

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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Stephen is a transitional figure in the story of the beginnings of Christianity. He and the other of the seven chosen to serve the Greek-speaking Christians were a part of a community of Hellenistic synagogues called the Libertines (the non-traditionals); one of five such synagogues located in Jerusalem. Stephen can be called “transitional” in that he marks the beginning of a change of emphasis with reference to the growth of Christianity in this early period. To this point, the evangelistic activity has been focused in the homeland of Israel. Here we see the presence of an established community of Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem. Further, in chapter 8, Philip, another of the seven, takes the message of the coming of the Messiah/Christ to Samaria. It is also of significance that among the contingent of Hellenistic Jews living in Jerusalem was Saul of Tarsus, who becomes the apostle to the Jews of the Dispersion throughout of the Greco-Roman world as well as the *ethnoi*, the nations or gentiles.

There was a controversy among the Diaspora Jews of the concerning the essentiality of the Temple and priesthood to the faithful practice of Judaism. Some Jews of the Diaspora, especially in Egypt, insisted that the Torah was the dwelling place of God in this world rather than the Temple; especially since the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant was missing, and this was the place where God dwelt in the Temple of Solomon. This was also the view taken by the rabbinic community following the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD; and curiously, this is the position of Orthodox and Reformed Judaism today.

This controversy comes through clearly in Stephen's speech in which he confronts Israel with the fact that God had repeatedly sent saviors to reveal his will to them and they consistently rejected them. It is interesting to note that this speech has a great deal in common with the theology expressed in the letters of Paul.

The argument presented by Stephen is found in the account of the history of Israel and is so intricate and subtle in nature that it is given here in a different format than the other lessons of this series. The text is given in italics with the commentary given in brackets [] in a script font.

Introduction of Stephen: Acts 6:8-15

And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9: Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Libertines (non-traditionalists), and of the Cyre'nians (of North Africa), and of the Alexandrians (Egypt) and of those from Cili'cia (North of Syria - Paul's home) and Asia Minor (the land across the northern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea), arose and disputed with Stephen. [The repeat of coordinating conjunctions with the genitive case would indicate that these were all separate Hellenistic synagogues - five in all - gathered here together in a joint attack on Stephen. Saul of Tarsus, from Cilicia, was very likely right in the middle of it all].

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. 11: Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12: And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13: and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place [the Temple was believed by Palestinian Judaism, especially the Jerusalemites, to be the dwelling place of God on earth] and the law [the Torah also represented the presence of God in the absence of the Ark of the Covenant] 14: for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth

[this designation is used consistently to speak of the historical Jesus who came from Nazareth in Galilee] will destroy this place *[no doubt a reference to Jesus' prediction of Matthew 24:1-35, which the apostles had most probably repeated to the community of believers]* and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us," *[if Jesus was being confessed as "Lord," the very designation of God, a title Moses never wore, then Jesus was greater than Moses as well as his words, as he expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:17-6:48), were to be taken as more authoritative than the words of Moses]*. 15: And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel *[was this a transfiguration like appearance?]*.

Stephen's Sermon (7:1-60)

God's Saviors and Israel's Rejection

And the high priest said, "Is this so?" 2: And Stephen said: "Brethren and fathers *[the elders of Israel]* hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham *[the primary patriarchal figure - Matt 3:9, "We have Abraham as our father," and John 8:33, "We are Abraham's descendents"]* when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran *[on the Euphrates River in what was later Assyria]*, 3: and said to him, 'Depart from your land and from your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' 4: Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans *[Babylon]*, and lived in Haran and after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living *[Palestine proper]*; 5: yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him in possession and to his posterity *[his heirs]* after him, though he had no child *[Genesis 17]* 6: And God spoke to this effect, that his posterity would be aliens in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and

ill-treat them four hundred years. 7: 'But I will judge the nation which they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place *[the exodus]*.

Stephen was here attempting to show that Jerusalem and the Temple could not be the exclusive abode of God in that he appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia over 1,000 miles away from Jerusalem. God was not limited to the Holy of Holies inside the sanctuary of the Temple in the city of Jerusalem. It is reported that when the Roman General Pompey and his army entered Jerusalem in 63 BC, he entered into the Holy of Holies in the Temple to see the dwelling place of the God of Israel, but the ten by ten room was empty. There was not even a statue or artifact of God, which was completely baffling to Pompey (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.9; cf. Michael Green, *The Evangelism of the Early Church*, Revised edition, 2003, p 43).

