Acts 7 notes — Stephen's defense
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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?
- A review our discussion of Acts 6:8 – 7:2: What is blasphemy?
  - *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]
    - ברך *barak* (Strong's 1288) — *to bless, kneel, praise, salute, curse* (when overdone)[3] [4]
    - נאץ *na'ats* (Strong's 5006) — *to spurn, contemn, despise, abhor*[5]
      - 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 (חלל *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).
    - חרף *kharaph* (Strong's 2778) — *to reproach, taunt, blaspheme, defy, jeopardize, rail, upbraid*[6]
      - Other uses of the word are *betrothed* (Lev. 19:20), *despised* (Judges 5:18), and *taunted* (Judges 8:15).
    - גדף *gadaph* (Strong's 1442) — *to revile, defy, act with presumption*[7]
      - Blasphemy is always <u>in word or deed, injury, dishonor and defiance offered to God</u>, and its <u>penalty is death by stoning</u>.
    - נקב *naqab* (Strong's 5344) — *to pierce, perforate, bore, appoint, designate, curse*[8]
      - "And he that blasphemes the name of Yahweh, he shall surely be put to death" (Lev. 24:11,16).
        - This man "blasphemed (נקב) the Name and cursed (קלל *qalal,* Strong's 7043, *to be slight, trifling, of little account;* Piel (intensive case): *to make despicable, curse*)" (v. 11).
  - So, how was Stephen cursing, reviling, reproaching, taunting, defying, spurning, contemning, despising, abhoring, or trifling God and Moses?

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).

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1 Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor. "Entry for 'BLASPHEMY.' " *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. <www.studylight.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.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=1288>.
4 Ibid from the printed version: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., Peabody, Mass. 2003.
5 Ibid. "Hebrew Lexicon entry for Na'ats." <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=5006>.
6 Ibid. "Hebrew Lexicon entry for Charaph." <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=2778>.
7 Ibid. "Hebrew Lexicon entry for Gadaph." <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=1442>.
8 Ibid. "Hebrew Lexicon entry for Naqab." <www.studylight.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=5344 >.

- Does Stephen's use of "God of glory" here and calling Moses "lovely in the sight of God" (v. 20) and "a man of power in words and deeds" (v. 22) sound like he was reviling or trifling God or Moses?

Why did Stephen recount the history of Israel to the Sanhedrin, as Peter did once with John while on trial before that body and previously in the temple on Shavuot (Pentecost)?
- **Acts 7:2–8 — Abraham**
  - Abraham trusted God and left his homeland and relatives.
  - The nation of Israel wouldn't exist without Abraham's obedience (v. 4).
  - God promised Abraham that his descendants would not be lost to slavery in a foreign land.
    - How would this promise to Abraham apply to Israel in the first century A.D. and the Sanhedrin specifically?
    - What would God's promises (prophecies) about Messiah say to a people being oppressed by empires, inquisitions, dictators, intellectual elite, family members, and co-workers?
- **Acts 7:9–16 — Yosef**
  - "Our fathers," the patriarchs (i.e., the 10 oldest sons of Ya'akov), were jealous of God's "anointed one" — Yosef (v. 9).
    - The brothers couldn't see that God was working through the least in their midst.
    - Pharaoh and Potiphar, who were not of the house of Israel, could sense the LORD's influence.
    - The Sanhedrin was blind, as Gamaliel cautioned, to the workings of God through One who appeared to be insignificant among them — Yeshua and His followers.
  - God showed His working through Yosef by saving the house of Ya'akov and the surrounding region.
- **Acts 7:17–43 — Moses**
  - God saved Moses and Yeshua at birth.
    - God saved Moses at birth from a tyrant's edict to wipe out a growing threat (vv. 17–21; cf. Heb. 11:23).
    - God saved Yeshua in his infancy from a tyrant (Herod) who wanted to wipe out a challenger to his throne.
  - Moses learned obedience to God by living in exile for 40 years after trying to work out God's salvation his way (v. 25).
    - Stephen notes that Moses thought the Israelites would see his deeds as the will of God.
      - Abraham had to learn that God didn't need help fulfilling specific promises.
    - Hebrews 11 adds that the reason it entered Moses heart to be among the Israelites was his eschewing royal status (v. 23).
    - Stephen seems to be connecting the people's rejection of Moses as "a ruler and a judge" with the Sanhedrin's rejection of Yeshua as a ruler and a judge (v. 35).
      - This seems to be reinforced by Stephen's references to "performing signs and wonders" (v. 36), Moses' prophecy of the rise of "a prophet like me from among your brothers" (v. 37), and "who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you" (v. 38).
- **Acts 7:44–50 — tabernacle vs. temple**
  - Here, Stephen addresses the accusation that he was speaking against the temple, God's house, by quoting Yeshua that He would rebuild a torn-down temple in three days (John 2:19).
  - Why does Stephen recount Israelite history of the tabernacle and temple?
    - Moses, who had learned to obey God's direction, made the tabernacle according to a heavenly pattern (Ex. 25:40).
      - The LORD called for it, so He could dwell among His people (ch. 25:8).
    - The tabernacle entered the Land under Yehoshua.
      - The Angel of the LORD was going before the people.
      - The cloud of the LORD was over the people, directing their movement (Ex. 13:21).
      - Thus, the LORD wasn't just in the tabernacle or in a specific place.
    - King David wanted to have a prominent house for God (1st Chron. 17:1–14), and Solomon built it.
      - However, the LORD told Solomon that He would destroy that house if the leader and nation strayed (1st Ki. 9:1-9).
  - Stephen quotes Isa. 66:1 to emphasize that God doesn't need a house, but He accepts one as a nexus of the world's focus on Him (1st Kings 8; Ezekiel 40 and fol.) as long as it doesn't itself become an idol (Jeremiah 7).
- Acts 7:51–53 — accusation against stiff-necked people who reject the prophets and the Messiah

