

# Study 9: Acts chapter 7

*(History repeats itself...)*

Chapter 7 deals with a potted history of Israel. However there are many anomalies introduced by Stephen, and therefore we will spend two lessons on chapter 7 – the first with the events themselves, - and the second with the apparent discrepancies to the events of Israel's history from the Old Testament.

## **Introduction**

**Timing:**            *When did these events occur?*

**Content:**           *What are the major events?*

**Cast:**                *Who are the major players?*

## **Body of the Study**

**Who is the High Priest?**

**What were the charges brought before Stephen (6:13)?**

**Why does Stephen head off on a tour of Israel's history for his defence?**

**Who is Stephen identifying with in 7:2?**

**Stephen's examples and exhibits**

**How would the Sanhedrin have reacted to Stephen's defense?**

**Stephen's Closing Argument (51-53)**

**What did Stephen see?**

**What is Stephen's reaction to these people?**

**The Shekinah**

## **Homework:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study.*

- *In Acts 2:37, those who heard Peter were "pricked in their hearts" and did what?*
- *In Acts 7:54, those who heard Stephen were "cut to the heart" and did what?*
- *Why the difference?*
- *How did Stephen's stoning affect the church in Jerusalem?*

# Notes for study 9: Acts chapter 7

## *Introduction*

This first study on chapter 7 deals with the chapter itself and the events that are described here. The next study will deal with some of the difficulties from Acts 7 that appear to conflict with the events recorded in the Old Testament.

### **Timing:**            *When did these events occur?*

These events follow directly behind chapter 6, which places the time at late AD33, to early AD34.

### **Content:**            *What are the major events?*

Stephen is before the Sanhedrin; A brief history of the Jews (Israel); Moses' prophecy concerning Christ; These Jews resist God just as their fathers did; Stephen is stoned; Saul is a witness.

### **Cast:**                *Who are the major players?*

Stephen, Sanhedrin, Saul.

## *Body of the Study*

### **Who is the High Priest?**

Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, and the High Priest leads the questioning. Joseph Caiaphas was High Priest until his death in AD 36. It is most likely therefore that he is the High Priest to whom Stephen is appearing. If this is the case, then Caiaphas should be familiar with the events and the evidence presented, since it was he who presided over the trial of Jesus, and said that is was "...*better that one man die than for all of the people to perish...*" (Jn 11:49-50).

### **What charges were brought before Stephen (6:13)?**

1. He does not stop speaking blasphemous words against the Temple,

In support of the accusation, the false witnesses said that they had heard Stephen say that Jesus was going to destroy the Temple. Indeed, Jesus did say that He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (Jn 2:18-22), but he was speaking about the temple of His body, His death, and His resurrection. It is also true that Jesus said that the physical Temple was going to be destroyed (Mt 24:2), and His prophecy came true in AD 70 when the Roman army destroyed the city of Jerusalem.

2. He is speaking blasphemy against the Law,

The false witnesses said that Stephen was teaching that the customs that Moses delivered would be changed. The accusation is partly true, although Jesus did not come to change the Law, but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17-18). However, the logical consequence of Jesus' teaching is the inevitable abolishment of the Jewish religion. This finally came about with the destruction of Jerusalem, since all of the records were destroyed, and it was then no longer possible to identify the genealogy that proved the lineage. Further, the erection of the Dome of the Rock Mosque on the temple mount in Jerusalem has prevented the rebuilding of the Temple, and the practice of the Jewish religion based around the Temple. Added to this, the tearing of the veil of the temple in two at Jesus death, showed that the way into the Holy Place was open to everyone, and not just the High Priest (Heb 9:8; 10:19-29; Mt 27:51).

The Jewish nationality issue should not be confused with the Jewish religion – although for them (the Jews) these two issues were virtually inseparable. We will look at this in more detail in Acts 16.

### **Why does Stephen head off on a tour of Israel's history for his defence?**

The usual courtroom practice is to show from a previous case that a precedent has been set leading to the conclusion of the verdict required. In this case, Stephen shows that rather than being guilty as charged, his very accusers are the ones who are guilty.

Furthermore, the Jews loved their history, and would listen gladly (at least at the first) to what he had to say. But he wants to bring the story around to how the forefathers dealt with the patriarchs, and the parallels of this behaviour now being exhibited by his accusers.