Joseph: First Savior and Israel's Rejection (7:1-19)

And he gave him the covenant of circumcision *[the act that made a Jewish male an authentic Jew]* and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. 9: "And the patriarchs *[the forefathers of these very people]*, jealous of Joseph *[the first deliverer or savior figure of the case Stephen is presenting]*, sold him into Egypt *[they made him as one dead to his father]*; but God was with him, 10: and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him governor over Egypt and over all his household. 11: Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. 12: But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent forth our fathers the first time. 13: And at the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh *[Joseph became the savior of the heirs of Abraham]*, and Joseph sent and called to him Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five souls; 15: and Jacob went down into Egypt. And he

died, himself and our fathers, 16: and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. 17: "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt 18: till there arose over Egypt another king who had not known Joseph. 19: He dealt craftily with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants [*Exodus 1:22, in the LXX, says that Pharaoh ordered the Hebrews to throw every male child born to them into the Nile*] that they might not be kept alive.

Here Stephen argues that God was with Joseph in Egypt. Stephen argues that the tabernacle, and later the temple, were temporal places, God is eternal and omnipresent, he cannot be thought of as being contained within a room within the Temple (the Holy of Holies). The alter and the tabernacle, as meeting places with God, came before the Temple; in fact, there had been three Temples: the Temple of Solomon, the Temple of Zurubbabel (or Nehemiah), and the Temple of Herod the Great, who was not a true Jew but the son of a Jewish mother and an Idumean sheik. So, why would God be exclusively in "this" Temple? This type of abstract thinking with reference to the presence of God suggests a definite influence of Greek philosophy on Stephen; especially Plato who had so influenced Philo of Alexandria, considered one of the best of the Jewish thinkers of that period).

Moses: Second Savior and Israel's Rejection (7:20-41)

At this time Moses was born [*Stephen's second savior sent from God*] and was pleasing to God. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house; 21: and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. 22: And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds [*Moses was considered to be extra-ordinary in every way; in the Hellenistic writings of the Jews in Alexandria, Moses was referred to as "the prince"*]. 23: "When he was forty years old, it came into

his heart to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24: And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking the Egyptian. 25: He supposed that his brethren understood that God was giving them deliverance by his hand *[a savior or deliverer]*, but they did not understand. 26: And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and would have reconciled them, saying, `Men, you are brethren, why do you wrong each other?' 27: But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, `Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28: Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'

At this retort Moses fled, and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. 30: "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush (Exodus 3). 31: When Moses saw it he wondered at the sight; and as he drew near to look, the voice of the Lord came *[as the voice of God came to Jesus at his baptism and at the transfiguration]* 32: `I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. 33: And the Lord said to him, `Take off the shoes from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34: I have surely seen the ill treatment of my people that are in Egypt and heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.' 35: "This Moses whom they refused, saying, `Who made you a ruler and a judge?' God sent as both ruler and deliverer by the hand of the angel that appeared to him in the bush. 36: He led them out *[he became their deliverer]*, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. *[If Moses' miracles were proof that God's presence and power was with him, then why did the miracles of Jesus not prove that the presence and power of God was with him?]*

This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, `God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up.' *[In this passage - Deut 18:15 - "The Lord your God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brethren" - the speaker not only presented the contrast*

between the rejection of Moses by his brethren, even though God had sent him and appointed him to the very office they refused him, but he also introduces the prediction uttered by Moses concerning "that Prophet" who many believed to be the Messiah: and they all knew that Stephen believed "that prophet" to be Jesus of Nazareth] 38: This is he who was in the congregation [ekklesia, the equivalent of the Hebrew Qahal] in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living oracles to give to us.

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt [*the "same ole same ole," again and again!*]. 40: saying to Aaron, `Make for us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him' [*the same kind of reaction the people of the triumphal entry displayed when Jesus was arrested and crucified - he's gone!*] 41: And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and rejoiced in the works of their hands. [*The greater fragrance of this sin appears from the fact that it was committed immediately after the great manifestations of God's presence with Moses, which the people had witnessed in Egypt, in the march to Sinai, and in the giving of the Law from the summit of Sinai.*]

The Hebrews rejected Moses when he came to them but he later saved them in spite of the fact that they refused to acknowledge him. This was what they did with Jesus when he came to them. The Hebrews were always rejecting the will of God by rejecting the messengers who proclaimed his will as well as the deliverers or saviors God sent to deliver them.

