

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Lecture 10, Acts 6:8-8:4

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This is Dr. Craig Keener in his teaching on the book of Acts. This is session 10, Acts chapter 6, verse 8 through chapter 8, verse 4.

In chapter 6, verse 8 through chapter 7, and verse 1, Stephen is hauled before the authorities. Now, in chapter 6 and verse 9, we read that the conflict is initially with the synagogue of the freed persons.

Synagogues were community centers. They were also used as places of communal prayer and the study of the Torah. There would be readings of scripture.

This is reported to us not just in later Jewish texts. This is reported to us in Josephus and in Philo, writing in the first century. And of course, we have some excavated synagogues from this period, although we don't have nearly all of them that existed.

Freed persons. The term here is a Greek transliteration, basically, of the Latin libertini. These were freed persons in the Roman sense.

These were freed persons of Roman citizen, who were Roman citizens. If you were a slave of a Roman citizen, you were freed under the usual conditions. Under certain conditions, you could be freed and you yourself would become a Roman citizen, having been a slave of a Roman citizen.

Well, thousands of Judeans were enslaved by Pompeii, not Pompeii like the city that was destroyed at Mount Vesuvius, but this was Pompeii, the Roman general. They were enslaved by Pompeii in the first century B.C. They were brought to Rome and in Rome there were some other Jewish people and these Jewish people bought the freedom of their fellow Jews, which was a good thing to do. Well, they therefore became freed persons and became Roman citizens.

Philo tells us that a number of Jewish people living in Rome were Roman citizens. They were descended from these freed slaves. Some of them left there.

They came back to Jerusalem where they settled in other places and from there some of them migrated to Jerusalem. So, we have a synagogue of freed persons in Jerusalem. Now, this would be a fairly high-status synagogue among Hellenist synagogues because these people are Roman citizens, which is something that most officials in the Greek East, the Greek-speaking part of the empire, the Eastern Roman Empire, didn't have that privilege.

There's a synagogue inscription that's been found of a synagogue from Jerusalem and it's a synagogue dedicated by one Theodotus, it's a Greek name, son of Vitenas. Well, that's a Latin name. And Theodotus was son of a Jewish Roman citizen.

It might even be the same synagogue that we hear about here. It was a synagogue with nice facilities, a place for ritual baths, a place to take care of travelers, and so on. This is a Hellenist synagogue that we read about in verse 9. So, it's related to the same group that the seven who are mentioned in chapter 6 and verse 5 come from, that the widows come from in chapter 6 and verse 1. And apparently some members of the Hellenist community who had not become believers were very unhappy about other members of the Hellenist community who did become believers.

And particularly when Stephen is defeating them in debate after debate, full of the spirit and wisdom, and doing signs and wonders that they can't refute, full of the spirit and power, just like Jesus said back in Luke chapter 21, I'll give you the wisdom that none of your adversaries can speak against or refute. I remember years ago, I had some wonderful professors, by the way, very supportive professors, but there were some other professors that I had a lot of debates with. And one of these professors, we would sit for hours in his office debating.

And the first time it happened, I would concede, well, okay, so let's say if you're going to argue this, then how about this? But every time I would say something like that, I thought it was being polite, he would say, ah, you see, you're wrong, you admit you're wrong. He didn't play fairly in terms of the rules of debate in the academy. And I was ashamed of myself.

I was like, I could have given a better argument than that, but the way he twisted my words, made it sound like it wasn't the case. And so, I began to pray that God would give me wisdom that nobody could refute. I don't like debates, but we would sit in his office for hours, which was very gracious of him with his time, by the way.

Most of us who are busy writing and so on, there are only so many hours in the day, but we would debate for hours on end. And after I'd begun praying that, he would be the one acting very nervous. And one day after I'd given him so many different lines of evidence, he would just say, well, I don't accept that kind of evidence.

Finally, I said, if somebody were raised from the dead in front of you, would you believe? He said, no. I said, wait a minute, you're telling me I'm closed-minded because I'm a Christian? Even though I was an atheist, I was converted to Christianity through an encounter with Christ. You're telling me that I'm closed-minded, but you wouldn't believe even if somebody were raised from the dead in front of you? That's right.

Anyway, this happens sometimes and the Holy Spirit can give us wisdom for this. And some people are more skilled at this than others, but some people are given the gift of being able to do that. My gift usually works out in my writing.

But in any case, Stephen was full of the spirit and wisdom. He was doing signs and wonders. They couldn't refute this.

And so, they were getting upset with him in this Hellenistic synagogue. Well, why were they so upset? This had become an internal issue in their community. Their community was divided over this.

Also, they may have been compensating for their foreignness. Not everybody necessarily does that. But a grip of the first, when you read Josephus, and you read Acts chapter 12, he seems to have tried to compensate for the fact that he wasn't from Jerusalem, wasn't from Judea at all.

He'd spent most of his life in Rome by trying to identify with the most conservative faction that he could of the Jewish community. And he was fueling Judean nationalism in so doing. Sometimes when people play to the choir, they get more and more polarized as people on each side are appealing to the most conservative voice in their particular group.

