

First Christian Martyr

V 1 Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

“High priest.” Probably Caiaphas. The same priests were there that crucified Jesus.

“Are these things so?” In modern legal terminology, “How do you plead?” Stephen doesn’t really answer the question but defends his faith in Christ using Old Testament history. Rather than give a simple “not guilty” plea, Stephen delivered a lengthy rebuttal and a “you’re guilty!” charge against the Jewish leaders for their rejection of the Messiah.

By this time a big split had developed in the camp of the Jewish priests. Many of them had turned to the Lord, which led to polarization and reaction in the opposite direction from those who had rejected the Truth. Their hearts hardened, and their vengefulness against the Truth-proclaimers became vicious (as we find out in this chapter).

The charges leveled against Stephen (in Acts 6:13-14) were so ridiculous that he doesn’t stoop to answer them directly. However, during the course of his defense, his answers become obvious.

First charge: *“blasphemous words against Moses and God. . . against. . . the law. . . change the customs which Moses delivered us.”* Stephen’s knowledge of Israel’s history and his explanation from the Old Testament that Jesus was pre-destined to be their Messiah, showed that he was a true follower of Moses and of God; whereas the Sanhedrin were actually following in the footsteps of those who persecuted the prophets and so were not followers of Moses at all.

Second charge: *“blasphemous words against this holy place. . . Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place.”* Stephen went straight to the heart of the matter, showing how this accusation arose out of their lack of spiritual understanding and their narrow mindset that God’s presence was confined to the temple.

It is worth noting that Stephen knew his Bible fairly well, the Old Testament Scriptures. As a result the Holy Spirit was able to use his

knowledge and his tongue to deliver a good hard-hitting message when it was needed.

V 2-3 And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran,

“and said to him, ‘Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.’

Recognized as father of the nation, Abraham and his story made the best starting point in this, Stephen’s remarkable capsule summary of Israel’s history.

“Get out of your country. . .” Quote from Genesis 12:1

V 4 “Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.

Abraham departed from the city Ur *“of the Chaldeans”* (a Babylonian people) to *“Haran”*, another city far to the northwest, and then southward to the land of Canaan.

V 5 “And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.

The promise to Abraham about his future descendants and their inheritance may be found in Genesis 17:8, 48:4. Most likely, Abraham and his family carried with them the ancient written records of history - of the pre-Flood era and Noah’s account of the Great Flood. This could have been one reason why it was important that Abraham and his family forsook the pagan society of Babylon: it opened the way for the Lord to raise up a people and nation in the ancient world who would be ruled under God’s jurisdiction; it would guarantee that these important records of man’s beginnings would not get lost in the shuffle of history.

In addition, the nation of Israel stood out as God’s witness and testimony in a world full of pagan idolatry; as a result many seekers from

foreign lands were drawn to worship the God of the Hebrews in those ancient times.

V 6-7 “But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years.

‘And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.’

Stephen here is referring to Genesis 15:13-14, the prediction to Abraham about the children of Israel’s 400-year sojourn and slavery in Egypt and the promise of their future deliverance from Egypt, and also to Exodus 3:12, the prediction to the exiled Moses that the children of Israel would come to worship on Mt. Sinai.

V 8 “Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.

“Covenant of circumcision.” In Old Testament days this initiation rite meant that a person had officially entered the family of God; it was open to all, regardless of whether a person was Jewish or non-Jewish. (Genesis 17:11)

“Twelve patriarchs.” Jacob’s large family of 12 boys (plus one girl). (Genesis 35:22-26)

V 9-10 “And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him

“and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

“God was with him.” Without need for a temple, shrine, or any other manmade construction. In this remarkable story from Genesis chapters 37, 39-41, Joseph’s brothers sold Joseph to some Egyptian traders. He began life there as a slave, even landed in prison, but by the mighty hand of God, Joseph wound up becoming governor of Egypt.

V 11-14 “Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance.

