

## Sermon 29, Who's Really Blaspheming Moses?, Acts 7:30-42

**Proposition:** Stephen emphasizes the continuity between Moses and the early church — and explicitly announces the penalty for repudiating Moses' teaching.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the false witnesses suborned to procure Stephen's condemnation before the Sanhedrin stood up and accused him of blaspheming Moses and God (Acts 6:11). That accusation raises an important question: Is the Christian faith loyal to Moses? That is, does the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah somehow dishonor, blaspheme, or disagree with Moses' teaching? It's a question that Stephen thought to be very important. Jesus thought it was important too. And both Stephen and Christ give an unequivocal answer to this question. They insist that the Christian faith is completely loyal to Moses, that it is in continuity with the basic thrust of his teaching. John is the most "Moses-negative" writer in the NT, with

his statement “The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” At first glance, that statement sounds like it’s throwing Moses under the bus. Yet a moment’s thought shows that even though it’s phrased absolutely, its meaning is relative. If it were an absolute contrast, then John would be saying that Moses taught no truth. Of course, if Moses taught no truth then the entire NT is false as well. That’s simply a negative way of saying that the NT is indeed in continuity with Moses. Far from blaspheming Moses by his teaching about Jesus, Stephen was actually honoring and agreeing with Moses, who wrote about Jesus and indeed, as we’ll see in a few moments, got all his teaching and leadership from Jesus in the first place. So in responding to the question about blaspheming Moses, Stephen’s words are clear: “I’m not blaspheming Moses. You are. And if you insist on doing that, you will be delivered up to false gods.”

### **I. Moses’ Call: An Angel with Yahweh’s Voice, vv. 30-31**

Moses’ call begins with the burning bush. We looked at this story in the text of Exodus at length this past winter. But it’s worth revisiting because the Bible revisits it. Already, I want you to notice the presence of God the Son in the story of Moses. Stephen, of course, doesn’t phrase it that provocatively. He says first that an angel called from the burning bush. But then, in the next verse, he clearly ascribes the voice of Yahweh to the angel. Now, what angel speaks with the voice of Yahweh? It has to be the Angel of Yahweh, a person who appears regularly in the OT and is frequently identified with Yahweh. Thus, for instance, Manoah and his wife see the Angel of the LORD and then say “We will die, for we have seen Yahweh!” On that same occasion, the Angel announces that His name is Wonderful. That, of course, is the same name that Isaiah tells us will be given to the Child and Son who will come from the virgin. His name, too, will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Now, Stephen does not come right out and say “Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and the Angel of Yahweh who appeared to Moses as a flame of fire in the burning bush.” I believe that that information is indeed in the text. Did Stephen understand it clearly? I do not know. Already in the OT it is clear that the Angel of Yahweh is Yahweh but also distinguished from Yahweh. It took the early church over 400 years to get clear on what exactly that means. So I don’t know for sure that Stephen would have been able to say in so many words “Jesus called Moses to deliver the Israelites.” But he certainly did say it, if not so clearly as that.

### **II. Moses’ God, vv. 32-34**

Well, this encounter at the burning bush revealed four major things about Yahweh.

#### **A. The God of the Fathers, v. 32a**

The first is that He is the God of the fathers. Stephen uses the plural, though the Hebrew text has the singular here. Either way, the point is that “being God of” travels in families. If God is your God, He will be God to your seed after you. If He is the God of your fathers, you can count on Him to be yours too.

God was in covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, and so on down the generations to Amram and then to Moses. In fact, that is why He approached Moses and set him the task of

delivering Israel from Egypt and setting up the whole Levitical system of access to the presence of God.

### **B. The God Who Sets the Terms of Approach, v. 33**

But though He was the God of Moses' fathers, He is not a God who will let just anyone waltz into His presence anyhow. He is the God who sets the terms of approach. You come to Him on His terms. In this particular instance, Moses could only approach after shedding his sandals. Ultimately, though, we know that the way into God's presence is only open through the shedding of blood. That was not announced at the burning bush. But it was something that was later revealed to Moses. At the bush God simply established the principle that He controls access to His presence, and that Moses does not control that access.

