

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 7:9-16

Before we dive back into Stephen's defense, let me remind you of the "lay of the land". Stephen details four major epochs of Israel's history.

- 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.

Last time, we saw Stephen's account of Abraham and the patriarchal era. This time, starting at verse 9, we see his description of Joseph and Israel's Egyptian bondage.

Let's start reading by reading verses 9-10:

"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace."

Because Stephen wants to lead his hearers to some conclusions about the Temple and Christ's Lordship, he necessarily truncates much of the history he references.

F.F. Bruce notes that, "If Mesopotamia was the surprising context in which God appeared to Abraham, Egypt was

the equally surprising scene of God's dealings with Joseph." – F.F. Bruce

There are many ways to emphasize a theme. In Stephen's case, he uses the word "Egypt" six times in seven verses.

He is repeating the word, "Egypt" for a reason: He wants the Sanhedrin to remember clearly that Egypt was, in fact, the place that God referred to when he told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers and slaves in a "country [that was] not their own".

Let me note a couple of things at the outset. Because Stephen in truncating the account, he has Joseph's brother's selling him to Egypt. Actually, there was a step in between Joseph's home and Potiphar's household. Let's look at Genesis 37:26-28

"Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt."

Stephen has left out the fact that Joseph's brothers initially sold him to Midianite merchants. Did you notice that the words Midianites and Ishmaelites are both used in Genesis 37? That can be confusing at first, because the text makes these two groups appear to be separate.

The same issue will emerge in Genesis 39 and Judges 8. In Genesis 39 it states, "Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of

Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.”- Genesis 39:1

So what's the deal with the terms Ishmaelites and Midianites? While these appear to be two distinctively different groups of people, they aren't.

If we go back to Abraham's day, we find that Ishmael was born to Hagar - Sarah's Egyptian servant (Genesis 16:1-6). Because of God's covenant with Abraham, Ishmael was blessed with many descendants. He had twelve sons and was the father to the nomadic tribes in the north (Gen. 25:12-18).

That alone is fascinating. Both Jacob and Ishmael would be the progenitor of 12 tribes.

The Scriptures do not mention any Ishmaelite. It only reference Ishmaelite princes. In addition, they also do not indicate any national boundaries for Midianites. As such, anyone who was from Midian could also be referred to as an Ishmaelite.

Midian was to Abraham and his concubine named Keturah. This happened after Sarah's death recorded in Genesis 25:2-4. Midian's descendants did have some kings (See: Numbers 31:8) and resided near Moab. The Ishmaelites who lived with the Midianites were considered Midianites.

The Scriptures then, represent these two groups, the Ishmaelites and the Midianites as a nation within a nation with a common ancestral patriarch – Abraham.

That's one part of the story I wanted to point out. There's a second one as well. Let's notice that it is the Ishmaelites/Midianites who purchase Joseph from his brothers. There is a hint on the ongoing conflict between

Abraham's two families. Joseph is Abraham's descendant through Sarah, whereas the Ishmaelites are Abraham's descendants through Hagar.

Once again, Ishmael's family is persecuting Isaac's family – this time by purchasing Joseph.

Let's return to Stephen's account. In verse 9-10 he says, "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace."

I think Stephen chose to chronicle Joseph's problems because he had the end of his defense in mind. It wasn't arbitrary, it was quite intentional. I'll show you why I think that in just a moment.

Stephen begins by recalling how Joseph's brothers hated him because they were jealous of him. So what did they do? They sold him to the Midianite merchants for twenty shekels of silver.

Let's pause there for a second while I ask this question: "What did Judas receive from the high priest for betraying Jesus?" Wasn't it 20 pieces of silver?

Knowing that, consider what Stephen is doing. He's telling the story of Joseph, but it's really part of the backdrop to the story of Jesus. There are several similarities in those two stories.

Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. John MacArthur describes them as, "conniving, corrupt, [and] evil." Joseph is sold for a cheap price, suffers, and is later elevated by God in order to deliver his family.

Consider this: Despite what Joseph's brothers did, Joseph was God's choice to be Israel's deliverer. Verse 10 tells us that after he suffered severe afflictions, God rescued him and gave him such favor with Pharaoh he ended up as the second most powerful man in Egypt.

Do you see a parallel to Jesus' own experience? Jesus was betrayed by Judas and subsequently suffered severe afflictions by the hands of the Romans. He too, was elevated by God, and made "Lord of All". The rejected One turned out to be Israel's Savior.

What is Stephen telling the Sanhedrin? He's telling them that the history of Israel's fathers, including the Sanhedrin, is that of failing to recognize God's choice of Saviors among them. Joseph's brothers rejected him, while the Sanhedrin rejected Jesus.

Let's continue with verses 11-16:

"Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money."

Joseph's suffering and ultimate ascendancy turned out to be God's path to preserve Jacob's family – which now numbered some 70, or 75, if we include Joseph's children.

Once again, Egypt figures prominently in the story. Altogether, Stephen will outline the three visits to Egypt by Joseph's brothers. The first to get grain, the second when Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and the third when Jacob and his entire family came to see Joseph.

Stephen recalls how Jacob sent his sons – which Stephen purposely identifies as “our forefathers” – to Egypt to secure grain.

Jacob, of course, did not realize that Joseph was even alive. His sons had told him Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Jacob never questioned their account – so he assumed Joseph was dead.

On the first visit, Joseph immediately recognized his brothers, but hid his identity from them. He accused them of being spies and demanded that they leave one of their brothers with him, and return with the youngest brother, Benjamin.

When the brothers returned with Benjamin, it was only then that Joseph revealed his identity to them. As John Stott points out, “They were forced to acknowledge him as their deliverer.”

Now there is an interesting suggestion that has been made by some scholars. They suggest that Stephen may be telling this story about Joseph as a kind of allegory. John Stott, for example, regards Joseph's story as a parallel to Christ.

Just as Joseph was only recognized the second time, the same may be true of Christ and the Jews. Perhaps, at Jesus' Second Coming His own people will be forced to acknowledge him as their Savior.

Joseph's story results in somewhat of a reconciliation of Joseph's brothers to him. After Jacob died, this is what Joseph told his brothers:

“Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.” – Genesis 50:19-21

Stephen now rounds out Joseph's story as he relays these statements in verses 15-16:

“Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16 Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.”

There is a difference in the numbers of Jacob's family that moved to Egypt. The Greek Old Testament says 75 persons in total, whereas the Hebrew Old Testament lists 70. The difference is found in whether or not Joseph's own family is counted in the census.

Stephen finishes this section by noting that Jacob and his sons died in due course, but he also indicates that none of them were permanently buried in Egypt. He is, of course, noting the promise that God made to Abraham and his descendants of the Promised Land.

One of the reasons that Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin of the two tombs of the patriarchs located in Canaan is that he is showing how these tombs were tokens of God's promises. Even if Jacob and his sons died in Egypt, they were buried in what would become the Promised Land.

There is another picture of this related directly to Joseph. Exodus 13:19 tells us that when the Israelites left Egypt ... “Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear to do this. He said, “God will certainly come to help you. When he does, you must take my bones with you from this place.” – Exodus 13:19

Joshua 24 furthers the account of Joseph’s final burial when it records, “And the bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up out of Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the plot of land that Jacob had purchased from the sons of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for a hundred pieces of silver. So it became an inheritance for Joseph’s descendants.” – Joshua 24:32

Next time, we will look at Stephen’s account of Moses and the Exodus.