

Stephen's Powerful Message and Martyrdom

A Study in Acts Chapter 7

And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

~ Acts
7:59-60
NKJV



**By Dr. John C. Whitcomb
and
George Zeller**

Published by:

Whitcomb Ministries

(317-250-5469)

www.whitcombministries.org

and

The Middletown Bible Church

349 East Street

Middletown, CT 06457

(860-346-0907)

www.middletownbiblechurch.org

Acts Chapter 7

In Acts chapter 7 we have the moving account of Stephen's last message and his martyrdom. The name "Stephen" means "crown" [*stephanos*] referring to the victor's crown. It was woven of oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle or olive, or in imitation of these in gold, and was given to athletic victors or military conquerors. Stephen's life is summarized in Revelation 2:10—"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a **crown** [*stephanos*] of life."

Stephen was the first Christian martyr.¹ However, he was not the first Christian to die. In Acts 5 we learned about Ananias who was put to death by the Lord Himself on account of his sin of deceit and dissimulation. Stephen was the first Christian put to death by the enemies of the gospel. As we travel through Church history, the first major enemies of the gospel were the unbelieving Jews, as we find in Acts chapter 7. The second major enemies of the gospel were the Romans, led by their emperors. As the centuries moved on, the third major enemies of the gospel were, sad to say, Roman Catholic clergymen, as illustrated by the Spanish Inquisition (15th century). Of course, there was Muslim opposition to the gospel from the time of Mohammed (8th century) even to the present.

Christian believers, for nearly 2,000 years, have all faced physical death. The blessed hope of the body and bride of Christ is that there will be a generation of believers who will not experience physical death, but will have their bodies instantly transformed as they are caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-53; Tit. 2:13). This blessed hope was not shared by ancient Israel. God never gave Israel the expectation of being glorified without dying. That is a special promise for the body and bride of Christ. By Biblical inference it is reasonable to suggest that at the end of the Thousand Year Kingdom, Israelites and their proselytes among the Gentiles will experience a type of rapture as they are ushered into the New Jerusalem (the eternal state). Christ may come for us at any time. What a blessed hope and happy expectancy (Tit. 2:13)!

Acts chapter 7 is the longest sermon found in the book of Acts. Where did Luke, the author of the book of Acts, get all this information from? Most likely he received it from Saul of Tarsus who was there and heard every word. Saul of Tarsus was a brilliant man and Stephen's powerful words must have been burned into his memory. What he learned from Stephen he would implement later in his own preaching ministry. Stephen's sermon was not in vain, at least for Saul, who approvingly held the garments of those false witnesses and others who stoned to death this magnificent, God-honoring, eloquent preacher of the Word. Stephen was not an official elder of the Jerusalem church, but he was a deacon, a humble servant of God in the time of a "widow crisis" in the early Church. Stephen and the other six chosen deacons were able to resolve this administrative problem in a God-honoring way, as we studied in the previous chapter.

It is with a mixture of sadness and yet with deeper joy that we read the Holy Spirit's account in Acts chapter 7. This came through the pen of Luke, the Gentile convert and beloved physician who spent much time ministering to Paul in his later years (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11). Every time Paul was beaten or stoned he had a full time medical doctor with him to patch him up and keep him going a little longer. Not all physicians could provide the help that was needed. Indeed, Mark 5:25-26 tells

¹Technically the disciples were not called "Christians" until Acts 11:26, but there is no real problem in using the term retroactively from Pentecost on.

of a woman who had a number of physicians over the space of many years who took her money but provided little if any real and lasting help. The Great Physician, however, was able and willing to help her.

Luke wrote by inspiration and he is famous for being one of the greatest historians of the ancient world, because everything he wrote has been confirmed repeatedly by historians and archaeologists. How we thank the Lord for this outward, external confirmation of what we know intuitively to be inspired truth. This includes every word recorded by Luke, both in his gospel and in this magnificent history of the early Church which we now call the book of Acts.

Just as Jesus was completely maligned by false witnesses who deliberately distorted everything He said and even contradicted other false witnesses, so also Stephen was maligned by Jews who lied under oath in order to destroy this godly man (Acts 6:13). In the case of our Lord as well as in the case of Stephen, the darkness hates the light (John 3:19). The Lord Jesus was self-authenticating light in the midst of demonic darkness. People, apart from any rationality and valid arguments, will in one way or another accomplish what they deeply want to do, which is to suppress the light and seek to snuff it out. They refuse to respond to the light, so instead they deny the light, and try to destroy anyone who is reflecting the light and the truth of God.

Stephen was brought before the council and false witnesses accused him of speaking blasphemous words against “this holy place,” referring to the temple (Acts 6:13). This magnificent temple was spectacular, even bigger, if not more glorious than Solomon’s Temple. It had been enlarged and adorned by Herod the Great, a monster of iniquity, who desired to rebuild the temple as a monument for his own pride. It took years, even decades to complete this project. In fact, it was finished only a few years before it was destroyed by the Romans in A. D. 70. What was Herod’s motive? Partly, it was to gain respect and favor from the Jews who hated him. Building the temple was Herod’s way of placating the Jews. What a miserable motive or circumstance for the building of a temple for God! Solomon’s Temple was vastly superior in quality, though not in size, because it had the Holy of Holies. In this most holy place was the Ark of the Covenant which disappeared in the days of Nebuchadnezzar and has never been seen since (see Jeremiah 3:16). The Ark, along with the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God, is no longer to be found.² The Shekinah Glory also departed from Solomon’s Temple. Its location had been between the Cherubim, over the Mercy Seat, on top of the Ark, in the Holy of Holies.

What about Herod’s Temple? Was it legitimate at all? Should it have been completely abolished? There is a dual perspective on this from the Lord Jesus. On the one hand, He spoke of the temple as being His Father’s house (John 2:16), and He preached there and taught there. On the other hand, he told his enemies that they had made it a den of thieves (Matt. 21:13). So what was it? It was a legitimate place that had been misused by religious imposters. The Lord Jesus made it very clear that Herod’s temple would be totally destroyed (Matt. 23:38; 24:2). Stephen’s understanding of the

²There are all kinds of theories about where the Ark might possibly be today and whether it will ever be found. Nothing in the Bible is said about the Ark in the Old Testament after the return from Babylon, but the Apocrypha states that the Ark could not be found when the Jewish people rebuilt the temple at the time of Ezra and Zechariah. For a discussion of the issues involved, see <https://www.levitt.com/essays/ark>, as well as the book by Randall Price, *In Search of Temple Treasures*, Harvest House Publishers.

temple came from our Lord's teaching, received from the Apostles who heard Jesus teach these things. It is possible that Stephen could have heard some of the teachings of Christ directly, but it is more likely that he heard these things from the Apostles. Therefore Stephen is implementing in his public preaching and teaching the emphasis of the Lord Jesus, not that the temple was illegitimate and never should have been built, but that legitimate temple worship had become polluted by sin, formalism, and ritualism by those who had no real heart relationship to the Lord.

As members of the Church Age, we are not used to the common Jewish mentality of that time, that you have to be at a geographical location that God has chosen in order to be acceptable to God in your open, public worship. Old Testament Jews would have been dumbfounded to discover what God's plan was for the Church Age. We now have no animal sacrifices, no altar, no functioning priesthood handling animals at a God-appointed geographical localized worship center, namely Jerusalem. Instead, believers today are scattered all over the world with every believer as a priest, and the sacrifices we offer are giving thanks and praise to God from our lips (Heb. 13:16-16). We do not touch a single animal in worship at all! To a godly Jew under the Old Testament economy, that would have been unbelievable and unthinkable. Where is the temple now? Believers in Christ are the temple, both individually (1 Cor. 6:19-20) and collectively (1 Cor 3:16-17). God dwells in us! The Holy Spirit indwells each individual believer. Thus there are countless numbers of sacred temples all walking around Planet Earth. How amazingly different the Church Age is! This is one reason it is very hard for us today to adjust to Old Testament, God-revealed and legitimate worship programming, which centered in a given locality. We tend to want to say with Stephen, "Let us get rid of this temple and have a decentralized, global, temple program consisting of thousands of believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit." Stephen was living in the transition period between Jewish worship centered in the Jerusalem Temple and a new world-wide program where repentance and the forgiveness of sins would be preached "among all nations" (Luke 24:47). In the new program, God's marvelous presence is found wherever true believers are gathered together in Christ's Name (Matt. 18:20).

