

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 17, Chapter 7

The final words of our last lesson were meant to prepare us for today's teaching in Acts chapter 7. Here we find Stephen, full of grace and power, standing before the Sanhedrin with a mob of angry Jews wanting to lynch him for supposedly blaspheming Moses, God and the Temple. We were told in Chapter 6 that Stephen had gotten into an argument with members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (no doubt over doctrine) and they simply couldn't compete with or refute his wisdom, nor could they match the authority with which He spoke because it was not a fair fight: he had the Holy Spirit and they didn't.

How many in the Messianic and Hebrew Roots movement have tried diligently, patiently, lovingly to show Bible teachers, professors, Pastors and Elders, Rabbis, even Believing friends and family members what God's Word so plainly says about a number of important subjects that are central to a correct understanding of our faith; only to face anger and accusations of heresy when these religious leaders have no defensible response to explain their dubious doctrines. Thus Acts Chapter 6 verses 10 and 11 explain that because those Stephen tried to persuade had no defensible response to Stephens teaching, they retaliated by using false witnesses to fling false accusations against Stephen. However in the name of intellectual honesty, it is also the case in the Biblical era that witnesses can be called false not for lying, but rather when it is discovered that they did not witness the actual event, are presenting second hand evidence or hearsay, and thus their testimony is disqualified. We can't be 100% certain that the latter isn't the case, but we can be 99.9% certain that it is not, because it is inconceivable that Stephen actually suggested that Yeshua (who is dead) would destroy the Temple, or that Stephen denied Moses.

As Stephen is being interrogated we are told that his face began to glow like that of an angel. This compares with what happened to Moses as he descended from Mt. Sinai after a close encounter with God. So Luke's idea in including this bit of information (that otherwise adds nothing to the narrative) is to show that God was present with Stephen and that what Stephen was about to say in response to the questioning is divinely inspired.

Let's read Acts chapter 7, the longest continuous speech by anyone in the Book of Acts.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 7 all

Verse 1 specifies who is questioning Stephen; it is the High Priest who at this time was Caiaphas. Because the High Priest doubles as the head of the Sanhedrin, it is his prerogative to lead the questioning of the accused if he chooses to do so. And the question is: "Are these accusations true?" The response of Stephen is long and doesn't really address the question directly. Why didn't he just say "no", or perhaps explain that the charges were exaggerated or greatly distorted from what he had said? We need to keep at the forefront of our minds as we view this story that the false accusers were from a local Synagogue. Thus while they

occasionally visited the Temple for sacrifice and ceremony, their main allegiance and the place where they received their religious doctrines was their Synagogue. So was it really so upsetting to them that Stephen supposedly said something against the Temple? Yes and no; the matter of the Temple we will discuss shortly in a way you won't expect. But the primary issue was their claim that he was blaspheming Moses. What they meant by blaspheming Moses was that to dispute their Traditions was blasphemy. And this was because the Traditions (also called Oral Torah) that were rabbinical interpretations of the written Torah of Moses, was the epicenter of the Synagogue and whatever it was that Stephen said they took it as an assault on those cherished Traditions.

Essentially Stephen was charged with teaching against everything that Judaism stood for. We've spent much time in trying to understand the place and nature of the Synagogue in New Testament times, but we need to also remember the nature of Judaism at this same time. Before Babylon, Jewish life and religion sought direction from the Temple; that was the God-ordained way and it was generally the only source available. It was the Priests and Levites job to (among other things) teach the people the Law of Moses and then to enforce it. If we were to invent a name to call the body of teachings and the way of life that the Priests taught we could rightly label it Hebrew-ism. That is, the civil code for the Hebrews with its rules and regulations was essentially the Torah itself. And it was to be followed by all Hebrews since it was given by God at Mt. Sinai through Moses to all Hebrews (all 12 tribes plus the Levites).

However several centuries later that situation changed dramatically. Around 700 years prior to Christ, 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel were sent away in exile to foreign lands for their disobedience to God. The Assyrians were the Lord's hand of judgment. The 10 tribes that formed northern Israel were conquered and scattered throughout the vast Assyrian Empire and due to their disinterest in being Hebrews any longer, most assimilated into the world of the gentiles throughout the giant Asian continent, and others were sent into North Africa. What remained of the Hebrews in the Holy Land was the tribe of Judah and most of the tribe of Benjamin; but rather quickly Benjamin assimilated into the tribe of Judah. The name that was given to the people of Judah was Jews. And soon enough they too would be exiled from the Holy Land, only for them it would be into Babylon.

