

Stephen's Defense

Our readings for the day bring us to Acts chapter 7, and the account of Stephen's speech in defense of the Truth that he had previously spoken, concerning the forthcoming overthrow of Jerusalem. Chapter 6 recounts the charge that the Jews placed before him:

“this man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law, For we have heard him say, that *this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy his place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us*” (Acts. 6:13-14).

Whilst these words came from “false witnesses,” there was an element of truth in their accusation. Although it was not true the Stephen spoke blasphemous words, Jerusalem was indeed to be destroyed, as described by Messiah himself in the Olivet Prophecy. To the Jew – even today – Jerusalem is the holy place where Yahweh was to be worshipped, and to speak of its destruction was to speak the unthinkable. Even in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, they trusted “in lying words, saying the Temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the Temple of Yahweh are these” (Jer. 7:4), thinking that they were secure, living in the place where Yahweh had placed his Name. Due to their rebellious ways, and refusal to adhere to the holy principles of Yahweh, Jesus said: “behold, your house is left unto you desolate” (Mat. 23:38), and so the Temple in which they trusted was to be destroyed at the hands of the Romans in AD 70.

The speech of Stephen in Acts chapter 7 was designed to use Israelitish history to demonstrate that Yahweh had a purpose with men and women outside of the Jewish temple. Whereas for the Jews at the time of Christ, the Temple was the only place that their God could be worshipped, Stephen showed how that throughout their history, God had revealed himself to, and was worshipped by, men of faith outside of the land, and outside of the Temple arrangement of things. Beginning with Abraham, he shows how God appeared to men outside the land, and it is to this aspect of things that we shall focus our attention on for our exhortation today.

ABRAHAM

The first witness that Stephen calls upon in defense of his teaching, is that of Abraham: “Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; the God of Glory *appeared* unto our father Abraham, *when he was in Mesopotamia*, before he dwelt in Charran ...” (Acts 7:2). The point here is that God appeared to Abraham outside of the Land of Promise, and that there he had a purpose with Abraham. Being the progenitor of the nation, Abraham's example is a powerful one, and the steps of his faith something which we must seek to follow. His example is invoked elsewhere in a similar vein: Romans chapter 4 demonstrates that Abraham was accounted righteous before he was circumcised:

“... we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision” (Rom. 4:16).

The point here, is that therefore Abraham becomes the father of those who are uncircumcised, who share the faith he had before he was circumcised:

“... the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had yet being uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:12).

The point Stephen is making is similar: God appeared to Abraham before he dwelt in the Land, and there called upon him to forsake his natural family to dwell in an unknown country. So in him we have an example of how God calls men and women according to His purpose outside of the literal Land, even Gentiles who show the faith that Abraham had, yet naturally being outsiders.

Although Abraham entered the land in faith, Stephen makes the further point that “he gave him none inheritance in it” (Acts 7:5). Again, we read in Hebrews 11 that he, with others, “died in faith, *not having received the promises*, but having seen them afar off ...” (Heb. 11:13). So it is that even when within the land, Abraham did not seek a permanent dwelling place for himself, but instead lived as a stranger and sojourner in tents, patiently waiting for the time when he would be given his inheritance.

In the example of Abraham, we have a tremendous exhortation for ourselves. God has appeared to us in the personage of the Lord Jesus Christ, who commands us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness, before all else. The spirit of Abraham is one that we should seek to adopt: the Bride of Messiah is spoken of in Psalm 45:

“Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; *forget also thine own people, and thy father’s house*. So shall the king greatly desire thy beauty: for he is thy Lord; and worship thou him” (Psa. 45:10-11).

Forsaking worldly affection and attachments, we must devote ourselves to walking in the faith of Abraham, that like him, we might be given our inheritance in due course.

JOSEPH

The next example that Stephen gives, is that of Joseph:

“The patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him” (Acts 7:9).

The point being made here is that God was not with those who sojourned in the land, but with Joseph who was in Egypt – outside the Land. This comes out repeatedly in the inspired record:

“*Yahweh was with Joseph*, and he was a prosperous man ...” (Gen. 39:2).

