

Acts 6:8–7:60

Introduction

In the first half of Acts chapter six we were introduced to seven new leaders in the church, among whom were Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip. It's Stephen and Philip, especially, whom God will use to pave the way for the redemptive-historical expansion of the church outward from Jerusalem (Jews), to all Judea and Samaria (Samaritans), and even to the end of the earth (Gentiles; Acts 1:8). This morning, Luke recounts for us—first—the story of Stephen, and of his testimony even unto death. We read in chapter six, beginning with verse eight:

I. Acts 6:8–7:1 — And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen [former slaves or sons of slaves], including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians [diaspora/Hellenistic Jews from North Africa], and some from Cilicia and Asia [diaspora/Hellenistic Jews from modern day Turkey], rose up and were arguing with Stephen. But they were unable to oppose the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against **Moses [which is to say, the Law as that which was mediated through Moses] and God [which is to say, the temple as God’s dwelling place].**” And they stirred up the people [*ho laos*; contrast 2:47; 4:21; 5:13, 26], the elders, and the scribes, and they came up to [Stephen], dragged him away, and brought him to the Sanhedrin. And they put forward false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases speaking words against **this holy place [the temple] and the Law [Moses]**; for we have heard him say that this Jesus the Nazarene will destroy **this place [the temple]** and alter **the customs which Moses handed down to us [the law].**” And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin saw his face like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

The “conviction” of these Diaspora (Hellenistic) Jews is that Stephen’s preaching of Jesus is contrary to God’s revelation of Himself in the Law and at the temple. And yet they’re finding it difficult to prove this. This is why they have to “secretly induce” (the Greek word often indicates bribery). Luke himself says that when they brought Stephen to the Sanhedrin, they put forward “false witnesses.” Obviously, Luke’s conviction is that whatever it is that Stephen has been saying, it does not constitute “speaking against” the temple in Jerusalem or the law of Moses. But what about the claim that Stephen has been saying that Jesus will *destroy* the temple and *alter* the customs handed down by Moses? The high priest said to Stephen, “Are these things so?”

II. Acts 7:2–4 — And he [Stephen] said, “Hear me, brothers and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.”

What does this have to do with anything? So far, it might not seem to us like Stephen is answering the question. But as we’re about to see, it’s in this highly selective and carefully

worded presentation of redemptive history that Stephen will not only make his defense, but even—in the end—put his own accusers on trial.

“Hear me, *brothers and fathers!* The God of glory appeared to *our* father Abraham...” The first thing Stephen does is emphasize his solidarity with his Jewish countrymen as one of the physical seed of Abraham. He wants to be clear from the outset that he isn’t denying his religious heritage as a Jew. But then he moves to his apologetic, beginning with this striking reference to God as “The God of glory.”

There’s only one other place in the Bible that this expression, “the God of glory” appears, and that’s in Psalm 29. The title of this Psalm in the Greek translation of the Old Testament is: “A psalm of David... of the *temple*.” So we read in Psalm 29:

- Psalm 29:1–3, 9 — Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to Yahweh **glory** and strength. Ascribe to Yahweh the **glory** of His name; worship Yahweh in the splendor of holiness [LXX: “**in His holy court**”]. The voice of Yahweh is upon the waters; *the God of glory* thunders, Yahweh is over many waters... The voice of Yahweh makes the deer to calve and strips the forests bare; and **in His temple** everything says, “**Glory!**”

In the Old Testament, the “glory” of Yahweh was uniquely and especially associated with the temple (cf. Exod. 29:43; 40:34-35). At the dedication of the temple in the days of Solomon, we’re told four times that “the *glory* of Yahweh filled the *house*” (2 Chron. 5:14; 7:1-3). Ezekiel, in his vision of the eschatological temple, describes how “the *glory* of Yahweh filled the *house*” (Ezek. 43:1-5). The psalmist prays:

- Psalm 26:8 — O Yahweh, I love the habitation of Your *house* and the place where Your *glory* dwells.

