



## Stephen's defense

### Acts 7

After various accusations have been made against Stephen, he is allowed by the high priest to defend himself. This defense we find in this rather long chapter. Some have said that he does not defend himself against the particular accusations which have been leveled against him, but this is not true. He indeed answers his accusers. He is going to do this out of Israel's own history. He divides this history into the time of Abraham (vs. 2-16); the time of Moses (vs. 17-43); and into the time of David and Solomon (vs. 44-50). Although this defense cannot very well be split, it is divided into three parts.

The way in which Stephen now reviews the history of Israel for the Sanhedrin is educational. It is not merely a review of a history which each one of his listeners knew very well, nor is it a review of the entire history of God's Old Testament people. He has something very definite in mind. He will show these people before whom he makes his defense that he is not guilty of those things of which they have accused him, but that they are the guilty ones. He is also going to show by this brief review that the Old Testament history is redemptive in character. One may not look upon the Old Testament as merely a group of stories from which we may derive lessons, as the Scriptures are often used to do even to the present day. All things in the Old Testament revelation pointed forward to the fulfillment of what the Old Testament saints saw. This fulfillment occurred in Jesus Christ! The members of this Sanhedrin also looked at the visible things of the Old Testament and thought that those things had to be preserved at all costs. Stephen will show them that they are wrong, and that their wrong interpretation has led them to crucify the Lord of glory. He takes an *"historical redemptive"* approach perhaps more than any other writer of New Testament times. Those before whom he makes his defense will be able to learn a lot from this man and he will show them a whole new approach to Old Testament history.

He urges his listeners to give their attention not to him but to the revelation of God. He is polite in his address. In this address we encounter various problems when we carefully compare his account with the Old Testament history. For our purpose it is not necessary to go into all of them. Many, though not all, of these difficulties fall away, when we consider that he used the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It is also worthy of note that the members of the Sanhedrin do not interrupt him in his discourse despite the fact that they held the O.T. in high regard.

### The patriarchs

First of all he considers the history of Abraham. This man was called from "beyond the river" and finally came into the land where the Jews now dwell. This land was given him as an inheritance, but, at the time of his death he did not own a square foot of it. He had to buy a piece of land so that he might bury his wife. Besides this, Abraham's seed would inherit this land. This promise was made when he had no children and it did not appear that he ever would be a father. God had already spoken to Abraham of the fact that his descendents would be taken captive to another land where they would be treated shamefully. But, God will watch over his seed and judge the nation which oppressed them. Then they will return to their land. God used many detours to make His promises stand. He asked for great faith!

God gave Abraham a sacrament. This was to assure him again of the truth of the promise he had received from his God. Stephen compresses this history. He only speaks of the circumcision of Isaac. Isaac begat Jacob and Jacob, the twelve patriarchs. These were the heads of the tribes.

Now only Joseph is mentioned, because it is through the happenings in the life of Joseph that God realizes His purposes with His people. Joseph is elevated to the second in command in Egypt and the famine drives the entire household of Jacob there. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, speaks of nine sons of Joseph and therefore 75 and not 70. It is noteworthy that Isaac was promised the land before his circumcision and that the patriarchs had to leave the promised land in their lifetime and were only buried there!

## **Moses**

Stephen had been accused of not sufficiently honoring Moses. He now goes into the history of this man of God. This history is necessary to see how Israel again came out of the land of Egypt and finally found their home in the land of Canaan.

Stephen shows only the preparation of this man Moses. He was very fair in the sight of God. He, though belonging to that hated race which Pharaoh sought to eliminate, was brought up by Pharaoh's daughter! God has the controls firmly in His hand. Because he was brought up in the household of Pharaoh, he was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. This was considerable already in that time. Later Paul receives a very good classical education before his conversion. Moses received this kind of education before he was called to lead God's people.

