

ACTS

Chapter 7

Then the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?”² To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.³ ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’^{a 4} “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.⁵ He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.⁶ God spoke to him in this way: ‘Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.⁷ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’^{b 8} Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.⁹ “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him¹⁰ and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.¹¹ “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food.¹² When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit.¹³ On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family.¹⁴ After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.¹⁵ Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died.¹⁶ Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.¹⁷ “As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased.¹⁸ Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt.¹⁹ He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.²⁰ “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child.^c For three months he was cared for in his father’s house.²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son.²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.²³ “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites.²⁴ He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian.²⁵ Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.²⁶ The next day

Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

²⁷ “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’ ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ ^d ²⁹ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons. ³⁰ “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord’s voice: ³² ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ ^e Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. ³³ “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’ ^f

³⁵ “This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea ^g and for forty years in the desert. ³⁷ “This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’ ^h ³⁸ He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. ³⁹ “But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰ They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ ⁱ ⁴¹ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. ⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: “‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? ⁴³ You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile’ ^j beyond Babylon. ⁴⁴ “Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ^k ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built the house for him. ⁴⁸ “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ⁴⁹ “‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? ⁵⁰ Has not my hand made all these things?’ ⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

7:1 *high priest.* Probably Caiaphas (see Mt 26:57–66), but see note on 4:6; cf. Jn 18:19, 24.

Are these charges true? See notes on 6:11, 13.

7:2 LISTEN TO ME – Accused of speaking against Moses, God, the temple, and the law and customs, Stephen spoke to them in great order and at some length. He revealed his thorough knowledge of the Scripture in each case, providing that he spoke only the Word of God. (LL)

Abraham ... in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. Abraham's call came in Ur, not Haran (cf. Ge 15:7; Ne 9:7). Or perhaps he was called first in Ur, and then later his call was renewed in Haran (see note on Jer 15:19–21).

7:4 *land of the Chaldeans.* A district in southern Babylonia, the name was later applied to a region that included all Babylonia.

After the death of his father. Ge 11:26 does not mean that all three sons—Abraham, Nahor and Haran—were born to Terah in the same year when he was 70 years old. See Ge 11:26–12:1. It may be that Haran was Terah's firstborn and that Abraham was born 60 years later. Thus the death of Terah at 205 years of age could have occurred just before Abraham, at 75, left Haran.

7:6 *four hundred years.* A round number for the length of Israel's stay in Egypt (Ex 12:40–41 has 430 years; see Introduction to Exodus: Background). That four generations would represent considerably less than 400 years is not a necessary conclusion (see note on Ge 15:16). Ex 6:16–20 makes Moses the great-grandson of Levi, son of Jacob and brother of Joseph. This would make four generations from Levi to Moses. But in 1Ch 7:22–27 a list of ten names represents the generations between Ephraim, the son of Joseph, and Joshua. The ten generations at 40 years each would equal 400 years, the same period of time noted as four generations. But one list is abbreviated and the other gives a full genealogy.

7:8 *covenant of circumcision.* See notes on Ge 17:10–11. The essential conditions for the religion of Israel were already fulfilled long before the temple was built and their present religious customs began.

twelve patriarchs. See Ge 35:23–26.

7:9 *they sold him.* Israel consistently rejected God's favored individuals. Stephen builds his case about Jesus' rejection by noting Joseph's rejection by his brothers (Ge 37:12–36).

7:13 *second visit.* See Ge 43.

7:14 *Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.* Although the Hebrew Bible uses the number 70 (Ge 46:27; Ex 1:5; Dt 10:22), the Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) adds at Ge 46:20 the names of two sons of Manasseh, two of Ephraim, and one grandson of the latter. This makes the number 75 and is the number that Stephen uses.