“But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.

“And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to the Pharaoh.

“Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people.

The story continues with the journey to Egypt of Jacob’s sons (“*our fathers*”) to seek for grain followed by the touching reunion of Joseph with his brethren and father Jacob. (Genesis 42-47:12)

“*Second time.*” Joseph did not reveal himself to his brethren during their first visit but waited until their second visit to Egypt.

V 15-16 “So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers.

“And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.

Jacob’s death and burial is covered in Genesis 48-50. Later on Joseph’s and his brothers’ bones were also carried back to Abraham’s burial plot.

In those days before Jesus came and brought the promise of the Resurrection, a person’s passing was an event of great concern. (The Egyptians were so obsessed with the issue of death and the afterlife that they built the pyramids - enormous tombs for their dead Pharaohs.)

Perhaps these details about Jacob’s funeral were not so important to Stephen’s message; however, they were evidence of his very thorough acquaintance with the Scriptures. The council had no reason to belittle Stephen’s message on that account. He knew the Scriptures just as well as they did, if not better.

V 17-19 “But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt

“till another king arose who did not know Joseph.

“This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose [cast out - KJV] their babies, so that they

might not live.

Oppression of the children of Israel. The *“king which knew not Joseph.”* During the 400 years of Israel’s sojourn, the rulership of Egypt changed hands at least once, and maybe twice: once to a group of foreign invaders known as the Hyksos, and later back into the hands of the Egyptians.

V 20-29 “At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father’s house for three months.

“But when he was set out, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son.

“And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.

“Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel.

“And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian.

“For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand.

“And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?’

“But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?

‘Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?’

“Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.

Birth and early life of Moses. *“Learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.”* No doubt Moses had to unlearn much of that wisdom; still it was a heritage and background that was needed to outfit him to become the future ruler of the new nation of Israel. His Egyptian *“wisdom”* may have proved useful later - the knowledge of government and administration. Or when confronted by Pharaoh and the magicians, he did not feel intimidated by their power or wisdom since, very likely, he had been educated in the same things himself.

“Who made you a ruler and a judge?” Quote from Exodus 2:14. Moses, being a rather over-confident fellow at this point in his life, had *“supposed*

that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand.” Moses had much to learn yet before he would be ready to lead the children of Israel.

“Then. . . Moses fled.” For fear that Pharaoh would learn of the murder and view Moses as the leader of an Israelite rebellion.

V 30-36 *“And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai.*

“When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him,

“saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and dared not look.

“Then the LORD said to him, ‘Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

‘I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’

“This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush.

“He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

“And when forty years had passed.” Much of this time was spent in the humble occupation of shepherding sheep. Moses had time then to listen to the voice of God instead of his own impulses - the very training he needed that would equip him for the monumental task of leading the children of Israel out of Egypt.

“Angel of the Lord.” It was really the Lord Himself who appeared to Moses in the burning bush. This was brought to light in John 8:57 when Jesus identified Himself as the *“I am”* Being, the One who had existed before Abraham.

“I am the God of your fathers. . . Take your sandals off. . . I have surely seen the oppression. . .” Quoted from Exodus 3:5-8,15

“This Moses whom they rejected.” These words seem to be preparing

Stephen's listeners for what he is soon to tell them. In this historical episode that he refers to, Moses eventually did become the leader of the children of Israel despite their initial rejection of him. This paralleled the current situation: the Jewish leaders had rejected and caused Jesus to be crucified.

But now that He had resurrected, it was time for them to repent and accept His authority as the Messiah, just as Moses (whom the children of Israel rejected at first) was accepted once he had proven his godly authority by the miracles and signs that God had given him to do before Pharaoh.

V 37-38 "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.'

"This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us,

By quoting the Deuteronomy 18:15 prophecy about the future *"Prophet"*, Stephen is building up to his main subject: the coming of the Messiah. (Find more information on this ancient prophecy at *"Further Explanation of Deuteronomy 18"* at the end of *"ACTS 3"* post.) The Jews held Moses in great reverence, and to them, *"a Prophet like me (Moses)"* could only mean the Messiah.

