

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 7:1-8

As we return to the Book of Acts, we will look at Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin. This is, by far, one of the longest speeches in the entire New Testament.

At the outset let me say that the Sanhedrin could not have expected this remarkable account from someone who wasn't even one of Jesus' original apostles. If they thought the apostles were "unschooled" in the Torah, what must they have thought about Stephen?

Now before we dive into Stephen's defense, let me give you the "lay of the land". Stephen's outline is brilliant. He takes four major epochs of Israel's history and uses them to bring the Sanhedrin to a logical conclusion.

In verses 2-8, he reminds the Sanhedrin of Abraham and the patriarchal era. In verses 9-19 he covers Joseph and Israel's Egyptian bondage. In verses 20-44 he outlines the leadership of Moses, as well as the Exodus and Wilderness wanderings. Finally, in verses 45-50 He covers David, Solomon, and the start of Israel's monarchy.

As F.F. Bruce points out, if there is anything that connects all these eras, it is that "God's presence was not limited to any particular place. On the contrary, the God of the Old Testament was the living God, a God on the move and on the march, who was always calling his people out to fresh adventures, and always accompanying and directing them as they went."

With this in mind, let's start with Stephen's first account of Abraham's calling and history in verses 2-8. Let's read verses 2-3:

“Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’

The immediate implication of Stephen’s speech is that it is a historical summary – something that the entire Sanhedrin would have been familiar with. As others have noted, it was common practice for the Rabbis to point to God’s past interventions to prove God’s direct involvement in Israel’s history. It was, in effect, a proof of the Jews’ special place in divine providence.

Stephen begins, therefore with Abraham – as he was the undisputed “Father” of Israel. He reminds the Sanhedrin that Abraham began in Mesopotamia, far from the Promised Land. Notice the opening words of Stephen’s outline of Abraham’s experience:

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’”

The first thing he points to is “The God of Glory” appearing to Abraham. This designation is one of God’s titles throughout the Old and New Testament and is extended to Christ as well. For example,

- Psalm 29:3 says,

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; **the God of glory** thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.”

- Ephesians 1:17 says,

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, **the glorious Father**, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better

- 1Corinthians 2:8 tells us, “None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified **the Lord of glory**.”

In relation to Abraham, what would cause him to leave his place in Ur of the Chaldees to travel hundreds of miles to a place he knew little to nothing about? Stephen gives us the answer. He tells us that the “God of Glory” appeared to him and instructed him to leave his homeland and his family in pursuit of Canaan.

I want you to notice that Stephen’s defense is, in effect, Spirit-centric. Whereas Peter’s messages, up to this point, have been quite Christ-centric, Stephen is going to point to the Holy Spirit in each of the four eras he outlines. It was the God of Glory who called Abraham and sent him to Palestine.

F.F. Bruce makes this comment on that: “It was the God of glory who appeared to him and summoned him to embark on the path of faith, and the use of that title implies that God manifested himself to Abraham in glory so compelling that Abraham had no option but to obey.”

- F.F. Bruce

As Bruce is noting, Abraham’s encounter with the God of Glory was so pronounced, his obedience was never in question. It was one of those moments when no doubts existed as to God’s clear purposes and directions.

One of the underlying themes then, is this: Anyone who clearly hears the Spirit’s voice will be willing to leave anything behind in order to be fully obedient to God.

Let's read verses 4-5:

“So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.

As Stephen describes Abraham's movements, he notes that he left “the land of the Chaldeans” and settled in Harran. He uses “the land of the Chaldeans” as a synonym for Mesopotamia. It's also interesting that the Genesis 11 account has Abraham's father, Terah, settling his family in Harran. It states:

“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.”

If you look at the Genesis 11 account, it seems that Terah originally intended to go to the area of Canaan but stopped short of it when he came to Harran. We wonder if Terah had received some insight but failed to follow through. Abraham, however, did not.

Geographically, Harran was located in the upper Euphrates valley, at the intersection of some important caravan trade routes that were prosperous around 20 B.C.

