

Acts 6:8 – 7:2 notes

Hallel Fellowship (<http://hallel.info>)

Speaker: Jeff Quackenbush (jeff@hallel.info)

Sept. 13 & 27, 2008

Passages are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

Summary: Stephen, one of seven exceptional men the 12 selected as special ministers for the needs of the congregation in Yerushalayim, is accused of blaspheming God and Moshe and speaking against the temple and “the law,” specifically, saying that Yeshua would destroy the temple and “alter the customs Moses handed down to us.” Was Yeshua Messiah or manipulator? Stephen responds with a Peter-like cutting-to-the-heart retelling of Israel’s history.

Acts 7:1 “Are these things so?”

- As discussed regarding Yeshua’s trial before the Sanhedrin, the sages developed legal procedure that allows the accused to provide a defense but allowed for the accused to opt out of self-incrimination.
- How do we have accurate accounts of the trials of Yeshua, Peter and John, and Stephen? Which believers, and later believers, were members of the Sanhedrin?

Acts 7:2 “brethren and fathers” ... “God of glory”

- Stephen was a Jew talking to Jews.
- “Fathers” is equivalent to אבות *avot* in Hebrew. In other words, Stephen was addressing the descendants of or even the ones responsible for “customs Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:14).
- Stephen is charged with blasphemy. What is it?
 - *Blasphemia* in Greek means “defamation,” “evil speech” (“revile,” “rail,” Acts 13:45; 18:6; Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:22; Col. 3:8), “a word of evil omen,” “impious and irreverent speech.”¹
 - Also applied to actions unbecoming of a believer (Rom. 2:24, 1st Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:5, 1st Tim. 1:20).
 - Blasphemy is expressed via five Hebrew words in the *TaNak* (Torah, Prophets, and Writings).²
 - בָּרַךְ *barak* (Strong’s 1288)
 - The verb means³:
 - “to bless, kneel”
 - (Qal) to kneel, to bless
 - (Niphal) to be blessed, bless oneself
 - (Piel) to bless
 - (Pual) to be blessed, be adored
 - (Hiphil) to cause to kneel
 - (Hithpael) to bless oneself
 - “to praise, salute, curse”
 - Of the 330 times this word is used in the *TaNak*, it is translated by the NASB as *curse*, *cursed*, or *curses* only seven times.
 - The *Brown-Driver-Briggs* lexicon explains that this meaning for *barakh* is thought to stem from “a blessing overdone and so really a curse”⁴.
 - In a well-known passage about wicked King Ahab’s tantrum over not getting Naboth’s vineyard (1st Ki. 21:10, 13), false witnesses frame Naboth for blasphemy, claiming “You cursed God and the king” (NASB). As interpreted by the *King James Version*, the word for *cursed* is *barak*.
 - In the first chapter of the book of *Job*, he intercedes continually for his sons, saying to himself, “Perhaps they have sinned and cursed God in their hearts” (v. 5). In verse 11, the Accuser asserts that if God were to withhold blessings from Job he would “surely curse You to Your face.”
 - In *Job* chapter 2, the Accuser again calls on God to curse Job so he will curse God (v. 5). Job’s wife calls on him to, “Curse God and die” (v. 9).
 - Psa. 10:3 shows two different Hebrew words translated as “curse”: בָּרַךְ and נָאץ *na’ats*.
 - It also shows that הָלַל *halal* (Strong’s 1984), which literally means *to shine* and is

1 Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor. “Entry for ‘BLASPHEMY.’” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. <www.studydrive.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T1546>. 1915.

2 Ibid.

3 Brown, Driver, Briggs and Gesenius. “Hebrew Lexicon entry for Barak.” *The Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon*. <www.studydrive.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=1288>.

4 Ibid from the printed version: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., Peabody, Mass. 2003.

commonly translated as *praise*, can also be used in a negative sense for praising oneself, i.e. boasting.