Because one result of the Babylonian conquest was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and thus the end of a functioning Priesthood, so the Hebrew-ism that used the Torah of Moses as its civil and religious code was soon replaced with something else. And that something else was a mixture of Torah and newly formed traditions. Since this was only applicable to those of the tribe of Judah (the 10 tribes no longer being present, having melded into the gentile world), this new hybrid religion became the basis of Judah-ism; the religion of Judah. The Jews at that time didn't actually refer to their religion as Judaism; that is something that came centuries later. Nonetheless, all the practices and customs that in time gained the label of Judaism were being developed and practiced by the Jews during and after their Babylonian captivity.

So to be clear, it was against this hybrid religion of Torah and Tradition whose home was the Synagogue, a religion that we call Judaism, that Stephen is said to have offended. Remember; the Temple was controlled by the Priests and the Sadducees. And the Temple and the

Sadducees denied the validity of the very thing that the Synagogues taught, believed in, and demanded adherence to: Traditions, Oral Torah. So, as mainstream Christianity regularly claims, was Stephen distancing himself from the Law of Moses and from the culture of the Jews? That is, that the Believing congregation to whom he belonged was in process of ceasing to be Jews and instead becoming Christians?

Verse 2 immediately answers that question. "Brothers and fathers" he says, "listen to me". Stephen makes it clear that he regards himself as one of them, and they remain a part of him. He is in no way separating himself from the Jews of Judea. And from here he goes on to recall the heritage that he feels he shares with his brothers and sisters, the heritage that all Jews know starts with Abraham whom he calls "our father" (not your father or my father, but rather OUR father). So far so good.

It is important to note that everything that Stephen is quoting about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph is theoretically taken directly from the Torah so that he could demonstrate both his knowledge of the Torah as well as his dedication to it. But a problem arises that isn't easy to spot unless you know what to look for. If we check with the Hebrew Bible, some of the details that Stephen quotes don't line up. I need you to pay close attention to this, please, because this isn't trivial. For instance, in verse 4 Stephen says that during the time Abraham was living in Haran, his father died and then God made Abraham move to the land (that is to Canaan, which is now Judah). Genesis 11:26 says that Abraham's father Terach was 70 when Abraham was born and then Genesis 11:32 specifically says that Terach died at the age of 205. But Genesis 12:4 says that Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran. 70 plus 75 equals 145; so that would make Terach 145 years old when he died, not 205. Yet 205 is what the Hebrew Tanakh clearly says. One of these numbers has to be incorrect, but which one? And this was as evident to the people of that day as it is to us. So what to do?

We talked last week about the Samaritans who had established their own Temple and Priesthood, but who also modified the Torah in some ways to match their traditions. And one of the ways they did that was to change Genesis 11:32 to say 145 years instead of 205. In other words, they decided that there was an error in the math and so they corrected it in their Torah. The Sanhedrin to whom Stephen was speaking would likely have immediately noticed the use of the number 145 instead of 205, since this was an area of dispute. Would they say then that Stephen had made a basic mistake that most Jewish children would have recognized? No. This would have told them something important that infuriated them all the more; Stephen was quoting the Samaritan Pentateuch; the holy book of the despised Samaritans. Why would he do that? In order to keep this train of thought and move to the point I would like to make, drop down to Acts 7:14. There we have Stephen saying that Jacob and all of his relatives went down to Egypt to meet Joseph; all 75 of them. However the Hebrew Bible says this in Genesis 46:

Genesis 46:27 CJB²⁷ *The sons of Yosef, born to him in Egypt, were two in number. Thus all the people in Ya'akov's family who entered Egypt numbered seventy.*

The Hebrew Tanakh says 70, not 75. However in the Samaritan Pentateuch and in the Greek Septuagint, the number is indeed 75. Remember that I pointed out last time that Stephen was

Hellenist Jew; his name was Greek, his first language was Greek, and he would have originally come to Judah from somewhere foreign. Here's the crux: was Stephen perhaps from Samaria? Could he have been a Samaritan? The people present would have caught the differences between the Hebrew Torah and the Greek Torah because the Synagogue mostly used the Greek Torah while the Temple strictly used the Hebrew Torah. But there is yet another clue that pretty well nails matters down. Move down now to Acts 7:15 and 16. There Stephen says that the place that Abraham bought for a tomb for his family was in Shechem, and he bought that tomb from Hamor of Shechem. Listen however to the Hebrew Tanakh (the Old Testament) and what it says about where Abraham bought a burial plot and from whom.