“... *but Yahweh was with Joseph*, and shewed him mercy ...” (Gen. 39:21).

So Stephen continues to allude back to these verses:

“... God was with him, and *delivered him out of all his afflictions*, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt ...” (Acts 7:9-10).

The example of Joseph, again, is a powerful one. Just as Yahweh was with Joseph outside of the Land, delivering him out of all his afflictions, even so David the sweet Psalmist of Israel wrote, whilst he was outside of the city, persecuted by Saul: “many are the afflictions of the righteous: but *Yahweh delivereth him* out of them all” (Psa. 34:19).

By the hand of Providence, Joseph was not sold into Egypt by mere chance: he recognized that he was a man of purpose. Speaking to his brothers who sold him for money, upon their expression of repentance, he said: “Now therefore, be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for *God did send me* before you to preserve life ...” (Gen. 45:5). Again, Psalm 105 describes God’s purpose with Joseph:

“*He sent a man before them*, even Joseph who was sold for a servant: Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: until the time that his word came: the word of Yahweh tried him ...” (Psa. 105:16-17).

Although it is not immediately obvious from a surface reading, not only was God with Joseph in Egypt, through providential means He actually sent Joseph there, in order to fulfill his Purpose in providing food for the people and the prophecies that spoke of him. All of these things being worked out according to the purpose of God – and outside of the Land.

MOSES

The third witness called upon by Stephen, is Moses: “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds” (Acts 7:22). Stephen alludes back to the Exodus record of how when he was forty years of age, Moses took it upon himself to defend one of his fellow countrymen who was being oppressed by an Egyptian, and slew the Egyptian. But Stephen – under inspiration – provides a detail not given in Exodus: “For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not” (Acts 7:25). When he smote the Egyptian, he assumed that his brethren would recognize this as a sign that he was to be their deliverer, to lead them out of Egypt. However, they rejected him: “this Moses they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge?” (Acts 7:35).

Some 40 years later, God appeared to Moses – again, outside of the land:

“When forty years were expired, *there appeared to him* in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush” (Acts 7:30).

So the Exodus account records:

“... the angel of Yahweh *appeared unto him* in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed” (Exo. 3:2).

This burning, yet unconsumed, bush, was a sign that Israel were to pass through a fiery affliction, yet would come through it unconsumed. So Isaiah the prophet records the words of Yahweh:

“I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee: and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: **when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee ...**” (Isa. 43:1-2).

Interestingly, these words also reflect what was to happen to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, in being cast into the fiery furnace – outside of the land – for their refusal to bow down before the gods of Babylon (see Daniel chapter 3). Their God was with them in Babylon, and His Angel delivered them from harm. Even so Israel would pass through a fiery trial, but would come through unconsumed by the fire.

The sign of the Burning Bush was also a token that Yahweh was with Moses, and so he returned to Egypt, having been appointed to be a ruler and a deliverer by God himself. His forty year sojourn in the wilderness had the effect of humbling him. Whereas in Egypt, Moses was “mighty in words and in deeds”, when he was sent back, he said to Yahweh: “O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but ***I am slow of speech***, and of a slow tongue” (Acts 4:10). So it was that Aaron was chosen to be a spokesman before Pharaoh for Moses – and interestingly, we are told that God also appeared to Aaron in Egypt to choose him – that is, outside the land. So the prophet spoke to Eli, the High Priest in Samuel’s day: “Did I plainly ***appear*** unto the house of thy father, **when they were in Egypt**, in Pharaoh’s house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest ...?” (1 Sam. 2:28).

THE ECCLESIA IN THE WILDERNESS

In continuing to provide examples of Yahweh’s calling of those outside of the land, Stephen speaks of the “ecclesia in the wilderness”. In the context of the choosing of Moses, we read:

“This is he, that was in ***the ecclesia in the wilderness*** with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us ...” (Acts. 7:38).

And again, later in his speech, Stephen refers to how “Our fathers had ***the tabernacle in the wilderness***, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen”. So not only was it that the people were regarded as being an ecclesia – whilst outside of the land, but also the symbolic dwelling place of Yahweh itself was “in the wilderness”, where the ordinances of the Law were given.

