

SPEECHES IN ACTS

Should The Book Really Be Called

The Words Of The Apostles?

Class Three – Stephen Gives His All

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

Acts 7 is often described as “Stephen’s Defense” – I have used this phrase often

- It is natural to do so – consider the setting
 - Charges have been made against Stephen by the authorities
 - He is imprisoned and brought before a judge and jury
 - He is given the chance to answer to the charges against him

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

- The scene has all the trappings of a modern courtroom drama – pick your own television version – *Law & Order*, *Boston Legal*, *Perry Mason* (if you're as old as me)
- Where the courtroom lawyer, through the brilliance of his argument, saves the day
- But there is a big problem with this framework – not just because Stephen loses his case

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE ?????

- If I were on trial in a courtroom for any crime, let alone a capital offense where my life hung in the balance, I certainly wouldn't want Stephen as my lawyer!
- I come from a family of lawyers (a brother was an attorney, my sister a judge), and they used to say that any lawyer who defended himself had a fool for a client!

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE ????

But more than just that, Stephen doesn't really "defend" himself against these charges:

"We have heard him speak **blasphemous words against Moses and God.**" *Acts 6:11 (NRSV)*

"This man never stops **saying things against this holy place and the law;** for we have heard him say that this **Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place** and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." *Acts 6:13-14 (NRSV)*

PARALLEL WITH JESUS

These charges are similar to those laid up against Jesus

Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to **destroy the temple of God** and to build it in three days.'" *Matthew 26:59-61 (NRSV)*

LET'S LOOK AT STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

- He doesn't really directly address the charges
- He doesn't "go after" the false witnesses
- He doesn't even try to prove that he's innocent
- He deliberately attacks the court, the judge and the jury
- He even goes so far as to tell them that they are the guilty ones
- So why does he do this?

SOME COMMENTARY ON ACTS 7

“ ... the purpose of the speech is still much disputed. In form it is a lengthy recital of Old Testament history, discussing in detail what appears to be **insignificant** points and culminating in a bitter attack on the speaker’s hearers. What is the speaker trying to do? ... it is **not clear what the theological point** of the details is.” *Howard Marshall, The Acts of the Apostles*

“The **irrelevance** of this speech has for long been the real problem of exegesis. It is, indeed, impossible to find a connection between the account of the history of Israel to the time of Moses and the accusations against Stephen ... the major part of the speech **shows no purpose** whatever ...” *Martin Dibelius, Studies in the Acts*

REALLY? That’s what well-regarded Biblical scholars have said?

ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY ON ACTS 7

- How about an entry from a well-known Bible dictionary:
“... How are we to explain the fact that Steven [sic] does not really speak to the charges brought against him?” *F.D. Gealy, “Steven,” The Interpreter's Dictionary*
- Here's Gealy's answer to his own question:
“... an anti-Jewish polemic which Luke fashioned into a speech for his purposes ...” to show that the history of Israel is “... a history of continual disobedience to God.”
- All of these scholars seem to have missed the point of Stephen's speech (not defense)
- It isn't insignificant, irrelevant, or anti-Semitic

WHAT ACTS 7 SEEMS TO BE ABOUT

- The basis interpretation of the themes in Stephen's speech are usually given as:
 - Israel's history shows extraordinary lack of understanding (especially among the leaders) of seeing God's hand at work and in recognizing those He sent
 - The misinterpretation of the role of the "Temple" and the focus on it needs to change
- Or put another way, it's all about:
 - The place of God's presence
 - The Rejection of God's messengers

OVERVIEW OF STEPHEN'S ARGUMENT

The place of God's presence

- v.2 God appears to Abraham in **Mesopotamia**
- v.5 God gave him no inheritance in the land 'not even enough to set his foot on'.
- v.6-7 his descendants would be aliens in another land
- v.9-10 God was with Joseph in **Egypt**
- v.11-15 Jacob went to **Egypt**
- v.16 Jacob was buried in **Shechem** outside Judea
- v.29-30 Moses lived 40 years in **Midian**
- v.30-34 God appears to Moses in **Midian**
- v.36 God's miracle working presence in **Egypt** and the **wilderness**

Rejection of God's messengers

- v.9 The patriarchs rejected **Joseph**, the one whom God was with, and sold him into slavery
- v.17-28 rejection of **Moses**
- v.35 restatement of rejection of **Moses** in stronger terms.
- v.37 promise of a **Prophet** like **Moses**