7:16 Stephen greatly compresses OT accounts of two land purchases (by Abraham and Jacob) and two burial places (at Hebron and Shechem). According to the OT, Abraham purchased land at Hebron (Ge 23:17–18), where he (Ge 25:9–11), Isaac (Ge 35:29) and Jacob (Ge 50:13) were buried. Jacob bought land at Shechem (Ge 33:19), where Joseph was later buried (Jos 24:32). Josephus preserves a tradition that Joseph’s brothers were buried at Hebron. Stephen’s rhetorical device (by which he recalls that Jacob and the 12 patriarchs were not buried in Egypt but in Canaan) is strange to modern ears but would have been well understood by his hearers.

7:18 *another king, who knew nothing about Joseph.* See note on Ex 1:8.

7:22 *Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.* Not explicitly stated in the OT but to be expected if he grew up in the household of Pharaoh’s daughter. Both Philo and Josephus speak of Moses’ great learning.

POWERFUL IN SPEECH AND ACTION – In Exodus 4:10 we read that Moses said, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent...I am slow of speech and tongue.” In verse 12 of Exodus 4 God promised: “I will help you speak and teach you what to say.” The content of what Moses said and the way in which he led Israel were from God, and they were, as Stephen said, powerful. (PBC)

7:23 *Moses was forty.* Moses was 80 years old when sent to speak before Pharaoh (Ex 7:7) and 120 years old when he died (Dt 34:7). Stephen’s words agree with a tradition that at his first departure from Egypt he was 40 years of age.

7:24 **KILLING THE EGYPTIAN** – God had not yet called him to act on behalf of Israel, and God never called him to take justice into his own hands. (PBC)

7:29 *fled to Midian.* Rejected by his own people, Moses feared that they would inform the Egyptians, and this led to his flight to Midian (Ex 2:15), the land flanking the Gulf of Aqaba on both sides.

had two sons. Gershom and Eliezer (Ex 2:22; 18:3–4; 1Ch 23:15).

7:30 *After forty years.* Plus the 40 years of v. 23, making the 80 years of Ex 7:7.

Mount Sinai. Called Horeb in Ex 3:1 (see note there).

7:35 *the same Moses ... sent to be their ruler and deliverer.* Israel rejected Moses, their deliverer, just as the Jews of Stephen’s day were rejecting Jesus, their deliverer. Yet both were sent by God.

angel who appeared to him in the bush. See Ex 3:2.

7:37 *prophet like me.* See 3:22–23; see also note on Dt 18:15.

7:38 *angel who spoke to him.* According to Jewish interpretation at that time, the law was given to Moses by angel mediation—after the manner of the original call of Moses (see Ex 3:2; see also v. 53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2). – It was the Angel of the Lord, the second

person of the Trinity before his incarnation, who appeared to Moses at the burning bush. (PBC)

he received living words to pass on to us. Moses was the mediator between God and man on Mount Sinai.

7:39 *refused to obey him.* Another rejection of God's representative and his commands.

7:40 *Make us gods.* While Moses was on Sinai receiving the law, the people made the golden calf, rejecting God and his representative (Ex 32:1). The people had not traveled far from the idolatry of Egypt.

7:42 *God ... gave them over.* See note on Ro 1:24.

7:43 Stephen quotes Am 5:25–27 as translated in the Septuagint, except that he replaces Damascus with Babylon in view of the fact that the final exile of Israel from the promised land was carried out by the Babylonians (Amos was speaking first of the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom).

7:44–50 Because he had been accused of “speaking against the holy place” (6:13), Stephen concludes his recital with a word about the sanctuary. Presumably, he had been preaching that the risen Christ had now replaced the temple as the mediation of God's saving presence among his people and as the one (the “place”) through whom they (and “all nations,” Mk 11:17) could come to God in prayer (see note on 6:13).

7:44 *tabernacle of the Testimony.* So called by Stephen because the primary contents of the desert tabernacle were the ark of the covenant and the two covenant tablets it contained, which were called “the Testimony” (see Ex 25:16, 21 and notes).

7:49 Isaiah reminded Israel that all creation is the temple that God himself had made. Stephen recalls that word to remind his hearers that ultimately God builds his own temple.

