

Acts 6:8–15 notes

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

Summary: Some of the leadership of Israel were “cut to the heart” as the Spirit moved on Shavuot (Pentecost) and repented. Others refused to repent, even when the progression of rebellion against God through Israel’s history and culminating with the rejection of Messiah Yeshua was revealed.

Acts 6:8 “word of God kept on spreading”

- The unstoppable word of God is seen “blowing” with force here, acting like Santa Ana winds on a wildfire.
- This reminds me of a well-known passage from prophet Yeshiyahu:
“Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. 9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. 10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. 12 For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. 13 Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up, And it will be a memorial to the LORD, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.” (Isa. 55:6-13)

“a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith”

- The main English translations render ἱερεῖς as *priests*, but some manuscripts and the Syriac translation use Ἰουδαίων or *Jews* and even have added words to make the phrase say, “and a great multitude, some of them priests”
 - Some think these scribal edits resulted from a belief that Jewish leadership were too hardened to believe.
 - There is some basis among the four apostolic witness-biographies:
“The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, ‘Why did you not bring Him?’ 46 The officers answered, ‘Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.’ 47 The Pharisees then answered them, ‘You have not also been led astray, have you? 48 No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? 49 But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed.’ 50 Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) said to them, 51 ‘Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?’ 52 They answered him, ‘You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.’” (John 7:45-52)
 - Note: The leaders called the people who believe “accursed.”
 - God looks harshly upon those who attribute the work of His Spirit to evil (Matt. 12:27-32).
- Remember where the key events of Acts 2–5 — sermons and healing — mostly took place: the temple. Priests would have had a front-row seat for the teachings and healings, especially in confirming the healing.
- As Acts 15:5 points out that the early believers included more Pharisees than Nicodemus and Yosef.
- In a passage we’ve looked at before about apostle Paul’s continued obedience to the Torah after his conversion, we also see that thousands of Diaspora Jews believed:
“After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. 16 Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge. 17 After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 And the following day Paul went in with us to Ya’akov (James), and all the elders were present. 19 After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;’ 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. 25 But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.’ 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.” (Acts 21:15-26)

- This passage touches on the long-standing accusation that apostle Paul advocated the changing of the Torah, specifically regarding circumcision for non-Jewish believers. We'll touch on that when we get to this passage and further when we explore Paul's letters, but here are some initial thought-provokers:
 - Stephen also is accused of advocating the changing of the Torah.
 - As seen in Acts 15, even the Jerusalem council didn't require circumcision for new believers.
 - The Jerusalem council seems to be convinced that these accusations against Paul are unfounded, and reiterates the standards required for new believers, standards that don't include circumcision.
- Some claim that this is an example of weakness in the ecclesiastical leadership.
 - Some accuse Paul of caving to ecclesiastical pressure or the council of capitulating to Judaizers.
 - Some claim this is an example of Paul's being "all things to all men, so that [he] may save some" (1st Cor. 9:22), meaning the Jerusalem council.
 - If either were true, the testimony and teaching of Peter, Ya'kov and Paul in their letters is duplicitous.
 - Indeed, modern scholarship that takes a low view of the Bible, i.e., it's just the work of men, conjectures about all kinds of duplicitous motivations behind not only the biographies of Messiah but also all the other writings.
 - Is this what the Paul-dumped-the-Law advocates want?
 - Yet as revealed soberingly in Acts 5 with Ananias and Sapphira, truth is revealed to those filled with the Holy Spirit, and deception isn't tolerated.
 - If congregants could be struck down for "lying to the Holy Spirit," what would happen to leaders who misrepresent the Holy Spirit?

6:8 "Stephen, full of grace and power, performing signs and wonders"

- What is the interplay between signs and wonders and the word of God?
 - What do signs do for the words of God one speaks?
 - What does the word of God do for the signs one performs?
 - Does the word of God have to be accompanied by signs?
 - "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after/ craves a sign; yet none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." (Matt. 12:39; 16:4)
 - Could this be an appeal to not look for the deity with the bigger bag of tricks?
 - Nineveh was steeped in paganism, yet its inhabitants knew when the LORD was speaking to them.
 - "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves." (John 14:4-11)
 - Yeshua's disciple Thomas needed a lot of convincing but really was craving for a sign of the truth speaking to Him.
 - We read in Acts 1 how God finally supplied that sign.

6:9 "Synagogue of the Libertines" (KJV)

- The majority view of scholars is that this refers to a synagogue in Jerusalem for pilgrims who were freed Jewish slaves. Pompey and other Roman generals' took Jewish slaves during their conquest of Jerusalem in B.C. 63 while fighting the Greek empire remnant Seleucia. The freed Jews were kicked out of Rome in A.D. 19 for refusing to adopt religions of the empire.¹ Archaeologists think they've found a synagogue of such freed slaves in Pompeii.
- Cyrene is in modern-day Libya, and Cilicia is in Turkey today.
- Historically, Diaspora Jews were looked down upon. Petrus Cunaeus, the pen name for Peter van der Kun (1586-1638), a Dutch expert on the writings of Josephus and his greatest work, *The Hebrew Republic*, a 1617 treatise on the republican form of government of ancient Israel, formed the basis for the Dutch Republic.² Drawing from Josephus, he wrote that Jews outside the Holy Land, except for those from the east in Babylon and Parthia, were snubbed by "native" Jews because they continued to live abroad and weren't fluent in Hebrew or Aramaic (*Rep. Hebr.* ii. 23).

¹ Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor. "Entry for 'LIBERTINES.'" *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. <www.studylight.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T5506>. 1915.

² "Entry for Petrus Cunaeus." Wikipedia. <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrus_Cunaeus> Accessed Aug. 30, 2008.

