

Stephen's Speech (Part 1): Acts 7:1

“And the high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’ And Stephen said:” (v. 1)

The high priest's statement is clearly meant to encourage Stephen to defend himself. However, Stephen's speech is not a defense. He does respond to the accusations that he opposes the Laws of Moses and the Temple; yet, his purpose is to rebuke the Sanhedrin rather than vindicate himself. He would rather use his last words to condemn the council than to exonerate himself.

As Stephen presents a brief overview of Israelite history, it can be difficult to track the main themes in his argument. That obscurity was likely intentional. If Stephen had been too direct in his accusations against the Sanhedrin, they may have cut him off before he could have completed his speech. But when we take a step back to examine the speech as a whole, three primary threads of thought present themselves.

First, Stephen argues that the Temple is now obsolete. At the end of the previous chapter, false witnesses claimed that Stephen taught against the Temple, saying, “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place” (6:14). This appears to suggest that Stephen was anti-Temple and looked forward to the day when the Temple would fall. It is true that Jesus prophesied the destruction of the Temple (Mt 24; Mk 13;

Lk 21), and Matthew 24:4-35 seems to imply that the Temple's fall was a direct expression of the Son of Man's authority. But this does not mean that either Jesus or Stephen were anti-Temple. They would have been saddened by the loss of the Temple and the sinfulness that lead to its demolition. Stephen was not anti-Temple, but he did understand that the Temple was now obsolete since a) Jesus provided the ultimate sacrifice for sins (note that Stephen uses the rare title

— Prayer —

Take a moment and read John 4:23-24. Then, thank God that he has opened the way for us to worship him in Spirit and in truth, apart from the Temple, right where we are.

“Righteous One” of Jesus in Acts 7:52, which is likely an allusion to the “Righteous Servant-Sacrifice” of Isaiah 52-53), b) the Holy Spirit now resides in all believers allowing worship to be conducted apart from the Temple precinct (cf. Jn 4:23-24), and, c) God has never dwelt in houses made by human hands (Acts 7:48-50). Worship was not centralized in Jerusalem. It is no wonder, then, that after the martyrdom of Stephen we see the gospel go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Second, Stephen casts a subtle light on Israel's habit of rejecting those sent by God to lead or minister to her. We see this theme for the first time in the retelling of the Joseph story. Stephen immediately emphasizes that jealousy drove the patriarchs to sell Joseph into slavery (7:9). It appears again with frequency in Stephen's account of Israel's rejection of Moses and their disobedience to his commands, which occupies much of his sermon's centermost content (7:26-29, 35, 39-41). Finally, when the speech reaches its climax, Stephen calls the Jewish council “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised of heart.”

One who is “stiff-necked” is in a position of active defiance, unwilling to bow in display of humility. This was the posture taken by the Israelites in the wilderness, where they disobeyed the leadership and commands of Moses and built a calf to worship Egypt's goddess, Hathor, rather than YHWH (Ex 32:9). Additionally, Stephen also calls them “uncircumcised in heart,” an allusion to Jeremiah 9:25-26, where God condemns to exile a generation of Jews because they had rejected the prophets and did not truly know YHWH (Jer 9:13-14, 23-24). They may have been set apart in body by physical circumcision, but their hearts were unholy.

In calling the people “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised of heart,” Stephen is, in essence, proposing that in the eyes of God there is no difference between the rebellious generations of old and the generation of Jews that crucified Jesus. This implies that the unrepentant of Stephen’s generation were to suffer a similar fate as those of the past, a reality sadly realized in the AD 70 and AD 135 destructions of Jerusalem. Therefore, it is not Stephen who deserves to be on trial for taking lightly “the customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:14); it is the Sanhedrin who will one day be called to stand before the Son of Man and answer for their crime of not keeping the Law (cf. Acts 7:53, 56).

Third, Stephen claims that God was, and always had been, at work among the nations and not simply in the land of Israel among the Jews. With the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem by Solomon, son of David the King, the Jews wrongly inferred that God was only at work among the people of Israel and was “bound” to the Land of promise.

This engendered a Jewish elitism that considered Jews to be the only people with whom God was concerned; Israel

was thought to be the only place in which God worked. Stephen challenges this sentiment by emphasizing how God was shown throughout Israel’s history to be just as active outside the Promised Land as he ever was in the Land:

- The “God of glory” appeared to Abraham while he was still in Ur (7:1);
- God moved Abraham from Haran to Palestine, yet, he gave Abraham no inheritance in the Promised Land (7:4-5);
- Joseph was protected by God in Egypt (7:9);
- God protected Jacob and his sons from a great famine in Egypt (7:11-12);
- Jacob blessed his sons and died in Egypt (7:15);
- God multiplied his people in Egypt (7:17);
- God raised up for the people the first prophet, Moses, in Egypt in the care of an Egyptian princess (7:20-22);
- God revealed his name to Moses—“I am”—through a burning bush in the Sinai wilderness (7:30-33 [Notice how there was “holy ground” outside Israel]);
- God led the people out of Egypt after showing them signs and wonders (7:36a);
- God led them through the Red Sea (7:36b)
- God performed additional wonders in the wilderness: he appeared to them as a pillar of clouds by day and fire by night, he gave them manna, quail, and water, he made the ground to swallow up Korah and the rebellious 250 families, etc. (7:36c);
- God gave Moses the Law by the hands of an angel in the Sinai wilderness (7:37-38);
- God commanded the people to build the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant while in the wilderness (7:44).

It is implied that since God had been at work outside the Promised Land in salvation history past, he could now be at work among the nations in the newest stage of salvation history made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No doubt this angered the elitist Jews who thought Israel had a monopoly on God and worship. But it would have been empowering to the new Christian movement that was on the verge of taking the gospel to the world.

— Prayer —

Thank God that he is able and willing to take care of us no matter where we are in life, geographically, spiritually, mentally, or emotionally.

— Prayer —

Pray that we as CCBC would be at the forefront of sharing the gospel with our community and the world, so that we might display God's awesome glory, power, and love among the nations!

Even though the high priest gave Stephen the chance to defend himself, he used the opportunity to condemn the Sanhedrin. They represented a rebellious generation who set themselves in direct opposition to the Holy Spirit, the "Righteous One," and the Father who sent them. Therefore, the Son of Man stands in judgment against them (7:56) and empowers the disciples of Christ both to worship and display his glory apart from Jerusalem and her Temple (Acts 8:1-8, 26-40).