

Acts 7 (NIV)

Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin

7:1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

This verse gives the Sanhedrin the appearance that Stephen was getting a fair trial. We previously heard in Acts 6:11-14 that the Jewish leaders persuaded people to lie and give false witness in order to put Stephen on trial. Looking at Matthew 26:59-61, the Jewish leaders had not changed their tactics.

7:2 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 Harran. 3 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.

Stephen starts a dissertation on the Pentateuch with Abraham. These verses do not appear to be a defense in order to save himself. It appears that he knows where this trial is leading.

"A single thread runs right through the first part of his defense. It is that the God of Israel is a pilgrim God, who is not restricted to any one place...If he has any home on earth, it is with his people that he lives." (Stott)

Stephen is starting his argument with God going to "the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran" to talk to Abraham because God has always been everywhere and is to be worshiped everywhere. The place, say the Temple in Jerusalem, is not as important as what is in your heart. In John 4:19-24, Jesus told us that there would come a time when we could worship God anywhere in spirit and truth. The false testimony presented against Stephen said that "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law." So Stephen is discussing this holy place (the Temple) and the Law. The statement that God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants even though he had no sons is significant because it shows that God always fulfills His promises.

7:6 God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7 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.' 8 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.

For 400 years, the Hebrew nation lived in bondage in the country of Egypt. During that time, God did not stay in the land settled by Abraham. See Genesis 15:13-14. Stephen is being thorough with his historical defense. He covers Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons.

7:9 "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

11 "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16 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.

Again Stephen says "God was with Him" pointing out that God did not stay home and talk to Joseph from a long distance. Stephen is very thorough in his historical account, He wants the Jewish leaders to know that he doesn't have a superficial understanding of Jewish history or what we call the Old Testament. Joshua 24:32 says *"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.* This confirms that Stephen is still on track with his history of the Jews.

J.B Phillips wrote the New Testament in Modern English. He was a paraphrase and he would have told the Sanhedrin that "Your God is too small". They were worshiping a small god that would fit in the Temple. God told David that He didn't need a home on earth. In 2 Samuel 7:6 "I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling."

7:17 "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. 18 Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.' 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

20 "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. 21 When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

23 "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. 24 He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. 25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. 26 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?'

27 "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28 Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

Stephen moves on to the story of Moses. Moses lived 120 years and Stephen broke up Moses life into 40 year chunks. The first 40 years were birth, salvation and education.

Moses was also like Jesus who would come after him, in that he was wise, skillful with words, and a man of mighty...deeds. (Guzik)

The next 40 years, Stephen covers the Hebrews' rejection of Moses as their leader.

"Stephen's message was plain: "You have rejected Jesus, who was like Moses yet greater than him, and you deny that Jesus has any right to be a ruler and a judge over you." (Guzik)

7:30 "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

33 "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 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.'

35 "This is the same Moses 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. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 "This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.' 38 He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

During the final 40 years, Moses became their deliverer even though they rejected him. Where is Stephen going? Stephen was trying to show these Jewish leaders that Jesus was like Moses. We consider Jesus much greater than Moses or any other man but at that time Moses was the greatest Bible figure that had lived. Everything in Jesus history went back to Moses leading the Exodus from Egypt. Stephen is talking about Jesus, the Messiah in verse 37 regarding Moses' prophecy about a prophet like me. This is not the first time we have heard this prophecy in Acts. In Acts 3:22-23, Peter used it in Solomon's Colonnade. Stephen is tying Moses and Jesus together. Both were prophets and deliverers of Israel but both were denied or rejected and both did miraculous signs.

7:39 "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 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!' 41 That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. 42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

43 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

44 "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors 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, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: 49 "'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? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?'

What started out as a historical account, is turning into Stephen pointing out all their failings or faults. Stephen points out what was one of the greatest sins ever performed by the Israelites, returning to Egypt. They sinned in their hearts. Stephen is staying true to the Pentateuch. Verse 40 is a quote of Exodus 32:1. The false testimony presented against him said that *“This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.”* Throughout this “sermon”, Stephen gave the Jewish leaders a history lesson on the Law and on this holy place.

Things are about to change.

7:51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Merriam-Webster defines “stiff-necked” as haughty (blatantly proud) and stubborn. When I read these verses my mind went back to Matthew 23:13 and on. Jesus was warning these same men about their sins.

There are 6 things that Stephen accused these Jewish leaders.

Always resisting the Holy Spirit

You are doing just as your fathers did.

Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?

They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, Betrayers and murderers of Jesus.

You who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.

The Stoning of Stephen

7:54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 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. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

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

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 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.

From the time that Stephen was arrested, he knew that this was where it was leading. He had defended his faith and proved that he did not speak against the Law and this holy place, the Temple but he knew it would end in his death. When Stephen looked up to heaven, he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

They stoned Stephen to death and a young man named Saul or Paul was present as a witness. Stephen’s final words are very much like those of Jesus in Luke 23:34. “Father forgive them.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote of Stephen.

'HE heeded not reviling tones,
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
Tho' cursed and scorn'd, and bruised with stones.'
'But looking upward, full of grace,
He pray'd, and from a happy place
God's glory smote him on the face.'