So if someone so revered had predicted the coming of the Messiah and had exhorted the people to give heed to Him - *"him you shall hear"* - then it behooved the Jewish leaders, whom Stephen was addressing, to pay stricter and more open-minded attention to the events of recent times - events that were ushering in the age of their long-foretold Messiah.

"Living oracles." Although the Laws of Moses were *"lively oracles"* back in Old Testament days, once the *"grace and truth"* of Christ came into the world, along with the Holy Spirit, the Laws of Moses became the *"law of sin and death"*. (John 1:17, Romans 8:2) The Law had been a useful guide up to this point in time but did not possess the kind of power needed to transform lives and hearts in the way the Lord desired.

V 39-43 “whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt,

“saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’

“And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

“Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets:

*Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness,
O house of Israel?
You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch,
And the star of your god Remphan,
Images which you made to worship;
And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.*

“Whom our fathers would not obey.” Israel’s history of rejecting her God-sent deliverers begins here in the wilderness. Stephen is steadily building up to the “punchline” - that the priests’ and elders’ rejection of the Messiah was no different from their ancestors’ rebellious worship of false gods.

“Make us gods. . .” Quoted from Exodus 32:1,23.

“They made a calf.” Calf-worship was common in that part of the world then.

“Host of heaven.” Worship of the sun, moon, and stars. Here Stephen quotes from Amos 5:25-27. Amos actually wrote “Damascus”, not “Babylon”, in his prophecy because he was warning the northern kingdom, which was to be invaded by Syria where Damascus was. But later the southern kingdom was taken captive by “Babylon”, and this is the word that Stephen used here.

V 44-47 “Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen,

**“which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David,
 “who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.
 “But Solomon built Him a house.**

Stephen’s account of the temple’s history showed that he respected the temple and would not be guilty of blaspheming it.

“Tabernacle of witness.” During Israel’s wilderness wanderings, the tent, the ark of the covenant, and other related items were the predecessor to the temple that **“Solomon built”**.

V 48-50 “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:

***Heaven is My throne,
 And earth is My footstool.
 What house will you build for Me? says the LORD,
 Or what is the place of My rest?
 Has My hand not made all these things?***

Although the presence of God - the “Shekinah glory” as it was called - used to reside in the temple, the prophet Isaiah, whom Stephen quotes, had taught that the Maker of heaven and earth and His power extended far beyond this manmade construction of the temple. (Isaiah 66:1-2. Refer also to 1Kings 8:27.) That was some 700 years earlier, so it was high time to start thinking along the lines of what the Prophet Isaiah had taught so long ago.

“What house will you build for Me?” God is greater than the temple, so it was the Jewish leaders who were in error. They were limiting the power of God and confining Him to the temple and to all the rules and laws of Moses associated with that temple worship.

In putting forth his case, Stephen showed that he understood very well the context and history behind the customs that were central to Judaism - like the **“covenant of circumcision”** and the **“laws of Moses”**. He also did

not neglect to show his respect for Israel's glorious history, especially the Exodus and the great wonders that God did then.

By recounting all this background history, Stephen demonstrated that his commitment to the cause of Christ was not a shallow one; it wasn't a case of being swept off his feet by some passing trend of thought, but it was based on a deep understanding of the foundations of Judaism.

In addition, during his message to the council, Stephen brought to light the fact that God was frustrated with the shortcomings and limitations of their system of worship. Along these lines, Jesus once said, *"The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him."* (John 4:23) Merely going through the motions of animal sacrifices and temple rituals did not mean that the people had a genuine devotion to God or concern for their fellow man. And this is what the Lord wanted, and what the people needed.

