

## LIMITED, LOCAL or LORD of ALL?

... their hearts turned back to Egypt ... And at that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the work of their hands Stephen (Acts 7:39,41)

The imageless worship of Jehovah announced not merely that he was greater than nature but also that he was unbound by it H.L. Ellison Baker's Dictionary of Theology

## The Gospel collides with the Temple cult

*But will God indeed dwell on the earth?*

*Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house that I have built!*

--Solomon in 1 Kings 8:27 (NAS)

### 9a: THE FALSE WITNESS OF THE TEMPLE CULTISTS (6:8-7:1)

The church is now on the verge of a crisis. The appointment of the 7 men to distribute the alms had an outcome surely not anticipated. It started the church on its mission to evangelize the world. Some years must have elapsed since the apostles received their commission to preach the gospel to the whole creation. Pentecost is 5 or 6 years in the past, and the risen Christ has NOT YET BEEN PREACHED OUT OF THE SIGHT OF HEROD'S TEMPLE. The disciples have been left here long enough to test whether Israel would repent and secure the promise spoken by Peter, "that he may send the Christ who has been appointed for you, Jesus" (3:19,20) -- **James Stifler**, Acts p.58

At this point Luke interrupts his narrative with a brief report of progress. Six such brief reports appear at intervals throughout the book and serve to punctuate its history. But here, immediately before the account of Stephen's

activity, there is special relevance in Luke's emphasis on the church's increase and popularity. In particular, the fact that so many priests joined the community meant that the ties which attached so many of the believers to the temple-order would be strengthened. --**F.F. Bruce**, Acts p.131

### 6:8-10 With which personal attributes is Stephen's being "full of the Holy Spirit" connected? (cf.v.5)

His name indeed would seem to have been prophetic. Stephen means a crown. One can imagine that some fond mother named the boy thus, and so expressed her hope that he would come to some crowning; but little she knew the crowning to which he would come, the first to wear the crown of the martyr in the history of the catholic Church. -- **G. Campbell Morgan**, Acts p.140

### 6:11-7:1 So blinded are the temple cultists to the Divine priorities that they are willing to break the 9th commandment in order to retain their tradition (Matt. 15:6-9)

They are called "false witnesses," as those who brought similar testimony against Jesus are called (Matt.26:59-61; Mark 14:55-59). But in both cases the falseness of their testimony consisted not in wholesale fabrication but in subtle and deadly misrepresentation of words actually spoken. -- **F.F. Bruce**, The Book of Acts p.135

He was arraigned upon a charge partially true and pally false. There is never any more serious situation than that: "A lie which is all a lie may be met with and fought outright; But a lie that is partly true is a harder matter to fight." --**G.C. Morgan**, Acts p.147

### 9b: COULD WE IMPROVISE WITH STEPHEN'S SKILL? (7:2-53)

### 7:2-53 What can we learn from the apologetic method of the first Christian martyr [Gk. for witness]?

Stephen's speech is the longest in the book of Acts; Rackham points out that it is as long as the three sermons of Paul put together. Actually, it is not a defense of himself at all, but a defense of the gospel he preached. More correctly, it is an "apology" -- but the word apology today has come to have a quite different meaning. Originally, an apology was a statement proving that you are right; today it is an admission that you are wrong. Stephen was the first of the long list of Christian Apologists, stalwart champions of the Faith who defended it against all attacks in the early centuries of our era! -- **W.S. LaSor**, Church Alive p.101

At first sight S. Stephen's speech seems baffling and disappointing. There is no direct answer to the charge; and the name of Jesus Christ does not occur at all. An obvious reason is that he was cut short and his defence left incomplete. but deeper consideration will shew that it does furnish a complete reply. In fact the speech is unique. It corresponds exactly with the time, place, and audience: at the same time it is marked by a strong individuality. It stands midway between the speeches of S. Peter in chapters ii and iii and of S. Paul in chapter xiii; but though S. Stephen has points of contact with each apostle, his presentation of the gospel is entirely his own. As special characteristics we note at once -- the use made of the OT, revealing an Alexandrine training; the

criticism of materialistic religion (verse 48), betraying a Hellenist ... -- **R.B. Rackham**, *The Acts of the Apostles* p.92

**COMMON AUTHORITY -- Stephen selects his subject matter and illustrations from the Old Testament**

Stephen begins with *the God of glory*. The title is only found here: it is really *the God of the glory*, i.e. the Shekinah or 'glory of the LORD' -- the bright cloud of divine majesty which was as it were the pavilion of God himself. The title then denotes God in his divine being, rather than in his relation to man of which S. Peter reminded his hearers in his 'God of our fathers.' It was then the very God who *appeared to Abraham*. How he appeared, S. Stephen does not say: but the word denotes a visible appearance. Probably he would have said in the person of his Angel. -- **R.B. Rackham**, *The Acts of the Apostles* p.102