OVERVIEW OF STEPHEN'S ARGUMENT

The Place of God's Presence

v.37 presence of God on **Mt. Sinai**

v.44-45 presence of God in the wilderness **tabernacle**

v.46-47 Solomon builds the **Temple**

v.48-49 Isaiah declares that God does not dwell in temples **made with hands**

The Rejection of God's Messengers

v.39 rejection of **Moses** (still associated with the Prophet of v.37)

v.40-41 **Idolatry** (golden calf) worshipping a **work of their own hands**

v.42-43 jump to their later apostasy which led to their exile for **idolatry**

v. 51-52 accusation of rejecting the **prophets** and of murdering the **Just One**

v. 53 accusation of **apostasy from the law**

SURFACE INTERPRETATION

- While these ideas are certainly true, there must be more to it, as much of Stephen's speech does not deal with either of these themes
- The key to understanding what Stephen is really saying is understanding the concept of "sacred space"

THE MISSING MESSAGE

- The reason that some commentary thinks much of Stephen's speech is irrelevant is they are thinking in a too-narrow sense
- Stephen isn't limiting himself to the charges regarding the Temple
- He is talking to a broader and more basic concept of a "sacred space" or "sacred land"
- His argument is that such a space or land should not be seen as a limitation on God
- His thrust is "God can work just fine without the use of a "sacred space"
- This is a key idea in fulfilling the final command given to the Apostles

STEPHEN'S FUNDAMENTAL POINT

- It isn't totally clear exactly what was meant in the charge that Stephen blasphemed "this holy place" – the Temple? Temple Mount? Jerusalem? Judea?
- But it would be hard to exaggerate how central the idea of "The Holy Land" (as we know term it) was to the Jews
- Their sense of religion was inextricably linked to both the **land** and their **descent** from Abraham – some have termed it "Race and Space" or "Blood and Soil"

STEPHEN'S FUNDAMENTAL POINT

- Ironically, we have seen traces of this type of thinking in the last century – just think of Nazism and its emphasis on Aryans and Fatherland
- Stephen's speech is laying a foundation for the movement away from a local ethnically-based religion to a universal, worldwide (catholic in the true sense) one
- Let's see how this is developed in his speech

WHAT ABOUT ABRAHAM?

- Everyone knew that God related personally to Abraham ... but to Stephen, the critical point was He did so “... while he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran”
- He directed him to “Leave your country and your people ...” (just as He has now directed people “ ... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” *Acts 1:8 (NRSV)*)

WHAT ABOUT ABRAHAM?

- Stephen admits Abraham was directed to “this land,” but reminds them that he never owned any of it – he was a stranger, just like the Greeks & Gentiles were now
- and that “your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own ...” for 400 years before coming to worship God in “this place”
- He reminds them that circumcision (the sign of the covenant) was being practiced before Abraham had any land, so it was not dependent on being “in this place.”

ANOTHER ELEMENT FOR STEPHEN

- The behavior of patriarchs (so beloved by the Jews) also demonstrated a key theme for Stephen
- They did not recognize that God was with Joseph, just as they didn't with Jesus
- That part of Stephen's argument is clear, but why include the part about the famine?

ANOTHER ELEMENT FOR STEPHEN

- To Stephen, the most important thing wasn't that the patriarchs sold Joseph into slavery, but that he was sold into slavery "in Egypt"
- This didn't mean that because he wasn't in the land ("this place") he was not in the center of the spiritual action – far from it!
- The center moved with him - "God was with him," says Stephen

JOSEPH

- What happened to Joseph in Egypt and the events of the famine showed clearly that God was working through Joseph
- The outcast brother, the Egyptian slave living outside the land
- In fact, God was working so effectively that Joseph's entire family eventually moved to Egypt
- The whole focus of salvation during 400+ years shifted completely out of the land
- And, in a nice, subtle touch, Stephen reminds them that when Joseph's bones came back, it wasn't to Jerusalem, but to Shechem – in the territory of the hate Samaritans

MOSES

- Stephen was also accused of blasphemy against Moses – so his discussion of him is important to understand
- Of all the incidents in the life of Moses, Stephen makes some interesting choices in what he discusses
 - His Egyptian background and lack of knowledge of the Israelites
 - The failure of his own people to recognize him, especially:

He supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them, but they did not understand. *Acts 7:25 (NRSV)*
 - And tellingly, what may seem to be unnecessary details

SACRED SPACE

- He flees to Midian, where he settled as a “resident alien” (NRSV) and it was here that God appeared to him as a burning bush
- Where God says to him:

Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. *Acts 7:33 (NRSV)*
- If any space should be considered sacred, this place somewhere in Sinai was it

SACRED SPACE

- But no one in Stephen's day (or ours, for that matter) knew where this ground was
- Would it be worthwhile to find it? – Not at all!
- What made it sacred was the presence of God working there – now that God had moved on to different work, the location was unimportant

SACRED SPACE

- Stephen is telling them it is a serious mistake to stay in a place when God has moved on
- Stephen is telling them that their institutional inertia was inhibiting God's work
- He is laying the Biblical foundation for the spread of the Truth
- He tells them that God worked wonders “in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for forty years in the desert”

SACRED SPACE

- And now, God's work is moving out from Jerusalem
- But why does Stephen talk about idol worship in the history of the Jews?
- To point out they have a penchant for worshipping "the work of their own hands."

