

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts***

(SB\_Acts 6 and 7\_Stephen – An Early Hero and Martyr)

#### **Introduction**

The “communistic” practices of the early “church” (i.e. assembly) that was introduced to us in Luke’s narrative in 4:32 continued to be the practice of these early believers as the group of believers continued to grow in Jerusalem and Judea. Jews and Jewish proselytes of varying backgrounds become a part of the growing body of faith. In chapter 6 & 7, Luke documents one of the key pivot points in the book of Acts – the murder of Stephen and the hinge that it provided in God’s working in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. In chapter 6 & 7, we see the following general outline:

- ✓ Crisis among the body of believers (6:1-2)
- ✓ God’s man for the crisis arises (6:3-8)
- ✓ God’s man is attacked (6:9-14)
- ✓ A warrior of the faith in open warfare (6:15-7:60)

#### **Crisis Among the Body of Believers (6:1-2)**

Here Luke notes that the number of the “disciples” continued to grow and the administrative burdens began to present issues. This is the first time in the book of Acts that Luke has used the word “disciple” – the first of twenty-eight times in the book. The word appears about 238 times in the Gospels, but nowhere else in the New Testament.

Jews (and Jewish proselytes) worshipped in a number of different synagogues throughout Jerusalem depending upon a number of factors. One of the bigger issues was whether a Jew was native to Jerusalem or not.

- ❖ Hellenistic Jews were reared outside of Jerusalem and perhaps Judea and spoke Greek and their native language (see 2:5-11).
- ❖ The Jews of Jerusalem and most of Judea spoke primarily Aramaic and Greek.
- ❖ The Hellenistic Jews used the Septuagint.
- ❖ The Jews of Jerusalem used the scrolls containing the Scriptures written in Hebrew.
- ❖ The Jews of Jerusalem tended to strictly adhere (or attempted to strictly adhere) to the Mosaic Law.
- ❖ The Hellenistic Jews considered the Jews of Jerusalem to be narrow-minded.
- ❖ Paul considered himself among the Hebrews (2 Cor 11:22; cf. Phil 3:5) though he grew up outside Palestine.
- ❖ The basic difference between the Hebrews and Hellenists, therefore, appears to have been linguistic. Those who could speak a Semitic language were Hebrews, and those who could not were Hellenists.<sup>1</sup>

We are not completely sure how and when the Jewish synagogue began; however, the synagogue of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. was most likely a derivative of that which began to evolve in Jewish society after the Babylonian exile. When the Jews were dispersed throughout the civilized world after the Exile, they began to establish structures where they could meet and learn about their faith. By the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D., synagogues served as local centers of worship, education, and government. Each synagogue had its own system of polity led by elders who had the power

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 367 and Thomas Constable’s “Notes on the Book of Acts” at [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com) .

to enforce discipline and punish members. While the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem remained the focal point of sacrifices and feasts, the synagogues began to increase in prominence in terms of religious instruction for the Jews. Jewish tradition holds that there were more than 400 synagogues in Jerusalem alone by A.D. 70. Also, according to Jewish tradition, a Jewish synagogue was established wherever there were as many as ten Jewish men. It is completely understandable why Paul, Barnabas and the other missionaries of the faith always went to the synagogues wherever they went.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the twelve apostles (evidently including Matthias – see 1:26; 2:14) understood their priority to be that of providing instruction from the Word of God (6:2). While they recognized the importance that the disciples be served equitably, they also knew that if they became distracted with the execution of such administrative details, all would eventually suffer the effects of a lack of more strategic vision.

**Principle:** Wise leaders are sensitive to the needs of those whom they lead.

**Principle:** Wise leaders know how to maintain a strategic vision while at the same time understanding and appreciating the difficulties faced by those who execute the details.

**Principle:** The wisest of leaders are those who have at one time had to execute the details (see Proverbs 10:8; 14:4).

**Principle:** The person who is promoted to a position of leadership without ever having had to serve people in unrecognized and unglamorous ways will never appreciate and love those he leads. He will take his position and those he leads for granted because he takes the details for granted.

**Principle:** Wise leaders possess humility (see 1 Peter 5:5-6).

**Principle:** Wise leaders understand how and when to delegate and hold accountable.

### **God's Man for the Crisis (6:3-8)**

There were three qualifications mentioned for those who would serve others in these administrative details: 1) full of the Holy Spirit (type 1); 2) full of wisdom; and 3) there was validation in the conduct of their lives that was observed by others. All three were necessary for the handling of finances and emphasizes the importance of integrity in financial matters. God places a high weight on integrity in financial dealings (see Proverbs 11:1).

