

The Seven Servants

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The video version is at: <https://youtu.be/DDhjyt8gakM>

The scripture reading is: Acts 6:1-15

The community of believers in Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel continued to grow as the apostles continued every day in the temple proclaiming the good news of Yeshua's coming. As the community grew, so did the burden on the twelve apostles to minister to the community. This community did not just consist of men, but of women, children, and families. This included many widows and orphans as well. The report came to the apostles that some of the widows were being neglected.

Acts 6:1 MKJV 1 And in those days, the disciples having multiplied, a murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews occurred, because their widows were overlooked in the daily serving.

Over and over again, Luke had stated that the believers were all together in one accord and that great signs and wonders followed the apostles because of this. Now, that unity of purpose was being threatened. What could be done to make sure that everyone in the community was being taken care of? What could be done to maintain that unity of purpose so that God's mission would not be hindered? Who were the Hellenists and the Hebrews that were involved in this dispute? What role did the Hellenists play in the community of believers?

In the complaint that was brought before the apostles, the Hellenists stated that they were being neglected in favor of the Hebrews. Both groups of people were Jewish. The Hellenists were Jews who spoke Greek and were conversant with the Greek culture. The origins of the Hellenists go back to the Greek/Seleucid Empire that formed in the wake of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Middle East. This brought Greek thought, culture, and religion to Israel. In the Ptolemaic region of the empire, which included Alexandria, the aim was to be "multi-cultural." Alexandria was the center of international thought with the great library of Alexandria collecting works from all around the world. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures was commissioned by patrons of this library.

Israel was included in the Seleucid region of the empire. The aim of the Seleucids was to erase the individual cultures and force assimilation to the dominant Greek culture. In Israel, this took the form of forcing the Jewish people to build altars to the Greek gods and accept them alongside of God, or even to replace God. The Hellenists were those Jews who advocated assimilation to the Greek culture and accepting Greek gods alongside their God. Traditionalists among the Jews were adamantly against this. This led to rebellion against the Seleucids culminating in taking the city of Jerusalem with the help of the Hellenists. The Seleucids placed a statue to Zeus in the temple, and sacrificed pigs on the altar of God. Led by the Maccabees, the Jewish people drove the Seleucids out of Israel regaining Israeli independence for the first time since the days of Nebuchadnezzar. However, the Jewish people remained divided. The Jews in the diaspora especially adopted Greek culture, manner of dress and customs. Rabbi Hersch Goldwurm in The History of the Jewish People asserts:

"The Hellenists were assimilationists who saw no reason for existence of a Jewish State. They advocated complete integration into the surrounding peoples and an end to Judean independence."ⁱ

Although in the strict sense of the word, a Hellenist was an assimilationist, by the time of Yeshua the term came to mean any Greek speaking Jew who was comfortable in the Greek culture. First Fruits of Zion in The Chronicles of the Apostles write:

“The Greek-speaking Jewish community contained a broad diversity of people with varying affiliations and loyalties. A Hellenist Jew might be assimilated into the Gentile culture (e.g. Herod Agrippa), or he might be scrupulously Torah-observant (e.g. Saul of Tarsus).”ⁱⁱ

Luke indicates that the presence of Torah observant Greek speaking Jews in the temple was nothing unusual. On the Day of Shavuot, Luke describes the presence of Jews from all over the Roman Empire.

Acts 2:5 NKJV 5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.

The Greek speaking Jews tended to rely on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. They gathered in Greek-speaking synagogues of which there were many scattered around the Roman Empire including a large one in Jerusalem called the Synagogue of the Freedmen. The Hellenists generally came from the west of Israel and were centered in Alexandria and Tarsus.

The Hebrews, in contrast, were those Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. Like the Hellenists, there were pockets of Hebraic Jews in the diaspora. The Hebraic Jews were mostly east of Israel in Babylon and Syria, as well as in Judea and Galilee. They maintained a more traditional Jewish lifestyle tending toward living a life separate from the Greek and Roman culture.

