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## Saint Stephen: A Window on the Past and Future of God's Plan

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## Saint Stephen: A Window on the Past and Future of God's Plan

### Cover Page Footnote

1 Christopher D. Ritcheson, "Saint Stephen: A Window on the Past and Future of God's Plan," *Diligence: Journal of Liberty University Online Capstone in Research and Scholarship*, Vol. , No.

*“His death was occasioned by the faithful manner in which he preached the gospel to the betrayers and murderers of Christ. To such a degree of madness were they excited, that they cast him out of the city and stoned him to death.”*

*-John Foxe (Foxe's Book of Martyrs)<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Saint Stephen is well-known in Christianity for being the first martyr of the fledgling church. He is, unfortunately, known for little else to the average Christian. Stephen's description in the book of Acts, however, makes it clear that he is a servant of special importance. He is described as possessing much grace and power from God, as well as performing wonders and signs and being a powerful speaker (Acts 6:8-10). This arguably places him on the level of an apostle. The speech he gives just prior to his execution is the longest one in Acts and among the longest discourses in the entire New Testament (Acts 7:1-53). Given Stephen's clear importance to the early church, it would be wise to know both his view of Scripture and of Christ, but these are seldom explored at any length. While universally praised for his martyrdom, Stephen's theological contribution is relatively unsung. It is to this purpose that this study aims for a closer look at the proto-martyr. Properly understood, Stephen provides not only a window into early Christian interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures, but

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<sup>1</sup> John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (Boston: Digireads.com Publishing, 2018), 9.

also provides a theological framework that likely influenced the Pauline canon, as well.

## **Stephen's Speech: A Testimony Looking Back**

### **The Immediate Context**

The foundation for understanding Stephen's speech, or any speech, is to place it definitively within the tapestry of history. As for where it took place, that is simple. As Stephen is before the Sanhedrin, accused of “speaking against this holy place” (Acts 6:13), Stephen is clearly in Jerusalem. The time frame is easy to discern, as well. Being soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, but before Christianity had definitively spread out of Judea, Stephen's trial can be placed confidently in the early 30s AD. As for the contexts of speaker and occasion, these require a closer look.

### **Who Was Stephen?**

Stephen is an undeniably large personality who leaves a deep impression within the space of scarcely three pages. It should not be surprising, then, that the brief, but compelling account in Acts has from the earliest days whetted the appetite of readers to know more about the first Christian martyr. Predictably, the gaps in Stephen's story were filled in by legend as the centuries wore on. By the Renaissance, some pious, but outlandish Stephen stories were widely circulating.

Among the most common involved Stephen's mother conceiving him in old age, in the tradition of Sarah bearing Isaac (Gen 21:1-3) and Elizabeth bearing John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-60). In addition, there was a particularly strange, but popular narrative in which Stephen was replaced as an infant by a demonic changeling, and the real baby Stephen survived in the wilderness by being suckled by a doe until he was found by a bishop. The story ends with an adult Stephen returning to the home of his parents and banishing the changeling.<sup>2</sup>

These late folklore traditions notwithstanding, all that can truly be known of Stephen comes from the book of Acts in conjunction with what can be gleaned from its historical and cultural context. Stephen is introduced as one of “the Seven” who are chosen to ensure fair food distribution to the widows (Acts 6:1-5). Because the initial complaint of neglect came from the quarter of the Hellenistic Jews in the church, it would make sense that those chosen to remedy the situation, including Stephen, were all Hellenistic Jews themselves, but that cannot be known for certain. Another popular argument is that Stephen was a Samaritan, on account of his favorable mentions of Shechem (the Samaritans' holy city) and his apparent disdain for the temple in Jerusalem. This hardly seems likely, though, as Stephen's Samaritan status would almost certainly have been

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<sup>2</sup> George Kaftal, "The Fabulous Life of a Saint," *Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 17, no. 2/3 (1973), 296-298, Accessed April 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27652337>.

mentioned just before the very section of Acts which centers on the gospel spreading to Samaria before reaching the “ends of the Earth.” Additionally, Stephen's Scripture citations rely more clearly upon the Septuagint than the Samaritan Pentateuch.<sup>3</sup>