Given that the only other place this expression (“the God of glory”) appears is in connection with the temple, and given the Old Testament association of God’s glory with the temple, what does it mean when Stephen says, “*The God of glory* appeared to our father Abraham *when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran*”? Clearly, there’s an agenda here. “The God of glory,” as it turns out, is not tied to the temple. Before He revealed Himself at the temple in Jerusalem, this same “God of glory” revealed Himself to Abraham in Mesopotamia, even before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.”¹ Of course, the “land that I will show you” is Canaan, but Stephen takes his time getting there: “Then [Abraham] left the land of the Chaldeans *and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.*” Even when Abraham did arrive in Canaan, there’s still this:

¹ In the context of Genesis 12, God appeared to Abraham and spoke the words that Stephen goes on to quote (“Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you”) *after* he had left Mesopotamia and settled in Haran (Gen. 11:31-12:1). And yet Stephen is explicit: “*before* he lived in Haran.” There *is* the implication in Genesis 15 that God also spoke to Abraham when he was still living in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 15:7), and it’s this implication that Stephen chooses to emphasize.

III. Acts 7:5–7 — “And He [God] gave him [Abraham] no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his seed after him, even when he had no child. But God spoke in this way, that his seed would be sojourners in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. And I Myself will judge the nation to which they will be enslaved,’ said God, ‘and after these things [*tauta*] they will come out and serve [worship] Me in this place.”

Stephen continues to emphasize the presence of “the God of glory” with His people apart from the temple, and even apart from any inheritance in the land at all. This explains the language, “no inheritance... not even a foot of ground.” “Not even a foot of ground” did God ever give to Abraham—the very one to whom He had given the promises.

Before moving ahead in his history, Stephen pauses to highlight God’s word to Abraham about his seed being “sojourners in a foreign land” and “enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years” (cf. Gen. 15:13). It would only be “*after* these things” that the people would come out and serve God “in this place [*topos*].” From God’s first call of Abraham in Mesopotamia to the time that God gave the land to Abraham’s seed as an inheritance there was a long interval of hundreds of years full of rootless wandering and foreign slavery. Certainly, by our standards, the God of glory wasn’t in any hurry to get His people into the land, much less to have them build Him a temple.

“...after these things they will come out and serve Me in this place...” In Genesis 15, what God actually says to Abraham is this:

➤ Genesis 15:14, 16 (cf. LXX) — “...after these things they will come out [*exerchomai*] with many possessions... in the fourth generation they will return here.”

But suddenly, in mid-sentence, Stephen substitutes for these words that God spoke to Abraham when he was sojourning in the land of Canaan, the words that God would speak to Moses some 400 years later when he was pasturing the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, at Mount Sinai.

➤ Exodus 3:12 — “...when you have brought the people out [*exago*] of Egypt, *you shall serve God at this mountain.*”

Only, because Stephen is applying these words that God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai to the situation of Abraham when he was sojourning in Canaan, Stephen changes “at this [*en touto*] mountain” to “in/at this [*en touto*] place.” Stephen’s listeners wouldn’t have missed his “mixing” of God’s word to Abraham and God’s word to Moses. They wouldn’t have missed the fact that in God’s word to Moses, the “place” where Israel would serve Him was not at a temple in the land of Canaan, but at a mountain in the Sinai desert. Can the God who descended in fire and smoke on Mount Sinai be “contained” or “tied down” to any one *place*—as if that place was *for Him*, so that He might receive the worship He “needs,” and not actually for us, so that we might render to Him the worship that is His due? Stephen continues:

IV. Acts 7:8–10 — “And He [God] gave him [Abraham] the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham was the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. And the patriarchs, becoming jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he appointed him governor over Egypt and all his household.”

Earlier, Luke told us that the Sanhedrin had arrested the apostles because they were “filled with *jealousy* [*zelos*]” (5:17). Now Stephen reminds this same Sanhedrin of the time when “the patriarchs, becoming *jealous* [*zeloo*] of Joseph, sold him into Egypt.” By referring to Joseph’s brothers not as Joseph’s brothers, but as “the patriarchs” (the fathers), Stephen establishes a connection between the patriarchs and their descendants—between the fathers and their children who would act in the same way and with the same jealous spirit.