### **C. The God Who Delivers, v. 34**

Well, God further reveals that He is the God who comes down to deliver His people. He is not going to let them sit in bondage and suffering forever. He is acting to redeem them. Yes, they've been in bondage 400 years. But God is not going to let them stay there permanently.

### **D. The God Who Sends a Man, v. 34d**

How does He deliver? By sending a man. The man for this task was Moses — foreshadowing (though again Stephen does not say this explicitly) the sending of the man Christ Jesus to deliver God's people from the greatest enemy of all, sin and death.

## **III. Moses' Fear, v. 32b**

Moses responded to God with fear and trembling. He did not even dare to raise his eyes and look on God. Stephen, one would think, is contrasting the temerity of his accusers, who are not afraid to lie and murder in the name of God, with Moses' fear when he stood in the presence of the real God. The accusers would not be so bold in wickedness if, as they claimed, they actually stood in God's presence and made intercession for the sins of their people. Far from it. They too would tremble with fear, unwilling to sin in the sight of God.

## **IV. Moses' Identity: Ruler and Judge, v. 35a**

Stephen goes on to emphasize the offices to which God appointed Moses: ruler and deliverer. The parallel is clear: God's people rejected Moses, their true ruler and judge. And now they are rejecting Jesus, their true ruler and judge.

## **V. Moses' Angelic Empowerment, v. 35b**

Yet it all makes sense, for where did Moses get his power? He got it from the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush! That is, Moses' power came from the mighty right hand of the Angel of Yahweh, the pre-incarnate Christ. So of course anyone who is against Jesus would also be against Moses. The shoe is on the other foot now; Stephen is not-too-subtly telling his accusers that they are the ones blaspheming Moses and the Angel of the LORD who helped him, and thus blaspheming God.

## **VI. Moses' Ministry, vv. 36-38**

Yet though the contemporary keepers of Moses' legacy deny the role of Jesus Christ in Moses' life, it was only too clear. Stephen mentions several different facets of this.

### **A. Wonders and Signs, v. 36**

The first facet is the wonders and signs. Moses did things that no mere mortal could do, everything from water into blood to the plagues of hail and boils and darkness. In the wilderness, he brought water out of the rock. He also wrote the Pentateuch and thereby single-handedly invented the most revolutionary religious idea in history: Monotheism. Moses could not have done all these things on his own. He was helped by God. That's the implication of this verse, and of course it's clearly stated in the previous verse and the next two verses.

### **B. Messianic Orientation, v. 37**

In addition to the amazing wonders and signs he performed, Moses also prophesied the coming of a prophet like himself. Unlike Peter, who quoted the rest of the verse about how anyone who didn't listen to the prophet would be destroyed, Stephen leaves out that negative part. Yet the positive side of the verse is damning enough. According to his accusers, God had not yet raised up the prophet like Moses. According to Stephen, God had in fact done so. Now, the accusers were not in a good position to argue at this point. Any argument of the form "God hasn't kept that particular promise" is a tough argument to win — particularly when there is a candidate for the fulfillment of God's promise who walks like a promise, talks like a promise, and does miracles as promised. Moses said, "Keep your eyes open for a Mosaic prophet." Stephen says "I've seen that prophet like Moses. His name is Jesus."

### **C. The Company Moses Kept, v. 38**

Well, the company Moses kept is further evidence for the primacy of Jesus.

#### **1. The Church in the Wilderness, v. 38a**

First of all, Moses was with the church in the wilderness. Now, this verse is a fun one to bring up in conversation with our dispensational brothers and sisters. It's the first use of the word "church" in the book of Acts. (Yes, the word appears in 2:47 in the majority text. But the critical-text editions of the book of Acts believe that this verse in ch. 7 is really the first appearance.) And it's applied not to the first-century church, but to Israel in the wilderness! No wonder our Reformed forebears were in the habit of speaking of "the Jewish church." It's a way of talking that was taught them by no less a historical theologian than Stephen, the first martyr.