BUILDING A HOUSE

After the Children of Israel had entered into the Land, king David sought to build a house for the Divine Glory to dwell in (See Acts 7:46), but his request was refused, and the promise was given that Yahweh would instead build David a household (see 2 Sam. 7). But his Son Solomon was chosen to be the builder of the Temple instead. One might assume that here was the permanent Dwelling Place of God amongst his

people – but even in the land God did not literally reside in the Temple. So Stephen continued:

“howbeit the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet: Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? Saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?” (Acts 7:48-50).

The allusion is to Isaiah 66:1:

“Thus saith Yahweh, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? And where is the place of my rest?”

But the prophet continues:

“For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith Yahweh: ***but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word***” (Isa. 66:2).

Notice, the implication here is that the important thing is not the location of worship, but rather the spirit of worship. Righteousness is not where a person might offer their offerings, but rather the spirit in which those offerings were made. “to ***this*** man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word”. Interestingly, in the quotation of this passage by Stephen, this verse (verse 2) is left out. Instead, immediately after making the quote, Stephen said: “Ye stiffnecked and circumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye” (Acts 7:51). Here is the point: those who opposed Stephen were not of a poor and contrite spirit, and they did not tremble at the Word: rather they sought the destruction of the one who spoke it.

Here is a principle repeated by our Master to the woman at the well. She put before Messiah the then present debate as to whether worship should be conducted at Gerazzim, or Jerusalem. He taught her thus:

“Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father ... but the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father ***in spirit and in truth***: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (Jno. 4:21-23).

The debate as to whether worship should take place at Gerazzim or Jerusalem, would soon be over, as following the destruction of Judea and the dispersion of the nation of Israel, worship would no longer be offered at either place. Rather, anyone who worships in spirit and in truth at any place would be accepted. This is something which the prophet Malachi anticipated:

“from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and ***in every place*** incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith Yahweh of Hosts” (Mal. 1:11).

Although in the days to come, when Messiah returns from Heaven, there will be constructed a “house of prayer for all people” in Jerusalem (Isa. 56:7), the present circumstance of his brethren is that there is no specific place to which they ought to go to worship: men and women are rather accepted according to the spirit in which their supplications are made. The spiritual sacrifice to be offered is the prayers of the saints, foreshadowed in the offering up of Incense under the Law: “... let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, *that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks* to his Name” (Heb. 12:15). And interestingly, the context of these words from Hebrews, is that Christ was crucified outside of Jerusalem:

“Wherefore, Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered *without the gate*. Let us go forth therefore unto him *without the camp*, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Heb. 12:12-13).

THE DEATH OF STEPHEN

Returning back to Isaiah 66, we read:

“Hear the word of Yahweh ye that tremble at his word; your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name’s sake, said, Let Yahweh be glorified: but *he shall appear to your joy*, and they shall be ashamed” (Isa. 66:5).

Here we see those who hated their brother Stephen casting him out in their zeal for the Temple and the traditions that they had accrued concerning it. But Jesus appeared with the Glory of his Father to Stephen’s joy:

“He, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God ...” (Acts 7:55).

Though they ran upon him, and stoned him to death, Stephen fell asleep in the Lord knowing that he died not in vain, and with the hope of ultimate deliverance for his witness to the Truth. In a similar vein to his Master, “He kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60).

This is the hope that we have as Gentiles, brought in to the covenants of promise from the darkness of the world outside. Through the fall of Israel, salvation is extended to the Gentiles, and how much more then, shall their receiving in again be, but life from the dead. The Roman armies were providentially directed against Israel, destroying the Temple, and dispersing the nation, but we look forward to a future city, and a house that has foundations, to a house of prayer for all nations. But in the meantime, we seek to follow the example of Messiah himself, following him outside the camp, bearing shame for his name, if need be, but ultimately looking towards the vision of glory and joy that lies ahead for those who are of a contrite spirit, and who tremble at the Word.

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