Stephen's sermon becomes difficult because, on the one hand, he is speaking as a Jew to Jews on how to properly worship God as Jews. On the other hand, Stephen is a transition person leading us into a new dispensation where a body of believers will not be bound to any given nationality or geographical location. Stephen seemed to have a sense, perhaps even more so than the Apostles, of where this transition was headed.

According to the false witnesses, Stephen said that Jesus would destroy the temple (Acts 6:14). Whether Stephen actually said this or not, it is exactly what happened. The Lord Jesus used the Romans to utterly destroy the temple in 70 A.D. They also accused Stephen, in Acts 6:14, of teaching that the customs of Moses would be changed. We know that, under the new economy (New Testament Christianity), many of the Mosaic practices would be changed or abrogated. The book of Hebrews explains many of these changes in detail. The Lord Jesus was accused of violating the law of Moses, especially as it pertained to the Sabbath. Jesus deliberately did things on the Sabbath to help people and to show them that they misunderstood the intent of the law. The Sabbath law was given, not to hurt people by neglecting them when they were dying, but it was given to help people. He reminded them that they would rescue an animal from having fallen into a pit on the Sabbath. Why then would it be illegal for the Lord to heal on the Sabbath? Are animals more important than people (Luke 14:5)? They had distorted the Word of God in terms of its true intent, and the Lord told them what it meant, not just what it said. This was the kind of thing that created intense hatred between the Jewish leadership and Jesus, because it exposed them as being dishonest legalists who

were mishandling the very law which they claimed to keep. The Lord put them in a very bad light and they hated Him for it. Above all this, He told them that they needed to **repent** (Luke 13:3,5), to change their thinking drastically when it came to sin, self, and the Savior. This is accomplished only as God works in the stubborn and rebellious hearts of men.

All of this spelled bad news for Stephen because he so closely represented the position of the Lord Jesus, and their hatred of Christ now became their hatred of Stephen, Christ's true representative. Stephen became their target. As they saw Stephen and listened to his powerful message, they were reminded of Christ. As a true witness, he forced them to think about God.

Apparent Discrepancies in Acts 7

There are several apparent numerical and historical discrepancies found in Acts 7. We will deal with these in the course of this commentary. These will be enclosed in text boxes. By way of introduction, the following needs to be understood:

Our Lord Jesus Christ clearly stated that God's Word is truth (John 17:17). There are no contradictions in the Bible, because God does not contradict Himself. The problem is not with God and not with His Word, but with man and his faulty understanding. Even when we do not have the answer, God does.

When there may seem to be contradictory statements, and someone claims that the Bible contains errors, keep in mind that the burden of proof is on the critic. Let the critic prove it. He must:

- a. Show that the statement was in the original God-breathed text.
- b. Show that the translation he uses is absolutely correct.
- c. Show that his interpretation is the only possible one.
- d. Show that the present state of our knowledge, with respect to the passage, is final.
- e. Show that the task of reconciliation is impossible.

Remember, the words of our Lord, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35) and "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

Acts 7:1

Caiaphas was probably the High Priest at this time. He was the High Priest during the trials of Jesus. He held this office until 36 A.D. The High Priest gave Stephen an opportunity to defend himself against the accusations which had been hurled against him. Was the High Priest neutral and unbiased and willing to listen to an opposite point of view, giving it equal time and consideration? No, he used false witnesses because he had already determined that Stephen was a guilty blasphemer who was worthy of death. The guilty verdict had already been decided by these Satanically-biased Jews.

Acts 7:2

General Observations Regarding Stephen's Message:

1) This is by far the longest sermon recorded in Acts. It was God's last message to the Jewish people prior to the gospel going forth to the Samaritans and the Gentiles. Stephen's life and message sparked a great wave of persecution in Jerusalem that resulted in God's people being scattered and proclaiming the gospel in other places (Acts 8:1).

2) Stephen carefully answered each of the charges falsely made against him. Instead of speaking blasphemous words against God, he began his message by reverently speaking of the "God of glory." Indeed he most reverently referred to each member of the Trinity: "the most High" (v. 48), "the Holy Spirit" (v. 51), and the "Just [Righteous] One" (v. 52). Stephen was also charged with speaking blasphemous words against Moses, against the law, and against the temple. Stephen was careful to bring up all of these subjects in his message: Moses (verses 20-40), the law (verses 38,39,53), and the temple (verses 47-50). He demonstrated by his message that he fully respected the sacred record and spoke ever so reverently of God's personal involvement in the history of the Jewish nation. He simply recounted God's wonderful working, in particular with Abraham, Joseph and Moses. "He showed them that he had as firm a belief as they in the great historical facts of their nation."³ He did not resemble a blasphemer! He showed the deepest respect for Israel's history and sacred institutions.

3) Stephen's message demonstrated how well-versed he was in the Old Testament Scriptures. What a brilliant panoramic view of Old Testament history he gave! We are reminded of Psalm 78 and Psalm 107 where God's dealings with His people in history are recounted. Paul made similar use of the historical method in his message recorded in Acts 13.

4) Stephen spoke with great boldness even though he knew his life was on the line. He described his audience as "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" (v. 51). He accused them of betraying and murdering Christ (v.52). He labeled them as lawbreakers (v.53).

5) In spite of such strong words uttered against his enemies, he demonstrated a great love for them (v. 60).

6) Stephen focused in particular on two key Old Testament men: Joseph (verses 9-15) and Moses (19-41). Both of these men were saviors, raised up by God to deliver the entire nation of Israel, and both of these men were rejected by their own people. Thus both men were types of Jesus Christ, the great Deliverer, who also was rejected by His own people.⁴ Stephen drove home these points very effectively.

7) Stephen's message was brilliant. The unbelieving Jews put him on trial, but at the end of his message they were the ones on trial. They wanted Stephen to condemn himself, but at the end of his

³Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes—Acts/Romans*, p. 117.

⁴It is interesting that both Joseph and Moses were rejected by their brethren at first, but received by them when they came the second time. So the Lord Jesus will be received by the Jewish nation when He comes to this earth a second time (Zech. 12:10; Matt. 23:39).

message they were the ones who were found guilty of history's greatest crime—rejecting, betraying, and murdering Christ.

8) Stephen quotes frequently from the Septuagint, and since he was a Hellenistic Jew, this is not surprising.

* * * * *

Stephen begins with words of gracious respect toward these wicked men: “Men, brethren and fathers.” They were his brothers, Jewish brethren according to the flesh. And Stephen respected these older men who were in positions of leadership, and referred to them as “fathers.” He showed high respect for the leaders of Israel (compare Acts 23:5).

One of the major themes of Stephen's message was that God did not have to have a temple in Jerusalem in order to talk to people and carry out His purposes. The God of glory did marvelous things in Mesopotamia, marvelous things in Haran, marvelous things in Egypt, marvelous things in the Sinai Peninsula. God was not locked into one place such as Jerusalem. “The revelation of God to Abram was quite independent of Moses or the temple. God, restricted to neither a special person nor a special place, can reveal Himself when and where He wills, as He did to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees.”⁵ One of Stephen's main points throughout this chapter is that you cannot lock God into a specific locality (Acts 7:48-49). You cannot confine God to a specific, narrow box. God was able to reveal Himself to people **outside** of the Holy Land.