Notice how quickly Stephen has jumped ahead in his selective history—from Abraham, past Isaac, and past Jacob—to Joseph who was sold into slavery in a foreign land. He’s still emphasizing the theme of God’s saving presence with His people apart from any temple in Jerusalem and even outside the borders of Canaan: “Yet God was with [Joseph] [in Egypt], and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt...”

V. Acts 7:11–16 — “Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. And from there they were removed to Shechem and placed in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

The same Joseph that the patriarchs rejected out of jealousy is the Joseph whom God used to deliver and save His people. Once again, the implication for Stephen’s listeners is clear. And once again, Stephen emphasizes the theme of God’s saving presence with His people in a foreign land, long before there was any temple in Jerusalem. In this case, God even saves His people by bringing them out of Canaan into Egypt!

It was in Egypt, Stephen says, that “[Jacob] and our fathers died. And from there they were removed *to Shechem* and placed in the tomb which Abraham had purchased² for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor *in Shechem*.” Why does Stephen include this little detail as part of his highly selective survey of redemptive history? In fact, the Sanhedrin would have felt this as something of a slap in the face. Twice, Stephen mentions “Shechem” as the burial place of Joseph and his brothers (Josh. 24:32), rather than Hebron as the burial place of Jacob (Gen.

² In fact, it was *Jacob* who purchased the plot of land *in Shechem* (Gen. 33:18-20) while it was *Abraham* who purchased the plot of land *in Hebron* (Gen. 23:10-19). Stephen knows all this very well, and so do his listeners. Just as Stephen’s “they” must include only Joseph and some or all of his brothers, Stephen’s “Abraham” must assume that Jacob purchased the site at Shechem in the name of Abraham, who was still alive at the time (Peterson).

49:29-32; 50:13). In Stephen's day, Hebron was located in Judea, the home of the temple, while Shechem was located in the "unclean" territory of Samaria and was the city associated with Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had once built their own rival temple (cf. Jn. 4:20). And now it's in Shechem that the fathers of the tribes of Israel are buried! The question is, as awkward and uncomfortable as this might have been for Stephen's listeners, was it awkward or uncomfortable for God? Was God so tied to the temple in Jerusalem that the burial of the patriarchs in Shechem was somehow an embarrassment for Him? Stephen continues:

VI. Acts 7:17–22 — “But as the time of the promise was drawing near which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until another king arose over Egypt who did not know about Joseph. It was he who deceitfully took advantage of our family and mistreated our fathers to set their infants outside so that they would not survive. It was at this time that Moses was born, and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. And Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in words and deeds.”

If Shechem was awkward, then Stephen focuses in on more “awkwardness” here. If Moses was “lovely in the sight of God,” why did He allow him only “three months” of being nurtured in his father's home? Instead, Stephen emphasizes that Moses was nurtured by Pharaoh's daughter “as her own son” and educated “in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (cf. 1 Kings 4:30). If it was in and through an Egyptian mother's nurture and an Egyptian education that God raised up a deliverer for His people in the land of Egypt, should we really think that God is bound or tied in any way to a temple in Jerusalem? Stephen isn't denying the essential place of the temple in redemptive history, but he is denying that the temple is essential to God or that God is in any way dependent on the temple for the accomplishment of His saving purposes. Stephen continues:

VII. Acts 7:23–28 — But when he [Moses] was approaching the age of forty, it entered his heart to *visit* his brothers, the sons of Israel [the word for “visit” (*episkeptomai*); is often used to describe God “visiting” His people with salvation; cf. Gen. 21:1; 50:24-25; Exod. 4:31; Ruth 1:6; 1 Sam. 2:21; Ps. 80:14-15; 106:4; Zeph. 2:7]. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took justice for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. And he supposed that his brothers understood that God was granting them salvation [*soteria*] through him, but they did not understand. On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers, why are you treating one another unjustly?’ But the one who was treating his neighbor unjustly pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’”

In the Old Testament, Joseph and Moses are the two proto-typical “deliverers/saviors” of Israel. They were both providentially prepared and raised up by God to save His people. And yet, as Stephen carefully emphasizes here, they were also both rejected by their own people—the very people God had raised them up to save. The implication for Stephen's own audience is obvious, but they can't defend themselves without appearing to admit their own guilt. Stephen continues:

VIII. Acts 7:29 — At this remark, Moses fled and became a sojourner in the land of Midian, where he was the father of two sons.