Abraham stayed in Harran until the death of Terah. After that, he began the journey to Canaan. Stephen particularly cites the fact that God did not give Abraham an actual property in Canaan. Instead, he lived the rest of his life as an alien.

It reminds us of what Hebrews 11:39-40 says of the heroes of faith:

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

The only parcel of land that Abraham ever owned was the place where he buried Sarah. Beyond that, the real promise of possession belonged to his descendants. Stephen reminds us that Abraham had no children at the time God promised him Canaan. He is indicating the faith that Abraham had in God – that although he presently had no children, he believed God’s promises and acted upon them.

Let’s read verses 6-8:

“God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’

Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

Stephen moves ahead in Abraham’s story to relay the revelation that God gave him concerning the nation that would come from him and Sarah. Abraham was warned that, although God had promised the land of Canaan to him and his descendants, even that promise would not have an immediate fulfillment. Instead, they would serve

another nation for 400 years before being released to worship God in the Promised Land.

Rounding out the segment on Abraham, Stephen notes the all-important indication of the covenant: circumcision. He records,

“Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.”

The rite of circumcision permanently marked Abraham and all his descendants as belonging to Yahweh. By the way, other ancient societies practiced circumcision – but only the Israelites regarded it as the physical token of their unique relationship to Yahweh.

The oldest known depiction of circumcision comes from a bas-relief in the necropolis at Saqqara, Egypt. It dates to 2400 BC. It was performed on young boys as a ritual for the transition from boyhood to manhood. Around 100 years later, an Egyptian named Uha described his circumcision along with many others.

The Greek historian Herodotus, known as the “Father Of History”, travelled widely gathering information on other civilizations. This is what he recorded:

“...The Colchians (near the Black Sea), the Egyptians, and the Ethiopians are the only races which from ancient times have practiced circumcision. The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine themselves admit that they learned the practice from Egypt...and the Syrians...as well as their neighbors the Macronians (in Greece), say that they learned it only a short time ago from the Colchians (Black Sea inhabitants) No other nations use

circumcision, and all those who do are without doubt following the Egyptian lead.”

For Abraham’s descendants, the outward sign of the covenant God made with him became far more than a ritualistic mark. It became the very identity of Jewish inclusion. Stephen indicates that Abraham’s obedience in this matter was a further proof of his faith in Yahweh.

He records the continuity of Abraham’s obedience by saying, “Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.”

Stephen is citing the continuity of this covenant mark, as he rehearses how one man became the ancestral father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

In summarizing this section, it is apparent that Stephen is underlining the fact that everything that happened to Abraham and his descendants was a result of God’s direct intervention.

As John Stott notes, “It was God who appeared, spoke, sent, promised, punished, and rescued. From Ur to Haran, from Haran to Canaan, from Canaan to Egypt, from Egypt back to Canaan again, God was directing each stage of his people’s pilgrimage.” – John Stott

Stephen is emphasizing that God was directing Abraham and his people throughout their migration from the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia to the Euphrates to the Nile, and finally back to Canaan.

God was with them, not because they were such a special race of humans, but because of the covenant he made with Abraham and the promises he gave him. The

covenant, the sign of circumcision, and the future promises all marked out God's people.

To further explain the importance of Stephen's initial recounting of history, all of this took place long before God established the Law of Moses or Tabernacle worship. As one scholar put it, "Long before there was a holy place, there was a holy people, to whom God had pledged himself."

Let's keep track of that thought as we move forward in Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin, because it represents the crux of what he is going to say to them at his conclusion.

"Long before there was a holy place, there was a holy people, to whom God had pledged himself."

In preparation for the next block of history, Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that God kept renewing his promises to Abraham and his progeny finally emerged. He renewed those promises to Abraham's son, Isaac, to his grandson Jacob, to his great-grandsons - the twelve patriarchs.

Next, Stephen will turn from Abraham to Joseph, the second great figure of the Old Testament he wants to examine.