The choice of "seven men" may go back to a Jewish tradition of selecting seven respected men to manage public business in official capacities.<sup>3</sup> The Apostles showed their wisdom in selecting seven evidently Hellenistic Jewish men for the men selected all had Greek names. Nicolas was not even a Jew, but he was a Jewish proselyte who had become a believer.<sup>4</sup> The introduction of these men precedes more detail that is to be provided concerning the ministries of Stephen and Philip (see Acts 7; 8:5, 26; 21:8).

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<sup>2</sup> See Earl D. Radmacher, general editor, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson, Inc: 1997), 1826 and Thomas Constable's, "Notes on the Book of Acts" at [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com).

<sup>3</sup> Toussaint in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, 367.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

A question arises as to whether these men were the first deacons since that title is not conferred upon them in this passage or anywhere else. They are later referred to as “the Seven” (21:8). However, Greek words closely related to the word for deacon (*diakonos*) are used to describe their service, e.g. “distribution” (*diakonia*) and “to wait” (*diakonein*). There are several instances in Scripture in which the term *diakonos* or deacon is found:

- ✓ Christ (Rom 15:8)
- ✓ Paul (Eph 3:7)
- ✓ Civil rulers (Rom 13:4)
- ✓ Demon spirits (2 Cor 11:15)
- ✓ Servants (John 2:5)
- ✓ Preachers or teachers (1 Cor 3:5)
- ✓ A special position or office in the churches Paul organized (1 Tim 3:8;12; Phil 1:1)

The seven who were appointed in Acts to serve tables should not be confused with the deacons in Paul’s churches although the spiritual qualifications were similar. A main point of difference - Paul’s churches did not practice the communism of the early Jerusalem church. Paul instructed believers that “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” and “we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread” (2 Thess 3:10 & 12).

The early “church” (*ekklesia*) continued to grow so that even some of the priests became a part of the body of faith. It is estimated that in Jerusalem at this time there were around 8000 priests. Most of these priests were not from the high priestly families, rather they were men of ordinary means and vocations that allowed them to serve their turn in the temple periodically. Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, was among this group of priests. They were humble men who did not seek to maintain any position of power and prominence. As they came to faith, they probably began to see the true meaning behind the rituals they performed in the temple fulfilled in Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

### **God’s Man is Attacked (6:9-14)**

The Synagogue of the Freedmen was perhaps comprised of those who themselves or whose forebears had been set free from being prisoners of war or slavery – Roman prisoners (or the descendants of such prisoners) who had later been granted their freedom. We know that a considerable number of Jews were taken prisoner by the Roman general Pompey and these Jews were later released in Rome. It is possible that these are meant here. We don’t really know for sure. However, the members of this synagogue were from three different areas – North Africa (Cyrene and Alexandria were the leading cities of this area), Asia (western Turkey today) and Cilicia (south to southeast Turkey just above the island of Cyprus).

The false testimony against Stephen was that he was saying things about the temple and the Mosaic Law that the Jews regarded as untrue and unpatriotic (cf. Matt. 26:59-61). To the religious leaders, Stephen appeared to be challenging the authority of the Pharisees, the Mosaic Law, and a major teaching of the Sadducees, namely, the importance of the temple. He was evidently saying the same things Jesus had said (cf. Matt. 5:21-48; 12:6; 24:1-2; Mark 4:58; John 2:19-21). We see a virtual repetition of the things that happened to Jesus at His trial (Matt 26:59-61).

**Principle:** The opposition and persecution that a spiritual believer experiences from the religious crowd is most often directly proportionate to the Truth the spiritual believer represents.

**Application:** The religious crowd consists, among other things, of those who reject and even oppose salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.

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<sup>5</sup> Radmacher, *The Nelson Study Bible*, 1826.

## **A Warrior of the Faith in Open Warfare (6:15-7:30)**

Luke drew attention to Stephen's face in order to stress Stephen's fullness (type 1) with the Holy Spirit. Note the confidence, composure, and courage Stephen exhibited even though he was opposed by the powerful of this world. In similar fashion, Moses' face shone when he descended from Mt. Sinai after seeing God (cf. 7:55-56; Exod. 34:29, 35) and Stephen's hearers would have recalled the account of Moses' shining face when they saw Stephen.

