

The Book Of Acts: Verse by Verse

Acts 7:44-53

As we return to our study, we find that Stephen has outlined the consistent pattern of idolatry on the part of the ancient Israelites. We saw how he quoted Amos 5, specifically noting their worship of Molech and Rephan.

It's at this point that Stephen turns his attention to the worship of the Tabernacle and the conquest of Canaan. Let's read verses 44-46:

“Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them.

With those words, Stephen has now begun reminding the Sanhedrin of a fourth epoch of Israel's history. This final time frame covers the settlement of the Promised Land and the establishment of the monarchy.

As will become apparent, Israel's worship structure is mentioned – specifically, that of the Tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings.

There are a couple of initial points we should note here. Stephen has portrayed the idolatry of the ancient Israelites in their worship of the Canaanite god of Molech and the Babylonian Saturn-god, Rephan.

Why does he now refer to the Old Testament Tabernacle? F.F. Bruce makes this statement:

“Had the people of Israel no sanctuary in the wilderness, no reminder of the presence of God in their midst, that they should so unaccountably and so quickly forget him and lapse into idolatry? Yes indeed, says Stephen; they had the ‘tent of the testimony’”. -F. F. Bruce

It might not be immediately apparent, but Stephen is zeroing in on Israel’s historic cycles of Yahweh worship and idol worship. That’s going to be clear when we get to verse 51.

The Tabernacle, also called the “Tent of Testimony” was the center of Yahweh worship. It was a singular edifice. Why is it sometimes called the “Tent of Testimony”? It’s because it housed the second set of stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. These tablets were collectively called “The Testimony”.

In a similar vein, the Ark of the Covenant was also referred to as the “Ark of the Testimony”.

Now the Tabernacle or “Tent of Testimony” was a unique edifice in every respect. It was not conceptualized by humans nor constructed according to human plans. It was literally the only tent on planet earth that was designed by God. Let that sink in a minute. God himself designed the Tabernacle.

Hebrews 8:1-5 punctuates this reality. Let me read it from the New Living Translation:

We have a High Priest who sat down in the place of honor beside the throne of the majestic God in

heaven. 2 There he ministers in the heavenly Tabernacle, the true place of worship that was built by the Lord and not by human hands.

3 And since every high priest is required to offer gifts and sacrifices, our High Priest must make an offering, too. 4 If he were here on earth, he would not even be a priest, since there already are priests who offer the gifts required by the law. 5 They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: “Be sure that you make everything according to the pattern I have shown you here on the mountain.” – Hebrews 8:1-5

The writer of Hebrews puts special emphasis on the fact that the earthly tabernacle is an exact duplicate of the heavenly sanctuary, which as he puts it, “was not set up by man but by the Lord”.

A study of Hebrews will show you that it details every aspect of the Tabernacle’s construction, its purposes, and its typological significance. In his defense, Stephen is intentionally silent these things. He only mentions the wilderness sacrifices made to idols.

So, Stephen is not glorying in the Old Testament Tabernacle or the worship of Yahweh that took place in its confines. Just the opposite is true: He’s pointing out ancient Israel’s rebellion. He saying, “Look, our forefathers had the very center of Yahweh worship in the middle of their camp, but what did they choose to do? The worshipped pagan gods instead of Yahweh.”

That’s the first point of Stephen’s recitation of the Tabernacle and the wilderness wanderings. But there is

a second, and to some point, larger argument Stephen wants to make. Let's read verses 46-50:

“It (the Tabernacle) remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

48 “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: 49 ““Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?’

Stephen recounts the story of how the Israelites eventually transitioned from the Tabernacle to the Temple – but it doesn't end there. He's about to bring home the entire message he wants the Sanhedrin to hear.

Let's remind ourselves that the hired witnesses claimed that Stephen was “always speaking against the Temple” and that he claimed Jesus would destroy it and replace the Jews system of worship. As I have already noted, part of this is true, while part of it is false.

Why is Stephen detailing the progression from Tabernacle to Temple? He has a couple of reasons. First, he is defending himself against the charges that he was “Anti-Temple”. He shows that he is fully versed in the history and importance of the Tabernacle and, later, Solomon's Temple.

Stephen acknowledges the importance of the Tabernacle and the Temple. He notes that, once the

Israelites had conquered the Canaanites, they set up the Tabernacle as the very central feature of their worship. He acknowledges that the Tabernacle was of God's design and God had his own purposes for it.

