

Stephen's Speech: The Idolatry of Palestinian Jews (Acts 7:36-50)

It took the Ten Plagues to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites from their captivity, and it required Pharaoh and his army to be swallowed up in the Red Sea for the Egyptians to make their release permanent. With a legion of Hebrews at his back, Moses led the newly freed Hebrews to the place he met Yahweh in the burning bush, that is, Mt Sinai (i.e., Mt. Horeb). There, the Lord appeared to the people in terrifying glory and might, as the mountain was set ablaze in volcano-like fashion:

“On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.... Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain” (Exodus 19:16, 17-20a ESV).

By this moment in the Exodus narrative, there should have been no mistaking that God, the almighty Creator of the universe, was with them in that Midian desert. The sons and daughters of Abraham were aware of the miracles Moses and Aaron had performed before the Pharaoh. They had seen the Ten Plagues and watched the water of the Red Sea part and resettle over the armies of Egypt. They had experienced God leading them through the wilderness as a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. The Hebrews even had the previously hidden name of God revealed to them, which is a miracle unto itself. Yet, as Stephen highlights in his sermon, the people of God, in their extreme wickedness and faithlessness, rebelled against God's prophet and participated in idolatry, the most heinous of sins:

“This man [i.e., Moses] led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. 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.’ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands” (Acts 7:36-41).

The people of Israel had seen with their very eyes the works of God; they had keenly felt the weight of his magnificence and had all but seen the very face of the Lord at Sinai. Still, they chose to ignore the leadership of Moses, and they traded Yahweh, who had shown them immense love and favor time-and-again, for a statue of a cow formed by human hands out of shiny metal.

I think if we were honest with ourselves, we would probably admit that, if placed in Thomas' shoes, we might have doubted the resurrected Jesus. Or we may have alongside Peter denied being a Disciple of Christ had we been placed in the same situation. Moreover, should Jesus have told one of us to our face that even though he was the promised Messiah of old he was soon to die in Jerusalem, we might, parroting Peter, rebuke our Master. But I sincerely doubt that I would have joined the Hebrews in their worship of the Golden Calf after I had seen the wonders they had witnessed, and I think many of you would say the same of yourselves. That generation's faith was so hollow and their minds so twisted that to this day it stands as *the* portrait of fickleness and unbelief.

You can imagine, then, the shock and anger Stephen elicited from the crowd of Jews at the Temple when he subtly compared their worship at the Temple to the worship of the Golden Calf (and their rebellion to that of the wilderness generation in vv. 51-53):

“Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 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?’” (Acts 7:44-50).

The Temple in Jerusalem was rightly important to the Israelites. It was the place in which they interacted spiritually and ritually with their God. But the building itself had become, in a way, an idol to the people. Like an idol, the Temple was considered an instrument of worship made by human hands that was seen as housing the spirit of God. Notice the repeated words in vv. 41 and 48:

“And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in **the works of their hands**” (Acts 7:41).

“Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses **made by hands...**” (Acts 7:48).

God was not tethered to the Temple as a god was bound to an idol; the Lord could work among humanity anywhere he wished, even outside Israel. As Stephen’s citation of Isaiah 66:1-2 makes clear, God is the Lord of the universe. Neither the scope of his authority or the expression of his dominion is limited geographically. Therefore, the Jews’ beliefs about the centrality of the Temple and God’s preference for the residents of the Promised Land were misguided. As Stephen has highlighted throughout his speech, salvation history has seen many events of great spiritual magnitude take place outside the Promised Land, apart from the Tabernacle or Temple. Since this is the case, Stephen implicitly argues that God could be doing and is doing something spiritually extraordinary, not among the Jews of Palestine who live around the Temple, but among the Hellenistic Jews in Diaspora, and soon, among the God-fearing Gentiles.

Praise the Lord! For we are recipients of Gospel blessings because he decided in his infinite grace to work among the Gentiles and to invite them into a New Covenant made possible by the sacrifice of his Son.