Anyway, not only does Stephen describe this group as the church; he does so despite the fact that the word never appears in the Pentateuch. That is, the Greek word translated church (*ekklesia*) first appears in the LXX in Judges 20:2. It is absent from the Torah and from Joshua.

What is the point? Well, Stephen knows the Bible well. Indeed, he quotes it word-for-word at various points. Clearly, then, he is not simply speaking generally here. He is making a particular point: The group of Jesus-followers, the church, is in basic continuity with the group of Israelites in the wilderness under Moses. This church, of which I am a member, is one and the same as the church that followed Moses out of Egypt and wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.

How's that for a theological point? And it is almost an aside, a throwaway line, in Stephen's speech. Nonetheless, it scores a point against his murderers. They claim to represent the authentic assembly of the people of God. But actually, the church is that authentic assembly.

It was with Moses in the wilderness, and here it is in first-century Jerusalem spreading like wildfire and making the Sanhedrin hyperventilate.

## **2. The Angel of Yahweh, v. 38b**

Well, the church was not the only company Moses kept there in the wilderness. Oh no. He also was with the Angel who spoke to Him from Sinai.

Whoa, whoa. What, Stephen? It seems that you are deliberately conflating the angel from the burning bush with the angel that spoke on Sinai.

But there is no doubt whatsoever that it was Yahweh Himself who descended on Sinai and spoke to Moses. You can't turn a page in Exodus or Leviticus without seeing the phrase "Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying. . ."

Yes, brothers and sisters: Stephen is deliberately mixing Yahweh on Sinai with the Angel of the Burning Bush, because he knows that Yahweh and the Angel of Yahweh who spoke from the burning bush are one and the same. Moses was with the church. And he was with the Son of God, the Angel of the LORD who is Yahweh and speaks with the voice of Yahweh and in whom is Yahweh's name. Again, the point is only too clear: Stephen and his brothers and sisters in the church are the true heirs of Moses and his teaching, because Moses was with the Angel of the LORD who now dwells in the church. The one who sent Moses sent Stephen to argue with the synagogue-goers.

## **3. The Fathers, v. 38c**

Moses was not only with the angel of the LORD and the church; those people were the fathers of the people Stephen was talking to — you know, the ones who were going to kill him in the next ten minutes. It's not "Your fathers," either. It's "our fathers." There is no conflict like family conflict. And when you are related to every other practitioner of your religion and have the double whammy of religious conflict mixed with family conflict, the stakes couldn't be higher. What's being contested is not simply what happened fifteen hundred years before while Moses and the church went through the wilderness. What's being contested is the legacy of that. Who owns it? Who is in continuity with it? Who has left it behind? Who's honoring their fathers — and who isn't? That's the issue between Stephen and his accusers, as we've already said. And of course, that is still the issue between Christians and Jews today. Who is truly faithful to the letter and Spirit of the OT, to the revelation to Moses, to the words of the prophets and the cries of the psalms? Stephen insists that he is the one who's honoring the fathers, that the Moses he's talking about would have endorsed Jesus.

## **4. The Living Oracles, v. 38d**

The final element with which Moses kept company in the wilderness was the word of God. He calls it "living oracles." The word of God is living, not dead. In fact — and again, this is a point of dispute between Stephen and his accusers — the word is living because it is the perfect reflection of Jesus Christ, the single and final Word of the Father. It is the word of Christ, who is alive forevermore. The word of God gives life because God is the living God and the resurrecting God. Theoretically, of course, Stephen's Jewish opponents would assent to those propositions. But in practice, they rejected the life contained in the word of God. Rather than

living by the living oracles, they broke, repudiated, and rejected them. In that sense, Stephen is willing to grant that they carry on the legacy of their fathers.

## **VII. Moses Repudiated, vv. 39-42**

You see, the Jewish fathers repudiated Moses even during his lifetime. Stephen has been arguing through this whole summary of Moses' life and work that his accusers are repudiating Moses. Now he goes ahead and says it clearly: They have repudiated Moses just like their fathers did.