“The God of glory” (verse 2) is an expression found in only one other place (Psalm 29:3). God's glory is the outward manifestation of who God is in all His wonderful attributes and perfections. Stephen begins his message speaking of “the God of glory” and at the close of his message he sees “the glory of God” (verse 55). God visibly appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia as a theophany (an appearance of God). The Person of the Godhead who appeared to him was undoubtedly the preincarnate Christ who in Old Testament times is often called “the angel of the LORD” (compare Genesis 17:1; 18:1-2).

Abraham was called out of Mesopotamia⁶ to go to an unrevealed location not knowing where he would end up, but by faith he obeyed (Heb. 11:8). Keep in mind that Abraham was from a family of pagan idolaters (Josh. 24:2).

Stephen Thorpe, writing a devotional for children, illustrated the wonderful faith of Abraham as follows:

Abraham was just an ordinary man who came to believe that gods of wood and stone were not gods at all. Abraham came to trust in the true and living God. One day God spoke to Abraham telling him to leave his homeland and to go to a new land that God

⁵John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 123.

⁶Mesopotamia is a Greek term meaning “between two rivers” and refers to the region within the Tigris–Euphrates River system, in modern days roughly corresponding to most of Iraq. It was a very fertile area and was home to several of the great post-flood kingdoms: Sumeria, Assyria, Babylon, etc.

would show him. Abraham did not know where to go, but he knew Who said “Go,” and Abraham decided, “that’s good enough for me.” God told Abraham he would have a family too big to count, like the stars of the sky or the sand on the seashore, but Abraham had no children at all. Abraham didn’t know when he would have a family, but he knew Who had promised it, and he decided, “that’s good enough for me.” Abraham was very old, 99 years old, too old to have children. His wife, Sarah, was old too. But God once again told him he would have a son. Abraham didn’t understand how, but he understood Who said it, and so he decided, “that’s good enough for me.” Later God gave a him son, but then one day He told Abraham to kill his son as a sacrifice. Abraham didn’t understand why, but he understood Who said it and he decided, “that’s good enough for me.” Every time, God kept His Word. Abraham learned that he didn’t have to understand where, or when, or how, or why. All he needed to know was Who! God is faithful and God’s promises are good enough! God has made exceedingly great and precious promises to His children. Sometimes we don’t understand the whens and wheres and whys and hows of life. But if we understand the Who of life, the God of Life, we will be at peace without worry. Have you found the all sufficient Word of God good enough for you?

Where Was Abraham When God First Called Him?

In Acts 7:2 Stephen states that God appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia (in Ur) before he dwelt in Haran. In Genesis 11-12 it seems that Abraham had already left Ur and had arrived in Haran when he received this divine call (Gen. 11:31-12:4). However, Genesis 12:1 reads, “Now the LORD **had said** unto Abram...” The grammar here allows for God’s call to have been given at an earlier occasion. In Genesis 15:7 God specifically states that He had brought Abram out of Ur. So the call was made when Abram was in Ur, and Genesis 12:1 is referring back to that original call. In Nehemiah 9:7 we are told that God chose Abram and brought him forth out of Ur. If God brought him out of Ur, then God must have called him while he was in Ur and told him to go out from there. Also in Joshua 24:2-3 we are told that God took Abraham from the other side of the Euphrates, and led him to the land of Canaan. Stephen’s statement that God appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia harmonizes with these passages.

It is also possible that God repeated the call when Abram was in Haran. Haran was a halfway point between where Abram originally was and where God wanted him to be, so it would not be unreasonable for God to urge him to leave Haran even as He had previously urged him to leave Ur.

Acts 7:3-4

The land of the Chaldeans is Mesopotamia and Haran is the area of northern Syria today. Abraham came from an idolatrous family (Josh. 24:2,14), but came to know the one, true God.

Acts 7:5

Abraham walked by faith. He had no tabernacle and no temple, but he wonderfully enjoyed the

Person and presence of God. He had no law of Moses, but he faithfully obeyed God's voice and kept the commandments which he was given (Genesis 26:5). He did not own land for a home, but rather lived in a tent and confessed that he was a stranger and pilgrim on the earth, knowing that he had a more permanent dwelling place in the future (Heb. 11:9-10).

In Abraham's entire lifetime, the only property he ever owned in the Holy Land that God promised to him was the burial plot for Sarah. His only possession was a tiny plot of land to bury his beloved wife. This tiny plot was nothing in light of the land which God had promised to give to his descendants. This is a major issue today. To whom does this land belong? This controversy will continue to fester and create division and crisis and international conflicts until the Lord Jesus returns to this earth. God promised all this land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, namely the Jews. The term "Jew" is derived from the name of one of Jacob's sons, "Judah," through whose line the King of Israel came.

God tested Abraham. In Genesis 12, God promised, among other things, to make Abram's name great and to greatly multiply his descendants. More promises were added later in Genesis 15 and Genesis 22. The promises were confirmed and amplified to Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. Abraham was promised a land, a blessing and a seed. God promised him these three things, but he did not receive any of them right away. For many years Abraham was a curse and not a blessing. He went to Egypt and lied about his wife. Later he went to the Philistine king and lied about his wife Sarah. Both kingdoms were cursed and threw him out. Abraham was told he would be a blessing, but **not yet!** God promised to multiply his children? But he had no children by Sarah until he reached age 100. God then changed his name from "Abram" to "Abraham," the father of a multitude of people. What a test that was! For 25 years he was childless. He was promised a land, but he never saw the land. He had to purchase, at great expense, a burial plot for his dear wife Sarah. God was testing him just like He does all of us. He gives us great promises and then tells us to trust Him, not on the basis of tangible, visible, rational evidence, but on the basis of His Word only.

Acts 7:6-7

Not only was Abraham not to have a permanent holding in the Promised Land, but his descendants would actually leave the land altogether. They would settle in Egypt....At the very beginning of Jewish national life, and for four long centuries, the chosen people were not even in the Promised Land! They were a persecuted and ill-treated minority in Egypt.⁷

Israel would experience Egyptian bondage for 400 years. In Exodus 3:12 the Lord promised Moses that He would bring His people out of Egypt and they would "serve God upon this mountain" (not referring to Jerusalem, but to Mt. Sinai). God is not locked into one place where people must serve and worship Him. Depending on God's instructions, the location may vary. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "Believe Me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4:21).

⁷John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 124.

The Length of Time Israel Spent in Egypt

In Genesis 15:13 we are told that Israel would suffer affliction in a foreign land (Egypt) for 400 years. This agrees with Stephen's statement in Acts 7:6 where Israel would be treated in an evil manner for 400 years. In Exodus 12:40 and Galatians 3:17, we learn that the entire time that Israel stayed in Egypt was 430 years. Keep in mind that when Joseph first brought his family to Egypt they were treated well, but after some time a new king arose and Israel was plunged into slavery and maltreated (Exodus 1:6-11).

Acts 7:8

Isaac was the first human being ever to have been circumcised on the eighth day, on the basis of God's command. Ishmael became a pattern for the Muslims because he was circumcised when he was 13 years old. Hence, Muslims circumcise their boys at age 13, not on day eight. Circumcision involved separation from the world and dedication to the God who has revealed Himself exclusively to Israel as His chosen people. Note that God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision hundreds of years before He gave His people the Law, the Land, and the Temple!

Acts 7:9-10

These verses bring us to another theme that is developed in Stephen's masterful sermon, that Israel denied and rejected the leaders that God put over them. This was true in the case of Joseph. At first his brethren rejected him but years later they were forced to acknowledge him. Moses too was at first rejected by his Hebrew brethren.