Genesis 23:17-20 CJB

17 Thus the field of 'Efron in Makhpelah, which is by Mamre- the field, its cave and all the trees in and around it- were deeded ¹⁸ to Avraham as his possession in the presence of the sons of Het who belonged to the ruling council of the city.

19 Then Avraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Makhpelah, by Mamre, also known as Hebron, in the land of Kena'an. ²⁰ The field and its cave had been purchased by Avraham from the sons of Het as a burial-site which would belong to him.

Yes, I know that Stephen was talking about burying Jacob and Joseph, and not Sarah, in Shechem. However once again listen to another passage from the Hebrew Tanakh:

Genesis 49:29-33 CJB

29 Then he (Jacob) charged them as follows: "I am to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my ancestors in the cave that is in the field of 'Efron the Hitti,

30 the cave in the field of Makhpelah, by Mamre, in the land of Kena'an, which Avraham bought together with the field from 'Efron the Hitti as a burial-place belonging to him-

31 there they buried Avraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Yitz'chak and his wife Rivkah, and there I buried Le'ah-

32 the field and the cave in it, which was purchased from the sons of Het."

33 When Ya'akov had finished charging his sons, he drew his legs up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

The point is that the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, says that Jacob was buried in the same cave that Abraham buried Sarah and that cave was bought from Efron the Hittite, and it was near Hebron, not Shechem.

So why the glaring discrepancy? Was Stephen just a poor student of the Bible and he is mumbling nonsense? No. The Samaritan tradition was that Abraham bought the cave from Hamor and buried everyone near Shechem, not Hebron. Why this different tradition? Because

Shechem was in Samaria and Hebron was in the south of Judea. Stephen was quoting the Samaritan tradition about the burial place of the Patriarchs. Why else would he do that if he weren't a Samaritan? He certainly wouldn't have learned that at the Temple. I went through this little Sherlock Holmes exercise to make the point that it is nearly certain that Stephen was himself a hated Samaritan who had practiced the Samaritan religion until sometime before he became a Believer. My speculation is that he was probably a Jew who lived in Samaria from birth, and so was of course taught the Samaritan traditions, and he had not yet let go of the Traditions of the Samaritans, or just as likely didn't even know that the Hebrew Bible had a different tradition. And once that became clear to his accusers from the Synagogue and the Sanhedrin, he was quite literally a dead man walking. To them Stephen being a Samaritan would explain his supposed bent against Judaism and it explains to us why the men of the Synagogue reacted so irrationally about the supposed destruction that Stephen's master Yeshua (even though he was dead) was going to wreak upon the Jerusalem Temple. After all the issue of the Temple was a very sensitive one; the Samaritans had a rival Temple at Mt. Gerizim and thought the Jerusalem Temple illegitimate and vice versa. Jealously and rivalry is a terrible thing, especially when it involves religion. But Stephen being a Samaritan would also explain the blind hatred that they felt towards him (once they figured out that indeed he was a Samaritan) and thus their murderous desire to kill him immediately.

Let's back up now to verse 3, which begins Stephen's long overview of the history of the Hebrews to which he claims brotherhood. We'll not go over every detail, but rather simply follow his path. Since it was with Abraham that God made a covenant that created the Hebrew people and set aside a particular land for a national homeland, it is the logical place to start. I want you to notice that the main point Stephen makes about Abraham concerns the land. The land is the key, because the land and the people (the Hebrews) are organically connected. Thus we see Stephen speak about how Abraham was to leave his land, and go to a land that God would show him. And then after Abraham's father Terach died, only then did Abraham journey to that land. And next Stephen says that although Abraham didn't receive any land for his own, the land did go to his descendants.

Then in verse 8 land is used in a different way. Before Abraham's descendants receive the land God has set aside for them, they will be aliens in a **foreign** land where they will be slaves for 400 years.

