

Are These Charges True? The Trial of Stephen

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The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/4NwJ4R1sFRM>

The scripture reading is Acts 7:1-60

Thus far we have witnessed the apostles coming together as a community of committed believers in unity and one accord. They have been spending their days in the Temple courts worshiping, praising God, and proclaiming the good news of a resurrected Messiah to the ever-growing crowds of followers. They have faced serious opposition from the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin led by the High Priest and others of the sect of the Sadducees. The twelve original disciples of Yeshua have been called before the Sanhedrin, some more than once, and ordered not to teach in the name of Yeshua of Nazareth under the threat of severe punishment or even death. But they have persisted and thrived under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

One of the leaders of the apostles was a man by the name of Stephen. Stephen was to stand trial before the Sanhedrin as that body became more determined than ever to put a stop to this new movement of believers stirring up the people. Some of the men with whom Stephen had argued with came to the Sanhedrin as false witnesses against him.

Acts 6:12-14 NKJV 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 "for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

The deck was not stacked in Stephens favor. He was about to face the ultimate challenge to his faith. How would Stephen meet this challenge, and what would be the result and consequences going forward?

The charges the false witnesses brought against Stephen were serious and the ramifications for the community of believers was far reaching. If the court found Stephan guilty, the entire community of believers would be in danger of further persecution at the hand of the Sanhedrin and some of the believer's more zealous opponents. Stephen, and by extension the entire community of the apostles, were charged with four basic things: Speaking against the Torah, speaking against the Temple, teaching that Yeshua of Nazareth would destroy the Temple, and that Yeshua of Nazareth would change the customs handed down from Moses.

Moses, God, the Temple, and the Torah are four fundamentals of Judaism. The Sanhedrin had been looking for anyway to be rid of the apostles. The witnesses came forward to falsely accuse Stephen of violation of these four things. Underlying these accusations was the fact that this new community of believers of a risen, living Messiah violated the basic tenets of the Sadducean sect of Judaism of which the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem were the primary proponents.

After hearing the charges brought against him by the false witnesses, Stephen begins an extended answer. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he turns the tables on the witnesses and the Sanhedrin. Stephen opens his speech by calling for their full attention.

Acts 7:1-2a NKJV 1 Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen:...

He met his accusers head on and answered them point for point. We are not going to cover every verse of Stephen's sermon before the Sanhedrin in this teaching, but we will concentrate on the specifics of the four primary accusations. Stephen's answer was reminiscent of the speech by the prophet Samuel.

1 Samuel 12:5-7 NKJV 5 Then he said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand." And they answered, "He is witness." 6 Then Samuel said to the people, "It is the LORD who raised up Moses and Aaron, and who brought your fathers up from the land of Egypt. 7 "Now therefore, stand still, that I may reason with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous acts of the LORD which He did to you and your fathers:

In Stephen's answer, he presented a treatise of the pro-Temple, pro-Torah orthodoxy of the community of believers. First Fruits of Zion in their work [The Chronicles of the Apostles](#) gives a concise overview of Stephen's sermon.

"He (Stephen) cited the biblically based origin of the authority of Moses and the Torah, and he told the story of the origin of the Temple. He went on to make the case for Yeshua, declaring Him to be the "prophet like Moses" who, like Moses himself, suffered His people's rejection. In the same way, he drew in the Temple theme as he pointed out that Israel's historical compromises with paganism contrasted against the sanctity of the true Temple."ⁱ

Throughout His speech, Stephen, the accused, becomes the accuser. Calling out the witnesses and members of the Sanhedrin on virtually every point.

It needs to be noted that Stephen, being a Hellenist, a Greek speaking Jew, drew heavily on the Septuagint when quoting from the scriptures. This translation of the Hebrew Bible, nearly three hundred years old at the time, does contain some key differences from the original Hebrew text. The Septuagint reading of these passages is actually more in keeping with the common interpretation of the scriptures taught at that time.

Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and therefore, the Torah. To refute this charge, Steven retells the story of how the Torah was given at Mount Sinai and accuses them of rejecting the promised "prophet like Moses."