We've seen how the "God of glory" revealed Himself to Abraham first in Mesopotamia, then in Haran, and finally in the land of Canaan, though God gave him no inheritance there—not even a foot of ground. We've seen how the "God of glory" was with Joseph when he was sold into slavery in Egypt, and how God used Joseph to save His people by bringing them all down to live in Egypt. And now we see how the "God of glory" was with Moses when he was forced to flee and become a sojourner in the land of Midian. It was in Midian, Stephen says, that Moses became the father of two sons. Again, why does Stephen include this little detail as part of his highly selective survey of redemptive history? The names of Moses' two sons were Gershom ("I have been a sojourner in a foreign land") and Eliezer ("The God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"; Exod. 18:2-5). Moses' two sons, then, were the reminder of God's presence with Moses in Midian. And so Stephen keeps on emphasizing the theme of God's presence with His people in foreign lands, long before there was any temple in Jerusalem. What Stephen comes to next is really the ultimate case study.

IX. Acts 7:30–34 — And after forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him [Moses] in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. When Moses saw it, he was marveling at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and would not dare to look. But the Lord said to Him, 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to deliver them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'"

Where is it that the God of glory revealed Himself to Moses in the flame of a burning bush? "[I]n the wilderness of Mount Sinai"! Earlier, the Jews accused Stephen of never ceasing to speak words against "this **holy place** [*ho hagios ho topos*]... for we have heard him say that this Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this **place** [*houtos ho topos*]..." But now Stephen quotes from God's word to Moses when he was in the wilderness of Mount Sinai: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the **place** [*ho topos*] on which you are standing is **holy** [*hagios*] ground." The point is clear: It's not the "place" that sanctifies God as though He could be tied to, or dependent upon, any one place. Instead, it's the presence of God—wherever He may choose to reveal Himself—that sanctifies the "place." Long before God revealed His name at the temple in Jerusalem, God had revealed His name to Moses in the wilderness of Mount Sinai in a burning bush. Long before there was the "holy place" in the temple at Jerusalem, there was that holy "place" in the wilderness of Mount Sinai where Moses had to remove his sandals. The question, then, is this: Can even the temple in Jerusalem be the ultimate and final "place" for the fullest revelation of God's saving presence? Stephen will have something to say about that in just a moment, but first he brings to a climax the theme of Moses, chosen by God, but rejected by the people.

X. Acts 7:35–38 — “This [*houtos*] Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one [*houtos*] whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man [*houtos*] led them out, doing wonders and signs [cf. 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8] in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This [*houtos*] is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers’ [Deut. 18:15, 18; Acts 3:22]. This [*houtos*] is the one who, in the assembly [*ekklesia* (church)] in the wilderness, was with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai and with our fathers; the one who received living oracles to pass on to you.”

If Moses was sent by God to be both a ruler and a deliverer/redeemer [*lytrotēs/lytron*], then so was Jesus (cf. Lk. 1:68; 2:38; 24:21). If Moses performed wonders and signs, then so did Jesus (Acts 2:22; cf. 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8). If Moses was a prophet, then so is Jesus. It was Moses himself who said to the sons of Israel, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers” (Deut. 18:15, 18). And then Stephen reminds his listeners what was unique about Moses as a prophet: “This is the one who, *in the assembly* [*ekklesia* (church)] in the wilderness, was with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai... the one who received living oracles to pass on to you.” So, then, what will the coming “prophet *like Moses*” look like? What will He do? He, too, will be “in the assembly” (the *ekklesia*/church) to give them living oracles from heaven (cf. Jn. 8:26, 40; 14:24; 15:15). He, too, will give his new assembly a new law which will not so much replace the law of Moses, but fulfill it.