Stephen's unstated, but implied point: The Jewish hearers should have concluded that Stephen was not against Moses but like Moses.

Stephen functioned as a messenger from God, as well as looking like one, by bringing new revelation to his hearers, as Moses had. The Old Covenant (Mosaic Law) had come through angelic mediation at Mt. Sinai (Heb. 2:2). Now revelation about the New Covenant was coming through one who acted like and even looked like an angel.<sup>6</sup>

Stephen's speech follows an outline that corresponds to significant events in Israel's history. The major sections of Stephen's speech are as follows:

- ✓ *Patriarchal period* – verses 2-16. Stephen refutes the charge of blaspheming God (6:11).
- ✓ *Moses & the Law* – verses 17-43. Stephen responds to the charge of blaspheming Moses (6:11) and speaking against the Law (6:13).
- ✓ *The temple* – verses 44-50. Stephen responds to the charge of speaking against the temple (6:13-14).

### **The Patriarchal Period (7:2-16)**

The point of Stephen's discussion of the Patriarchal history: If the Sanhedrin (the Jewish religious leaders) recognized the Patriarchs as God's anointed servants, then they should have recognized Jesus as Who He claimed to be. Stephen proved that Jesus experienced the same things as the patriarchs and Jesus had been raised from death in an irrefutable manner. Initially the patriarchs were rejected; however, they were later accepted. In like manner, Jesus should be accepted.

#### *Abraham (7:2-8)*

Stephen began his defense by going back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and to the Abrahamic Covenant, God's foundational promises to the Jews. In Genesis 12:1-3, God instructed Abraham to leave his homeland and go to a land that God would give him in order to make of him a great nation. The Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. almost worshipped the land and God's promise to their father Abraham, but as non-spiritual people, they had acquired an inordinate national pride that was equivalent to self-righteousness. In their self-righteousness, they made a strong connection between being a true Jew and something less. This helps explain the underlying tension that probably existed between the Jews of Jerusalem and the Hellenistic Jews that spurred the controversy involving the care and treatment of the widows from the two groups.

The father of Judaism (Abraham) was willing to depart from his native land in order to follow God into unknown territory based upon the word of God alone. The Jews in Stephen's day were not willing to depart from their erroneous thinking even though God's word was leading them to do so as Stephen indicated. Stephen was appealing to their national pride to follow Abraham's example of faith and courage.

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<sup>6</sup> Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts."

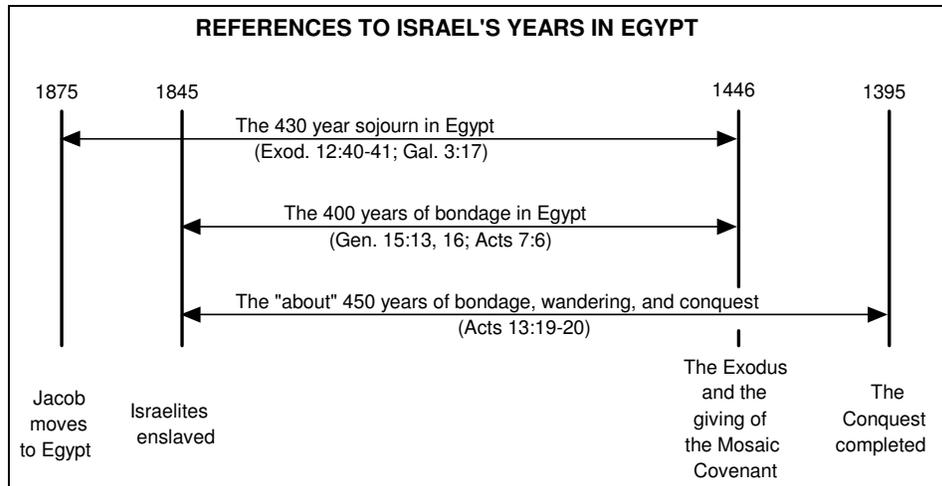
Abraham himself never experienced a permanent inheritance in the land; however, Abraham's descendants would receive the land as an inheritance (Gen 12:7 cf. Heb 11:8). Abraham did possess the cave of Machpelah in Canaan (Gen 23:3-20); however, God's promise was made to Abraham when he had no children. There was a greater inheritance to come to those who followed Abraham's example of faith by believing in Jesus. Stephen was making a distinction between spiritual, Jewish descendants of Abraham and those who were just physical descendants of Abraham, but not believers (see Gal 3:6-9, 29).