The next milestone is that Abraham received the rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant made between God and Abraham. To reiterate: the Abrahamic Covenant primarily concerns land. Note something that is often misunderstood: circumcision was first used as the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, which happened around 5 or 6 centuries before it was incorporated into the Covenant of Moses. So while the Abrahamic Covenant was built around land, the Covenant of Moses was mostly about people; it was about how redeemed people are to behave and conduct themselves before the Lord, and about what a relationship between God and His people is to look like. Circumcision was incorporated into the Law of Moses; thus we see how circumcision regarding Abraham's covenant that was about land, was integrated with the Mosaic Covenant that was about God's people. God made the two issues of His people and His land inseparable through the single sign of circumcision.

Next the promises of the Abrahamic covenant are passed to Isaac, and of course Stephen points out the all important circumcision ceremony, the **B'rit-milah**. He quickly moves to Jacob, son of Isaac, as next in line and that Jacob became the father of what Stephen calls the 12 Patriarchs. He is not confusing the well know term "the Patriarchs" (meaning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob); rather he is just using the term patriarchs in a more general way as referring to founders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

The next stage of history that Stephen recounts is of the life of Joseph. There are for sure two points to this part of Stephens's speech. First is that it shows the fulfillment of God's oracle to Abraham that Israel would wind up in a foreign land as slaves before they received their own land inheritance, and how it came about. Second is that Stephen points out how Israel continued with a long pattern of at times being faithful, and at other times being rebellious. And how God would punish, and then rescue, with the goal of redemption for Israel's grave trespasses and thus never closing the door on the possibility of God's mercy and Israel's restoration. Yet, there may well be a third point that Stephen is making by focusing on Joseph; Joseph's life somewhat mirrors that of Messiah Yeshua. And considering that Stephen was all about preaching the Gospel, I am convinced that he intended to draw this parallel. And he does so by pointing out that Joseph was the savior of Israel by bringing the clan to Egypt to survive a famine. But, at first Israel didn't recognize their own brother, and thus didn't know for a time the identity of their savior as one of their own.

Stephen recalls that once it was established that Joseph would save Israel, his father Jacob brought all his clan to Egypt, and that it was there that he died, but his bones were brought with Israel when they left Egypt for Canaan. And says verse 17, this was a fulfillment of God's oracle to Abraham to first send Israel to a foreign land, and then rescue them from it and bring them into their own land, the Promised Land.

Now Stephen sets the stage for the advent of Moses by briefly speaking about Israel's terrible time in Egypt shortly before their deliverance when newborn Hebrew babies were cruelly killed on order of the Pharaoh. And this was due to the dramatic multiplying of Israel's population in the most impossible of circumstances. One of the things being accomplished here is that Stephen is cementing his personal identity with Moses, calling him beautiful, so that any charges against him that he would blaspheme or deny Moses would be seen as absurd.

Stephen goes on to explain that in a wonderful irony, Moses (a hated Hebrew) was raised in Pharaoh's household and given the best education. But then verse 23 tells us something that ties in with our long discussion of Judaism and the Synagogue. Stephen says that Moses was 40 years old when, still as a member of Pharaoh's household, he decides he wants to go visit his Israelite brothers. This of course doesn't mean that there was a journey involved; it just means that Moses had been segregated from the Hebrew community that lived next to the ethnic Egyptian community. Here's what I want you to catch: nowhere in the Torah do we find that Moses was 40 years old when he went to see his Israelite brothers. So did Stephen just use a bit of rhetorical license to invent a number to embellish his story? Of course not; in fact it was a number that at least the mob that wanted to kill him would have agreed with. You see, the number 40 is a Tradition; it came from the Synagogue. And since Stephen was, as were all Jews in this era products of the Synagogue (except for the Priests and Levites who were

products of the Temple), he simply took this Tradition of Moses being 40 at this time as immutable fact. I point this out because it is another opportunity to demonstrate that the thought processes of the writers and Bible characters of the New Testament....all of it..... revolve around the Synagogue and Oral Torah (Tradition) that was taught there. They did so automatically and unconsciously because that's what they knew; it was simply part of who they were. It is not unlike Christianity accepting December 25th as the date of Jesus's birth. There is not one hint in the Bible that this is so; but because Roman Church authorities long ago deemed it to be so, few in the modern Church would even think to question it. December 25th as Christ's birthday is a manmade tradition with no basis of historical fact or record, and neither is Moses being 40 at the time of the event in Egypt that Stephen refers to historical fact or record; it too is a manmade tradition. But Lord help anyone who would dare to challenge either of these points. That is the power of long held customs and traditions and doctrines especially in a religious environment. Sometimes the effect is benign; at other times it is malignant and causes grievous doctrinal error.