The Words of the Prophets: Third Savior and and Israel's Rejection (7:42-50)

But God turned and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: `Did you offer to me slain beasts and

sacrifices, forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 43: And you took up the tent of Moloch, and the star of the god Rephan, the figures which you made to worship; and I will remove you beyond Babylon.' 44: "Our fathers had the tent (tabernacle) of witness in the wilderness, even as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen *[the implied question was, "Was God not there in the Sinai peninsula rather than here in Jerusalem?"]* 45: Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations, which God thrust out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David *[there was no temple during the most glorious period of Israel's history, so why would it be the exclusive abode of God now? This was the kind of argument only a Diaspora Jew would make]*. 46: who found favor in the sight of God and asked leave to find a habitation for the God of Jacob. 47: But **it was Solomon who built a house for him**. 48: Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands as the prophet says (Isaiah 66:1-2); 49: "Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. **What house will you build for me**, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? 50: Did not my hand make all these things?" *[This is the same argument Paul made in Athens in 17:24-28. Did he recall these words from Stephen?]* 51: "You stiff-necked people [cf. Exodus 33:5 and Neh 9:28-30] *uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.*

The Jewish nation had always been a stubborn people. To be stiff-necked was to be unwilling to see in any other direction than the one upon which one's face is set. To be uncircumcised was to not be in covenant with God, to be unclean and unfit for fellowship. The fathers of these people had always resisted the Holy Spirit. This statement could have been taken directly from Nehemiah 9:28-30, where the Hebrews were reminded by Ezra of their repeated rejection of God's revelation of his will to them.

*The Messiah: Fourth Savior and Israel's Rejection
(7:52-53)*

Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One (God's Anointed, the Messiah), whom you have now betrayed and murdered [*phonos - the same term used in the LXX of Exodus 20:13, "You shall not kill."*] 53: you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

His argument is that the twelve patriarchs had rejected their savior in their rejection of Joseph, they were filled with a hatred rooted in jealousy, yet, by the grace of God, he became their savior. The Hebrews rejected Moses in Egypt when he tried to be a savior to them, and it was Moses who became their deliverer to lead them out of Egyptian bondage; so also with the prophets. The Jews, from the forefathers to the present fathers of Israel, were always rejecting God's visitations in his attempts to deliver them.

Israel's Destruction of Another Prophet (7:54-60)

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. 55: But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God 56: and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." [*The purpose of this vision was, no doubt, to prepare him for what was about to happen as with Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration and the angel of God in Gethsemane*]. 57: But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. [*Can you imagine the rage and hatred that filled these men to drive them to such behavior?*]

58: Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him [*It was not the case that the Jews were forbidden to execute someone they considered to be in transgression of Jewish law. They could and did stone people, as we see in John 8 and in the actions of Saul of Tarsus. The reason the*

Sanhedrin could not execute Jesus is that they wanted him crucified by Romans as a messianic pretender to show that he was not the Messiah, nor was he the heir to the throne of David; the crucifixion would also subject him to the curse of Deut 21:22. The history of the Jews of Jerusalem is filled with examples of murder, assassination, and execution for religious violations; most of which were considered by the Romans as crimes of passion. Josephus gives numerous examples].

And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. [This was something of a ritual wherein those participating in such an action passed before someone in authority to receive a nod acknowledging their willful participation in the action, thus receiving peer approval for what they were about to do]. 59: And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60: And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep [Stephen died with the words of Jesus on his lips].

Application

How do we find a place on the stage in this text? The themes are consistently developed around the players of the scene: Stephen, the Jewish hierarchy and people, and the saviors God had repeatedly sent to deliver Israel from its state of self destruction: Joseph and the deliverance from the famine, Moses and deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the prophets and deliverance from enslavement to sin, and Jesus the Messiah and the deliverance of mankind from its fallen state and estrangement from God.

The text of Stephen's sermon is so lengthy that it's easy to get lost in these sixty plus verses and miss the point of the story he's developing. But to simplify our study I will attempt to develop his argument from within the text as we read through it.

God's Saviors and Israel's Rejection

God had repeatedly sent saviors to deliver the heirs of Abraham in order that his promise to Abraham might be fulfilled. But, the children of Abraham repeatedly rejected the deliverers and the deliverance God sent them. Now, God had sent his Son to deliverer them and the greater majority of Israel had rejected him as well. Deliverance was offered to them first and they had again rejected it.

Now, what conclusions are to be draw from the application Stephen makes to his listeners? It appears obvious that the greater majority of the people of Israel had historically refused to hear God's voice when he spoke to them through the deliverers who were sent by God; nor would they yield their will to God's will in order to receive his deliverance. Here again, Israel was doing what their forefathers had done, again, and again, and again.

