

Stephen, the first martyr (Part Two)...

Acts Chapter 7 v 17 to Chapter 8 v 1

In this 'trial' Stephen, a young Christian, is going up against the Sanhedrin, the elite ruling ecclesiastical experts of Israel. Stephen's summary of the Old Testament sets out to show that

- (a) God's presence with his people is not limited to a particular place or building, and
- (b) far from overthrowing Moses, Christ is the promised prophet of whom Moses himself spoke.

More importantly, Stephen's speech seeks to show that

- (c) 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.

So if history is any guide the people of Israel will not recognize their Messiah until his Second Coming...

Second part of Stephen's speech (Acts 7 v 17 to 53)

- Verse 22 – Moses was groomed for leadership in Egypt, having the best education the country could provide. Moses was "powerful in speech", but how did he respond to God's call (see Exodus 4 v 10)?

Verse 25 – The Israelites did not realise that God wanted Moses to rescue them – this insight is not clear from the Exodus account. Stephen's point here is that here again Israel rejected its leader the first time, but accepted him the second time 40 years later (v 35).

- From Exodus 3 v 2, what was it that first attracted Moses' attention (v 30)? (Remember that burning bushes are a common occurrence in desert environments.) This was an acacia or thorn bush. If thorns are a symbol of God's curse on sin, and fire is a symbol of God's judgment, then what do you think the Burning Bush in Exodus symbolises?
- To whom is Moses referring in verse 37? In Deuteronomy 18 v 15, Moses predicted the very person whom the Sanhedrin are now rejecting.
- The tragedy of Israel's spiritual blindness is described in verses 39 to 43. Idolatry and astrology are expressly forbidden by God in the Old Testament. What was the penalty for Israel's disobedience (v 43)? In his conclusion, how does Stephen teach the divine origin – and yet the inadequacy – of the Tabernacle and the Temple?
- What charges does Stephen bring against his accusers? Who do you think is really on trial here – Stephen or the Sanhedrin?

“An angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai” (v 30) – Stephen again emphasized one of the main points of his reply to the Council – that God, his glory, and his work was not confined to the temple. God appeared to Moses in the wilderness, before there ever was a temple.

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“and were rejoicing in the works of their hands” (v 41) – this phrase is especially poignant. One of the accusations against Stephen was that he blasphemed the temple. It wasn’t that Stephen spoke against the temple, but against the way Israel worshipped the temple of God instead of the God of the temple. Just as Israel worshipped the calf in the wilderness, so now they were worshipping ‘the works of their hands’.

“God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven” (v 42) – in their rejection of Moses and the God who sent him, Israel turned instead to corrupt idols, bringing upon themselves the judgment described in the passage quoted from Amos 5 v 25 to 27.

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears” (v 51) – drawing on concepts from the Old Testament, Stephen rebuked those who rejected Jesus as ‘stiff-necked’ (as Israel is described in Exodus 32 v 9), and as ‘uncircumcised in heart and ears’ (Jeremiah 9 v 26). Stephen uses these Old Testament labels against the religious rulers of Israel. He goes on to point out that it is a national trait – that of deadly hostility to the messengers of God who predicted the coming of the Righteous One – which culminated in their betrayal and murder of the Messiah.

“You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (v 53) – this accusation must have outraged the members of the Sanhedrin. They prided themselves on their obedience to the law, even as Paul would later claim of his pre-Christian thinking (see Philippians 3 v 5, 6).

The stoning of Stephen (Acts 7 v 54 to 8 v 1)

- Consider the likeness between Stephen and his Lord – in his life, his character and finally in his death. How do Stephen’s last words compare with Jesus’ words before the Sanhedrin and from the Cross? In what ways can we follow Stephen’s example?

“Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (v 55) – it is significant to note that Jesus is standing, as opposed to the more common description of him sitting, at the right hand of God the Father (Matthew 26 v 64), Colossians 3 v 1). We can imagine that Jesus was standing there in solidarity with Stephen at this moment of crisis. Jesus had said, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10 v 32) – Jesus may have also stood to plead Stephen’s case before God the Father, assuring that though he was found guilty and punished on earth, he was found righteous and rewarded in heaven. We need to remember that Jesus “always lives to make intercession” for us (Hebrews 7 v 25, Romans 8 v 34), and the traditional posture for prayer is to stand.

“And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (v 58) – Saul stood there as the supervisor of the operation. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he had also approved of Stephen’s execution. ‘Young man’ literally means ‘a man in his prime’. It does not mean that Saul was not old enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin. In Acts 26 v 10, Paul says “I cast my vote against them”, and the plain implication was that he had a vote as a member of the Sanhedrin.

Prayer –

Lord, thank you for the Book of Acts, which describes the heroes of the early church – Peter, John, Stephen and others.

Help us to learn from their example, and to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

Give us the wisdom and courage to speak your truth with grace and power.

Amen.