Acts 7:36-39 NKJV 36 "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. 37 "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.' 38 "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, 39 "whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt,

In Rabbinic thought, the life of Moses is the prototype or shadow of the Messiah to come. Much of Jewish teaching speaks of Moses and the Messiah as the first redeemer and the last redeemer, respectively. Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that they did not listen to Yeshua, the promised prophet like Moses, as they were commanded to do. Stephen maintained that Moses received the Torah directly from God. Stephen's use of the Septuagint translation which uses the term "angel" for God lines up with common Jewish writings and rabbinic teachings.

Stephen presents a very high view of the Torah and therefore, Moses in his words before the Sanhedrin. Stephen clearly states that he considers the Torah to be the "words of life" and he reminds the Sanhedrin that Moses' generation did not heed the words of life and wished to turn back to Egypt. They built and worshipped the Golden Calf in Moses' absence and so began the long historic struggle of idolatry in the camp of Israel.

Stephen illustrated their long track record of not heeding the words of not only Moses, but the later prophets as well. They continued to worship images and false gods. Their rejection of Yeshua was yet another in a long line of wrong choices. Stephen proves their history of rebellion by quoting from the prophet Amos.

Amos 5:25-27 NKJV 25 "Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings In the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? 26 You also carried Sikkuth your king And Chiun, your idols, The star of your gods, Which you made for yourselves. 27 Therefore I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus," Says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

Stephen is accused by the false witnesses of speaking against the Temple of God, again from Acts chapter six verse thirteen.

Acts 6:13 NKJV 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;

The tabernacle or Temple is the central place of worship of God. They accused Stephen of teaching that the Temple would be destroyed by Yeshua. But was Stephen really anti-Temple? Look at what he told the Sanhedrin.

Acts 7:45-50 NKJV 45 "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, 46 "who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 "But Solomon built Him a house. 48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 '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? 50 Has My hand not made all these things?'

Stephen was not speaking of the validity or lack of validity of the Temple in Jerusalem, or even the earlier Tabernacle in the wilderness. What he was doing is stating that God's permanent dwelling place was in a heavenly Tabernacle, not in an earthly one. In verse forty-nine, Stephen quotes from the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 66:1-2a NKJV 1 Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? 2 For all those things My hand has made, And all those things exist," Says the LORD...

Stephen isn't advocating the destruction of the Temple or negating its value by stating God's dwelling place is in heaven. He is pointing out the transcendent nature of God. Jewish thought as well as scripture has always viewed God as transcendent and this transcendence was a part of Temple tradition from the beginning.

Solomon, who built the Temple envisioned by his father David, understood this and voiced it in his prayer at the Temple's dedication.

1 Kings 8:26-27 NKJV 26 "And now I pray, O God of Israel, let Your word come true, which You have spoken to Your servant David my father. 27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!

The existence of the Temple or Tabernacle is not a prerequisite for God's dwelling with man. Examples would be when God walked in the garden of Eden with Adam before the fall; When God met Moses on Mount Sinai before the instructions for the tabernacle were given; and also when the Holy Spirit was present with the prophets of old as well as the Holy Spirit indwelling the apostles.

The last two accusations leveled against Stephan by the false witnesses are very closely related, that Yeshua of Nazareth would destroy the Temple and change the customs handed down to them by Moses. On the surface and given common modern-day Christian theology, these last accusations against Stephen appear to be true.

The destruction of the Temple was not without precedent. The prophet Ezra spoke of the destruction of the first Temple and exile of the people to Babylon.

Ezra 5:12 NKJV 12 "But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and carried the people away to Babylon.

The false witnesses and the leaders of the Sanhedrin were obviously familiar with Yeshua's very words concerning the Temple. Yeshua also faced false witnesses that were purposely brought to this very same court to accuse Him of planning to destroy the Temple.

Matthew 26:59-61 NKJV 59 Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, 60 but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward 61 and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'"

The false witnesses twisted around the words of Stephen as well as the words of Yeshua. The account of Yeshua's appearance before this court as recorded in Mark's gospel sheds additional light on what exactly Yeshua meant. Yeshua spoke of building a temple not of human hands.

Mark 14:56-59 NKJV 56 For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree. 57 Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, 58 "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'" 59 But not even then did their testimony agree.

Yeshua was speaking of His own body as a Temple or dwelling place of God which again, reflects the transcendent nature of God. Jewish thought and teaching places a heavenly Temple or Tabernacle as the true dwelling place of God with the earthly Temple being only a shadow or reflection. The apostles taught this very same concept.

