

## Study 3 13/2/14

# Stephen and the Reigning Christ

## Acts 7:1-53

### The setting (6:8-15)

Newly elected deacon, Stephen, begins a new phase of the mission into Judea, Galilee and Samaria (to 9:31). As with every section of this book, the Holy Spirit leads the way. Stephen, certain that Christ is Lord, reveals his power through wonders and signs and speaks with the power of the Spirit (6:10). He dies as he began, full of the Spirit (7: 55; as Luke 12:12; 21:15). Nothing less than this is needed to break open to the church and the world the broadness of God's plan.

Two Jerusalem synagogues foment bitterness against the church, the one including Cilicians, may include Saul. Proper argument with a wise and inspired man proves impossible so they turn to subterfuge, using methods similar to that used with Jesus, and on the same issue, that Stephen is speaking against the temple (Matt. 26:60-61). Caiaphas is again in charge and the Council hopes to make their charges stick better with Stephen than they had with Jesus.

### The speech (7:1-53)

Stephen puts Israel's life in Scriptural perspective, using the normal means of Jewish discourse (similar to Neh. 9:6-37 or Psa. 105; 106).

Abraham is the agreed starting point for Stephen and Israel (vv. 1-8) but Abraham's witness speaks to Israel's situation. The God of glory appeared to Abraham *outside* of Israel (not in a temple). God moves him to Canaan but as a wanderer and with the threat of being taken elsewhere and enslaved for centuries, until God judges that nation. Already, Abraham has the covenant of circumcision binding him to keep God's commandments—before the giving of the law and the temple. True worship is a matter of the heart and not merely of form.

God's covenant extends to Isaac and Jacob, but this family cannot recognise Joseph as God's means to save them (vv. 9-16). God preserves their deliverer anyway. From his position of power, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and brings them under his care. It must be clear to Stephen that this is precisely what is happening now with the ascension of Jesus and he wants them to see how God works.

The patriarchs remember God's promise and are buried in Canaan. After some centuries, God makes them numerous, but persecuted. Again, God gives them a deliverer, beautiful in God's eyes. His parents 'expose' him, as required, but in a way that he will be pitied by Egypt's Princess (vv. 17-22). Moses, like Joseph, wills the good of his people and offers to help them (vv. 23-29). He wants to save them from slavery, but Israel is resentful of his authority and he must run far away to Midian.

God speaks to Moses well outside the borders of Israel (vv. 30-35). The burning bush is no temple but it is holy ground! Moses will in fact deliver his people and be their ruler and redeemer. Israel's slowness will not prevent God giving them a Saviour.

Of the many things Stephen could have said (vv. 36-41) about 'this' Moses (used 4 times), he refers to the gracious wonders and signs Moses did (we recall the signs done by Jesus, by the apostles and by Stephen) and moves straight to his prophecy of a later Prophet whom they were to heed in all that he said (Deut. 18:15-18). He received 'living oracles to give to us'—a

way of life, and a gift to be treasured. But Israel did not obey Moses or the living oracles given to them, any more than Israel is now receiving the living oracles of the gospel. They preferred a return to their captivity, and idols. So what is Israel doing now?

Idolatry and disobedience become a way of life for Israel (vv. 42-43). God gives them over to this (cf. Romans 1). Stephen quotes Amos asking if Israel ever brought offerings to God, even in the wilderness (Amos 5:25-27 in the LXX), probably meaning that their offerings were not made to the Lord. Later in their history, they are offering sacrifices to 'the host of heaven', planetary deities associated with Assyria in particular and God sends them into captivity.

Stephen comes to his main point (vv. 44-50). The original tabernacle was made according to the pattern given by God and this is what they had for worship until settlement under David. This King loved God and wanted to make a better temple but the task was given to his son. Solomon constructed the temple but could see that God was not limited to that (2 Chron. 6:18). Stephen quotes Isaiah (66:1-2) saying that all heaven is God's throne and the earth a mere footstool for him. He is Creator and cannot be confined.

With the little he makes of Solomon's temple, Stephen may understand that Jesus is David's Son who will build a temple where God may be worshipped. This is certainly the meaning of Jesus in diverting attention from Herod's temple to his own body (John 2:19-22; also Luke 21:5-6). In contrast, Israel has no way to understand Jesus' statements because they do not know the God of the Temple, or love him, or his Law.

Stephen needs no further Scripture proof to make his point that Israel is consistently stubborn and effectively uncircumcised. They are proving that they are the same as their forefathers by killing God's Righteous One (Is. 53:3, 11). *They* who accuse *him* are the blasphemers and breakers of the Law.

### **The sequel (7:54—8:1)**

Stephen's testimony is like Christ's. Jesus revealed the hypocrisy in Israel's worship and pointed to himself as the temple. He showed that keeping the law is done by honouring its Giver rather than by adding instructions to make it clearer. He was accosted with false witnesses misreading his intended meaning. Asked if he was the Messiah, Jesus said they would see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God.

Stephen is filled with the Spirit and sees this Son of Man standing at the right hand of God—standing perhaps because he is witness to this faithful servant. Apart from here, only Jesus ever uses the title 'Son of Man'. Stephen's use of the term may link to what Jesus said at his trial. Jesus is Israel's Messiah. His witness is complete.

Generally, Israel could not conduct executions, but Rome did leave Israel to their own resources when it suited them and, in this case, though there has been no formal verdict of blasphemy, passion carries the day and Stephen is stoned to death. Again, he is like Jesus in his death (cf. Phil. 3:10) and wishes that no one be charged with his death. His accusation of Israel does not arise from a desire for vengeance but that they may see where they are in relation to God. He wants them to see that Christ is, in fact, at the right hand of God.

Saul of Tarsus sees all of this and cannot see the glory of God in Jesus Christ that Stephen sees. But he has this witness in Stephen's face, and words. He has met the heart and mind of the Church, and soon, would meet him in Person.