 Chronicles 36:20-21).

<sup>44</sup> “Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen.

#### Acts 7:44

Stephen turned to the charge made against him regarding the temple (Acts 6:12-14). He contrasted the tabernacle, or tent of meeting, with the temple. The temple is not necessary for God's purposes, for in the wilderness God directed the construction of the tabernacle, see Exodus 25:40. In distinction from the temple, it was movable, and it contained the witness, the stone tablets inscribed with God's law. It continued as Israel's place of worship through the period of the conquest on down to the time of David, who was the first to request a temple, as recorded in 2 Samuel 7:1-17. However, Stephen should not be understood as saying that the building of the temple was wrong, for he narrates this event without any hint of disapproval. Verse 48 merely affirms that God cannot be contained in or confined to any earthly temple: <<The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he

needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else>> (Acts 17:24-25). His point was not to make too much of the temple, which is just as well as it would be destroyed in less than 40 years time.

<sup>45</sup> Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, <sup>46</sup> who enjoyed God's favour and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

#### Acts 7:45-47

Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them. Even though it was easily transportable and had several locations during its history, the tabernacle was at the heart of Jewish worship. Only the priests were allowed to minister in the tabernacle and they were also responsible for its transportation when it was relocated. Until David took the Ark to Jerusalem, it was housed in the tabernacle. Even after this, the altar of God remained with the tabernacle and was the place where sacrifices to God were offered.

There are two main aspects to the Jewish people: continuous privileges and blessing; and continuous disobedience. The more privileges people have, the greater the condemnation if they choose to take the wrong way. Stephen insisted that the condemnation of the Jewish nation was complete because, in spite of the fact that they had every chance to know better, they continuously rebelled against God. They had wrongly limited God.

The temple, which should have become their greatest blessing, was in fact their greatest curse; they had come to worship it instead of worshipping God. They had ended up with a Jewish God who lived in Jerusalem rather than a God of all people whose dwelling was the whole universe.

The land was not what the people had made, it but what God allows people to make of it. And if his seed degenerates, he can destroy the crop and plant new seed in a new field. He visited Abram far off to the east and can just as easily visit others far to the west, north or south. To speak of him destroying Judæa or any other land for that matter is not therefore blasphemous but a statement of fact.

<sup>48</sup> “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup>       “‘Heaven is my throne,  
          and the earth is my footstool.  
          What kind of house will you build for me?  
          says the Lord.  
          Or where will my resting place be?  
<sup>50</sup>       Has not my hand made all these things?’

#### Acts 7:48-50

Stephen quoted Isaiah 66:1-2 to establish that God does not dwell in houses, a point Solomon himself made: <<But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!>> (1 Kings 8:27). Israel's error was in confining God to the temple. Further, Stephen suggested that neither the tabernacle nor the temple were intended to last forever. Both pointed to something greater that was to come.

**<sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!”**

### Acts 7:51

Stephen suddenly changed from his eloquent discourse on OT history, having perhaps perceived that they would not allow him to go on when he would liken their generation to that of their father's, to show that they were just as opposed to doing God's will, despite their claims to the contrary. So he placed a brutal but honest statement on them that labels their character to that of their forefathers, and established them as the ones responsible for crucifying the Messiah. While this may seem harsh, Luke will soon say that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (v.55), and he was no doubt led by the Spirit, who knew the hearts of Stephen's listeners, to make his accusation. Using the language of the OT, he accused them of being: **stiff-necked**, e.g. Exodus 33:3, 33:5 and 34:9; and Deuteronomy 9:6 and 9:13. **Uncircumcised in heart and ears**, e.g. Leviticus 26:41, Deuteronomy 10:16, Jeremiah 4:4, 6:10 and 9:26, and Ezekiel 44:7 and 44:9; and **resisting the Holy Spirit**, e.g. Isaiah 63:10. In fact, the repeated rejection of God's will is the point of his story, justifying the charge that prophets had repeatedly made against the nation and, in particular, its leaders.

Paul would later write that they should really have recognised that: <<In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ>> (Colossians 2:11).

**Stephen does not excuse them on the plea of ignorance as Peter later does:** <<As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance>> (1 Peter 1:14), **and:** <<Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders>> (Acts 3:17), **as did the Lord, for:** <<Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”>> (Luke 23:34a). **Paul offered up in his own defence:** <<Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief>> (1 Timothy 1:13); **for he clearly believed that it was not ignorance but rebellious disobedience, which made them commit that crime. There is anger in Stephen's closing words, but there is sorrow as well.**

**<sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him**

### Acts 7:52

Like Jesus, Stephen accused his Jewish listeners of **persecuting and killing the prophets**, which is confirmed in Luke 11:47-51 and 13:34, and now of rejecting their ultimate God-sent deliverer, the **Righteous One**, see Acts 3:14-15.

