

Stephen, the first martyr (Part One)

Acts Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 v 1 to 16

The world outside Israel spoke Greek and in 285 BC the Jewish establishment empanelled 70 scholars in Alexandria, a major Jewish centre, to translate what we call the Old Testament into Greek – this is called the ‘Septuagint’ version. In the first century AD the Jews in Israel (Hebraic Jews) did not speak Hebrew, except to participate in the local synagogue – after the Babylonian captivity they spoke Chaldean Aramaic. The Grecian Jews were Jews born outside Israel who spoke Greek. They were still Jewish but were looked down upon by the native-born Jews...

The seven helpers (Acts 6 v 1 to 7)

- How did the apostles deal with the troubles mentioned in verse 1? What results followed (a) for the widows; (b) for the seven helpers; (c) for the twelve apostles?
- What lessons can we learn from the apostles’ handling of the situation?

“When the disciples were increasing in number” (v 1) indicates that the work of God’s kingdom through the early Christian community was still highly successful, and they dealt with the problems well. The mention of growth reminds us that the early church was organized. They knew how many were saved; they met together at specific places and specific times. Money and goods were collected and distributed to those in need. Sin was confronted and dealt with.

“A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews” – the Hebrews were those Jews more inclined to embrace Jewish culture and were mostly from Judea. The Hellenists were those Jews more inclined to embrace Greek culture and were mostly from the Diaspora (from all over the Roman Empire). Hebrews tended to regard Hellenists as unspiritual compromisers with Greek culture, and Hellenists regarded Hebrews as ‘holier-than-thou’ traditionalists.

“Seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v 3) – the qualifications described by the apostles focused on the character of the men to be chosen. The apostles were far more concerned with the internal quality of the men than their outward appearance or image. The idea behind ‘full of the Spirit and wisdom’ is that these men were to be both spiritually and practically minded. The seven men all had Greek names (v 5), indicating they were probably Hellenists. The people (and the apostles) showed great sensitivity to the offended Hellenists by appointing these men to take care of the widows’ distribution.

The arrest of Stephen (Acts 6 v 8 to 15)

- What were the outstanding features of Stephen’s life and ministry? What was the nature of the persecution against him? What charges were laid against him? Were those charges valid?

Notice that Stephen was a young man – how long do you think he had been a Christian? In the ‘trial’ that follows he is going up against the Sanhedrin, the elite ruling ecclesiastical experts of Israel.

““We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God’... ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law...” (v 11, 13) – these were the accusations against Stephen. Significantly, many of the same false accusations were levelled against Jesus (Matthew 26 v 59 to 61). They accused him of these things because Stephen clearly taught that: (i) Jesus was greater than Moses; (ii) Jesus was God; (iii) Jesus was greater than the temple; (iv) Jesus was the fulfillment of the law; (v) Jesus was greater than their religious customs and traditions.

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First part of Stephen's speech (Acts 7 v 1 to 16)

Stephen's presentation provides a summary of part of the Old Testament. Though a 'young' Christian, his insights into Old Testament history are staggering. Stephen sets out to show that God intended first Joseph, and then Moses, to deliver his people from bondage, and that the pattern of Israel's history is to reject God's chosen leader the first time, but to accept him the second time. Stephen starts with Abraham, as in a sense he was the first Jew... Who do you think is really on trial here – Stephen or the Sanhedrin?

- See Genesis 11 v 27 to 12 v 5. God called Abraham while he was still in Ur; he moved to Haran with his family (just 80 km up river), and did not move again until his father died some 25 years later. Do you think Stephen draws attention to this 'lapse of faith'? What points does he make about Abraham?
- Joseph was hated by his brothers and they sold him into slavery. How does Stephen show that this was in God's plan? How did God bring about his good purposes out of the brothers' evil actions? In v 13 notice that the brothers did not recognise and accept Joseph until their second visit. If history is any guide the people of Israel will not recognise their Messiah until his Second Coming...

"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia" (v 2) – at the very beginning, Stephen emphasized that the God of glory appeared to Abraham before he even came into the Promised Land. Not only was the temple unnecessary for this revelation of the God of glory; the Promised Land itself was not necessary. God was greater than either, and so Stephen was falsely accused of speaking against the temple. Stephen wasn't defending – he simply explained.

"Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you" (v 3) – God said this to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia. Yet Stephen explained that Abraham did not immediately go to Canaan (he dwelt in Haran), and did not immediately leave his relatives (his father came with him to Haran). Abraham's partial obedience did not take God's promise away. Instead, it meant the promise was 'on hold' until Abraham was ready to do what the Lord said. The fulfillment of the promise did not progress until Abraham left Haran and his father behind, and went to where God wanted him to go. Abraham would certainly become a giant of faith, even being the father of the believing (Galatians 3 v 7), yet he did not start there. Abraham is an example of one who grew in faith and obedience.

"But God was with him" (v 9) – again, Stephen emphasized the spiritual presence of God with Joseph. Joseph did not need to go to the temple to be close to God – there was no temple. Instead, God was with him all the time. Stephen mentioned the story of Joseph because he is a picture of Jesus, in that the sons of Israel rejected Joseph, who later became a 'saviour' to them.

"The tomb that Abraham bought" (v 16) – the only land that Abraham ever actually possessed in Canaan was this burial plot. The rest was received only by faith. Note that in verse 16 many commentators suggest that Stephen made a mistake, as according to Genesis 33 v 19 it was Jacob, not Abraham, who bought the land at Shechem from the sons of Hamor as a burial site. A possible resolution is that Abraham may have originally purchased the land when he passed through Shechem (Genesis 12 v 6), and after an altercation with the sons of Hamor, it was later re-purchased by Jacob.

Prayer –

Lord, help us to learn from Stephen's example, and to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

Give us wisdom and courage to speak your truth with grace and power, despite opposition and hostility.

Amen.