7:51 *uncircumcised hearts and ears.* Though physically circumcised, they were acting like the uncircumcised pagan nations around them. They were not truly consecrated to the Lord. – Uncircumcised means, in religious terms, pagan or heathen. Their hearts were not with God. (PBC)

7:53 *law that was put into effect through angels.* See note on v. 38.

54 **When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.** **55** **But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** **56** **“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”** **57** **At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,** **58** **dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.** **59** **While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed,**

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ **Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.**

7:54 LOOKED UP TO HEAVEN AND SAW THE GLORY OF GOD – The Holy Spirit gave this ability of sight to Stephen’s eyes without blinding him. This is a special sight given to him, not as though it were intended for him and his strengthening alone, but through him for all of them as they near death. The Savior stands ready to receive them. (LL) – In the O.T., the visible sign of God’s glory was the Shekinah, the pillar of cloud or of fire that went before the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22). That cloud was an assurance of God’s saving presence and his gracious intentions. What Stephen saw gave him the same assurance: Jesus at God’s right hand, powerful to sustain Stephen’s witness. In the presence of and with the help of the triune God Stephen completed his testimony. (PBC)

7:55 full of the Holy Spirit. See note on 2:4; see also 6:5.

7:56 Son of Man. See note on Mk 8:31. Jesus used this title of himself (see Mk 2:10) to emphasize his relationship to Messianic prediction (Mt 25:31; Da 7:13–14). It is unusual for someone other than Jesus to apply this term to Christ (see also Rev 1:13).

7:57 COVERED THEIR EARS – The physical gesture is wonderfully expressive of Stephen’s charge that they are “uncircumcised in ears.” They do everything to keep from hearing the prophet’s proclamation that Jesus is the one raised to the presence of God. (Sacra)

7:58 DRAGGED HIM OUTSIDE THE CITY – The person to be stoned should be taken outside the court (city). (Sacra)

BEGAN TO STONE HIM – It was illegal to carry out the death penalty without permission of the Roman governor, but did not seem to matter when a mob action resulted in murder. (PBC)

laid their clothes at the feet of ... Saul. † Luke’s way of introducing the main character of the second section of the book. – According to Jewish law, the witnesses had to throw the first stones. They had to take off their outer cloak to do it. (PBC)

7:60 FELL ON HIS KNEES – This is the body language of submission and prayer. (Sacra) – The major contrast between the death of Jesus and one of his witness Stephen (apart from the mode of execution) is the fact that Jesus was portrayed as keeping silence in the face of his accusers, whereas Stephen’s speech is precisely the sort of response to an accusation a sage would be expected to make. But even this is in fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy: “I will give you speech and wisdom such that all those opposing you will not be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:15). (Sacra) – Driven to his knees by the blows from the stones, at the very moment of his death, Stephen made one last attempt to reach his enemies and the crowd. At the top of his voice, so that all in the crowd heard, Stephen prayed his final prayer: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”. This prayer for his enemies he had learned from his Savior. Stephen’s prayer had one most notable answer, the young man named Saul. (LL) – The similar responses in a similar situation

show that Stephen is a true follower of Jesus. They also emphasize important points in the implied author's understanding of martyrdom. The martyr bears witness to the exalted Lord, ruling with heavenly power, whom the opponents cannot see. The martyr trusts in a divine care reaching beyond death and shows no animosity toward the killers, instead interceding for them. In these ways the martyr follows the example of the Lord Jesus. An impressive picture of a faithful follower of Jesus results, a picture that probably had considerable appeal in the early Christian era. (Tannehill)

do not hold this sin against them. Compare with Jesus' words (Lk 23:34).

FELL ASLEEP – The death of Stephen, in fact, provides the first major transition in the Acts narrative. The Jerusalem story is effectively ended except for those necessary contacts with the Church there that the narrative will demand. (Sacra)