TABERNACLE VERSUS TEMPLE

- Stephen uses the comparison between the Tabernacle and the Temple to illustrate the difference between how God views things and how man does
- The tabernacle (designed by God) hardly fit the usual pattern for a sacred space
- Man's shrines and temples were built at specific places – on hills, near springs, or groves – and usually big, imposing structures

TABERNACLE VERSUS TEMPLE

God's Tabernacle was humble and mobile – its sacredness was not about “place” but “pattern”

"Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, **ordering him to make it according to the pattern** he had seen. Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, *Acts 7:44-45 (NRSV)*

TABERNACLE VERSUS TEMPLE

- The Tabernacle was not in itself an object of veneration
 - It sat in the barnyard of a farmer for about 400 years
 - Coincidentally (?) almost the same period of time since the Babylonian exile
- During this time, the Tabernacle wasn't relevant to God's actions
- Not many details given about the Tabernacle during this period
- Stephen's point – it wasn't tied to a specific place, a “sacred space”

GOD'S VIEW OF THE TEMPLE

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? **I have not lived in a house** since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but **I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle**. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, **did I ever speak a word** with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, **saying, "Why have you not built me a house** of cedar?" *2 Samuel 7:4-7 (NRSV)*

Is it possible that God's refusal to let David build the Temple despite his being more favored than Solomon, indicates that a Temple was not God's ideal?

GOD'S VIEW OF THE TEMPLE

- It isn't so much that building the Temple was a mistake, but rather that false interpretation of its meaning was a grave error:

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, *Acts 7:48 (NRSV)*

- This was the critical misunderstanding that Stephen was addressing

GOD'S VIEW OF THE TEMPLE

- That misunderstanding was creating a great roadblock to the Great Commission

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. *Mark 16:15 (NRSV)*

"... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." *Acts 1:8 (NRSV)*

- How could the Gospel message spread if the Jewish authorities were determined to keep it as just a local, ethnically-based religion?

HOT BUTTON FOR THE JEWS

- Stephen said their ancestors “reveled in the works of their hands” when they worshipped the golden calf
- When Stephen describes the Temple as “made with hands” it would have touched a nerve
- This was a deliberate provocation by Stephen – a horrifying phrase to have used

HOT BUTTON FOR THE JEWS

- It was the phrase the Jews used to condemn the idolatry of the other nations
- They dismissed the pagan gods as human artifacts “made with hands”
- Stephen was calling the Temple itself an idol (and in a very real sense, he was exactly right)
- The Temple “cult” had become a form of apostasy

STEPHEN LAYS IT ON THE LINE

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it." *Acts 7:51-53 (NRSV)*

- Not exactly "If it please the court ..."
- Not designed to lead to an acquittal – an of course, it does not
- What was most likely an illegal lynch mob took Stephen out and stoned him

THE TRAGEDY OF THE DEATH OF STEPHEN

- Based on this speech in Acts 7, Stephen was a scholar of the first-order
- He, maybe more than anyone else, understood the purpose of God
- He realized the relationship of the Gospel message to the issues of race, sacred space and the radical change brought about by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
- His loss must have been keenly felt in the new community – but his “mantle” quite literally passed to someone else – Saul of Tarsus

AN ESSENTIAL TRAGEDY?

- Although Stephen's death was an undoubted tragedy, God brought from it good things
- Stephen's death led directly to the persecutions by Paul (and others)
- This caused the dispersal of the new Christians out from Jerusalem
- To all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth
- As in other circumstances, such as the Holocaust, God's Plan was furthered through tragedy
- And so Acts moves on – from Peter and his speeches, and from Stephen and his speech to Paul and his speeches
- It is the record of these speeches which drives the progression of the Book

SUMMARY

- Acts 7 shouldn't be referred to as "Stephen's Defense" – he certainly showed that the best defense isn't a good offense
- He doesn't answer the charges – he dismisses them
- Much misunderstanding of why Stephen did what he did – it was about more than just where God was and how the Jews rejected His messengers
- It was essential for the foundation of the message moving outward
- The real issue was the Jews perversion of the idea of "sacred space"
- The Tabernacle embodies God's idea – the Temple was man's idea
- Stephen gave his life for his ideas and gives way to Paul

SPEECHES IN ACTS

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