Controversial number? In [verse 6](#), Stephen states that God had told Abraham that his descendants would be in bondage in a foreign land for 400 years. There is some controversy surrounding this prediction through Moses in Genesis 15:13. The controversy can be summarized as follows:

- In Galatians 3:17, Paul implied that the period of time from when the promise was given to Abraham (Gen 15:13-16) to the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai was 430 years.
- This is problematic because it means that for the prophecy to Abraham that is recorded in Genesis 15:13-17 to be true, then only 30 years are allowed to elapse between Abraham and Jacob's sojourn to Egypt. (Think Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with Jacob having had to bear sons and grow old himself by the time of the migration to Egypt.)
- If one accepts the date of the Exodus to be 1446 B.C., then the enslavement in Egypt began around 1845 B.C.
- Potential resolution of the controversy – Paul was most likely referring to the period during which the promise was given – not a specific point in time.
- This has precedent in Genesis where we see the promise being referenced in relationship to “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Gen 48:15; 49:25; 50:24).
- In other words, Paul was viewing the promise as having been given over a period that spanned from Abraham to Jacob.
- Jacob had the promise reconfirmed in Genesis 46:1-4 while he was on his way to Egypt.
- The period that spanned from the year of Jacob's sojourn to Egypt until the Exodus is equivalent to the period of bondage of 400 years plus the additional 30 years or a total of 430 years as Paul mentions in Galatians 3:17.
- The 30 year period may represent the remaining years of Joseph's life during which the Jews enjoyed favor with the Egyptians and prior to their subjugation at the hands of a pharaoh who did not know Joseph.
- The chart below attempts to present this visually.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Constable, “Notes on the Book of Acts.”



The Jews of Stephen's day faced an interesting parallel situation to the Israelites of Joseph's day. The Jews of Stephen's day were under Roman oppression and faced the very real possibility that they would soon lose their remaining freedoms via the 5<sup>th</sup> Cycle of Discipline (Lev 26) should they not repent and accept Christ as the promised Messiah and Redeemer of Israel.

As Stephen recounted the history of the Israelites and their oppression, his hearers must have begun to see the parallels to their oppression of those who were now claiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah/Redeemer/Deliverer of Israel. In [verse 7](#), Stephen notes that God had promised to punish the nations that oppressed Israel (Gen 12:3) and, consistent with the parallels that he was highlighting, the Jews who rejected this truth and attempted to suppress it through persecution would be punished. Earlier, Gamaliel had warned that if the Christians were correct the Jewish leaders would be fighting against God by opposing them (5:39).

Stephen affirmed belief that God had given the Abrahamic Covenant, which contained promises of land (vv. 2-4), seed (v. 5), and blessing (vv. 6-7) to Israel. The ritual of circumcision that Jews had practiced from the days of the patriarchs was a reminder of God's covenant and His faithfulness to the Jews as a race as well as their nation, Israel.

Throughout his speech Stephen made many statements that had revolutionary implications for traditional Jewish thinking of his day. He did not expound these implications, but they are clear in view of what the disciples of Jesus were preaching. As such his speech is a masterpiece of understatement, or rather non-statement. That the Sanhedrin saw these implications and rejected them becomes clear at the end of the speech when they reacted as negatively as possible.<sup>8</sup>

*Joseph (7:9-16)*

As we examine this speech of Stephen, we must ask the question – "Why did the Holy Spirit Who 'filled' Stephen choose to include or emphasize select portions of Israel's history?" After all, Stephen could have spoken about a number of things, but he chose to give a recap of Israel's history by highlighting certain people and events.

<sup>8</sup> Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts."

Stephen's point (1): God remained faithful to His promise by using Joseph to deliver His people.