*The defense of Stephen before the Sanhedrin is hardly a defense in the sense of an explanation or apology calculated to win an acquittal. Rather, it is a proclamation of the Christian message in terms of the popular Judaism of the day and an indictment of the Jewish leaders for their failure to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah or to appreciate the salvation provided in him. Before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the three great pillars in the religious faith of the vast majority of Jews were the land, the law, and the temple. It is this type of thought that Stephen confronts here, as the writer of Hebrews also did later. (NIVBC)*

### **Who is Stephen identifying with in 7:2?**

Stephen identifies himself with "...our father Abraham..." He shows that as a Jew he identifies with the Jewish religion, and is not trying to run off to some new or false religion.

### **Stephen's examples and exhibits**

#### **1 Abraham as the first example (2-8):**

- God spoke to him when he was in the land of his forebears, and he left without question – not knowing where it was that God was leading him.
- Abraham led a nomadic life (7:5) and did not personally receive any of the land that God had promised him (not even enough to put a foot on).
- Yet God made promises to Abraham – not only that He would give him the land – but also that his descendants would inherit it, when Abraham had no children!
- He further told how Abraham's children would live as aliens in a foreign land, and in bondage, and they would be oppressed for 400 years. (actually 430 years, but 400 years is "rounded off").
- God sealed his promise to Abraham with circumcision, and completed it with the birth of Isaac and the 12 patriarchs.

Abraham was prepared to step out in faith, and fully trusted God, even though it took him out of his field of comfort and experience. God delivered on the promises, even though they seemed impossible.

#### **2 The Patriarchs (9-10):**

- They became envious of Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt.
- God delivered him from his bondage and exalted him in Egypt.

Whilst the Jews held the patriarchs with esteem, God providentially watched over and guided Joseph to bring about the salvation of His people.

#### **3 Joseph – he was a type of Christ (9-19):**

- He was rejected by his brethren,
- He was given up for dead,
- But exalted by God
- Became a saviour of his people.
- His family came to be dependent upon the one whom they had formally persecuted.

This latter point is an allegorical reference as to how the Jews (when they came to their senses) would come to be dependent on Jesus whom they had formally persecuted.

#### 4 *Moses (17-37):*

- He was born just at the right time (providential),
- Was rejected by his brethren,
- But appointed by God,
  - At the burning bush,
  - Made a Ruler and deliverer,
  - Proved his appointment with miracles in Egypt,
- To give deliverance to his people.

#### *Moses prophesied that another prophet like him would come (vs 37; Dt 18:15)*

- Despite his God appointed status he was still rejected by his people,
- The people turned from God (and wanted to go back into bondage in Egypt),
- They even made idols to worship, instead of worshipping God,
- They were punished by God as a result.

Moses was held in great regard as *the lawgiver*, and the Jews regarded his law as unchangeable. But Moses always foresaw that another Prophet would arise, and hence the Law would of necessity change.

#### 5 *The prophets (42-43):*

The prophet Amos speaks about God turning away from the Jews because of their rejection. It is a book with a theme of doom to the people who rejected God. Stephen quotes from Amos 5:25-26. Whilst the Jews in the wilderness were ritualistically keeping the Law by offering sacrifices, their heart was not in what they were doing. They were keeping the *form* of worship, but they often turned away from God to worship idols, and carried them with them as “good luck charms” as a defense from evil. They really did not have faith in God at all!

Stephen outlines the effect of not keeping the law. God punished those who did not keep it, and Stephen gives his approval for such punishment.

#### 6 *The tabernacle and the Temple (44-50):*

The tabernacle was made exactly in accordance with God’s requirements (Heb 8:5) and had a temporary role to fulfil, until the Temple was built by Solomon. Implied in his argument is that the tabernacle moved around with the people, and so God was not worshipped in one particular place. This is further evidenced by the “more permanent” place of worship in the Temple, and the fact that the place of worship moved when the Temple was built.

It would not be lost on Stephen’s hearers that the Temple built by Solomon was not the one in which they were now sitting, as Herod had built that one!

The prophets observed that God was not limited to temples made with hands (Is 66:1). Stephen’s argument is that they should not be concerned about the loss of the Temple!

