

STEPHEN'S SPEECH!
A RELIABLE, FAITHFUL AND GODLY WITNESS!
ACTS CH7:37-43

ILLUSTRATION

We need to consider some questions:

1. What is Stephen's speech all about?
2. Does it have any themes?
3. What is it meant to achieve?

ANSWERING QUESTION 1 – BY INTRODUCING THE UNCHURCHED CULTURAL MINDSET! Ch6:8-15

Remember that Stephen is just a typical “Joe Blogs”, working a daily mundane job serving at tables (diakonia) as he looks after the widows of the Church, but at the same time witnessing to the public as he does his 9am – 5pm work! There is a Synagogue called “The Freedmen's”, who wage a war of words against Stephen and his Gospel (v9-10) setting up a smear campaign against him, which turns the people (v12) against the Christians, in spite of the signs and wonders! Stephen is then seized and placed before the Council (v12 - Sanhedrin) accused of blasphemous words against Moses and God v11 and specifically against the Temple and the customs of Moses (the Law) v13+v14!

They are accusing Stephen of saying that “..... this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place (the Temple) and will change the customs that Moses delivered” (v14). The Jews believed at this point that God's presence would only be at the Temple in Jerusalem, look at the following Psalms - 15; 27:4; 42-43; 84; 122; 134; 147; + 150. The Jews believed that by protecting the physical building of the Temple, it would guarantee them the presence of God. **Therefore, if the Temple was destroyed they figured that God would abandon them!**

Ch7:1 – The high Priest now challenges Stephen asking if the two charges are true!

ANSWERING QUESTION 2 – BY INTRODUCING THE UNCHURCHED MINDSET, TO THE BIBLICAL MINDSET! Ch7:2-36

John Stott in his commentary on Acts, says, “What Stephen did was pick out four major epochs of Israel's history, dominated by four major characters. **First** he highlighted Abraham and the patriarchal age (Ch7:2-8); **then Joseph** and the Egyptian exile (Ch7:9-19); **thirdly Moses**, the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings (Ch7:20-44); and **lastly David and Solomon**, and the establishment of the monarchy (Ch7:45-50). **The connecting feature of these four epochs is that in none of them was God's presence 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 (John Stott, Commentary on Acts, pg 130-131).”

Another way to understand Stephen's speech is to consider the accusations laid against him (v13+v14) and think about what themes (what is Stephen saying) he is raising to counteract the accusations. Therefore, the speech could also be understood in the

following way:

1. The Land – Ch7:2-36
2. The Law – Ch7:37-43
3. The Temple – Ch7:44-50
4. The Indictment (the Charge) – Ch7:51-53

LAND – v2, v3, v4, v6, v9, v10, v11, v12, v15, v16, v17, v18, v23, v24, v28, v29, v30, v34, + v36. Throughout these verses areas or regions of land, or the word “land” itself is mentioned, demonstrating that God, throughout the lives of Abraham, Joseph and Moses was meeting them where they were, calling them to be where He wanted them to be, appearing to them and working through the evil with His good plans and purposes which no force could thwart! ***This shows the crowd that God does not need to live in the Temple! Stephen, with a crucial part of his defence, is drawing out truthful lessons that his crowd had not heard or learnt before, despite knowing the Scriptures!***

ANSWERING QUESTION 3 – BY INTRODUCING THE UNCHURCHED MINDSET TO BIBLICAL TRUTH! Ch7:2-36

God provides a deliverer, that deliverer is rejected by Israel (v51-52)!

V2-V8 – God speaks to, and makes promises' to Abraham!

V9 – Joseph's brothers reject him, because they are jealous (Ch5:17) and sell him into slavery!

V9 – God was with Joseph!

V10 – God rescued Joseph!

V20 – Moses is beautiful in God's sight!

V25 – Moses is the means of deliverance!

V28 – Moses is rejected by his brothers!

V35 – Moses is rejected!

The Council, the men of The Freedmen's Synagogue, and the people, although aware of their history, they did not see that just like their forefathers, they too have rejected God's ruler and redeemer (v35), JESUS OF NAZARETH (v51-52)!

MOSES AND THE LAW! V37-38

“True, this greatly privileged nation refused to obey God. They not only in their hearts turned back to Egypt, but, rejecting Moses' leadership, commissioned Aaron to make them substitute gods to go before them into the promised land (39-40). They then brought sacrifices to the golden calf and held a celebration in honour of what their hands had made (41), which provoked God to turn away from them and to give them up instead to the worship of the heavenly bodies (42a). Although Stephen backs up the accusation with a quotation from Amos Ch5 which dates from several centuries later, it nevertheless refers to the corrupt worship of Israel during their forty years in the desert. Their sacrifices and offerings were not in reality brought to Yahweh, whatever their claim may have been, but rather to pagan idols (42b-43)” (Cited in John Stott's Commentary on Acts, pg 137).