A common question that arises is whether “ the Seven” could properly be called the first deacons of the church. There is certainly a tradition to that effect reaching at least as far back as Eusebius (265-339 AD).<sup>4</sup> That case is also sometimes bolstered by the fact that in Acts 6:1 and 6:2, the Greek words translated as “distribution” and “wait,” *diakonia* and *diakonein*, respectively, are closely related to the word *diakono*i (deacons). Yet, the text stops short of giving these officeholders any title other than “the Seven,” and the words *diakonia* and *diakonein* are not commonly used in any specialized way in the Greek New Testament.<sup>5</sup> Probably, “the Seven” were simply given a temporary position to fulfill a specific need for a specific time. This is borne out further by the fact that by Acts chapter 11, relief money is shown to be placed under custody of the church elders, as a rule.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the office of deacon, as it would eventually be

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3 Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea, ed. *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia: Vol. 2.* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 1623.

4 Eusebius, trans. C.F. Cruze, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2015), 35.

5 John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, ed., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition* (Dallas, TX: SP Publications Inc., 1983), 368.

6 Ibid.

understood, had probably not yet come into existence while Stephen lived.

Despite all this straw-splitting, it is certainly fair to say Stephen and the rest of “the Seven” indeed “laid the foundation for the diaconal order.”<sup>7</sup>

### Famous Last Words

Deacon or no, Stephen is not mentioned in this capacity again after the sentence in which he is introduced. Rather, his roles as a brilliant apologist and a worker of “signs and wonders” come to the fore. He did not do these things without garnering detractors, however. Yet, any who argued with him at the synagogues found themselves defeated by the wisdom he had from the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:8-10). This only made his critics angrier, and they eventually brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin on charges of speaking against the temple and the law of Moses. (Acts 6:12-14). Blasphemy charges were no small matter and when the high priest questioned him, the stakes were high. If the “Righteous One” had not been spared by the Sanhedrin, this servant of Christ could certainly not expect any better. Stephen likely knew that his very life hung in the balance.

### The Themes

What Stephen offered his accusers was not a criminal defense, but a gospel defense. The majority of his speech is a recounting of Israel's history.

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<sup>7</sup> Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 226.

Within the pages of Acts, such rehashing of the Hebrew scriptures is a familiar tune, but what makes this speech brilliant are the notes that Stephen emphasizes and sustains. In what follows, three themes are consistently played upon.

### Rejection of God's Prophets

Stephen begins, as one would expect, with the patriarchal narratives. In doing so, he shows that Israel's rejection of God's prophets goes back even to the fathers of the twelve tribes, when Joseph the seer was sold into slavery by his brothers (Acts 7:10).<sup>8</sup> The next rejected prophet Stephen mentions is Moses. His was a twofold rejection by his own people, both in Egypt and when he received the commandments on Mt. Sinai (Acts 7:23-40). Neither, Stephen says, did Israel honor the prophet that Moses said would come after. When the Righteous One came, the leaders of the Jews had him killed, just like they did to so many of the other prophets (Acts 7:52). With this final rhetorical flourish, Stephen turns the charge of blaspheming Moses back upon his accusers.

### Idolatry

In the course of detailing how Israel's ancestors had turned away from Moses, Stephen is sure to mention what they had turned *toward*: "They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us

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<sup>8</sup> Pfeiffer, Vos, and Rea, *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia: Vol. 2*, 1624.



out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him! That was the time they made an idol in the form of a golden calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made” (Acts 7:40-42 *NIV*)<sup>9</sup> This, Stephen goes on to say, set the tone for all of Israel's wandering from God, which resulted in the literal wandering of the Exile (Acts 7:42-43). There is more in this theme of idolatry yet to unpack, but it is best explored after the introduction of the final theme.

### The Temple's Transitory Role

Carefully planted throughout Stephen's narrative are examples of God revealing himself in places that are not the temple, nor Jerusalem. He begins with Abraham and how God spoke to him in Mesopotamia. He then details how God displayed his power in Egypt through both Joseph and Moses. God also showed himself to Moses in the burning bush near Mt. Sinai and revealed his glory on Mt. Sinai itself. Finally, Stephen reminds his accusers of the tabernacle in the wilderness that first housed the ark of the covenant. Taken together, the point of these allusions could not be clearer: There was a time before God used the temple as the place of his presence, and there is now a time after. God has shown Himself to His people in a new way, a new Incarnation, but they have mostly failed to see.