Jesus Was More Than the Messiah

This son or "seed of Abraham," to use the language of Paul (Gal 3), was Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of a daughter of Abraham, was born under the Law of Moses and submitted himself in obedience to it and in fulfillment of it. He came in fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham centuries earlier and gave the promise new interpretation, that through him (the offspring of Abraham) all the world, the whole of mankind, would be blessed through belief in him as God's Savior and through submission to him as the Lord Messiah.

No Universal Salvation

This is an inescapable insight given us from Stephen's sermon, but there is also a darker theme to be found within. It cannot be denied that the offspring of Abraham did not appear willing to receive God's salvation in great numbers. Throughout this presentation of the history of the people that God had repeatedly

tried to deliver, there were only "a few" who proved to be open to God's revelation to them and to be accepting of it.

This is a truth also spoken by Jesus. In Matthew 7:13-14, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to the people:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matt 7:13-14)

Then, in Matthew 8, when Jesus saw the faith of the Roman Centurion, we read:

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. 11I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. 12But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, (Matt 8:10-12).

Again, in Matthew 19:27-30, following his comments on the difficulty of the wealthy to enter into the kingdom of God, we read,

Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" 28Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first (Matt 19:27-30).

In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus told a story (the parable of the Wedding Banquet) about the danger of believing that all Jews would be accepted at the table of the Messianic Banquet, and a similar story

in Luke 14:16-24 (the parable of the Great Banquet), where Jesus says the same thing: only a few will be invited to the table, the greater majority will be turned away as a result of their own choices.

In the chapter that proceeds the parable of the Great Banquet Jesus gave the following answer to the question, "Are only a few people going to be saved?"

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. 23Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, 24"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able (Luke 13:22-23).

The Fate of the Human Race

From this it would not appear that there is a lot of hope for the human race, and it would appear that this is what Stephen was saying here to this Jewish audience - there's not much hope for you, the sons of Abraham. The message of messianic deliverance was presented to them first and even though many did accept it, the greater masses of the several million Jews of the first century did not. Nor was it the case that the greater masses of the gentiles nations accepted it. This was true of the early centuries and is true today, even though there appeared to be a mass acceptance of Christianity in the fourth century with the edict of Milan, in which Constantine granted recognition to Christianity by the Roman Empire.

Given the nature of the Christianity which developed from that time, it would be impossible to think that Jesus would give serious recognition to the massive perversions and distortions of "the faith once delivered to the saints," resulting from the actions of the Roman clergy.

Why all this warning that there will not be a universal acceptance into eternity. Jesus' revelations about the number of those who will enter into the eternal presence of God appear to be contrary to the beliefs of masses. The question Christian history has refused to

address concerns the issue of when does accommodation or conformity to the will of man rather than the expressed will of God becomes apostasy?

Man's Choice in His Salvation

The question the human race has refused to ask and the answer they have refused to hear is, simply put, is whether the greater part of the human race doomed to destruction because of their self-will, which is set over against the will of God? The inescapable fact is that God will deliver no one against his/her will and he will only save those who have through their earthly sojourn have attempted to fit themselves for eternity.

Life is filled with choices, all men are free moral agents with the ability to choose, and all choices have consequences. That is certain! God has not usurped nor will he eliminate the will of man in order to save him. Man is a free moral agent and has, since the creation of Adam and Eve, had the freedom to choose his destiny in eternity. If he did not have freedom of choice, then God telling Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil makes no sense at all. Why would God set such a choice before him if he had no choice?

The theme flowing throughout the preaching and writings of the prophets of the OT Scriptures was that Israel's choices had estranged them to God and that they must repent and return to God in order to find favor with him.

In both the Hebrew and Greek languages in which the Scriptures were penned the word repentance meant to change the mind concerning one's erroneous decisions. A decision is an exercise of the will, a choice, and if man does not have freedom of will, then none of the calls for Israel's repentance make any sense at all. God is not the author of confusion and he is not the author of the teaching that man is not free to do that which God has required of him. Man was given freedom of will from the beginning of his existence and that has not changed.

This is the crux of what Stephen was saying to the Hellenistic Jews and members of the Sanhedrin here in this text. They had repeatedly chosen to reject God's deliverance, if it meant yielding their will to his will; and in their rejection of God's final deliverer, they were doing it again. If God commands all men everywhere to repent, then they must do so to be acceptable to God. The audience before Stephen refused to accept the Messiah, if he was Jesus of Nazareth. Rather than accept the will of God, they chose to stone Stephen to death. But that did not stop others from telling and retelling the story of God's redemption in Christ, and this is yet the responsibility of those who hear this story.

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