- “For the wicked boasteth (הָלַל) of his heart’s desire, and blesseth (בָּרַךְ) the covetous, whom the LORD abhorreth (נִאָץ)” (KJV).
- “For the wicked boasts of his heart’s desire; He blesses the greedy and renounces the LORD” (*New King James Version*).
 - The difference in translation from the KJV to the NKJV likely stems from the word order of נִאָץ יְהוָה *na’ats YHWH* being transposed in the KJV to mean *the LORD abhors* rather than the NKJV’s *renounces the LORD*. The NASB and other modern versions take the latter interpretation.
 - This is a great reminder to withhold conclusions about a teaching from the Bible before comparing different translations, even literal ones like KJV, NASB and *English Standard Version* with dynamic ones such as the *New International Version*.
- “For the wicked boasts of his heart’s desire, And the greedy man curses and spurns the LORD” (NASB).
- נִאָץ *na’ats* (Strong’s 5006)
 - The verb means “to spurn, contemn, despise, abhor.”⁵
 - (Qal) to spurn, contemn (the seldom-used verb behind the noun *contempt*)
 - (Piel) to spurn, to cause to contemn
 - (Hiphil) to spurn
 - (Hithpolel) to be contemned
 - In 2nd Sam. 12:14, the prophet Samuel delivers that sobering word to David that his sins with Bat-Sheva (Bathsheba) would result in the death of the child conceived from that affair because “you have given occasion to (נִאָץ) the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme (נִאָץ).”
 - Here are two variations of the verb used to mean *to cause to contemn* and *to despise*.
 - Psa. 74:10, repeated in v. 18, show use of נִאָץ and synonym חָרַף *kharaph*.
 - “How long, O God, will the adversary revile (חָרַף), And the enemy spurn (נִאָץ) Your name forever?”
 - During a rousing promise in Isaiah 52 to Israel to redeem the nation from exile, the LORD said in v. 5, “‘Now therefore, what do I have here,’ declares the LORD, ‘seeing that My people have been taken away without cause?’ Again the LORD declares, ‘Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long.’”
 - The KJV seems to have a better translation *for naught*, or *for nothing*, rather than *without cause*. Didn’t God have cause to exile Israel?
 - Aramaic translations have *boast* instead of *howl*,⁶ taking the root verb of יְהַלִּילוּ *yeheileilu* to be הָלַל *hallal*, as mentioned before is commonly used for *praise* or *boast*, rather than יָלַל *yalal* (Strong’s 868), which means *to wail, howl, or make a howling*.⁷
 - However, the *Septuagint*, the Greek version of the TaNaK that was contemporary with the Dead Sea Scrolls, has ολολυζετε *ololuzete* (Strong’s 3649), which means to howl or wail in grief or joy.⁸
 - Ya’akov in his letter (*James* 5:1) has the word’s only use in the Apostolic Writings, warning the rich to howl over the miseries coming on them.
 - Apostle Paul in Romans 2, in the context of condemning Jews who hypocritically condemned others for not observing Torah, seems to hint at this prophecy from Isaiah and a parallel condemnation from the LORD in Ezekiel 36.
 - “For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,’ just as it is written” (Rom. 2:24).
 - “‘When they came to the nations where they went, they profaned (חָלַל *khalal*) My holy name, because it was said of them, ‘These are the people of the LORD; yet they have come out of His land’” (Ezek. 36:20; context vv. 16–24).
 - One of the signs that God is the Most High God is that He dominates the will or purported will of other national *elohim*, or gods. That is what the Philistines were

5 Ibid. “Hebrew Lexicon entry for Na’ats.” <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=5006>.

6 Clarke, Adam. “Commentary on Isaiah 52.” *The Adam Clarke Commentary*. <www.studylight.org/com/acc/view.cgi?book=isa&chapter=052>. 1832.

7 Brown et al. “Hebrew Lexicon entry for Yalal.” <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=3213>.

8 Thayer and Smith. “Greek Lexicon entry for Ololuzo.” *The New Testament Greek Lexicon*. <www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=3649>.

looking for when they put the captured Ark of the Testimony on a cart and looked to see whether the cows went toward Israel or just in some random direction. They wanted to know whether the calamities that came upon their cities and on their temple to Dagon were happenstance or acts of God. (1st Sam. 6:9)

- Note that Eze. 36:22 foretells of a regathering of Israel, not for the nation's sake but for the LORD's name, His reputation and character among the nations and among His people.
 - The LORD has staked His name on having His people living in His land.
 - Is this a prophecy only about the return from the Babylonian exile?
 - Since modern Israel's cities have been rebuilt and are booming, why didn't the giving of a "new heart" (v. 26) and putting the LORD's spirit within the people (v. 27; also 37:14 and 39:29) accompany the rebirth of the state? Israel is more secular today than at its founding.
 - Did a restoration of God's Torah and a filling of the people with His Spirit accompany the return under Ezra and Nehemiah?
 - When did this outpouring of God's Spirit reach a crescendo in Israel's history (Acts 2:17–21; cf. Joel 2:28–29)?
 - What does this prophecy say to Christians and Jews who say that the against-all-odds, i.e. miraculous, return and persistence of Israel in modern times is of no biblical significance?
 - What does Eze. 36:33-38 say to Jews who attribute modern Israel to, in the words of atheist Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, "If you will it, it is no legend"?