So far we see two themes set forth by Stephen: 1) God does not have to function only in Jerusalem; 2) the greatest leaders God gave to Israel were rejected by His people. Sadly, the Jews of Stephen's day were acting in the same way. Their rejection was a repeat performance. They deserved exactly what God was going to give them: a) the destruction of their Temple; b) the termination of their theocracy. The descendants of Solomon would experience the curse of Jeremiah 22:25-30. None of them could be kings. Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, a descendant of Solomon, was disqualified from being king for this very reason. But he was directed by God to adopt the child Jesus, who, because of the virgin birth, had no human father (Matthew 1:18-25). Jesus could inherit the kingship through His mother Mary, who was a descendant of Nathan, not Solomon (2 Samuel 5:14; Luke 3:31). Luke, "the beloved physician," recorded God's amazing answer to Mary's confusion about how this could happen: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Not only was the kingship destroyed, but the Temple functions would come to an end also. This kingship can never be re-established for Israel until Jesus Himself appears on the earth at His second coming. For Israel, there would be a forty-year final testing period from the time when Jesus was crucified until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. During this time there would be a reoffer of the kingdom (Acts 3), and there would be continual reoffers, not as public or official as in Acts 3. Nevertheless, Israel was given opportunity after opportunity to turn to God. Stephen afforded them one such opportunity to repent and to rethink and to express remorse before the God whom they had dishonored.

What about Joseph of the Old Testament? What happened to him? Even though his brothers rejected him and cast him into a distant country, yet in that distant country he was greatly honored and became the number two person in the kingdom. The same thing happened to Jesus. His brethren (the Jews) rejected Him, He went to a far country (heaven), and became number two next to God the Father, unseen by those on earth. Finally Israel will see Him again, recognize Him and honor Him.

Joseph was rejected by his brothers who were motivated by the sin of envy (Acts 7:9). Likewise, Jesus was rejected by the Jewish leaders because they too were moved with envy (Matt. 27:18). Pilate fully understood that envy was the chief reason why Christ had been delivered to the Romans to be executed (Mark 15:9-10). Joseph's brothers were envious at the special treatment Joseph was given by his father; the Jewish leaders were envious of Jesus' fame and the great following He had, and also because of the marvelous works that He could do. The only solution was to get rid of Jesus, following the sad pattern of what had been done to Joseph.

The brothers of Joseph treated him wickedly, but God used it for good to save the nation (Genesis 50:20). The Jewish people rejected their Saviour and had Him crucified, and yet God worked it all together for good and for the salvation of the those who believe in Him (Acts 4:10-12).

Acts 7:11-13

There was a great famine in the land where Jacob and his family dwelt. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent his sons to Egypt in two stages, first without Benjamin and second with him. On the second visit, Joseph was made known to his brothers, and to their great shock, they learned that the one whom they thought they had destroyed was now second in command in the land of Egypt, second only to the powerful Pharaoh.

The first time the brothers came to Egypt, they did not recognize Joseph, but they did recognize him on their second visit (Gen. 45:1-4). When Christ came to Israel at His first coming, the nation did not recognize Him for who He was (John 1:10). When He comes the second time, Israel will recognize Him and will repent (Zech. 12:10-14).

Acts 7:14-16

How Many Souls Came Down to Egypt?

Stephen, following the Septuagint, mentioned 75 souls who comprised Jacob's family who were abiding in Egypt. Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew, most probably used the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Septuagint has the count at 75 in Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5. The Hebrew text [MT] of these two passages has 70. Josephus follows the Hebrew text (*Antiquities* ii. 7.4; vi. 5.6).

Genesis 46:26 mentions the number of 66 (not counting the wives of Jacob's sons) and Genesis 46:27 mentions the number 70. The four additional people would be Jacob (not counted in verse 26) and those who were already in Egypt: Joseph and his two sons.

One solution is that the added persons refer to grandsons of Joseph. Homer Kent explains as follows:

“The difference was caused by a slightly different method of computation. In Genesis 46:26,27, the LXX (Septuagint) adds sixty-six and nine to get seventy-five (where the Hebrew Masoretic text has added sixty-six and four). Instead of adding two sons of Joseph, the LXX mentions nine sons. It apparently includes the two sons (Ephraim and Manasseh), five grandsons, and two other grandsons who died (Num. 26:28-37; 1 Chron. 7:14-23). In view of the fact that sons and even grandsons were counted in the figure sixty-six, it would not be inconsistent to count sons of Ephraim and Manasseh since they became tribal heads in place of their father Joseph. This is also in harmony with the Jewish way of regarding descendants as already present in the loins of the father, even before they were born (Heb. 7:9). Stephen apparently cited the LXX figure which really was not an error, but computed the total differently by including five people which the Masoretic text did not” [Homer Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 69].

William Kelly, Brethren scholar, solved the problem in a similar way: “The original and the Greek version might both be true; the latter reckoning in five sons of Manasseh and Ephraim born in Egypt (1 Chron. 7:14-27), according to a latitude of various forms, by no means uncommon in such lists” [William Kelly, *Acts*, p. 84]. Gleason Archer also agrees with this solution [*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 379].

The Jewish patriarchs knew that God had promised them the land of Canaan. Even though they lived and died in Egypt, they made sure that they were buried in the promised land (Acts 7:16). By faith they lived and by faith they were buried. It is helpful to note that the children of Israel, from the beginning, held the practice of burial in high esteem (see Gen. 3:19), in contrast to the heathen round about them who would often burn the bodies of those who had died. For human beings to be burned with fire, according to the Scriptures, was reserved as a punishment for the wicked (the fate of Achan in Josh. 7:15; see also 2 Sam. 23:6-7).

Abraham buried his wife in the field of Machpelah (Gen. 23:17). Abraham was buried in the same field by his sons, Ishmael and Isaac (Gen. 25:9). Jacob’s wife, Rachel, was buried on the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem (Gen.35:19). The body of Joseph was embalmed, after the custom of the Egyptians. After some three hundred years his body accompanied the children of Israel in their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and his bones were finally buried at Shechem (Josh. 24:32). Moses was buried in a valley in the land of Moab against Beth-peor **by God Himself** (Deut. 34:6). As we shall see in Acts 8:2, Stephen, the first recorded martyr of the Church, was carried to his burial by devout men who made great lamentation over him. Lazarus was buried in a cave with a stone rolled upon its entrance. Our Lord was buried in a new sepulcher, wherein man was never yet laid, in fulfilment of a prophecy of over seven centuries that His grave would be with the rich in His death (Isa. 53:9).⁸

These thoughts are relevant in a day when cremation is becoming more and more popular as a way of disposing of the dead. This method is usually much less expensive than burial, and it certainly saves room in crowded cemeteries. Cremation does not affect a person’s salvation because a person’s eternal destiny must be settled before death. Also, just as in the case of a believer whose body is burned in a house fire or in tragedies such as the terror attack on the Twin Towers of New

⁸See A. J. Pollock’s excellent discussion in *Cremation or Burial?* where much of this information was derived [Bible Truth Publishers].

York City on September 11, 2001⁹, God has no problem raising that body from the dead, even a body that has been incinerated in flames. So whether or not a body is cremated does not have any effect on the future resurrection. The real issue for the believer is to decide which treatment of the deceased body best pictures Biblical truth and shows the most respect for the body.