### **A. The Motives, vv. 39-40**

The fathers rejected Moses for two stated reasons.

#### **1. Longing for Egypt, v. 39**

The first is that their hearts had already returned to Egypt. They wanted what Egypt had to offer. Their bodies may have been free, but their hearts were still enslaved. Psychologically, we know that generations of slavery are not thrown off in months of freedom. That's a big part of why you and I still sin. But regardless, even if it's understandable at some level why Israel wanted to go back to slavery, it is also inexcusable. God had freed them to worship; for them to repudiate that, along with the agent of freedom, is completely on a par with the Israel of Stephen's day repudiating the deliverance for worship found in Christ so that they could return to the slavery of their customs, traditions, and Levitical ceremonies.

Do you ever want to just go back to sin and live the way you used to? I do. I bet you do too. The second you and I get on our high horse and huff how we can't believe they rejected Moses/Jesus/Stephen is the second we too have begun to reject Jesus and His ambassadors who announce deliverance to us. If you and I are in bondage to pride in our own righteousness, we are no better than the wilderness generation whose hearts turned back to Egypt or the first century generation whose hearts hardened against Christ and the gospel proclamation.

#### **2. Desire for visible gods, v. 40**

The other reason they rejected Moses is that they wanted visible gods. They were sick and tired of following an invisible Yahweh who was represented by an absent Moses. Do you ever get sick and tired of worshipping an invisible Yahweh who's represented by an absent Jesus? That, after all, is the Christian message. Our God is hidden; our Christ is in Heaven; our Holy Spirit is invisible like the wind. Meanwhile, we are stuck here on earth with visible enemies and problems. What to do? The temptation to make a visible god can be overwhelming. For some churches, it's money or buildings. For others, it's good deeds, acts of community service. They can point to a soup kitchen, a food pantry, a homeless shelter, and say "This is what we are for. We do everything we do in this church to keep these things going." For other churches, it can be a bank balance, a charismatic pastor, or some other human leader. In the worst cases, such as among our friends in the Roman Catholic Church, it is formalized into a human leader who is officially declared to be a stand-in for an absent God, endowed with god-like powers to lead and teach the church. No matter which kind of visible god you settle on, again, you are in the position of Stephen's accusers — not the position of the first martyr of the Christian era.

Don't demand a visible god. Be content with a hidden God, an absent Christ, an invisible Spirit. After all, this whole book of Acts (including Stephen's speech) is designed to tell us that

even though we can't see Jesus, He still reigns over heaven and earth, and His kingdom is localized and blessed in the church.

**B. The Method: Making the Golden Calf, v. 41**

So in order to get a visible god in Moses' day, the congregation commissioned Aaron to make a golden calf. They sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

**C. The Penalty, v. 42**

Stephen has only too clearly drawn the lines of continuity from the Angel of Yahweh who appeared to Moses to the Lord Jesus Christ who founded the church. Now he proceeds to announce the judgment that fell on those who repudiated Moses. Again, the point is obvious: This is the judgment that will fall on those who repudiate Jesus. This is the judgment that will fall on you, my accusers!

**1. God Turned Away from Them**

The first judgment is that God turned away from them. After all He had done, when they rejected His deliverance and preferred the golden calf instead, God simply walked away.

**2. God Handed them Over to Worship Idols**

He gave them into the control of the host of heaven — that is, the sun, moon, and stars. Is the sun a god that can deliver? Will Betelgeuse save you? The answer is obvious. Israel is going to become a crew of idolaters unless they repent.

Stephen isn't the one blaspheming Moses. Rather, his opponents are the true heirs of the crowd that cast the golden calf and worshipped it as the deliverer from Egypt.

Brothers and sisters, don't blaspheme Moses by turning away from Jesus. Instead, follow the Lamb wherever He goes! Trust Him for salvation. Walk with Stephen; you may be martyred, but you will definitely be saved. Amen.