■ חָרַף *kharaph* (Strong's 2778)

- The verb also means "to reproach, taunt, blaspheme, defy, jeopardize, rail, upbraid"⁹
 - (Qal) to reproach
 - (Piel) to reproach, defy, taunt
- (Qal) to winter, spend harvest time, remain in harvest time
- (Niphal) to acquire, be betrothed
- Other uses of the word are *betrothed* (Lev. 19:20), *despised* (Judges 5:18), and *taunted* (Judges 8:15).
- This verb shows up a lot in the familiar story of David vs. Goliath (1st Samuel 17).
 - It is translated *defy* in the taunt from Goliath (v. 10) and in the fear expressed by Israel's armies at Goliath's formidable presence (v. 25).
 - What did Goliath's challenge say about God?
 - What did the response of Israel's army to the challenge say about God?
 - David in v. 26 refers to Goliath as a *reproach*, using the noun form חֶרֶפָה *herephah*, against Israel then asks the army, "For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?"
 - What is it about *uncircumcised* and *living God* in David's question that point to a key point behind the death-worthy sin of blasphemy?
- The word shows up repeatedly in the account of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah (2nd Kings 18 and 19).
 - The king is dismayed by enemy general Rebshakeh's *reproach of the living God* (חָרַף) (vv. 4 and 16).
 - Hezekiah uses both חָרַף and synonym גָּדַח *gadhaph* — "Whom have you reproached and blasphemed?" — in his retort to Rebshakeh (v. 22). The latter Hebrew word also appears in v. 6.
 - How was Rebshakeh blaspheming God (see ch. 18:25, 29–30)?
 - Interestingly, Rebshakeh was right about the power of Egypt and idols to save Israel (see Isaiah 37).
 - The parallel passage in 2nd Chronicles 32 adds an interesting piece to the account, "[Rebshakeh] also wrote letters to insult [חָרַף; KJV: *rail on*] the LORD God of Israel, and to speak against Him, saying, 'As the gods of the nations of the lands have not delivered their people from my hand, so the God of Hezekiah will not deliver His people from my hand'" (2nd Chron. 32:17).
- In a lament about Israel's idolatry in the face of God's blessings, the LORD said, "they have

9 Ibid. "Hebrew Lexicon entry for Charaph." <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=2778>.

burned incense on the mountains And **scorned** (גָּדַף) Me on the hills” (Isa. 65:7).

- Interestingly, apostle Peter picked up on God’s calling “a nation which did not call on My name” (v. 1) as a call to Israel to “keep your behavior excellent among the gentiles” (1st Pe. 2:12).
- **גָּדַף *gadaph*** (Strong’s 1442)
 - The verb means “to revile men, blaspheme God.”¹⁰
 - In Num. 15:30 the meaning of this word for blasphemy is connected to doing evil “defiantly” (NASB) or “presumptuously” (KJV) or “with a high hand” (*Revised Standard Version*).
 - As is seen in the Gospels and in Acts, being “cut off from his people” meant death by stoning.
 - Other uses of גָּדַף are Isa. 37:6,23; also Psa. 44:16; Eze. 20:27.
 - Blasphemy is always in word or deed, injury, dishonor and defiance offered to God, and its penalty is death by stoning.
- **נָקַב *naqab*** (Strong’s 5344)
 - The verb also means “to pierce, perforate, bore, appoint, designate, curse.”¹¹
 - In Gen. 30:28, we see the sense of the word meaning *to designate* referring to a deal between Laban and Ya’akov: “He continued, ‘Name me your wages, and I will give it.’ ”
 - “And he that blasphemes the name of Yahweh, he shall surely be put to death” (Lev. 24:11,16).
 - This man “blasphemed (נָקַב) the Name and cursed (קָלַל *qalal*, Strong’s 7043, *to be slight, trifling, of little account*; Piel (intensive case): *to make despicable, curse*)” (v. 11).
 - Perhaps, this iniquity worthy of death was using God’s name in vain, or making it of little account, as the Third Commandment literally means.
- So, how was Stephen cursing, reviling, reproaching, taunting, defying, spurning, contemning, despising, abhorring God and Moses?

10 Brown et al. “Hebrew Lexicon entry for Gadaph.” <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=1442>.

11 Ibid. “Hebrew Lexicon entry for Naqab.” <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=5344>.