

Stephen's Speech (Part 2): Acts 7:2-8

“Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran...” (v. 2).

Before he was called by the Lord, Abraham was a pagan living in the city of Ur. This was the center for the worship of Sin the Moon-god, among many other local gods and goddess. Additionally, it was the city in which the first ancient epic, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, had been written. In fact, many scholars have posited that the *Poems of Bilgames*—which were later expanded upon to create the *Epic*—were published around the same time Abraham left Ur, approximately 2150 BC. Therefore, the *Poems* and the *Epic* give us insight into the social and religious values of the world in which Abraham lived prior to his conversion to belief in Yahweh.

Socially, males in Mesopotamian societies valued a lasting legacy above all else. One's legacy could be built in any number of ways. However, the three that appear most prominently in their writings are a) experiencing legendary travels or performing great acts; b) being blessed directly by the gods; or, c) fathering many children. It is interesting that in one way or another all three of these are present in the story of Abraham:

- Abraham traveled from Ur to Haran, from Haran to the Promised Land, from the Promised Land to Egypt, and, finally, from Egypt back to the Promised Land. Such grand travels, and the adventures he encountered along the way, make Abraham's story rather unique in the Ancient Near East (ANE).
- God not only blessed Abraham by entering a covenant with him, God blessed Abraham through Melchizedek, the High Priest of Salem, and allowed Abraham to converse with himself directly. These would have all been considered high honors in the ANE.
- God promised Abraham that that he would be the father of many nations, which he indeed became through his sons Ishmael and Issac.

Yet, what separates Abraham's story from others told of great Mesopotamian men is that in the account of Abraham's life and deeds God deserves the praise for all his achievements. Abraham himself does not.

- God is the one who led Abraham on his fantastic travels and protected him.
- God did not make the covenant with Abraham because Abraham deserved it—it was not a merit-based promise—but rather because God loved Abraham.
- Abraham himself only had two sons, which is nothing extraordinary. But it was God's blessing that made Abraham the father of many nations.

Ultimately, then, the story of Abraham is really the story of God and his interaction with a new generation of men after Noah. He preserves Abraham in his journeys and gives Abraham a promise that he will multiply his children, not simply for Abraham's glory and fame but for his own.

Religiously, the story of Abraham turns the ANE depiction of the divine on its head. According to Mesopotamian poems, the gods were not much different than men. Yes, they were more powerful, but only slightly so. The strongest of humans could challenge the gods. Morally, they were often worse than the average human, though their sins were tolerated or overlooked because of their status. The gods were often liars, vindictive, jealous, grumbling, lazy, sexually immoral, and cruel. They were not omnipotent, and neither were they omniscient or omnipresent. Events could catch the gods off-guard, leading to disastrous consequences. According to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the only substantive difference between a god and a

human was that the gods were immortal. In all other aspects, the two categories of beings were the same.

The story of Abraham paints a much different picture of the Divine. The picture painted in Genesis is one of monotheism. God has no heavenly or earthly rivals. There is only one God, who, at this point in the OT, is only known by *Elohim*, that is, “God” (The plural *Elohim* is plausibly the “plural of majesty,” commonly used by kings in the ANE). God is pictured as present and communicative through his messengers, the angels. There is nothing that blindsides God; there is nothing outside the purview of his authority. Morally, he is righteous, and he demands the righteousness of others. He does not lie, cheat, or steal. Rather, he holds to his covenants and makes good on his word. Aside from the fact that God, too, is immortal, there is little-to-no correspondence between *Elohim* and the gods of the Mesopotamians.

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“...and [God] said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. And God spoke to this effect —that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place’” (vv. 3-7).

So much of this story is familiar to us that it hardly needs explanation. Surely, the Jews who were listening to Stephen give this speech were confused as to why he was giving them a rundown of the story of Abraham that they had heard dozens of times since they were small children. Yet, even though this passage seems simple and straightforward, there are two matters of note in this text that deserve exploration, as they may have a bearing on Stephen’s larger argument.

First, as was discussed in the last handout, Stephen emphasizes throughout his speech that God has always been active among the Gentiles and has never been confined to Israel or the Temple in her capital. Not only was Abraham himself a Gentile, made to father the chosen nation of Israel by God, Abraham spent most of his life, as did his earliest ancestors, outside Palestine. Additionally, while his descendants were promised control of the Promised Land, Abraham himself had no inheritance in the Land. Over four-hundred years would pass before the people of Abraham would truly gain control of what would eventually be known as the nation of Israel.

Therefore, the Jews of Stephen’s day were misguided when they considered themselves more important to God than the Gentiles, or Israel to be the only place God was at work. God was, of course, at work among his people; he sent his Son to live as a Jew and to die as their sacrificial Messiah. However, God was soon to bestow his covenant promises on Gentiles likewise. All believers in Christ’s Lordship—both Jew and Greek—were to have an equal standing at the foot of Jesus’ throne.

Second, in a similar vein, Stephen emphasizes in his sermon the decentralization of worship. If one were to read Acts 7:7 in a vacuum, one might think that the point Stephen will be making is that proper worship of God can only take place in the Temple: “‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’” However, this does not mean that the Lord could never be worshipped apart from the Temple or Tabernacle. Now, the Spirit resides in the believer, meaning that worship is not tied to a building, city, or country; the fullness of worship can be experienced in the human spirit, and it can be expressed in private or corporate communication with directly God by means of his Spirit. God is just as much with the Christian as he was in the Holy of Holies, or as he was with Abraham far away from the Promised Land in Ur.

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“And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs” (v. 8).

God is faithful. There is nothing that will keep him from fulfilling his promises. Through Isaac, God made Abraham the father of a chosen people, a nation for his name. But as we will see, this nation was far from faithful to their Lord. Although her males were circumcised of body, being marked physically as set apart for God, the people of Israel remained uncircumcised of heart (Acts 7:51). It is the heart set apart that God ultimately desires, and no amount a physical alteration will cover up for its lack.

Therefore, to be a true follower of Christ, one must be markedly set apart from the world in heart, that is, in the spirit, by the Spirit of the Lord. By means of disciple and the empowerment of the Spirit, one must humbly and wholly be dedicated to Jesus: repenting when stumbling, sharing his gospel when loving others, rejoicing when persecuted, glorifying God when victorious. Anything less is unacceptable to the Father. Any other lifestyle is unworthy of our calling.

Therefore, pray that the Lord would give us the resolve to walk in a manner worthy of him, so that he might receive all the glory and praise due his Name. And ask the Lord that he would remove any obstacle in our lives that might stand in the way of living a righteous, God-honoring life.

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Next week we will continue into the Joseph story as told by Stephen in Acts 7:9-16. As we will see, even in the land of Egypt, the home of some of the most famous ancient gods, Yahweh reigns supreme and takes care of his chosen people.