Stephen's point (2): The treatment of Joseph by his Hebrew brothers should have been a pointed reminder of the way Jesus had been dealt with by the Jewish nation. There is remarkable similarity between the career of Joseph, a savior whom God raised up, and that of Jesus. The Israelites of Stephen's day were similar to the brothers of Joseph in the past. Stephen mentioned Jesus explicitly only once in his entire speech, in his very last sentence (v. 52). Nevertheless he referred to Him indirectly many times by drawing parallels between the experiences of Joseph and Moses and those of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph is nowhere called a type of Christ, but the events of his life so parallel those of Christ that it can hardly be doubted that Stephen considered him to be one. Joseph was ordained of God to be the leader of His people, but his brethren conspired against him and figuratively put him to death. In the meantime Joseph, raised up from the pit where his brothers had thrown him, became the savior of the known world and was exalted at the right hand of the King. At the second time, corresponding to the second coming of Christ, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, forgave them, and established them in the most fruitful place in the land.<sup>10</sup>

The parallel between Jesus and Joseph is clearly seen in Stephen's speech in [verses 11-12](#). The Jews' forefathers suffered from a famine in the Promised Land and sent to Egypt for food (Gen. 41:54-55; 42:2, 5). Once trials and tribulations came to God's people, He sustained them and brought them into blessing and under the rule of Joseph. It will be this way in the future with Jesus. The Jews will suffer hardship (in the destruction of Jerusalem and in the Tribulation) and then God will bring them into blessing under Jesus' rule (in the Millennium). As the brothers finally recognized Joseph's identity, so it will be in the future – the Jews will finally recognize the identity of Jesus.

The seventy-five people who went to Egypt that Stephen mentions in his speech ([v. 14](#)) differs from the account in Genesis 46:26 which mentions sixty-six. Stephen arrived at the number seventy-five based upon the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament where the translators apparently added nine wives to the sixty-six count of Genesis 46:26. This passage in Genesis specifically states that the count of sixty-six did not include the wives. Only nine were added instead of twelve because the wives of Judah and Simeon had died and Joseph's wife was already in Egypt with Joseph.

From Egypt the chosen people eventually returned to the Promised Land. God had been with them out of the land, and He now returned them to the land. Believers in Jesus will end up in the final resting place of Jesus, heaven.<sup>11</sup>

In [verse 16](#), Stephen makes a special point to highlight the fact that the patriarchs were buried in Shechem.<sup>12</sup> At this point in Jewish history, Shechem was the center of Samaritan life.

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<sup>9</sup> Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts"

<sup>10</sup> Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts"

<sup>12</sup> Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal are situated on either side of Shechem, just north of Jerusalem. Mt. Gerizim is about 2,849 feet in elevation and much of Palestine can be seen from its top. Tradition indicates that Abraham's altar is located here where he almost sacrificed Isaac

Mount Gerazim, the site of another temple, was located near Shechem (Jn 4:20). He reminded the Sanhedrin that their ancestral deliverer was buried in the land that orthodox Jews despised and avoided.

A bit of history: The story of Abraham's original involvement in the land is documented in Genesis 23:1-20.

- Abraham purchased a cave and the field in Hebron (a city to the south of Jerusalem) in which it was located from a Hittite named Ephron (Gen 23:11)
- This cave would eventually become the burial site for not only Abraham's wife Sarah, but Abraham (Gen 25:9), Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah (49:29-31; 50:13).
- This purchase seems insignificant on the surface; however, it is extremely significant in the history of the Jewish race.
- Abraham's purchase of the land was an act of faith in God's promise (Gen 12:1-3) that He would make of Abraham a great nation and give him a land.
- Abraham took nothing from those who dwelt there – he purchased it.
- In Abraham's period, it was very important where people buried their dead – their native land
- To Abraham and all that were associated with him, this purchase of the land and burial signified that there was no going back
- Though Abraham was an alien and stranger among the people, his hope was in the land and he was renouncing his native land of Mesopotamia
- Even though the land of Canaan was Abraham's new native land, the only part of the new "Promised Land" that Abraham received, he purchased – a burial cave
- Abraham knew that the promise extended to his descendants, so he was making plans for the future through the purchase of the land
- The patriarchs who were revered by the Jews of Stephen's day were only sojourners in the land
- Stephen's point of emphasis: Jerusalem was not the only place where God worked and place where he was interested in people.
- After all, had the Jews forgot their origins – the land of Mesopotamia as the place where God had revealed Himself to Abraham?
- Had the Jews forgot the faith that was the basis of the hope of the patriarchs – not some self-righteous claim of superiority
- Stephen's allusion to this even was his way of concluding this period of Israel's history.