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<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*.

Israel's position may well have been less perilous before the temple, before they imagined they could compel God to give them His presence by building him a house. Stephen quotes God's words to Isaiah, "Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?' says the Lord. 'Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'" (Acts 7:49-50). The cosmos itself is God's first temple, in a tradition going all the way back to first words of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> The works of masons and carpenters cannot contain his glory.

God pressed Abraham to strike out from the place he knew, and he went faithfully. In contrast, when God pressed Israel to strike out from Egypt, they grumbled against Moses and turned their hearts backward to the land of their captivity. Now, once again, God was calling his people to strike out from the place they knew and toward the unknown, telling them that He was now with them in a new way.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the leaders have rejected this new call. The reason for this is clear in Stephen's mind: Israel has allowed the temple itself to become an idol.

### **Stephen's Overarching View of the Hebrew Scriptures**

One can see from the above just how masterfully Stephen's three central themes are woven through his recounting of Jewish history, sometimes with two

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<sup>10</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 77-85.

<sup>11</sup> Pfeiffer, Vos, and Rea, *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia: Vol. 2*, 1623.

or even all three threads braided together in a single episode of the sequence. The rejection of the prophets, a history of idolatry, and an increasingly malignant attachment to outward religious trappings are all symptoms of the same disease, which Stephen names: “You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51). History has shown their ancestors' habit of turning up their noses at what God has offered and wishing to travel any path but the one God has prepared. Some things never change, according to Stephen. His accusers are still “stiff-necked” (Acts 7:51). Too often, they have been wavering where God was steadfast, and static where God was dynamic. A new thing is now happening, but the leaders hold on to empty symbols. As Stanley D. Toussaint explains, “In God's workings with the nation from Abraham to Solomon there is innovation and change.”<sup>12</sup> And now, says Stephen, the greatest, most important change of all has arrived, a change that the Scriptures pointed to. But just as their ancestors killed those prophets who predicted the coming of Christ, so, Stephen concludes, “...you have betrayed and murdered [Christ]—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it” (Acts 7:52-53). Thus, the accusations against Stephen have resulted in an indictment of his accusers.<sup>13</sup>

### **Stephen's Speech: A Testimony Looking Forward**

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<sup>12</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 369.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon D. Fee & Robert L. Hubbard, ed., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 610.

### **Stephen's Direct Effect on Paul**

Stephen's grasp on the history of God's people also seems to have put him ahead of the curve when it came to the future of God's plan. The occasion of Stephen's stoning and the increased persecution in Jerusalem sets the stage circumstantially for Christianity to spread to greater Judea, Samaria, and then the world, but it is Stephen's speech that sets the stage *theologically*. While Acts credits Philip and Peter with the firstfruits of the Gentile conversions (the Ethiopian of 8:26-40 and Cornelius' household in Chapter 10), it is Stephen's speech that first overtly untethers the concept of "God's people" from the concept of nation. Of course, the mission to the Gentiles would eventually become synonymous with the apostle Paul. It therefore becomes reasonable to ask what connections may be drawn between Stephen and Paul.

#### Saul at Stephen's Stoning

Paul is introduced in Acts under his Hebrew name of Saul at the scene of Stephen's murder. Far from the apostle of Christ he would one day become, Saul wholeheartedly agrees with the killing of Stephen, and even facilitates it by taking the coats of the participants (Acts 7:58). It is also tempting to conjecture whether Saul had encountered Stephen earlier than that, as Acts 6:9-10 tells us that some of the Jews that Stephen had bested in synagogue debates were from the province

of Cilicia. One of the principle towns of Cilicia was Tarsus, Saul's hometown.<sup>14</sup> If Saul himself was not one of those who Stephen had defeated and enraged with his arguments, they at least would have been among Saul's friends. In any case, by the time of Stephen's trial, Saul could tolerate it no longer. These Jesus followers were a cancer, as far as he was concerned. How intolerable all this must have been to Saul is perfectly encapsulated by N.T. Wright:

“...the followers of this Jesus were claiming that he had been raised from the dead. They were talking as if heaven and earth were somehow joined together in *him*, in this crazy, dangerous, deluded man! They were speaking as if, by comparison with this Jesus, the ancient institutions of Israel were on a lower footing. The Temple itself, Stephen was saying, was only a temporary expedient...Stephen, on trial for his life, made matters worse. 'Look!' he shouted. 'I can see heaven opened, and the son of man standing at God's right hand!'...Blasphemy! The court had heard enough. Stephen was rushed out of the city and crushed to death under a hail of rocks. Saul approved. This was the kind of action the Torah required...”<sup>15</sup>

If Saul had assumed that this execution meant the end of the Jesus movement, he was soon disappointed. The cancer was still spreading, but Saul knew what to do. He went in search of Christians, dragged them from their homes, and threw them into prison (Acts 8:3). He even went so far as receiving the high priest's permission to take Syrian Christians back to Jerusalem as prisoners (Acts 9:1-3), but a funny thing happened on the road to Damascus. Just

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<sup>14</sup> “Note: Acts 6:9” in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1835.

<sup>15</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 38.

as Jesus had appeared to Stephen, he would next appear to Saul (Acts 9:4-6).

### Stephen's Speech and Paul's Epistles

Saul's encounter with the risen Christ famously changed the course of his life in an instant, and he would soon be better known as Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. He went about growing the church with every ounce of the zeal he had once poured into destroying it. Paul's letters to the early churches make up the largest part of the New Testament. Yet the memory of Stephen's trial and the aftermath still hung over Paul more than twenty years later when he wrote, "...I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am..." (1 Cor 15:9-10).

In addition to remembering Stephen's death, a strong case may be made that Paul remembered Stephen's words while crafting his own. Even within Acts it can be seen that Paul must often have used words to similar effect. Compare the charges made against Stephen with those made against Paul in Jerusalem during his third missionary journey.

For Stephen: "...This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law" (Acts 6:13).

For Paul: "...This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place..." (Acts 21:28).

A close look at the wording of Paul's letters further bears out this similarity. Nearly every time Paul speaks of temple theology, he makes a single point. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul says, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in your midst?" Again, in his very next sentence, "...for God's temple is sacred and you together are that temple" (1 Cor 3:17). Yet again, in 2 Corinthians 6:16, "...For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'" And finally, there is this masterstroke to the Ephesians:

"...you are no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:19-22).

The overall effect is unmistakable. Paul is fleshing out the implications of what Stephen had already laid out: God is doing a new thing. God was never limited to one nation or one building, and now Christ and his body, the believers,

wherever they might be, are the dwelling place of God. As in the beginning, the whole Creation is to be God's temple. The old distinctions are passing away: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

It is also easy to see why Paul would be accused, like Stephen, of speaking against the law and Moses, for Paul, too, takes the view that the law of Moses was to serve a specific purpose for a specific time, but was altogether insufficient for bringing final righteousness. “...the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (Gal 3:24-25). The promise of God to Abraham was before the Law and was fulfilled through Jesus, despite Israel's failure to keep the Law (Gal 3:15-22). Therefore, “...what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son...” (Rom 8:3). As Paul goes on to argue in Romans 9:30—10:4, Israel rejected their Messiah, the stumbling stone of Isaiah that would become the cornerstone, not because the law was evil, but because they pursued the law in the wrong way,—not through faith in the one who gave it, but as though they could supply their own righteousness through works.<sup>16</sup> As a result, they could not conceive of a grace through faith which was to be offered to all. Paul charges, just as Stephen did, that the idol of

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<sup>16</sup> Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 210-211.



tradition has caused them to resist the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

It has been shown that Stephen, speaking as he did and when he did, serves as a historical and theological gateway through which Judaism opens out into Christian doctrine and the mission to the Gentiles. The mark he left on Paul, just a young man when he abetted Stephen's murder, was indelible, both in terms of the regret he felt and in the themes he would build upon in the course of his ministry and his *own* eventual martyrdom. When Stephen is spoken of, his status as protomartyr should certainly be remembered, but he is a prototype of something else, as well: the gospel of a worldwide church.

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