But then, Stephen begins to outline the transitory nature of both the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. Let's quickly trace the journeys of the Tabernacle and then talk about the Temple.

Throughout the Israelites time in the desert, the tabernacle was set up in the very center of camp, with the 12 tribes encamped around it. Depending on God's directions, the tabernacle was constantly moved.

Its design allowed for all of its parts to be packed into ox-carts and transported to the next location. Only the ark of the covenant was hand-carried by Levites after being covered to preclude the Israelites' curiosity.

If we look at the tabernacle's journeys, we find it began at Sinai, and later stood at Kadesh for 35 years. After Joshua and the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the tabernacle stood at Gilgal for seven years.

Its next home was Shiloh, its longest location. It stood there some 369 years, until the time of the Judges. It was later set up in Nob and Gibeon.

When King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, the Tabernacle remained at Gibeon. From that point forward, the Tabernacle was separated from the Ark of the Covenant.

We do not know what happened to the Tabernacle. There are mentions that the furnishings were retained. 2 Chronicles 5:1 records:

“So all the work that Solomon had done for the house of the LORD was finished; and Solomon brought in the things which his father David had dedicated: the silver and the gold and all the furnishings. And he put them in the treasuries of the house of God.”

As to the Tabernacle proper, there is no record of what happened to it. While several theories have been offered, it has never been found.

The Tabernacle, then, had its season. But then, something changed. After David had conquered his enemies both inside and outside of Canaan, he wanted to provide a permanent, and much more elaborate, place for the Ark of the Covenant.

If you've read the story, you know that David had completed his royal palace – an extremely expensive and elaborate edifice. When he looked at the Ark of the Covenant housed in a fabric tent, it bothered him.

He thought the Ark of the Covenant – the very symbol of God's presence in Israel – ought to be housed in a building that better represented its prominence.

David shared his thoughts with the prophet Nathan, who initially encouraged his idea. However, shortly afterwards, God gave Nathan some very specific directions. Here's what he said:

“Go and tell my servant David ... ‘Will you build a house for me to live in? From the time I brought the Israelites out

of Egypt until now I have not lived in a house. I have been moving around all this time with a tent as my home. As I have moved with the Israelites, I have never said to the tribes, whom I commanded to take care of my people Israel, “Why haven’t you built me a house of cedar?” ... When you die and join your ancestors, I will make one of your sons the next king, and I will set up his kingdom. He will build a house for me, and I will let his kingdom rule always. - 2 Samuel 7:4-7; 12-13

There’s a bit of irony in that passage. David is proposing to build a house for God ... but God tells him “no”. But then, God tells David he will build David’s house – meaning he would establish David’s dynasty in perpetuity.

Now keep following this progression. David draws up the architectural plans for the house he wants to build for God, but he leaves it to Solomon to do the actual construction.

Cost estimates put Solomon’s Temple in the range of 130-190 billion dollars in today’s currency. That cost totally eclipses the estimate of 13 million dollars spent to construct the Tabernacle and its furnishings.

Solomon built the First Temple at around 1000 BC. It stood for 414 years, until it was destroyed in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem. There are scant remains of the temple on the south hill of the City of David.

Evidence of the conquering and destruction of the city can be found in what are known as the “Burnt House” and the “House of the Bullae”. Bullae refer to clay seal impressions.

After the destruction of Solomon's Temple, there was a period of some 70 years before the construction of what we now call "The Second Temple".

The Second Temple was built sometime around 516 B.C., under the leadership of Ezra and Zerubbabel. This took place following the Babylonian exile. Because Judah did not have the financial resources Solomon possessed, it was built on a much smaller scale.

That said, the Second Temple did survive much longer than the first one. It stood nearly 585 years.

The numbering of the Temples can be confusing. Were there two or three Temples? The answer lies in the fact that the Second Temple was greatly expanded under the Herod the Great. You need to know a little about him for this to make sense.

In 40 A.D., Herod was given the title "King of the Jews" by the Roman senate. This set off a series of conflicts because the Jews already had a king - Antigonus, who was from the old, royal Hasmonean family.