A bit of controversy: Stephen mentions "Shechem" as the location where the patriarchs were buried. Shechem was a city north of Jerusalem (not south of Jerusalem as was Hebron in Gen 23 where Abraham purchased a burial plot. However, Shechem is the city where Jacob later purchased some land (Gen 33:18-19) and bequeathed it to Joseph. It is possible that Stephen telescoped two events into one : Abraham's purchase from Ephron in Hebron (Gen. 23:1-20), and Jacob's purchase from Hamor in Shechem (Gen 33:18). This makes sense since Stephen's point was to summarize the Jewish history in the land and relate it to the faith of the patriarchs – not give a detailed chronology. Today, there is a mosque situated over what is suspected to be the site of the cave of Machpelah. The mosque was formerly a crusader church and prior to that a church that was erected by the emperor Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>13</sup>

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and where he interviewed Melchizedek. Moses commanded that the blessings of the Law should be read from Mt. Gerizim and the cursings of the Law should be read from Mt. Ebal (Deut 11:29; 27:12-13; Josh 8:33). See Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 468.

<sup>13</sup> Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 549.

## Stephen's View of Moses and the Law (7:17-43)

In these verses, we see Stephen continue his review of Israel's history by recounting the period of the Exodus. He sought to refute the charge that he was blaspheming against Moses (6:11) and was speaking against the Mosaic Law (6:13). Stephen is again emphasizing God's faithfulness to His promise in the Abrahamic covenant as well as demonstrating how Moses was a precursor of Jesus in so many ways. Stephen returns to the point he had begun to make in verse 7 that God would judge the nation that enslaved His people.

In [verses 17-22](#), Stephen highlights the fact that before Moses appeared on the scene, Israel increased in numbers and fell under the control of an enemy that was hostile to her. Likewise before Jesus appeared, Israel had increased numerically and had fallen under Roman domination. Moses came at just the right time as did Jesus (Gal 4:4).

Moses became a powerful man in word (his writings?) and deed. All this took place outside the Promised Land, which further depreciated the importance of that land.

In [verses 23-36](#), Stephen highlights Israel's rejection of yet another of God's anointed leaders. Moses, like Joseph was rejected.

- Moses offered himself as Israel's deliverer, but was rejected.
- The Jews thought that Moses' position of power would be used to bring them harm. They feared the same thing about Jesus (Jn 11:47-48).
- This rejection led Moses to leave his brethren and live in a foreign land where he fathered descendants and accumulated an inheritance.
- Jesus left His people and went to a distant land where he is producing descendants (believers) with an inheritance
- Moses received a commission from God in Midian to return to his brethren to lead them out of their oppressed condition.
- Jesus, on God's order, will return to the earth to deliver Israel from her oppressed condition during the Tribulation when He returns at His second coming.
- The third reference to 40 years (cf. vv. 23, 30, 36) divides Moses' career into three distinct parts. These stages were (1) preparation ending with rejection by his brethren, (2) preparation ending with his return to Egypt, and (3) ruling and judging Israel. The parallels with the career of Jesus become increasingly obvious as Stephen's speech unfolds.
- Moses, the lawgiver, was trusted by the people of Stephen's day, but rejected by his own generation.
- In like manner, Jesus had been rejected, but the Jews of Stephen's day had an opportunity to repent.

In [verses 37-43](#), Stephen shifts to an emphasis upon Moses' teaching – the Law. The Jews venerated the Law and the religious leaders claimed to have the inside track on following the Law exactly. Stephen is making a case that they really rejected Moses' teaching. It was Moses who had predicted that a prophet like himself would come (Deut 18:15 cf. Acts 3:22). Therefore, Israel should not have concluded that the Mosaic Law was the end of God's revelation to them. By insisting upon the finality of the Mosaic Law, Stephen's hearers were in danger of repudiating what Moses had prophesied – another prophet like Moses would come.

The Israelites refused to follow Moses but sought to return to their former place of slavery. So had Israel refused to follow Jesus but turned back instead to her former condition of bondage under the Law (cf. Gal. 5:1). Stephen's hearers could expect a literal bondage or slavery in spite of the sacrifices they brought to God if they too rejected God's prophet.

Stephen had answered his accusers' charge that he had spoken against Moses (6:11, 13) by showing that he believed what Moses had predicted about the coming prophet. It was really his hearers who rejected Moses since they refused to allow the possibility of prophetic revelation that superseded the Mosaic Law.