As king David had written, *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart - these, O God, You will not despise."* (Psalm 51:17) In fact, without that heartfelt, spiritual connection to God they were no better than the lowliest publicans and sinners whom the Pharisees so despised. These feelings of self-righteous superiority were a shortcoming in their religion mentioned by Jesus on more than one occasion. (Luke 18:9-14, Matthew 21:31-32)

V 51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."

"You stiffnecked and uncircumcised. . . you always resist the Holy Spirit." To the Jews, who prided themselves on being physically circumcised, it was a huge wake-up call to be told that they were *"uncircumcised in heart and ears"*. Circumcision had always been the official sign that a person belonged to the household of God.

But now, *"the true worshipers"* were to *"worship the Father in spirit and truth."* (John 4:23) Stephen was only trying to help them see themselves as they really were - *"uncircumcised"* as far as God was concerned, and no more a part of His household because of their stiffnecked refusal to yield to the Holy Spirit's leading to accept Jesus as

their Messiah.

A thousand years earlier, the prophet Samuel had issued a similar rebuke to King Saul: *“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.”* (1Samuel 15:22)

Neither Saul, nor the Jewish leaders that Stephen was talking to, had a genuine relationship with God. Nor did they have the conviction and dedication to obey Him. They were just being led by their own desires, hiding under the cloak of their religious observances, and deceived by the Devil into thinking they were doing God service by killing the prophets. (John 16:2) As Samuel went on to say, such rebellion and stubbornness was just as bad as witchcraft and idolatry. (1Samuel 15:23)

V 52-53 “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, “who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”

The climax of Stephen’s message comes now with his charge that the Jewish leaders, by killing Jesus, had done the same thing as their ancestors who also had rejected God and killed His messengers. Stephen courageously tears away the veneer of hypocrisy and exposes how their own carnal-mindedness and lack of yieldedness and true spirituality had led the Jewish leaders to commit the ultimate crime of betraying and murdering the *“Just One”*, the Messiah.

These words remind us of what Jesus had said not long before: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves, that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.”* (Matthew 23:29-31)

“Received the law by the direction of angels.” Deuteronomy 33:2 states, *“The LORD came from Sinai. . . with ten thousands of saints*

(angelic beings).”

“And have not kept it.” They had deceived themselves into thinking that by keeping the minor aspects of the Law that they were righteous. But Jesus put it to them very plainly, *“You. . . have neglected the weightier matters of the law: judgment and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done.”* (Matthew 23:23)

V 54-60 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.

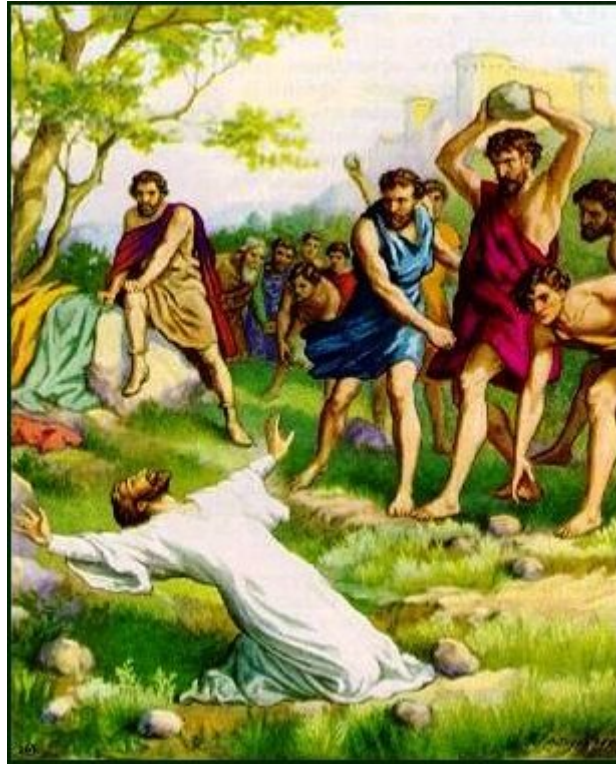
But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;

and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

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.