Far from speaking words against the Law, then, Stephen—in preaching Jesus—was upholding and affirming the Law (cf. Jn. 5:45-46). If Stephen preached that Jesus would “alter the customs which Moses handed down” (6:14), was this not exactly what Moses himself had foretold? Stephen continues:

XI. Acts 7:39–41 — “Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him [Moses], but rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘*Make* [*poieo*] for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what has become of him.’ At that time they *made* [*moschopoieo*] a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the *works of their hands* [*cheir*].”

Notice Stephen’s emphasis on the things that they made with their hands. This will be really important to remember in a moment. Not only did the people reject Moses, the one who had received living oracles to pass on to them, but they rejoiced instead in “the works of their hands” (*cheir*), seeking to tie God down—as it were—to things that they made (“make for us gods... they made a calf...”).

XII. Acts 7:42–43 — “But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘Did you present me with slain beasts and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Molech and the star of the God Rompha, the images which you *made* [*poieo*] to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon [Amos 5:25].”

Was it really Yahweh that the “fathers” were worshiping when they offered sacrifices in the wilderness?—When at the same time they were worshiping the images of foreign gods? Stephen emphasizes again the innate tendency of the people to want to tie “God” down to images that they “made.”

And then, fast-forwarding, we have this reminder of Israel’s exile “beyond Babylon.” We can almost hear Stephen asking: Where was God, then—when His people were “beyond Babylon” and the temple was in ruins? Was He “homeless”? Was He needy? Was He helpless to save? In these next verses, Stephen emphasizes just how *long* was the period of the moveable tent/tabernacle before there was ever a permanent “house [temple]” in Jerusalem.

XIII. Acts 7:44–47 — “Our fathers had the **tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness**, just as He, who spoke to *Moses*, directed him to make it **according to the pattern which he had seen** [Ex 25:9, 40; 26:30; Heb 8:2, 5]. And **having received it in their turn**, our fathers **brought it in with Joshua** when they dispossessed the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, **until the time of David**. David found favor in the sight of God, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. **But Solomon** built a **house** for Him.”

It was less easy for the people to tie God down to the tabernacle because the tabernacle was a “tent”—portable and by its nature temporary. And so the almost painfully obvious point that Stephen makes in these verses is that God was in no hurry to have a “permanent” house built for Himself. In fact, it was not God who finally asked the people to build Him a house, but David who asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But even though David’s motives were pure, God knew how easy it would be for the people to suppose that He was in some sense “bound” to His “house.” And so Stephen reminds us that even though David “found favor in the sight of God,” it was not David, but Solomon who finally—finally, after all those years and even centuries—built a house for God.

Do you see how Stephen has carefully situated the temple within the broader sweep of redemptive history—a story that progressed for over a thousand years after Abraham (not to mention the thousands of years before Abraham) without any temple? But what about once that temple was built? Was God suddenly bound to that place? Was His saving presence with His people suddenly dependent upon that “place”?

XIV. Acts 7:48a — “However [*alla*/but], [says Stephen] the Most High does not dwell in houses *made by human hands* [*cheiropoietos*]. . .”

The last thing we heard was “made” with human “hands” was the golden calf, along with other idolatrous images that Israel had “made” to worship (7:40-41, 43). When Stephen identifies the temple, then, as a house “made by human hands,” his point is that it’s possible to turn even the temple itself into an object of idolatrous worship, and that this is, in fact, exactly what his hearers have done. In their devotion to the temple, they’re actually “rejoicing [not in God, but] in the works of their hands”—supposing, somehow, that God needs this house and that He’s somehow bound to this house and the worship that’s performed there (cf. Jer. 7:4).

XV. Acts 7:48–50 — “However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet. What kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord, ‘Or what *place* [*topos*; cf. 6:13-14; 7:7, 33] is there for My rest? Was it not *My hand* [*cheir*] which *made* [*poieo*] all these things?’” (Isa. 66:1-2; cf. 1 Kings 8:27-30).

Here, then, is the awesome conclusion to Stephen’s highly selective and carefully curated presentation of redemptive history. Can you see, now, the power of his “defense”? Can you see “the wisdom and the Spirit by whom [Stephen is] speaking” (6:10)?