Hebrews 9:11-12 NKJV 11 But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

And skipping to verses twenty-three and twenty-four.

Hebrews 9:23-24 NKJV 23 Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;

Stephen spoke with the boldness given him by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He refuted each and every charge made against him. He affirmed the high view of Moses, the Torah, the Temple, and the Messiahship of Yeshua, the very things that he and the other apostles had been teaching all along. After refuting the testimony of the false witnesses who came against him, Stephen then turned his attention to the court itself.

Acts 7:51-53 NKJV 51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 "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, 53 "who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

Stephen outright accused them and all their predecessors of killing any and all the prophets who questioned them and announced the coming of the Messiah. He outright called them murderers! In verse fifty-three, Stephen issued a powerful accusation against the leaders of the court stating that it is they themselves who do not keep the Torah! He argued that it is the Sanhedrin leadership who violate the Torah by bringing false witnesses against and persecuting the innocent and righteous men of their day. It is the actions of these leaders in resisting the Holy Spirit that would result in the destruction of the Temple and the elimination of the customs handed down from Moses!

Stephen considered them to be in violation of the Torah commandment to listen to the prophet like Moses. Stephen considered this Sanhedrin leadership to be in contempt of the Torah. Stephen's statements before the court that day echo a prophecy spoken by Yeshua in His last days.

Matthew 23:34-36 NKJV 34 "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, 35 "that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Stephen spoke boldly like the prophets of old. He held back nothing and spoke nothing that could be construed in any way as blasphemy. In the end, Stephen stood and looked up to heaven and saw Yeshua standing before God.

Acts 7:55-57 NKJV 55 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, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;

Stephen testified that he was looking at the throne in heaven. This enraged the leaders of the Sanhedrin. They considered it blasphemy even though it did not meet the biblical definition of blasphemy. It did however, rail against the very foundation and philosophy of their particular form and practice of Judaism as well as threatened their standing as the leaders of the people. They covered their ears so they would not hear anything further from Stephen. They then had Stephen led out to be stoned for his perceived blasphemy.

Acts 7:58-60 NKJV 58 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. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 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.

As Stephen lay helplessly under the punishing force of the stoning, he prayed for his accusers asking that this act not be held against them using nearly the same words that Yeshua spoke toward the end of His execution. Among those present at Stephen's execution was a man by the name of Saul. Perhaps Saul was charged to oversee the carrying out of the sentences or pronouncements of the Sanhedrin. But he was there offering his approval none the less. Saul would later become a pivotal part of the body of believers in the not to distant future. But that is a story for a later teaching.

Stephen had become the first martyr of the community of believers but he would not be the last. Nearly all the apostles would one day face a similar fate as Stephen and even today we may be called upon to give testimony before a court and face punishment or even execution for belief in Yeshua of Nazareth. Let the Spirit be in us just as the Spirit was in Stephen. Let us go forth boldly proclaiming the good new of salvation through Messiah Yeshua. Let us stand strong and speak out against the corruption and evil in our world today.

Study Questions:

1. Last week we saw that there were many Synagogues in and around Jerusalem at the time of the Apostles. Many were segregated along cultural lines not unlike Synagogues and Christian Churches today. Why would Stephen's accusers who were members of the Synagogue which Stephen attended, bring false testimony to the Sanhedrin?
2. In his answer to the accusations brought against him, Stephen replies with a long sermon laying out the history of the Jewish people beginning with Abraham. What was Stephen trying to communicate by relating this History before the Sanhedrin?
3. The next portion of Stephen's answer before the Sanhedrin, focuses on Israel's time in Egypt and the deliverance from bondage by Moses. How did Stephen use this history to illustrate the Messiahship of Yeshua?
4. Many of the early apostles and followers of Yeshua were Hellenists, Greek speaking Jews, of which Stephen was one. There were many cultural differences between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenists Jews. How did the community of Believers in Yeshua address these differences in order to come together in one accord? What lessons can we learn from them?
5. It is apparent that the community of believers came from devout men and women, Hebraic and Hellenist Jews, both native born and proselyte, who understood the scriptures first in a literal sense. How does a basic, literal understanding of the scriptures point to the true nature of God and the true Messiah?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ FFOZ Chronicles of the Apostles, D. Thomas Lancaster, Vol 1 P154