Here is the Hellenistic mind at work. The Jews had, first of all peoples, a theology of history. They knew that it was by universal and inbuilt moral law that nations rose and fell. The Greeks added philosophy. Herodotus asked why Greece, with her small manpower, flung back the enormous might of Persia. Aeschylus pondered the problems of law and righteousness in his plays. So did Sophocles. The Jews, who had been in contact with Greek

**THE ESSENCE OF IDOLATRY:**

## God in a box

For, indeed, all that others can do is "to dwell in things made with hands." That is one difference between them and the Highest, one of the great titles of God. It is because of his infinite exaltation that he is beyond all man-made things. **R.C.H. Lenski**, *Acts* p.295

Stephen reverses the order of the pernicious charges (6:13,,14) and deals logically and chronologically with Moses before the temple. He has, throughout, with a keen sense of history, been undermining the notion that God dwelt in any one place, let alone a place constructed by man. The first revelations of God's plan and purpose took place in Ur and then in Midian (2-4,29-34,44-50). The patriarchs themselves were buried, he gently reminds them, in Samaria. The earth and the heaven were God's dwelling place (49; Isaiah 66:1,2). Nor, in fact, was the temple, even of Solomon, a divinely ordained project, like the tent in the wilderness days. **E.M. Blaiklock**, *Acts: The Birth of the Church* p.59

To emphasize the full agreement of his case with OT revelation, Stephen quotes the opening words of Isa. 66 -- words which clearly anticipate his own argument, whether their primary reference was to the building of the second temple or to some other occasion. There the prophet goes on to say, in the name of Jehovah, almost immediately after the passage quoted here, "but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word" (Isa. 66:2b). This well describes the character of the people of God, who constitute His true temple (cf. Isa. 57:15). But to those who imagine that they can localize the Presence of God, His scornful question comes, "What is the place of my rest?" Do they think they can make God "stay put" -- **imprison him in a golden cage?** **F.F. Bruce**, *Acts* p.160 (emphasis added)

thinking, thus added a dimension to the study of their own history. Observe the Sanhedrin listening, rapt, to a story they well knew. It is part of a people's decadence to lose contact with their past, and today's decay of historical teaching, in so many quarters of the western world, is part of the peril which besets our way of life. Sociological and political studies are no substitute for history. Both are inherent in history well-taught and understood. -- **E.M. Blaiklock**, *Acts: The Birth of the Church* p.58

**COMMON LEVEL -- Stephen puts himself in the same boat as his accusers, directness WITH respect**

The address is dignified, respectful, from the standpoint of one who belonged to the Jewish nation ("brethren") and was under Jewish authority ("fathers"). -- **R.C.H. Lenski**, *Acts* p.258

This speech is commonly called Stephen's defence, or apology, but it is obviously not a speech for the defence in the forensic sense of the term. Such a speech as this was by no means calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin. It is rather a defence of pure Christianity as God's appointed way of worship; Stephen here shows himself to be the precursor of the later Christian apologists, especially those who defended Christianity against Judaism. The charges brought against Stephen by the witnesses for the prosecution (Ch. 6:13f.) were garbled; Stephen sets forth here the arguments of which these charges were travesties. -- **F.F. Bruce**, *The Book of Acts* p.141

**CONVICTION -- Stephen drives home conviction of sin by use of Old Testament only -- could we? (WHAT sin? See box>)** By careful selection of OT biography (e.g. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David), what undeniable conclusion must even unbelieving Israel reach?

**9c: GLORY and GRACE (7:54-60)**

**Stephen's message severs the jugular vein of 1st century Judaism -- what is left for Israel? (Ezek.43:1-7)**

Finally, the most overwhelming testimony of his death was its witness to the glory of God as being grace. In that prayer of his, full of tenderness, there was an echo of the prayer of his Lord. Stephen died with a prayer upon his lips for the very men who were murdering him; and by that they knew that he believed, and lived in the power of the belief, that the glory of God, to which he had referred at the commencement of his argument, was the very grace of God. **G. C. Morgan** *Acts* p.152

Israel, as the martyr's historical citations disclose, invariably opposed God in his first offer of mercy, rejected the deliverer sent, suffered awhile in consequence, and then accepted that very deliverer afterward. -- **James Stifler** *Acts* p.64

Saul saw Stephen die after having heard him preach, and I, doubt not, Stephen is Saul's spiritual father; the sacrifice of the one led to the salvation of the other. See how a Christian can die! Only a godlike soul can pray as Stephen did. **W. G. Scroggie**, *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption* Vol 2 p.235