The Purchase of a Burial Place (Acts 7:16)

William MacDonald handles this difficulty as follows: “Here (in v. 16) it says that **Abraham bought** a burial place from **Hamor**. Genesis 23:16-17 says that *Abraham* bought the cave of Machpelah in Hebron from the sons of Heth. *Jacob* bought land in Shechem from the children of Hamor (Gen. 33:19). Shechem is Stephen’s time was in Samaritan territory. There are several possibilities: (1) Abraham may have bought land in Shechem as well as in Hebron. It is possible that Abraham bought some land for his altar when he was in Shechem (Gen. 12:6-7). Later Jacob could have repurchased the plot in Shechem. (2) Stephen could have used Abraham’s name for Abraham’s descendant, Jacob. (3) Stephen may have condensed the purchases by Abraham and Jacob into one for brevity [William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 1603]. The first possibility listed above seems more likely. There are some difficulties in Scripture which cannot be fully solved because we do not have all the facts. If we had all the facts, the passage would make perfect sense. One fact we do have is that God’s Word is truth (John 17:17), and we can always rest and rejoice in that! For further study on this matter, see Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pages 379-381 and Homer A. Kent Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, pages 69-70.

Acts 7:17-21

The time of promise refers to God’s promise that Israel would be slaves in Egypt (see Acts 7:6-7).

The king that knew not Joseph was a Hyksos king. This line of kings had invaded and taken over the native Egyptian people. Moses was born in a horrible time of affliction, bondage, cruelty and genocide, but God had an answer. Moses was another man that God raised up as a deliverer, even as He had done with Joseph. The Hebrew people would at first reject and despise Moses, in spite of all the evidence that God had prepared this man to be a magnificent deliverer. Moses was a remarkable child. His own mother became his nurse, hired by the Pharaoh’s daughter to take care of her own baby. Thus Moses was prayed for and loved and taught the distinctives of the faith of his ancestors, even though he was in the household of Pharaoh.

Acts 7:22

You did not need to be a rabbi in Jerusalem to be brilliant and totally qualified to be a leader of God’s people. You could even be trained in Egypt, apart from any rabbinical school. So also the Lord Jesus and His apostles had no rabbinical training, a fact which greatly irritated the Jews. Later we find Daniel who prospered in the ways of God even though he served under pagan Babylonians. The point is this: there was no basis whatsoever for rejecting Moses, the man of God. He loved the Lord. He identified himself with his people. He was well trained and mastered Egyptian law and literature and art and architecture and military strategy. Remember, the Egyptians were very brilliant

⁹See Peter Skinner, *World Trade Center*. www.whitestar.it

people. Thus Moses was qualified to write the first five books of the Old Testament. So also, Paul was brilliantly qualified in Jewish theology at the feet of Gamaliel (cf. Acts 5:34; 22:3). Paul was also a master of secular history, which he frequently alludes to in his sermons. Paul was also multilingual, and he wrote 13 books of the New Testament. God is absolutely able to prepare a man for a time of crisis and to equip that man for every good work. Moses was so equipped. Why was he not immediately appreciated by his own people?

Moses was brilliant, but not eloquent (Exodus 4:10), and in this way he was similar to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 2:1; 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6).

Acts 7:23-29

The Israelites rejected Moses, the very one whom God sent to deliver them. In the same way the Lord Jesus, God's greatest Deliverer, came unto His own, and His own people did not receive Him (John 1:11). Moses' brethren did not understand his mission of deliverance (Acts 7:25). Even worse, Jesus' Jewish brethren refused to understand the claims and promises of their divine Messiah and Deliverer.

Moses endeavored to start the Exodus, somewhat prematurely at this point, and he had to be sent off to the desert for 40 years for a postgraduate study in humility. Finally, when God did call him, he said that he was not worthy, not able, not knowledgeable, not qualified, not equipped, etc. God prepared this man in a special way, and by the time he was 80 years old, he was ready to be under God's leadership. He could then be involved in an Exodus that really worked. For a time it was appreciated by Israel, until they took their eyes off the LORD in the wilderness. At that time Moses was despised and hated again as these murmuring people, on several occasions, longed to go back to Egypt!

"Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" (Acts 7:27) Israel said much the same thing about the Lord Jesus. "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14).

The two sons of Moses were Gershom and Eliezer.

Stephen was charged with speaking blasphemous words against Moses and the law of Moses. Stephen's brilliant defense was to give two examples of how the Jews rejected Moses; first when he was 40 years old (Acts 7:23-28), and second when he was more than 80 years old. The climax came in the making of the golden calf, immediately after the giving of the law. Further acts of idolatry continued throughout the nation's history (Acts 7:39-43).

Acts 7:30-33

Moses, during his first 40 years, was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), but he was not ready to lead the people of God. He needed another forty years in the desert to be trained by God. As Dr. J. Vernon McGee says, it was there that he received his B.D. Degree (Backside of the Desert Degree).

The angel of the Lord was the preincarnate Christ. This magnificent display of God's glory in the burning bush did not take place in Jerusalem! The display of God's majesty is not limited to the city

of Jerusalem. Holy ground is wherever God is.

We know that God through Moses performed fantastic miracles which included the plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the sustaining of Israel in the wilderness (feeding millions, preserving their shoes and clothing, providing manna, keeping them from diseases, opening the earth to swallow the rebels, etc.). The miracles which Moses did were undeniably spectacular, and yet they were nothing compared to the sign miracles that Jesus performed. How many more miracles should Christ have performed in order to be credible to Israel and qualified to be their Messiah? The Jews seek after a sign (1 Cor. 1:22)! An evil and adulterous nation seeks after a sign! The only sign given to them would be the sign of Jonah (Matt. 16:4). Christ's resurrection from the dead would be the final confirmation that He was everything He claimed to be and that everything He has said can be fully trusted. And yet He was totally rejected. The depth of human depravity is beyond comprehension. "Lord, apart from Your grace and mercy and providence in my life, where would I be?" I likewise would be like Israel and like the world that hates the truth and suppresses the light. We are no better than anyone else. We can gladly cast down any crowns we receive at the feet of our Lord. He alone deserves the glory. It is easy to read Acts chapter 7 and marvel at these awful, ignorant, wicked and depraved Jews. We should be careful! They are simply the most conspicuous examples of what we all are like, apart from the mercy and grace of God!

Acts 7:34-36

At first Moses was rejected by Israel (Acts 7:27), but later he became their leader and deliverer. Joseph's case was similar in that he was at first rejected by his brethren, but later became their ruler. So also Christ was rejected at His first coming (John 1:11), but was embraced by the repentant Jewish nation at His second coming (Zech. 12:10-12; Matt. 23:39).

God saw the affliction of His people and Moses was His choice to lead them out of the bondage of Egypt. And yet, in spite of the fact that he led them out, the people really hated Moses because circumstances in the wilderness were not as nice or as comfortable as they had anticipated. Everyone of them died in the wilderness, including Moses himself and Aaron his older brother and Miriam his sister. The only two exceptions were Joshua and Caleb. Only two men out of millions! What a wicked generation!

Acts 7:37-41

Stephen was not a blasphemer. He took seriously the prediction of Moses that there would come a Moses-like prophet that the nation should hear and heed (v. 37). Unlike the Sanhedrin, Stephen believed this prophecy and correctly identified the Lord Jesus as this Prophet (compare John 6:14). How could Stephen be blamed for preaching about Christ, the very Prophet whom Moses had foretold? Israel rejected Moses and would not hear him (v. 39). In a similar way, the Jews of Stephen's day rejected the greater Prophet whom Moses said would come, and refused to hear Him. In these verses Stephen rehearses how the Israelites rejected Moses and God's message through him. The grievous sin of making the golden calf (v. 40) is one great example of Israel's departure from the true God and their breaking of God's holy law which Moses had recently given to them.