Stephen hasn’t spoken a single word against the temple. Far from it! But he *has* “unshackled” God—as it were—from the temple. And in so doing he’s proved beyond all shadow of a doubt that a physical temple structure in Jerusalem cannot possibly be the ultimate and final “*place* [*topos*]” for that fullest (eschatological) revelation of God’s saving presence—no more than this would have been possible for the tabernacle that came before it, or for any other “place” on earth before or after. But if there’s to be an eschatological “place” not made with human hands where God manifests the fullness of His saving presence, then we know there must also be an eschatological prophet and law-Giver who makes known to us the fullness of God’s saving will for us (cf. Heb. 7:12). All this is what explains Stephen’s preaching of *Jesus* (cf. 6:14). Now we can see not only how powerful Stephen’s defense is, but how it’s actually put his own accusers on trial.

XVI. Acts 7:51–56 — “You men—stiff-necked [cf. Exod. 33:3, 5; Deut. 9:6, 27] and uncircumcised in heart and ears—are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As *your* fathers³ did, so do you. And which one of the prophets did *your* fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the Law as ordained by angels, and yet did not observe it.” Now when they heard this, they became furious in their hearts, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Stephen began his defense: “*The God of glory* [*doxa*] appeared to our father Abraham...” And now, here at the end, what does Stephen see as he gazes intently into heaven? He sees “the *glory* [*doxa*] of God, **and Jesus** standing at the right hand of God.” “And [Stephen] said: ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’” Here is the prophet like Moses—the eschatological *Law-Giver*—who has ascended not Mount Sinai, but even into heaven itself, and who has now poured out His Spirit upon us, writing His laws upon our hearts. Behold Him there! Here is the ultimate, eschatological “*place*” of God’s saving presence—the one in whom all the fullness of God was—and is—pleased to dwell (Col. 1:19). Here, then, is the one who renders both the temple (as the place of God’s special presence) and the law (as the covenantal charter of God’s people) obsolete (cf. Heb. 8:13).

³ Ten times, Stephen has referred to “*our* fathers” (vv. 2, 11, 12, 15, 19, 38, 39, 44, 45). Now, suddenly, he refers to “*your* fathers.”

We behold in Jesus, standing not on earth but in heaven at the right hand of God, not the work of our own hands or of anything that we have made, but the one who is, Himself, “the radiance of [God’s] glory [*doxa*]” (Heb. 1:3)—the one of whom the Apostle John writes: “And we beheld His glory [*doxa*], glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). We behold in Jesus, standing not on earth but in heaven at the right hand of God, not the work of our own hands and not even the “creation” of God, but Him who is the “firstborn over all creation” (Col. 1:15), the one in whom all things were created (Col. 1:16) and through whom all things came into being (Jn. 1:3).

When we worship God only in and through Jesus, then there can be no thought of idolatry—of tying God down to something we can manipulate or control. Instead, we bow down now before Him who is, Himself, the saving presence of God with us (He is the fulfillment of the temple), and who now makes known to us—in all its fullness—the will of God for our salvation (He is the fulfillment of Moses). And so we come to the conclusion of the story:

XVII. Acts 7:57–60 — But crying out with a loud voice, they covered their ears and rushed at him with one accord. And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he was calling out and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And having said this, he fell asleep.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, He said: “*Father*, into Your hands I commit My spirit” (Lk. 23:46). But now what does Stephen say? “*Lord Jesus*, receive my spirit!” When Jesus was hanging on the cross, He prayed: “*Father*, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). But now what does Stephen pray? “*Lord [Jesus]*, do not hold this sin against them!” And how can Stephen pray like this? Because of the “sermon” he’s just preached! Because he sees in Jesus the final, eschatological revelation of the “God of glory” (who appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia) and of His saving power and presence with us.

For Stephen, the theme of his defense has been no academic exercise. Instead, it’s shaped not only how he lives, but even how he dies. May our own vision of Jesus be as true and as clear as Stephen’s, so that it might shape how *we* live, and even how *we* die (cf. Rom. 14:7-9). We know that in death, we can hear Jesus say to us, even as He said to the thief on the cross: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with *Me* in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43).