In verse 25 Stephen makes the point that Moses, like Joseph, was rejected by his brother Israelites (again, his point is to make an obvious connection to Yeshua). But, says Stephen, Moses was rejected because the Hebrews didn't understand that he was to be their deliverer, their savior. So he kind of softens his rhetoric by making the Israelites early rejection of Moses and Joseph (and by association, Yeshua) due to ignorance rather than knowingly choosing to deny the Son of God. Next Stephen quotes Exodus 2:14 and says that when Moses intervened in a dispute among Hebrews they retorted, "Who made you ruler and judge over us....?" So what we see is Moses' second act as a Mediator; but this time as a mediator between 2 Israelites. And these combatants question Moses' authority over them. But more they remind Moses of his first act of mediation when he killed an Egyptian for striking a Hebrew. So here we see God's future Mediator mediate with both gentiles and Hebrews on earthly matters. But we also see how hard hearted the Hebrews had become. As a result, Moses fled to Midian from fear of prosecution for murder.

Stephen now turns to the moment when Moses became God's official Mediator, as he describes the Burning Bush event. But once again we see Synagogue Tradition play a role in Stephen's speech. He begins verse 30 by saying, "After 40 more years an angel appeared to him in the desert...." In fact the Torah does not say Moses' age when he fled Egypt, nor how long he spent in Midian. The best Torah reference we get in determining Moses age is in Exodus 7:7 when we're told that Moses was 80 years old the first time he confronted Pharaoh. So here Stephen merely quotes Oral Torah, assuming it as fact, and I must say that I find it mildly amusing that since his speech wound up in the New Testament, Moses being 40 when he fled Egypt and spending 40 years in Midian is taken by the Church to be Biblically and historically accurate when in fact it is ancient Synagogue Tradition.

Now Stephen starts to narrow his message and purpose by saying that Moses, the one who was rejected by the people of Israel saying, "Who made you a ruler and judge?", is in fact the very ruler that God had chosen to be ruler and judge over His chosen people, Israel. In other words, the people were wrong to question Moses; in fact they at first ridiculed and rejected God's appointed ruler and judge. But this time Stephen adds to his characterization of Moses by adding the word "ransomer". This of course starts to draw his story closer and closer to

Yeshua. And Stephen says in verse 36 that it is this man, Moses, who as God's deliverer took Israel out of Egypt through great miracles and signs, and led them through the desert wilderness for 40 years. And, knowing that the Synagogue members and the High Priest and the Sanhedrin whom he was addressing wouldn't in any way dispute his logic and conclusion to this point, he now reminds them that this same Moses that was venerated by all Jews is the one who said that at a later time God would raise up a prophet like him from among the Israelites. The unspoken question is: so who is this prophet like Moses?

Stephen returns to the theme of disobedience by saying that now that Moses' authority from God had been revealed the people of Israel did not want to obey Moses. In other words, this was not an act of ignorance but rather a display of willful rebellion against God (and by extension against Moses, God's Mediator). The intended implication is that it is not Stephen who is speaking against Moses but rather his accusers who are the rebels. And he uses the incident of the Golden Calf as an illustration of willful, knowing, intentional refusal to obey God. There Aaron, High Priest of Israel (and don't miss Stephen's implied connection between what Aaron did and what Caiaphas is currently doing), built god images and led the people into rebellion and into worshipping false gods.

As we near a close for today, I'll pause for just a moment so that we don't lose the forest amidst the trees: this immense, undying respect that Stephen is showing towards Moses IS his answer to Caiaphas about whether the accusations against him are true. And at the same time Stephen is turning this mock trial on its head from being the accused, to becoming the accuser, by comparing his persecutors with the worst of the historical rebels against God and Moses, making them one and the same. And don't think for a moment that everyone there didn't fully comprehend what Stephen was doing.

We'll conclude the story of Stephen as the first recorded Believing martyr next time.