This Moses, who was to become the deliverer of Israel, was not successful in his first attempt to do so. He was about 40 years old at this time, says Stephen. Moses took things into his own hands. Of course, this failed. He delivered one person — but is now in danger of his life and has to flee to Midian. Here he will have to learn a great deal. The deliverance of Israel seems far removed. God then calls him to his task in the burning bush. Here there was no temple, notice, but the ground where God is holy! Stephen had not rejected Moses, but their fathers had done so. God sends him back to Egypt and Moses leads the people out with many wonders and signs, bid the people follow him? No, they rebelled against him time and again. This Moses prophesied of a prophet like him who would be raised up later! Through Moses God gave the law to Israel and many other revelations. However, the people rejected Moses. They went so far as to make a golden calf, and they worshipped the stars and heathen gods. The fathers did not obey Moses and wanted to return to Egypt.

According to Amos, which Stephen quotes, they did not bring the sacrifices during the time they wandered in the wilderness. For forty years these proper sacrifices were not brought.

## **Tabernacle and temple**

Then God gave them a tabernacle as a symbol of His dwelling with His people. This had to be made in such a way that it was evident that God Himself was the architect. This tabernacle went into Canaan with them in the days of Joshua. It lasted until the time of David. Notice how he skips large segments of history in order to come to the point on which he has been accused, that he did not hold the temple in proper honor. There was none until David's time! He was not even allowed to build it! It had to wait another generation, because Solomon finally built the temple unto God. Solomon makes it very clear at the dedication of this temple that God cannot be contained in it. Isaiah is quoted to bolster this view.

This defense of Stephen is just beautifully crafted! It is a work of art! Joseph did not make himself known to his brothers the first time they came, but the second. Moses did not deliver Israel the first time he tried, but the second. Moses is not THE prophet, but there is Another Who is to come. God allows them to make a tent (tabernacle) first, but finally a permanent house (the temple). He moves slowly through this history but He moves methodically toward the Christ! He, after all, is the fulfillment of all of this Old Testament history.

## **Fixing blame**

Having made this most appropriate defense, Stephen proceeds with the application. Does he admit guilt on any count? On none — instead — they, his accusers are guilty of the things whereof they

have accused him. He has turned the proceedings about completely. They always cling to the material and to the visible. They hold to the stones of the temple. Their fathers persecuted the prophets, and his listeners do the same thing. Their fathers killed the prophets and their sons have even gone farther — they have killed the Righteous One! Their fathers killed those who spoke of Him; they have killed Him. They are heathenish in their hearts and ears. They rejected the law and Him who fulfilled it. That law came through the instrumentality of angels, and they didn't keep it!

## **The martyrdom**

The members of the Sanhedrin have not interrupted him as he took them through the history of Israel, but this application is too much. They become enraged. Beside themselves, they gnash their teeth and lose control of themselves. The proclamation of the truth does this!

It is said again that Stephen *"was filled with the Holy Spirit."* He sees the heavens open and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. He doesn't keep this to himself, but tells them what he sees! This intensifies the fury of his accusers. Together they rush at him, take him outside the city and stone him. Luke tells us that they lay their garments at the feet of a certain Saul of Tarsus.

Where are the Roman authorities? The Jews may not kill someone. But, Rome often winked at such happenings, that was the *Pax Romana*.

Stephen cries: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* At the close he cries: *"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."* Forgiveness! He was heard. A certain Saul of Tarsus later turns to the Lord. Then Stephen *"fell asleep."* This is a common New Testament statement concerning the death of believers, and is never used of unbelievers.

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## **Questions for discussion:**

1. What is usually the importance of Bible stories for us? Do we deal with them in a manner much different from fables?
2. Does the fact that Stephen speaks as he does detract at all from the fact that he was a deacon?
3. Is it of importance to see how the Scriptures are often works of art? Notice the groups of eight verses as found in Psalm 119.
4. Is Stephen sometimes mistaken in his facts? Compare Genesis and Acts 7.
5. In which way was Moses the Mediator of the Old Testament?
6. Is there significance in the fact that Solomon rather than David was allowed to build the temple?
7. Does the true preaching of the word lead men to crazed actions? Why?