Acts 7:54–60 — Another faithful messenger is silenced
- On being called murderers of the Messiah and hypocrite propagators of the Torah, the audience — the Sanhedrin? — is "cut to the heart."
  - After Peter's recounting of Israel's history on Shavuot in the temple and the leveling of the charge of executing the Messiah, pilgrims were "pierced to the heart" or "wounded in the conscience" (ch. 2:37) and wanted to know how to repent.
  - Peter recounted Israel's history to the Sanhedrin on the day after Shavuot (ch. 3; 5:17–42), and Peter called on the Sanhedrin to repent for executing the Messiah and ignoring the witness of the Spirit of God (ch. 5:29–32). That testimony left the Sanhedrin "cut in their hearts" (ch. 5:33). Instead of repenting, the audience sought to kill Peter and Yochanan.
- Stephen's audience is doing exactly what he called the Sanhedrin to remember, Israel should listen for the voice of God and learn from ancestral mistakes.

Questions of canonical consistency
Some claim that the Apostolic Scriptures cannot be trusted in interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures because quotes are taken out of context or garbled.
- Acts 7:4 — Is there an inconsistency between Stephen's retelling of Abraham's departure from Kharan (Haran) and the account in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew scriptures from Genesis 12?
  - Stephen said that Abraham left Kharan after his father died, but Gen. 11:26,32 and 12:4 say that his father, Terakh, was 70 when Abraham was born, Abraham was 75 when he left Kharan, and Terakh died at 205. By the Hebrew text and the Septuagint, Terakh would have been 145 when Abraham left.
  - However, the Samaritan Pentateuch lists Terakh's age at death as 145.[9]
  - Some scholars think Stephen was a Samaritan, based on his mention of Abraham as being buried in Shekhem (Acts 7:16), which is a Samaritan tradition.[10]
- Acts 7:14–16 — Are there several inconsistencies with Stephen's retelling and the accounts from the Torah?
  - Stephen said the house of Ya'akov numbered 75 entering Egypt, but the Hebrew Scriptures say 66 or 70 (Gen. 46:26; Ex. 1:5, and Deut. 10:22).
    - Perhaps the difference in head count comes from Stephen's use of the Septuagint, which names four grandsons and a great-grandson of Yosef. These five other people aren't named in the Masoretic version of the standard Hebrew text.
      - "Now to Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him." (Gen. 46:20 NASB)
      - "And there were sons born to Joseph in the land of Egypt, whom Aseneth, the daughter of Petephres, priest of Heliopolis, bore to him, even Manasses and Ephraim. And there were sons born to Manasses, which the Syrian concubine bore to him, even Machir. And Machir begot Galaad. And the sons of Ephraim, the brother of Manasses; Sutalaam, and Taam. And the sons of Sutalaam; Edom." (Gen. 46:20 LXX)
  - Stephen said Ya'akov was buried in Shekhem, but the Hebrew said it was in the cave of Machpelah, in Hebron.
- Acts 7:43 — Why does Stephen quote this prophecy from Amos as saying the people were taken "beyond Babylon," rather than "beyond Damascus" as in the Masoretic Hebrew and Septuagint Greek versions of the Amos text?
  - Amos prophesied against both the kingdoms of Yehudah and Israel, but chapter 5 is directed to the house of Israel (v. 1).
    - Assyria conquered the kingdom of Israel and carried away people beyond Damascus, the capital of that empire.
  - Stephen was speaking to the Sanhedrin, dominated by descendants from the house of Yehudah.
    - Babylon conquered the kingdom of Yehudah and carried away the people to Babylon and beyond (see the books of Daniel and Esther).
    - As he had with the entire retelling of Israel's history in Acts 7, Stephen may have recast the prophecy to remind the Sanhedrin that the only reason the nation existed at that time is God had mercy on their ancestors and brought them back after Babylon was taken over.

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9 Stern, David H. "Acts 7." *Jewish New Testament Commentary.* Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., Clarksville, Md., 1992. p. 244.
10 Ibid.