**<sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”**

### Acts 7:53

It was not Stephen but his accusers who were the ultimate rejecters of **the law**. In rejecting their God-sent deliverers, they rejected God himself.

### III.b.iii Acts 7:54-8:1a - The stoning of Stephen

Stephen's testimony was cut short as the enraged Sanhedrin turned on him (v.54). Their anger intensified as he shared his vision of the exalted Christ (vv.55-57). They stoned him (v.58), and he died praying for them (Acts 7:59-8:1a). His martyrdom triggered a general persecution against the church (Acts 8:1b-3).

Here, we see not just the courage and the comfort of the persecuted disciple, in this account of the first Christian martyr, but also the rage and fury of his persecutors, something the church has and will always face: <<If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you>> (1 Peter 4:14).

**<sup>54</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.**

**<sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.**

**<sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."**

#### Acts 7:54-56

In the time of his need, Stephen seemed to have extra strength given to him, being **full of the Holy Spirit** to overcome natural fear. When he **looked up to heaven** he was also given the comfort of a vision of his Lord in heaven: <<Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?>> (1 Corinthians 15:55).

On **the Son of Man** and the theme of vindication: <<In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence>> (Daniel 7:13), and: <<"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven">> (Matthew 26:64).

**The Son of Man was Jesus' favourite self-designation, which indicated the true meaning of his identity and ministry:**

- 1. The humble servant, who came to forgive common sinners.**
- 2. The suffering servant, whose atoning death and resurrection redeemed his people.**
- 3. The glorious King and Judge, who will return to establish God's kingdom on earth.**

**<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

#### Acts 7:57-58

It is debated whether Stephen was formally stoned by order of the Sanhedrin or killed by mob violence. The fact that he was appearing before that body (Acts 6:12) would favour the former, but the precipitous nature of the stoning suggests mob behaviour. Also, under Roman rule, the Sanhedrin did not have the legal right to execute without Roman prior concurrence: <<Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," the Jews objected>> (John 18:31).

There is no indication of a vote or the appropriate legal process being followed. They would have claimed legality under Leviticus 24:16 <<anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-

born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death>>, but the case had been far from proven against him nor was he fairly tried. Surely this was mob rule.

Stephen had rebuked them sharply, something Paul would advocate some years later: <<This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith>> (Titus 1:13), but Satan had so filled their hearts that they became a mob with echoes of 'crucify him' ringing in their minds. <<They are filled with the wrath of the Lord and the rebuke of your God>> (Isaiah 51:20b), and: <<God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes>> (Job 16:9). They snarled at him like wild dogs: <<Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh>> (Philippians 3:2), <<the wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing>> (Psalm 112:10), and: <<The bloodthirsty hate a person of integrity and seek to kill the upright>> (Proverbs 29:10).

**Rejecters and opposers of the Gospel are really tormenters of themselves. Enmity towards God is a heart-cutting thing; faith and love are heart healing.**

**They covered their ears.** Caiaphas, contrary to the law, tore his clothes when Jesus spoke of the Son of Man coming in glory (Matthew 26:64-65). Now they stop up their ears and make a great noise to avoid hearing Stephen confirm his vision of Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven.

**A young man named Saul** is introduced to us in this passage and he will become better known to us later on as the apostle Paul, when life will be so dramatically and radically changed by his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road in Acts Chapter 9.

**<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.**

### **Acts 7:59-60**

Stephen died with two prayers on his lips. The first: **Lord Jesus, receive my spirit** (v.59), recalls Jesus' dying words from the cross: <<Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last>> (Luke 23:46), and the second: **Lord, do not hold this sin against them** recalls Jesus' earlier prayer for the forgiveness of those responsible for his death: <<Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing>> (Luke 23:34a).

**Fell asleep** is a Christian expression for death, reflecting assurance of a future resurrection. Stephen's death surely had a profound influence on Paul, who later alluded to that experience: <<And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him>> (Acts 22:20).

**His body was broken and crushed but his soul was intact.**

## **The Book of Acts - Chapter Eight**

**<sup>1a</sup> And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.**

### **Acts 8:1a**

Although **Saul** was only minding their outer garments, he was also **giving approval** of Stephen's execution. As a zealous Pharisee, he would have seen Stephen's death as fully justifiable in the sight of God, as they were ridding the earth of a blasphemer, or so they supposed at the time.