### ***How would the Sanhedrin have reacted to Stephen’s defense?***

They would have agreed with most of what they had heard. They loved to hear the stories from their history, and probably would not have had their heckles up too much so far. However, the quote from Amos would have caused some anguish, as it was a book of doom and condemnation. The Sanhedrin should not be underestimated. They were chosen from the elders of Israel, and were specialists at the Law. They were highly intelligent. There is no doubt that they would have perceived where Stephen was heading with his argument, and felt uncomfortable with the implications.

### ***Stephen’s Closing Argument (51-53)***

There is a decisive change in direction as Stephen turns the tables around, and focuses the attention right at the Sanhedrin. He accuses them of continuing the traditions of their predecessors. Perhaps they were becoming enraged by Stephen’s implications. They had done exactly the same thing to Christ! Stephen’s remark of them having “...*uncircumcised hearts and ears...*” (7:51) would have been particularly cutting.

Circumcision was sign of the relationship between them and God. Administration of God's Law was entrusted to the Sanhedrin. Stephen has told them they are not listening to God and might as well be Gentiles!

Now that really got to them!

He drives the dagger in further, by drawing all of his previous speech together, showing that "...*their forefathers persecuted the prophets of God and even had them put to death...*" (7:52). They have continued exactly the same tradition by putting to death Jesus, God's Son.

Therefore, whilst Stephen is accused of blaspheming God, they are really the ones who have committed the offence, and have done the very things that they accuse Stephen of. Rather than the Sanhedrin putting Stephen on trial, Stephen has put them on trial and they have been found wanting! The Sanhedrin are so outraged that rather than look at themselves they are seeking revenge. They now send Stephen out and stone him to death.

### **What did Stephen see?**

As Stephen looks towards heaven (he is aware of the finality of his plight) he sees the Shekinah presence of God, with Jesus in the exalted position "...*at God's right hand...*" (7:55). Stephen has to tell others what he is seeing, so it must be concluded that only Stephen saw the vision, and not the others present.

Stephen's description of Jesus as "*the Son of Man*" is Messianic, and would no doubt have further inflamed the Sanhedrin. It must be remembered that Jesus had previously stood right before the Sanhedrin, where Stephen now stood, and had himself claimed to be the "Son of Man" – the Messiah (Mk 14:62).

Stephen confirms very effectively to the Sanhedrin that the Jesus whom they had put to death was in fact the very Messiah.

**Shekinah** [Heb., "that which dwells"] A Hebrew term indicating the special or visible presence of God.

God expressed his presence in the cloudy/fiery pillar of the Exodus (Ex 14:19,20), in the cloud that covered the tabernacle (Ex 24:15-18), and in the cloud that filled Solomon's Temple (2 Chr 7:1). These fiery manifestations have been called God's "shekinah presence" or "shekinah glory." Some would add the fire that burnt Elijah's sacrifice or the fiery chariot that took him to heaven; the brightness that eclipsed Mount Sinai, and later the Mount of Transfiguration, and shone on the faces of Moses and Jesus.

In Ezek 8-11, the prophet observes the glory of God move from its place over the ark of the covenant, to the threshold of the Temple, and on out of the city. God refused to identify himself with a place where he was no longer honored, and abandoned it to destruction by Babylonian invaders.

And might there have been a hint of shekinah glory in the bright white form that descended on Jesus "like a dove" at his baptism (Mt 3:16)? The Spirit of God had returned to Israel in the person of Jesus, Immanuel, "God with us" (Mt 1:23).

*The Applied Bible Dictionary:*

*Kingsway Publications, ISBN 0-86065-846-5; p913-914*

### **What is Stephen's reaction to these people?**

"...*Lay not this sin to their charge...*" (7:60). He has compassion on them, because they do not know what they are doing. And Stephen was praying as they were stoning him "...as he was calling on God, saying Lord receive my spirit..." (7:59)

### **The Shekinah**

No one has ever seen God and lived. God appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai, and He allowed him to see His back as He passed by. The experience caused Moses' face to shine with a radiance that required him to wear a veil. The appearance of God to His people was in the form of a "presence". When people saw the presence, what they "saw" was (to them) God. This is described in scripture as the *Shekinah*. What Stephen saw was the Shekinah presence of God. In many cases in the Old Testament, the Shekinah is associated with the Ark of the Covenant which normally dwelt in the Temple.

A further detailed study on [TheShekinah](#) (*Sh-kiy-nah*) provides much background of the Shekinah, particularly in the Old Testament.