In verse 28 we read of "the church in the wilderness." The word "church" [*ekklesia*] is most often used of the New Testament Church, but here it is used of the congregation of the Israelites in the desert wilderness in the days of Moses. The word means "a called-out assembly," and the Israelites

were called out of Egypt by the Lord for the purpose of worshiping Him in the wilderness (Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1). In general the word means “a called-out company of people gathered together for a certain purpose.” Later in Acts the term is used of an angry mob of people in the city of Ephesus who had assembled together for the purpose of stirring up trouble (Acts 19:32).¹⁰ “This is the non-technical use of the word and in no way implies that the Church existed in Old Testament times.”¹¹ The New Testament Church began on the day of Pentecost and did not exist prior to that day.¹²

Acts 7:42-43

Stephen was quoting from Amos 5:25-27 (Septuagint Version). Moloch or Molech was a Semitic deity honored by the sacrifice of children, an abominable practice strongly condemned by the prophets (Jer. 29-34; Ezek. 16:20-23; 23:37-39). That Israel would partake in such abominations shows the tremendous depths of their depravity. Children and infants were burned alive. It shows how corrupt human, demonic religion can become. By twisted thinking these parents may have thought, “If we give up our very own child, who is so dear to us, how pleased the gods will be! We could give no greater sacrifice.” One description of this horrible act is as follows:

The rabbis tell us that the idol, having the head of a calf with a crown upon it, was made of brass and placed on a brazen throne. The throne and image were hollow, and a raging fire was kindled within it. The flames penetrated into the body and limbs of the idol, and when the arms were red-hot, the victims were thrown into them and were almost immediately burned to death while their cries were drowned by the beat of drums.¹³

“Remphan” seemed to be some kind of star or planet worship (some believe it was Saturn worship), exalting the heavenly body above the heavenly Creator, worshiping the things made rather than the Maker of all things (Rom. 1:25). Idolatrous star-worship was strictly forbidden (Deut. 4:19; Job 31:26-28).

The result of this disobedience and idolatry was God’s judgment by way of captivity, ultimately leading to the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. The Jews accused Jesus of promising to destroy the Temple (Acts 6:14), but as in the case of Solomon’s Temple, the real reason God destroyed Herod’s Temple was due to the sin of the people of Israel. They were to be blamed, not Jesus. Don’t blame the Judge, but blame those who are truly guilty!

¹⁰For a study of this term [*ekklesia*] and its New Testament usage, see <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/church/chur1.htm>

¹¹Charles Ryrie, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 47.

¹²See our study on when the Church began: <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/dispn/begin.pdf>

¹³Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, #3434 (Chattanooga, AMG Publishers, Rev. Ed., 1993), p. 994.

Acts 7:44-46

Stephen was accused of speaking against Israel's sacred Temple, against "this holy place" (Acts 6:13-14). Stephen here begins his discussion of the tabernacle and the Temple. The tabernacle was a moveable structure which served the nation well in its desert wanderings. The Temple was a permanent structure in God's chosen city of Jerusalem, the future home of the great King (Acts 5:35) and the future home of the great Millennial Temple (Ezekiel chapters 40-48). God wonderfully manifested His presence in the tabernacle and in the Temple by way of His Shekinah glory (Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11), and yet God's presence was not confined to the Temple as Stephen so masterfully proved (Acts 7:48-50). Both the tabernacle and Temple were very temporary. The tabernacle was replaced by Solomon's Temple and Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. The God of Israel is indestructible.

The person referred to in verse 45 is Joshua, the successor to Moses and the great deliverer whom God used in the conquest of the promised land.¹⁴

David "desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob" (verse 46). The first Jewish Temple could have been called "David's Temple," since the idea originated in David's heart and he had a strong desire to build it. But God's will was for David's son to build it, and so history knows it as Solomon's Temple (2 Samuel 7).

Acts 7:47-50

Solomon built the Temple, the pattern of which was revealed to him (1 Chronicles 28:11-12), just as God had given Moses the blueprint for the tabernacle. It was God's house. Solomon himself said something very significant regarding the Temple in his prayer of dedication, something which he had learned from his father David: "And now, O God of Israel, let Thy Word, I pray Thee, be verified, which Thou spakest unto thy servant David my father. But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less this house that I have built?" (1 Kings 8:26-27) Stephen, in Acts 7:49-50, quoted a similar statement made by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 66:1). Paul saw all the worship places in Athens, and he made it clear to those people that God does not need a building to live in (Acts 17:24-25). He is not dependent upon a place made with human hands. God chooses to dwell with men whose hearts are humbled and broken and right with Him (Isa. 66:2).

Stephen's carefully chosen words about the Temple were a deliberate attack upon the Jewish leaders who had identified Herod's Temple with God's exclusive location in the universe. The Jews had completely misunderstood the purpose of the Temple. It was wrong to think that the Temple could confine the God of the universe to a particular location so that God could be manipulated and controlled. The God of the universe is not controlled by anyone except Himself. "To think that the eternal, uncreated, self-existing God could be limited to one location was ludicrous. Solomon had no such cramped concept of God. Nor did the prophets."¹⁵ The Lord Jesus spoke of Himself as One "greater than the Temple" (Matt. 12:6).

¹⁴The names "Jesus" and "Joshua" are equivalent and mean "the Lord delivers" or "the Lord saves" (compare Matthew 1:21).

¹⁵John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 140.

Acts 7:51

With holy boldness Stephen forcefully and directly denounced the sin of these unbelieving Jews, as Peter had done earlier (Acts 2:36; 3:14-15; 4:10-11), without mincing any words. If a doctor knew that his patient had a deadly but curable disease, would the patient want him to mince his words, or would he want him to tell the truth, no matter how unpleasant it might be?

The Jews boasted in circumcision, and yet Stephen boldly declares them to be uncircumcised! All the way back in Leviticus 26:41 and Deuteronomy 10:16, God told His people that He wanted them to have a circumcised heart. The outward sign of circumcision was to symbolize an inner reality. What good is an outward sign if there is no corresponding inner reality? What good is water baptism if the one baptized is not a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and has never experienced new life in Christ? For example, there are millions of baptized people in Europe, most of whom are pagans. They were baptized as babies. They rest upon an outward form and fail to realize their desperate need for a change of heart. If the outward symbol of water baptism does not symbolize a true inner change wrought by the Spirit of God (namely, regeneration), then what good is it? The same was true for circumcision: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will punish all them which are circumcised with the uncircumcised. Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the children of Ammon, and Moab, and all that are in the utmost corners, that dwell in the wilderness: for all these nations are uncircumcised, and **all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart**” (Jer. 9:25-26). Israel was just like all the pagan Gentiles! Their outward sign of circumcision meant nothing.

Paul made the same point in Romans 2:25—“For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law. But if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision.” Circumcision was a good, outward sign and reminder of something that must be true on the inside. “For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:28-29).

Stephen told the unbelieving Jews that they were stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears (Acts 7:51). The Jews looked down upon uncircumcised Gentiles, and yet morally they were very much like them.

Stephen pointed to the Jews’ hostile attitude towards the Holy Spirit of God: “ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye.” Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, and through this yielded man the Spirit was making known the glorious and gracious gospel of the blessed God. Yet, the hearers were resisting and rejecting the message of a crucified and risen Saviour. When we hear theologians speak of “irresistible grace,” we need to keep in mind that unregenerate men can and do resist the Spirit’s gracious appeals and invitations. “And ye are not willing to come to Me, that ye might have life” (John 5:40). How thankful we are that God does a special work in the hearts of sin-blinded men so that their hearts are opened (Acts 16:14) and they gladly come: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” (John 6:37). “Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father cometh unto Me” (John 6:45). “And as many as were ordained [appointed] to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Those who are lost have only themselves to blame; those who are saved have only God to thank, all boasting excluded (Eph. 2:9; 1 Cor. 1:29,31).