The rulers no doubt knew their own history well enough to be familiar with the stories of how their prophets had been killed. To be told now that they were followers, not of the prophets, but of those who murdered the prophets, was a shocking revelation. Unable to humbly receive the truth of what they had done, the council reacted as Cain did when Abel's good works had exposed his brother's religious hypocrisy.

These dignified religious leaders began to growl at Stephen like mad dogs and may have bitten him as well. *"They gnashed at him with their teeth."* (The most common version of the Greek word *e*pi is "on" or "upon": "they gnashed on him with their teeth.") They even *"stopped their ears"*. In modern terms we might say they were in a state of denial, unable to bear hearing the sad, awful truth about themselves.

And so they murdered Stephen by stoning. Stoning was the Law's punishment for blasphemy, which they thought Stephen was guilty of. (Leviticus 24:16) Of course, the real blasphemers were the Jewish leaders who had failed to give Stephen a fair trial or even formal execution; it was nothing more than a cowardly act of mob violence.

“A young man named Saul.” Later known as the Apostle Paul, we see him here, in his pre-conversion days, aiding and abetting the murder of Stephen.

Why did the murderers remove their clothes? For a few reasons probably. The loose robes of outer garments tended to interfere with vigorous activity but were at the same time easy to remove. In those days clothes were less available, and so, to keep from spoiling them with dirt or blood, and to make sure no one walked off with them, they *“laid down their clothes at the feet of. . . Saul.”*

Stephen became the first martyr of the Christian era, and the first to fulfill what Jesus had predicted: *“Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city.”* (Matthew 23:34)

“Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Jesus also experienced death at the hands of His enemies. As the sacrificial *“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”*, He took our sins upon Himself. (John 1:29) He endured the sinner’s death, separated from God: *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* (Matthew 27:46) Then the three days before His Resurrection, 1 Peter 3:19 tells us that *“He went and preached to the spirits in prison”*.

What a contrast we see now in the death of Stephen. There is Christ, risen from the dead and from Hell, ready to welcome the faithful martyr Stephen to his heavenly reward. This testimony about Stephen’s manner of death is a comfort to those Christians who find themselves thrust into the jaws of persecution: Jesus is right there, pouring out the grace needed to endure some momentary physical suffering before receiving them into His arms forever.



The Martyrdom of St. Stephen by Annibale Carracci (1560-1609)

“They gnashed on him with their teeth!” They actually bit him, like dogs yapping in the marketplace! Like mad hounds, they rushed up and bit him! - And stoned him to death! But, praise God, He had a glorious death! “They were cut to the heart. . . but he, being full of the Holy Ghost saw the glory of God!” (7:54 and 55.) Hallelujah!

You do God’s will and be bold and preach the truth and it doesn’t matter what happens to you, you shall see the glory of God! Hallelujah! Amen? In spite of persecution, have you seen God work? Have you seen Him do miracles in lives?

What was the result of this death? Did he die in vain? No! There was a young man standing there, holding the coats for the guys that threw the rocks, who saw the way he died, and it ate on him and ate on him! He kept kicking against his conscience and against conviction, he couldn't get over the way Stephen died! He got so mad, he kept trying to kill them off! He tried to throw them all in prison! He tried to run around and keep so busy, as he thought, serving the Lord, that he couldn't listen to the Lord! He kicked against the pricks and he resisted the Holy Spirit!

But God had mercy on him - Jesus appeared to him and Saul was gloriously saved! "That these shall not have died in vain!" - and Stephen certainly didn't die in vain - he was a great example! That was the next crisis, again an outside attack - persecution - and the result was the Church was scattered, 8th chapter, 1st verse, *"throughout the regions"*.

(from lecture by [David Berg](#) - 14 May, 1967)

[\(Continue to ACTS, chapter 8\)](#)