Yeshua and His disciples from the Galilee region would have belonged to the category of the Hebrews or Hebraic Jews. The names of all of the twelve except for Phillip and Andrew are Hebrew names. Andrew and Phillip’s names are Greek. We can see how favoritism or the appearance of favoritism could have crept into the community of believers. It would have been easy to notice the needs of those you interacted closely with which would probably be those of the same cultural background. Further, the focus of the twelve was not on the internal needs of the community but on teaching and proclaiming the good news!

Acts 5:42 NKJV 42 And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

In order to address the issue of favoritism personally, the twelve would have had to divert their focus on teaching and preaching to that of administration.

This was not a problem unique to the body of believers. When Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he attempted to personally address each dispute that came up in the camp of Israel. This quickly began to wear him out. Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro gave Moses good advice.

Exodus 18:20-22 NKJV 20 "And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. 21 "Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. 22 "And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you.

Moses’ job was to teach the people how to live according to God’s standards and how to judge fairly. The job of those appointed by Moses was to administer to the needs of the children of Israel. The twelve leaders of

the believing community followed Moses' pattern and sought seven men to serve as administrators while they focused on prayer and teaching.

Acts 6:2-4 NKJV 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

When we see the phrase "serve tables" we have the image of a waiter or waitress or perhaps a servant in the house of the wealthy whose job it is to literally put food on the table. This is not what this phrase refers to. In verse one, we read that the Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the daily serving. This word "serving" and the word "serve" in verse two is from the same Greek word "diakonos," number 1249 in Strong's Greek Concordance meaning to run errands, to be an attendant. The daily serving in verse one is that of attending to the needs of the widow. This would certainly include making sure they had enough to eat, but would also include such things as housing, clothing, and other needs. To understand the phrase "serving tables," we need to look at the word "tables." It is the Greek word "trapezo," number 5132, meaning a table which could be a table for eating or a counter for money such as that of a bank or broker. "Serving tables," then, means administering the funds of the community so that everyone's needs are met.

These seven men were to be appointed to the position of a servant or "diakonos" of the community distributing the funds as needed paying particular attention to the needs of the widows and orphans. The English word "deacon" is a transliteration of this word!

The task of taking care of the widows and orphans was an important task. God pays special attention to the care of both widows and orphans.

Deuteronomy 14:29 MKJV 29 And the Levite, because he has no part nor inheritance with you, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, who are inside your gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

The Psalmist describes God as the champion to the widow and orphan.

Psalms 68:4-5 NKJV 4 Sing to God, sing praises to His name; Extol Him who rides on the clouds, By His name YAH, And rejoice before Him. 5 A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, Is God in His holy habitation.

The prophet Isaiah indicts the inhabitants of Jerusalem by stating that they harbored murderers, took bribes and stole from the people. They, also, neglected the care of the fatherless and the widow.

Isaiah 1:23 NKJV 23 Your princes are rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them.

Yeshua chastised the scribes who were charged with the civil administration in the typical Jewish city and the Pharisees for their neglect of these important tenets of the Torah.

Matthew 23:23 NKJV 23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

The twelve set out the qualifications for that of a deacon to be those with a good reputation, filled with the Holy Spirit and having wisdom. Moses set out the qualifications for being a leader to be a man of wisdom and understanding.

Deuteronomy 1:13 NKJV 13 'Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you.'

The multitude of the disciples liked the idea of having men appointed for the purpose of ministering to the needs of the body.

Acts 6:5 NKJV 5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,

They chose seven men who seem to have all been from the Hellenists. The NKJV Study Bible comments on this verse:

All these names are Greek. The selection of Hellenists no doubt was a wise and gracious gesture to the people who had initially raised the complaint concerning the widows.ⁱⁱⁱ

The appointment of these men solved the problem and unity was maintained in the community. God's word continued to spread with power!

Acts 6:7 NKJV 7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

It sometimes surprises us to read that many of the priests were numbered among the disciples. However, the priests as they came to serve in the temple during their two weeks of the year and at the pilgrimage feasts would have observed the faithfulness of the disciples. They would have seen the signs and wonders and heard the testimonies of the apostles. These events happened as the disciples met daily in the temple at Solomon's porch.

The seven were now a part of the leadership of this new sect of Judaism which eventually would be called "The Way." These events took place over time. Most timelines of the Book of Acts place the selection of the seven deacons one to three years after Yeshua's resurrection. In this period of time, Stephen was a visible and outspoken member of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. He regularly engaged the Hellenist Jews in discourse about Yeshua.