Deuteronomy Ch18:15-18 + Acts Ch3:22 – The prophet spoken about is Jesus, and the early Christians, according to Acts Ch3:22 understood this!

v38 – Congregation = ecclesia = church community. Luke in Ch5:11 uses, for the first time, the word or term “church” the Greek word “Ecclesia” (“**gathering of those summoned**”), in ancient Greece, an assembly of citizens in a city-state. Its roots lay in the Homeric agora, the meeting of the people.

v38 – Oracles, this is where Moses received the Law, the living **Words of God** (Romans Ch3:2 Oracles of God) The giving of the Law was the high privilege of Israel, it is the sign of the covenant which God made with them and it was through the obedience of the Law that they would remain the covenant people of God.

THE FATHERS AND THE LAW! V39-40

Here is the turning point!

v39 – Fathers disobeyed the Law – The original recipients failed to keep the Law (Num Ch14:3)!

Ex Ch32:1 – Right when Law was given to the people they rebelled against the giver and turned to idolatry!

Idolatry – Worshipping created things, rather than the creator! (Romans Ch1:24; 26; 28)

IDOLATRY AND THE LAW! V41-43

v41 – They made a calf (Ex Ch32:4) The temptation to make such an image was a persistent one in Israel's history (1 Kings Ch12:28) an act of sacrificing to an idol and not God! Sacrifice and celebration before such an idol indicated that Israel was no different from the other nations and that as a people they had abandoned God's holy calling!

v42 – God turned away and gave them over (Romans Ch1:24; 26; 28)

v42 – The host of heaven (Deut Ch4:19) the sun, moon and stars (**By the way, over 50 countries have flags with stars on and over 19 have flags with the sun on them!**)

v43 – Since worship of the true God was at the heart of His saving purpose (**Ch7:7**), Stephen understands that the false worship of the planetary powers, for which the nation lost its liberty and suffered deportation, **was the climax of that idolatrous process which began in the wilderness!**

Stephen then quotes from the Old Testament Book of Amos. Amos comes from that large section of the Old Testament known as the “Writing Prophets” often referred to as the “Prophets”. The section begins with what are commonly known as the “Major Prophets”, because of the size of the books and then from Hosea to Malachi the 12 “Minor Prophets” because they are small books! When the prophets are described in this way, that is “Major and Minor, **there is a danger that we don't give too much attention to the “minor” prophets, big mistake!** James Montgomery Boice in his commentary on Amos says “The Book of Amos is one of the most readable, relevant, and moving portions of the Word of God.”

Themes that will run through the 9 chapters of Amos are:
God Speaks!

God is LORD of history!
God is LORD of creation!

All events in history however small or personal should be seen as the **“finger of God”** and should be assessed in the light of Scripture-revealed principles by which God deals with men and women. ***There is certainly no doubt that God's judgement is continually executed in all the earth (Psalm 105:7).*** Amos is an incredibly skilled prophet using different strategies throughout the Book to drive home his points. ***In Chapter 1-2*** we see him repeating key phrases and words! The reason for so much repetition is because of the importance of the material and for the listeners and future readers to face the implication of their faith, leaving no part of their mind or hearts unaffected! ***In chapter 3***, verses 3-8, why use 9 questions? Israel is blinded to her true condition, the Lord, as a skilful interrogator, uses Amos to lead the interviewed nation, for her to see her true condition. The pattern of “cause” and “effect” is revealed through the questions. For example, in verse 3, if people meet to go walking, it is by prior arrangement! ***In chapter 4*** we see the use of examples of language of divine inspiration, used not for fun or for abuse, or for affection, but to illustrate something about the person concerned. ***The LORD chooses His words with infinite care! Amos, through the nickname, means to make a serious point about the behaviour of the women of Samaria!*** Now ***in chapter 5***, we see Amos using a “lament” (to feel or express sorrow or regret, a poem or song in which a death is lamented!), as if there is a funeral! Amos is talking to the people of Israel, as if Israel has died “Fallen is virgin Israel” (v1)!

God uses Amos to speak into a historical situation, both then and to some point in the future! A prophecy can be fulfilled by God stepping in on any given day and a set day in the future! This was that “some point” in the future – ***a peshet***, an Old Testament prophecy also used for a New Testament situation! The use of Amos establishes the fact that Israel had been consistently idolatrous from the time of the exodus and had been judged accordingly by God!

APPLICATION

Stephen presents his defence in such a way that the people listening have an opportunity to draw lessons that they have never learned or even noticed before! In doing so Stephen demonstrates that far from being blasphemous when it comes to God's Word, he honours it! How could we use this defence?

A lesson he teaches is that God is everywhere, and that the holy place, is wherever God is present!

Stephen reveals that Israel, past and present, continually fall into idolatry, and break God's Law through their disobedience to it!