Acts 7:52-53

Israel rejected the message of their prophets, the very men who predicted the coming of the Messiah. Instead of believing the message, they persecuted and sometimes killed the messenger. The Lord Jesus had leveled the same charge against these Jewish religious leaders: “Wherefore be ye witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets....O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee” (Matt. 23:31; see verses 30-35). Stephen were merely echoing the message of his Savior. Their “fathers” (mentioned in verses 51-52; that is, those Jews who lived in previous times) were unbelieving, rebellious, and murderous. Like father, like son. The Jews of Stephen’s day exhibited the same sinful characteristics.

The law of Moses came by angelic agencies in order to enforce the significance and the awesome majesty of God’s provision at the time of the organization of the theocracy of Israel in the wilderness. The fact that angels had a part in the giving of the law is a remarkable revelation. The only Old Testament passage which seems to speak of this is Deuteronomy 33:2, “The LORD came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; He shined forth from mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints [holy ones]: from His right hand went a fiery law for them.”¹⁶ In addition to this verse in Acts 7:53, there are two other New Testament passages which speak of angelic involvement in the giving of the law: 1) Galatians 3:19–“it [the law] was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator [Moses].” 2) Hebrews 2:2–“For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward.” This latter reference states that the angels spoke the law, perhaps privately to Moses. There is much about this angelic involvement with the law that remains a mystery. The law was given by Moses (John 1:17) and angels were involved (Gal. 3:19); grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17), and angels were involved (Luke 2:8-14). These two most significant dispensations (law and grace) were both introduced by the presence of a great host of angels. The heavenly throng has great interest in what is taking place on the earth (1 Tim. 3:16; Eph. 3:10).

Stephen’s accusers charged him with the crime of being against Moses and his laws. Stephen turned this back on them, by accusing them of not keeping the law just as was true of their fathers (verse 53). The Lord Jesus said something very similar which Stephen could have echoed word for word: “Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law? Why go ye about to kill me?” (John 7:19)

Acts 7:54

They were “cut to the heart.”¹⁷ Praise God! This is what God can do through His Word, the Sword of the Spirit, which is “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joint and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). God’s Word is living and powerful, and Stephen used this mighty sword! Remember, the only Bible Stephen had was the Old Testament. Not one word of the New Testament had been written yet.

¹⁶The Septuagint of Deut. 33:2 actually mentions angels. It says, “with the myriads of Kadash were angels with him at his right hand.”

¹⁷The verb “cut” means “to saw asunder, to divide by a saw (as in 1 Chron. 20:3, Septuagint), hence, metaphorically, to be sawn through mentally, to be rent with vexation, to be cut to the heart” [Vine]. The verb is also found in Acts 5:33.

How wonderfully he handled the Old Testament to pick out the right passages with the correct emphasis and valid application to the hearts of his hearers! His use of Scripture to meet the specific needs of the people who were hearing him was spectacular.

The expression “gnashing of teeth” involves anger, rage, pain or anguish (Job 16:9; Psalm 35:14). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich defines gnashing of the teeth as “a sign of violent rage.”¹⁸ Stephen’s audience was deeply convicted and enraged. Their anger was directed at Stephen who was merely God’s mouthpiece. Stephen accused them of being murderers (verse 52) and they were about to prove Stephen to be right. They were about to do away with Stephen just as they had previously done with Christ!

Acts 7:55-56

The reference to the heavens opened and seeing the Son of Man reminds us of Daniel chapter 7 where Daniel saw one like unto a Son of Man approaching the Ancient of days and receiving from Him a kingdom with millions of angels present. Daniel was given an awesome glimpse of God the Father and God the Son. The Son was approaching the Father to receive the Kingdom. Stephen’s audience knew that Stephen was applying the “Son of Man” expression from Daniel 7 to Jesus Christ, and they considered this to be blasphemy.

At the trial of Jesus, our Lord reminded His accusers that they would “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Almighty, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). This was immediately considered a blasphemous statement. Stephen, in these verses, reinforces the fact that Christ is at the right hand of God. “Unless the judges were prepared to admit that their former decision [in the case of Jesus] was tragically mistaken, they had no logical option but to find Stephen guilty of blasphemy as well.”¹⁹ This is the last verse in the book of Acts or in the Epistles which mentions this title, “the Son of Man,” a title which the Lord Jesus often applied to Himself (Luke 19:10, and over 80 other times in the gospels).²⁰

Most passages which speak of Christ in the third heaven at the right hand of God make mention of the fact that He is seated there (Psalm 110:1; Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1). He is seated because His work was fully accomplished (Heb. 10:11-12). In the case of Stephen it appears that He arose from His normal position in order to encourage and welcome His faithful servant into glory. He stands up to welcome the first genuine Christian martyr. There have been countless numbers of martyrs since then. In the book, *By Their Blood—Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* [Baker Books, 1996] by James and Marti Hefley, the claim is made that there were more Christians killed for their faith in the 20th century than in all the other centuries of Church history

¹⁸There are certain “free grace” teachers today who believe that weeping and gnashing of teeth will be the future fate of a group of carnal, disobedient believers. They understand the term as meaning sorrow, regret, remorse, or grief, rather than anger, rage, pain or anguish. This false view is thoroughly answered in the paper, *Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth—Will This Be the Fate of True Believers?* accessible at <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/doctrine/hodgesgn.htm>.

¹⁹F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 165.

²⁰The title “Son of Man” is used twice in the book of Revelation.

combined. This awful carnage is continuing into the 21st century with a vengeance. The news media rarely report on the persecution of Christians that is taking place in many parts of the world.

Stephen's glimpse into the third heaven is a tremendous encouragement to every believer who is near death's door. We have a Saviour who has already gone to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-3), who is standing ready and eager to welcome us home when our work is done. "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus! Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ. One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrows will erase, so bravely run the race till we see Christ!"

Acts 7:57-58

They stopped their ears in order to keep from being contaminated from what they considered to be blasphemy. They refused to hear God's message through Stephen. We can picture them putting their hands over their ears.

They ran upon Stephen with one accord. The verb "ran" means to run violently or to rush impetuously. It is used in Mark 5:13 of the demon-possessed swine that rushed over the cliff. It is also used in Acts 19:29 of the angry mob in Ephesus that rushed into the theater, enraged that Paul had threatened their idolatrous livelihood. "With gnashing teeth, stopped ears, and shouting voices, the mob rushed upon its victim."²¹

Stephen was cast out of the city reminiscent of how Joseph was cast out by his brothers. In a similar way the Israelites wanted to cast Moses out and replace him with Aaron's golden calf program.

How could they stone Stephen? Did not only the Roman government have the authority to implement the death penalty and apply capital punishment? This was not a legal execution, but a lynching. It turned into lawless mob violence which happened somewhat spontaneously. Any Jew who had any kind of a conscience should have thought, "We did not really handle this very well." The execution of believers is most often carried out in a shameful and lawless manner.

Who were these witnesses? These were the false witnesses whom we learned about in Acts chapter 6. These men were hired to bring false accusations against Stephen. They laid down their clothes at the feet of Saul of Tarsus who would later be known as the Apostle Paul. We see here the providence of God. Did Stephen know that the future Apostle Paul was in the audience? No, he did not. Do any of us really know who is in the audience when the Word of God is publicly declared? No, but God knows. And He knows what needs are being met and why certain people are brought at certain times, at certain places to hear certain things from the Bible. All of these things are known to God in a wonderful way, and we need to simply be faithful heralds of the precious truth of God. God is able to work all things together for good (Rom. 8:28)! Nothing in the cosmic machinery is ever out of connection. It all works together perfectly.

Saul of Tarsus was approving of this deed and no doubt gnashing his teeth also, and openly identifying with the murderers by watching over the garments of the men who were stoning

²¹Charles Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises—Rich Truths from the Book of Acts*, p. 50.

Stephen.²² The murderers had to remove their outer cloaks in order to have the freedom of movement to throw the stones more effectively. Paul later mentions this sad event in his personal testimony: “And when the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto [approving] his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him” (Acts 22:20).