There was a second problem with giving Herod the title, "King of the Jews: Herod was only "half-Jewish". His father was an Idumean - meaning he came from the ancient region of Edom, south of Judea. Herod's father had converted to Judaism before he married Cypros, an Arab princess.

Just before Herod's coronation in Rome, Antigonus, backed by the Parthians, Rome's enemy in the east, conquered Jerusalem, which sent Herod on the flight out of the country.

Deprived of his army, friends, and family, Herod threw his allegiance to Rome. The Romans, meantime, were looking for a strong leader who roll back the Parthians and reconquer Israel.

These situations converged when the Roman Senate conferred upon Herod his new title of “King of the Jews”. Just to show you how convoluted the situation was, Herod’s first act as king was to climb the steps to the temple of Jupiter in the Roman forum, offer a sacrifice, and pledge his loyalty to Rome.

It would take Herod three years and a violent battle before he conquered Jerusalem in 37 A.D. As part of an appeasement campaign, Herod procured the financing necessary to make such massive improvements and expansions of the Second Temple that it was called, “Herod’s Temple”.

This is the temple that Jesus visited and taught in its courts. It is the Temple where the apostles preached the gospel and did miracles. It stood for 585 years until it was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans under the command of Titus.

Knowing this information helps us better understand what Stephen is getting at in verses 48-50 when he tells the Sanhedrin,

“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: ““Heaven is my throne, and the 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?’”

As I noted, Stephen is not “Anti-Temple”. That’s a large point of his historical recollection of the Tabernacle and Temple. He’s not suggesting that building either edifice for sacrifices, worship, and to house the Ark of Covenant was wrong. In fact, God designed the first house of worship and approved of the second.

So, what is Stephen’s point? He’s telling the Sanhedrin that neither the Tabernacle nor Temple was ever designed to “house” God. As one commentator put it, “They should never have been regarded as in any literal sense God’s home.” That’s because the Most High does not live in houses made by men.

That’s the same thing Paul would say to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:24. He said: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” - Acts 17:24

In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees and Sadducees were famous for their constant refrain, “The Temple, The Temple, The Temple”. It was as if they believed that God could be contained in a building like some finite human. Stephen is attacking their false notion because it lay at the root of Jewish exceptionalism.

Oddly enough, Solomon had already grasped the limitations of the Temple right after its completion. Listen to his prayer in 1 Kings 8:27 from the Contemporary English Version: “There’s not enough room in all of heaven for you, LORD God. How could you possibly live on earth in this temple I have built?” - 1 Kings 8:27

Stephen could have effectively used Solomon's own words in his defense. Instead, he cited Isaiah 66:1–2 where God says:

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that? Could you build me such a resting place? My hands have made both heaven and earth; they and everything in them are mine.” - Isaiah 66:1–2

I think F.F. Bruce really makes this clear to us when he writes: “The gods of the heathen might be accommodated in material shrines, but not God Most High. The contrast between what is “made with hands” and what is “not made with hands” is a prominent feature in the primitive catechesis of the New Testament and early Christian apologetic.”- F. F. Bruce

Let's tie all this together now. Throughout his defense, Stephen has been working towards a single thesis. As one scholar put it, “A single thread runs right through the first part of his defense.” Here it is:

The God of Israel is a pilgrim God, who is not restricted to any one place. Let me remind you of how Stephen has outlined this reality:

- In verse 2 he notes that the “God of Glory” appeared to Abraham while he was still in heathen Mesopotamia.
- In verse 9 he references the fact that God was with Joseph even when he was a slave in Egypt.

- In verses 30 and 33 He references how God met Moses in the flames of a bush in the desert of pagan Midian – and called it “holy ground”.
- In verse 44 Stephen recounts how God moved from place to place with his people in the howling wilderness.
- Finally, in verse 48 Stephen pointedly states, “The Most High God does not live in houses made by men”.

While Stephen’s opponents – including the Sanhedrin – acted as if Yahweh was their exclusive God, who lived exclusively within the confines of the Temple, their Jewish exclusivism denied the truth.

Stephen makes it clear from the Scriptures that God’s presence cannot be localized. No building – whether as humble as the Tabernacle or as elaborate and costly as the Temple can either hold him or confine him.

If God has any home on earth, it’s within the hearts of His people. And that pledge is not limited to the Old Testament covenant. In a very real sense, wherever God’s people are – He is there as well.

Next Time: Stephen is martyred.