### **Stephen's view of the temple (7:44-50)**

At this point in his speech, Stephen had effectively refuted the general charges that he blasphemed God and Moses (6:11; cf. vv. 2-16) and spoke against the Law (6:13; cf. vv. 17-43). He next addressed the charge that he spoke against the temple (6:13). The charges that he had said Jesus would destroy the temple and alter Jewish customs (6:14) were really specific accusations growing out of Stephen's view of the temple.

In [verses 44-50](#), Stephen highlights the fact that it was the tabernacle that God had ordered to be built, not the actual temple. The initiative to build the temple came from David, not God. God did not even permit David to build the temple due to the amount of blood David had shed in war. David's son, Solomon, had built the temple and Solomon acknowledged that God did not restrict Himself to a building (1 Ki 8:27; Isa 66:1-2). Stephen even quoted Isaiah (Isa 66:1-2).

Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin that the temple, which they venerated excessively, was not the primary venue of God's person and work. He was arguing that Jesus was God's designated replacement for the temple, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews also taught.

### **Stephen's Accusation (7:51-53)**

In these verses, Stephen concluded his defense by indicting his accusers. They had brought charges against him, but now he brought more serious charges against them.

Stephen highlights the rejection of Jesus by the religious leadership. He even used figures of speech similar to those used to describe all of the prior generations who had rejected God's messengers and anointed men – “stiff-necked” (Exod 33:5; Deut 9:13). They were proud of their circumcision, but they had not had the hardness of their heart removed through spiritual circumcision. They were similar to the apostates in Israel's past (cf. Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16) whom former prophets had rebuked (cf. Jer. 4:4; 9:26).

Their guilt was all the greater because they had received God's law, which angels had delivered (Deut. 33:2 [LXX]; cf. Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2), but they had disobeyed it. They were the real blasphemers (defiant sinners). Stephen, as an messenger or one sent (the basic meaning of the word angel - cf. 6:15), had brought them new insight, but they were about to reject it too.<sup>14</sup>

Stephen's speech demonstrated remarkable insight and shows why he was considered to be full of wisdom. Stephen was in a sense a forerunner of Paul. He seemed to grasp the changes that were taking place in God's plan perhaps more so than any of the apostles. God will use a man who consented to Stephen's death to carry this understanding forward

### **Stephen's death (7:54—8:1a)**

Stephen's speech caused a revolution in the Jews' attitude toward the disciples of Jesus, and his martyrdom began the first persecution of the Christians. Luke recorded the Sanhedrin's response to Stephen's message to document Jesus' continued rejection by Israel's leaders. He

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<sup>14</sup> Constable, “Notes on the Book of Acts.”

did so to explain why the gospel spread as it did and why the Jews responded to it as they did following this event. This is a pivotal event in the book of Acts.

This is the only time we read of Jesus in the standing position at God's right hand. Some think this indicates that Jesus was ready to return if Israel would only repent. However at this point it seems clear as crystal that they have given their final answer that they will not repent. Others think that His standing was to receive Stephen's spirit which would very soon be crushed out of his body.<sup>15</sup>

**Principle:** Those who are motivated to violence by religion always accuse their opposition of arrogance. This is a classic principle related to "reverse process reversionism."

Stephen purposely chose the title "Son of Man" in verse 56 because that is a Messianic title for Jesus. This was blasphemy to the Sanhedrin. Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy in Israel (Lev. 24:16; Deut. 17:7).

In the three trials before the Sanhedrin that Luke recorded thus far, the first ended with a warning (4:17, 21), the second with flogging (5:40), and the third with stoning (7:58-60). The Sanhedrin now abandoned Gamaliel's former moderating advice (5:35-39). It did not have the authority to execute someone without Roman sanction, and Jewish law forbade executing a person on the same day as his trial. However since witnesses were present to cast the first stones, as the Mosaic Law prescribed, Stephen's death seems not to have been the result of mob violence but official action. Probably it was mob violence precipitated and controlled by the Sanhedrin along the lines of Jesus' execution.<sup>16</sup>

Saul of Tarsus was there and cooperated with the authorities by holding their cloaks while they carried out their wicked business (cf. 8:1; 22:20). He was then a "young man" (Gr. *neanias*, cf. 20:9; 23:17-18, 22), but we do not know his exact age. Since he died about A.D. 68 and since Stephen probably died about A.D. 34, perhaps Saul was in his mid-thirties. Jesus and Paul appear to have been roughly contemporaries. This verse, of course, does not imply that Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Baker, *Acts*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts."

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*