The seed of God’s Word was burned into him on that day and the gospel was planted in his heart. Surely the things Saul heard from Stephen were some of the “pricks” or “goads” that Saul was fighting against and which eventually led to his surrender to the Lord (see Acts 9:5). Later as seen in Acts 17 and even in Acts 13 (a sermon quite similar to Stephen’s), he appeals to things he heard from Stephen. He never forgot. God’s Word does not come back empty, but it accomplishes God’s purpose (Isaiah 55:11). “Stephen was stoned, but not before making his mark on the soul of Saul.”²³ Augustine said, “The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.”

It is quite possible that much of the information about Stephen’s preaching and martyrdom was given to Luke by Paul, as this event and the words of Stephen were so pressed into his memory. Luke used various sources, under God’s direction, and Paul, a close companion of Luke, could have provided many of these details.

Acts 7:59-60

Stephen’s dying utterances reflected two of our Lord’s sayings on the cross. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (compare Psalm 31:5). The dying words of Stephen were much like those of the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 23:34,46). Jesus said, “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit” (Luke 23:46). These words anticipated the Lord’s physical death when His spirit would be separated from His body. Remember, no man took His life, but He laid it down voluntarily (John 10:17-18). Jesus dismissed His spirit. This is something the Lord did that we cannot do. The manner and timing of our physical death is totally in the hands of the Lord. Stephen did not have that power; the stones did that to him, under God’s good providence. Every stone that hit him was God-appointed.

F. F. Bruce points out a difference between what the Lord did and what Stephen did: “There is a striking difference: whereas Jesus commended His spirit to the Father, Stephen commended his to Jesus. This is surely an early, if tacit, testimony to the Christian belief in our Lord’s essential deity.”²⁴

Stephen obeyed his Lord and prayed for those who spitefully used him (Matt. 5:44). He prayed, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (verse 60).²⁵ Again Stephen was echoing the Lord’s

²²Acts 7:58 is the first mention of Saul (Paul) in the New Testament. We learn of him first as the chief persecutor of the Church, but later we see him as its chief Apostle.

²³James A. Crain, editor, *Baptist New Testament Commentary—Acts*, p. 138.

²⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 171.

²⁵Manford George Gutzke believes this prayer was answered and that Stephen’s killers were not charged with the crime of stoning Stephen: “I think that when those men come into the presence of God they are going to give an answer for their rejection of Jesus Christ as Saviour. I have a feeling, however, that they will never be asked to answer for the stoning of Stephen. My own thought is that Stephen will be granted this request. They will be responsible for other

sentiment: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The Lord did forgive Saul of Tarsus because he did not know what he did. Paul himself said that he did it ignorantly and in unbelief (1 Tim. 1:13). Paul (Saul) sincerely believed he was helping to rid the earth of a heretical and blasphemous cult of Jesus worshippers.

Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, a prophet and priest, was put to death in the temple court. He too was stoned for being God’s messenger, but his last words were quite different: “The LORD look upon it, and require it” (2 Chron. 24:20-22). The dying prayers of Zechariah and Stephen both reflect Biblical truth. Vengeance belongs to the Lord and He will repay men for the wrong which they have done to His servants. And yet it is also true that God can save and forgive those who persecute His own, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, ended his short but striking career in the likeness of his Lord [compare 2 Cor. 3:18]. Filled with the Spirit, his vision was filled with Jesus in glory. He had nothing more to say to men; his last words were addressed to his Lord. To the Lord he committed his spirit, and assuming the attitude of prayer, he desired mercy for his murderers. Who could have anticipated so astounding an answer as was given by his exalted Lord in the conversion of Saul, the arch-murderer? The prayer of the Lord Jesus from the cross for His murderers was answered by the sending forth of the Gospel, to begin at Jerusalem; the prayer of Stephen while being stoned was answered in the conversion of Saul. That Saul himself never forgot it, is shown by Acts 22:20 [F.B. Hole, *New Testament Commentary—Acts*, see under Acts 7:60].

Christ prayed that His enemies would be forgiven, and this was answered because His death and resurrection provided a way for every guilty sinner to be forgiven (Luke 24:47; Acts 10:43). Stephen prayed that his enemies would not be charged with the sin of killing him. God would gladly answer this prayer for anyone [such as Saul of Tarsus] who would believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah as Stephen did. We do not know how many others in that hostile crowd later believed the gospel.

Stephen manifested a wonderful love for his enemies, and after he prayed for them, “he fell asleep” (verse 60). After the brutal process of being stoned, how peaceful a description to indicate that He died physically! Why didn’t Luke simply say that he died? “Sleep” is a euphemism for a Christian dying because the lifeless body looks like it is sleeping. When we see a person sleeping, we know that at some point the person will wake up. So the use of the word “sleep” for a believer’s body points to the wonderful fact that he will awaken again, at the time of his bodily resurrection, which for Stephen will take place at the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18). It is wrong to use the term “sleep” to refer to a person’s soul, as in “soul sleep.” The soul does not sleep.

The similarities between Christ and Stephen are very evident:

things, but not for this” [Manford George Gutzke, *Plain Talk on Acts*, p. 80]. But it is unthinkable that a just and holy God can decide not to punish certain sins of those who have not been justified. Is Gutzke suggesting that our Lord’s atoning death can be partially applied to a lost soul, or that God can forgive apart from the atonement altogether? Perish the thought! Those who reject Jesus Christ will die in their sins (John 8:21,24), all of them!

Both in life and in death, Stephen was so much like his Lord. Jesus was filled with the Spirit, so was Stephen. Jesus was full of grace, so was Stephen. Jesus boldly confronted the religious establishment of His day, so did Stephen. Jesus was convicted by lying witnesses, so was Stephen. Jesus had a mock trial, so did Stephen. Jesus was executed though innocent of any crime, so was Stephen. Both were accused of blasphemy. Both died outside the city and were buried by sympathizers. Both prayed for the salvation of their executioners.²⁶

Charles Woodbridge summarizes Stephen's remarkable testimony:

His coolness in the face of danger was amazing: the howling, seething multitude seemed unable to raise the temperature of his spirit. His consistency in the presence of confusion was remarkable: he met an incensed mob with unhurried logic. His courage in the midst of growling foes was unsurpassed: he denounced them fearlessly for their sins. His charity was beautiful in the hour of death: he remembered his executioners' destiny. His countenance was angelic in a sea of scowling faces: he had learned his secret well. It was the secret of the Saviour's presence.

Stephen knew that Christ abides in the hearts of His own. He will never leave nor forsake them. Even amid circumstances which might seem to blast all human hopes, He dwells within to bless. Man may oppress or ridicule or misunderstand. But Christ is able to keep His dear ones in perfect peace. "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20) is not a vague promise. It is a present reality.

Many children of God have not entered into their inheritance in this matter. They remain fretful and worried. The story of Stephen gives them the cue they need. It is the Holy Spirit who enables the believer to realize Christ's presence. It is He who sheds abroad the love of the Saviour and implements that love to our needs. Stephen was prepared for suffering because he was "full of the Holy Spirit." The Lord Jesus is wondrously near and dear to those who are yielded to the Spirit. "Martyr" comes from the Greek word meaning "witness."

Perhaps we are not called upon to seal our testimony with our blood. But everyone who names the name of Christ is summoned to a life of consistent, consecrated, courageous, and Spirit-filled testimony for his, and Stephen's, Lord.²⁷

God used the death of Stephen in a marvelous way to spread the gospel message to the regions beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). In Stephen's case it was certainly true that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

²⁶John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Acts 1-12*, p. 226.

²⁷Charles Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises—Rich Truths from the Book of Acts*, pages 51-52.