6:11, 13-14 “blasphemous words against Moses and against God” ... “incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law” ... “Yeshua will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us”

- Stephen’s trial and execution is somewhat similar to the trial of Yeshua with false witnesses and a plea to God for mercy on his accusers.
- Notice that the account prefaces the accusations by mentioning “false witnesses” (verse 13).
 - If Yeshua truly did abrogate the Torah, as is commonly claimed today, then wouldn’t these be true accusations against Stephen?
 - Are the claims that Yeshua abrogated the Torah “blasphemous words against Moses and against God”?
- What were the bases for the accusation of blasphemy?
 - The same Spirit that prompted Peter, quoting Deuteronomy 18, to say that Yeshua was the prophet like Moses that was to bring restoration (Acts 3:22-23) was filling Stephen too. That is seen in the content of Stephen’s presentation in Acts 7.
 - Echoing Yeshua’s trial, Stephen and by extension the apostles are accused of teaching that Yeshua did away with the Torah.
 - Yeshua clearly said He was not changing God’s law (Matt. 5:17-18).
 - He did, though, clarify the Torah and discriminate between the written Torah and tradition, signaled by His “You have heard it said ... but I tell you ...” teachings particularly in Matthew 5-7.
 - Yeshua did say things such as, “Tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in three days” (Matt. 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29; John 2:19-20).
 - As we’ve studied in Matthew 24, God has destroyed the temple multiple times for the same reasons, mainly apostasy and feigned allegiance to God via veneration of His temple.
 - Though unknown to the accusers at this point in time, another “abomination of desolation” was coming.
 - Many in the leadership were blind to the workings of God and that their religious apostasy was dooming the temple to desolation yet again.
 - Stephen went on to detail the repeated blindness of Israel’s leadership to correction and reform.
 - Wisdom dictates, and the Scriptures were written so that, we learn from the past and not repeat the mistakes.
 - The witnesses were accurate in relating Yeshua’s words but not the context, and so they were false witnesses.
 - How is this a warning against “proof-texting,” creating views of God or reinterpreting His Word based on statements strung together out of context?
 - In the first century, the “tradition of the fathers” was taken to descend from Moshe himself, so an attack on what now is called the “oral Torah” was tantamount to an attack on Moshe.³ From *Pirkei Avot*, Hebrew for “Sayings of the Fathers,” in the *Mishna*, a collection of comments from early sages: “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and handed it down to Y’hoshua, and Y’hoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: be deliberate in judging, raise up many *talmudim* [disciples], and make a fence around the Torah” (Avot 1:1).
 - Thus, one must be careful in reading the Apostolic Writings whether the word “law” means:
 - The written Torah, i.e. Genesis–Deuteronomy.
 - Divided into witnesses (accounts), commands, statutes, and judgments, each with applicability ranging from universally binding to circumstantially principled.
 - The “oral Torah,” “traditions of the elders” or “sayings of the fathers.”
 - The context of Avot 1:1 indicates that the Torah referred to is not only the written but also the oral Torah.
 - “Works of law,” which as seen from the Dead Sea Scrolls refers to a specific use of the written Torah as outward proof of conversion, such as circumcision and observance of the Shabbat and feasts of the LORD.
 - To be sure, these are instructions from God, not men.
 - However, when one follows God’s instructions as a badge of salvation without whole-hearted, whole-minded and whole-strength love for God, such obedience, whether it’s “correct” or not is abhorrent to God (Isa. 1:14, referring to the paganized northern Kingdom of Israel; Isa. 29:1-2; Jer. 7:4).

³ Stern, David H. “Acts 6.” *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., Clarksville, Md. 1992.

- However, there are writings of the sages, published in the 6th to 11th centuries but thought to date from before the first century, with the expectation that the Messiah will explain the Torah more completely and even change it.⁴
 - “Rabbis Pinchas L’vi and Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Menachem of Galatia, ‘In the Coming time all the sacrifices will be abolished, except for the thanksgiving offering. All the prayers will be abolished except for the thanksgiving prayer.’” (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:7 on Lev. 7:11-12)
 - “The Torah which one learns in this world ‘is vanity’ in comparison with the Torah of the Messiah.” (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* on Eccl. 11:8)
- Yet, this expectation of clarification from the Messiah clearly was expected, particularly in the first century, as in the comments from the Samaritan woman to Yeshua at the well: “I know that Messiah is coming ... when that One comes, He will declare all things to us” (John 4:25).

6:15 “all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel”

- Adam Clarke notes that this was a common expression in rabbinical writings for signaling “eminent men”⁵:
 - “Rabbi Gedalia said that, ‘when Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh, they appeared like those angels which minister before the face of the Lord; for their stature appeared greater, and the splendour of their faces was like the sun, and their eyes like the wheels of the sun; their beard like clusters of grapes, and their words like thunder and lightning; and that, through fear of them, those who were present fell to the earth.’”
 - “The like is said of Moses, in *Devarim Rabbah*, fol. 75, that ‘when Sammael (Satan) came to Moses, the splendour of his face was like the sun, and himself resembled an angel of God.’”
- Yet the *TaNaK* (a common Hebrew acronym for Torah, Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketivim (Writings)), also draws comparisons between Godly wisdom and a bright countenance:
 - “Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man’s wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.” (Eccl. 8:1)
 - “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Dan. 12:3)

In summary, we want to be followers of God who realize when we’ve been wrong, like the priests who believed in Yeshua had to, rather than digging in our heels and fighting against God. Next time, we’ll explore Stephen’s recounting of Israel’s history, which further shows how pervasive rebellion against God can be with each unrepentant generation.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Clarke, Adam. “Commentary on Acts 6.” The Adam Clarke Commentary. <www.studylight.org/com/acc/view.cgi?book=ac&chapter=006>. 1832.