Acts 6:8-10 NKJV 8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

The other Hellenists associated with the synagogue of the Freedmen couldn't refute Stephen's words. However, instead of repenting and accepting that Yeshua was the Messiah sent by God for their salvation, these Jews hardened their hearts and plotted to discredit Stephen and those who believed in Yeshua.

Acts 6:11-14 NKJV 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 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."

Stephen was taken before the council based on the testimony of false witnesses. The false witnesses mixed truth with lies. Yeshua did prophesy about the fall of the temple, but so did the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel. In Daniel 9:26 we read:

Daniel 9:26 NKJV 26 "And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; And the people of the prince who is to come Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, And till the end of the war desolations are determined.

However, Yeshua never spoke against Moses. In fact, Yeshua called on Moses as a witness against His detractors.

John 5:45-46 NKJV 45 "Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. 46 "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.

The people who hated Yeshua also had Him arrested and brought before the same council on charges brought by false witnesses.

Mark 14:55-56 NKJV 55 Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. 56 For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree.

It's interesting that Stephen was not attacked or challenged about Yeshua which they had been unable to successfully contest, but about the symbols of the Jewish faith. The NKJV Study Bible comments:

The antagonist stirred up the people by convincing them that the essence of the Jewish faith—the things held as most sacred: the temple, the Law, Moses, and even God—was under attack by Stephen. The issue was not the work of Christ on the Cross but the core of traditional Jewish religion.^{iv}

The charges were serious. Stephen was a visible representative of the community of believers. If he was found guilty, that would open the door for all the Jews, not just the council, to turn against the entire community. Up until this time, Luke states in both Acts 2:47 and Acts 5:13 that the believers were well regarded among the people. These false witnesses had incited the people against Stephen and, by extension, the followers of Yeshua.

How would this new challenge to the faith community be met? As Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, his face was like that of an angel.

Acts 6:15 NKJV 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

In English vernacular, someone who has the face of an angel appears innocent and naïve. This is not how the Bible describes the face of an angel. Samson's mother describes the angel who appeared to her as having a countenance that was terrifying.

Judges 13:6 NKJV 6 And the woman came and told her husband, saying, A man of God came to me, and His face was like the face of an Angel of God, very terrifying. But I did not ask Him where He came from, neither did He tell me His name.

When the members of the council looked at Stephen, it was as if they were confronted by an angel of God, fierce and mighty. It didn't matter whether Stephen was a Hebrew or Hellenist Jew; what mattered was his faith in God and that Yeshua was the Messiah sent by God.

As leaders of the community of believers were brought before the council to answer to charges of spreading false doctrine, as in the case of the apostles, or to charges of blasphemy, as in the case of Stephen, God was faithful. The Holy Spirit gave each of them the words they needed to answer the charges brought against them. The message of Yeshua's coming and of His return could not be stopped!

Study Questions:

1. How did the believers deal with the issue of diverse cultures? How do we deal with this today?
2. Paul talks about the requirements for deacons and elders in his first epistle to Timothy and his epistle to Titus. What qualifications does he recommend for these positions? How do these qualifications line up with those set out by Moses and the Apostles?
3. When Peter and John, and then, the twelve were brought before the council, they were admonished not to teach in the name of Yeshua. Going forward, how did the tactics of the council change (e.g. with Stephen)?
4. The Bible doesn't give much of a description of an angel in the Bible other than the reference in Judges 13:6 that his face was terrifying. What can we infer from about the appearance of angels from the reactions of those who see them?
5. Why do you think so many of the priests came to believe in Yeshua as their Messiah? What are the possible results of so many priests coming to Yeshua?
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 Rabbi Hersch Goldwurm. History of the Jewish People: The Second Temple Era. Mesorah Publications, Ltd. ©1982. Page90

ⁱⁱ The Chronicles of the Apostles. First Fruits of Zion. ©2016 D.T. Lancaster. Page133.

ⁱⁱⁱ NKJV Study Bible. Earl D. Radmacher, ThD. © Thomas Nelson, Inc. 2007. Page 1718.

^{iv} Ibid. Pages 1718-1719.