And dialogue becomes less and less possible. Pharisees ranked first-generation freed slaves just below proselytes because they said, if you were born of a slave mother, we don't really know that your father was Jewish. So, they also had that against them, although we don't know how many of them were first-generation freed slaves and how many were just descendants of freed slaves.

And there probably were some other people who attended the synagogue because of its prestige who weren't even freed persons at all. The locations that are mentioned where these people came from, including Alexandria, Cilicia, and so on, later sources attest to a synagogue of Alexandrians and a synagogue of Cilicians, large Jewish communities in both places. Alexandria probably had the largest Jewish community outside of Judea and Galilee.

But Cilicia is very important in mentioning where these people came from in the synagogue of the freed persons because the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus. And pretty much everybody in antiquity who knew anything knew that. And so somebody who was probably a member of this synagogue was Saul of Tarsus.

And you get more clues to that as the Book of Acts goes on. But those freed in Rome often made their way eastward and they probably constitute the synagogue. Since they can't get them any other way, some are willing to not play by the rules.

We have no indication that Saul of Tarsus was that way. Probably they weren't all that way, but some of them got some false witnesses. And in Chapter 6, verses 11 through 15, they charge Stephen with blasphemy.

Now, in the most technical way that this term was used later on by rabbis, to be true blasphemy, you had to abuse the divine name. However, the Greek word *blasphemeo*, and again these are Hellenists, they're probably saying all this in Greek, to begin with. These Diaspora Jews wouldn't unless they were from Syria or maybe some other places, but not Hellenist Jews and not the places that are mentioned.

They wouldn't be speakers of Aramaic. They would be speakers of Greek. And the non-technical general use of *blasphemeo* can mean any kind of reviling or mocking.

And associated with God, it could mean disrespect for God. So, you don't go along with our traditions, you are blaspheming God. Ironically, the prototypical way of desecrating a divine name was to swear a false oath.

You called a deity to witness, or if it was the true God, the God of Israel, you called the God of Israel as a witness. And what you were saying was, you know, this God has seen that I'm telling the truth. And I'm calling on that God to witness that I'm telling the truth.

And if I'm not telling the truth, then that God will defend his or her honor. Speaking of the wider world, that God or goddess will defend his or her honor by punishing me. And if it's the God of Israel, he will defend his honor by punishing me.

Well, most people didn't want to swear a false oath. Somebody who would do that was somebody who really didn't have a very high respect for the deity. Most people in antiquity did fear the gods, although some people obviously feared them more than others.

And some people feared the true God more than others. Well, this is the irony. They're accusing Stephen of blaspheming the divine name.

But ironically, these are false witnesses. They give false testimony under oath and thereby desecrate the divine name. Well, there was a pre-Christian rhetorical manual, that probably wasn't widely used, but in the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, was sometimes falsely attributed to Aristotle.

One of the rhetorical techniques that it addresses in detail is how to lie under oath and be persuasive. This was in a period when rhetoric or professional public speaking wasn't concerned about the morality of it, which was considered something philosophers dealt with. It was a matter of winning.

You were defending a client. You have to win your case. So, they taught them how to lie under oath.

And apparently, well, these people probably had never read *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, but there were people who lied under oath, and it was known that some people lied under, well, these people were lying under oath. They were not pious. They were not God-fearing.

According to the Torah, Deuteronomy 19 verses 18 and 19, and also according to Roman law, false witnesses in the capital case were death worthy. They were to be executed. These are the charges against Stephen.

Well, the charges are that he has spoken against God by speaking against the law and against the temple, or as they put it, speaking against this holy place. Now, this could stir up passion. It was not only a religious issue.

It was a nationalistic issue. It was something in that culture that they were so closely intertwined. I know in my country, sometimes people have talked about God and country, and their nationalism gets bound up with their religious commitment.

It works really badly, like in World War I, where you had countries that claimed to be Christian, and many of the countries participating claimed to be Christian, and yet it was nationalism that drove this war, and it had disastrous effects. You have this also in countries where you have ethnic loyalties. My wife was a refugee in a civil war in a country where 89% of the people claimed to be Christian, and yet you had one ethnic group fighting against another ethnic group, or one part of the country against another part of the country.

Obviously, not all the people were genuine Christians, and obviously, some people were put in situations where they had to defend themselves, and obviously, most people were noncombatants who were caught up in the war. But all that to say, sometimes nationalism drives things, too. In this country, if somebody talks about God bringing judgment on the country, nationalism is such that it's not just a narrative, it's a way that people react against it.

So, you had someone I know named Jeremiah Wright, who pronounced judgment on the country because of its oppression of the poor, and because of its racism, and so on, and he was speaking from the political left, and he was denounced. Pat Robertson, somebody who was speaking from the right about abortion and other things in this country, and he said, you know, judgment is coming, and he was denounced. Well, it looks to me like whether you denounce it from the right or from the left, if you say judgment comes on America, a lot of Americans will be upset, and so it's become such an issue that if you were a member of a congregation where somebody said that, they might use it against you someday.

So probably you don't want me to say that judgment is coming on this nation, if you happen to live in this nation because you might get in trouble for listening to what I said. But in any case, the Bible says that the Lord rises up to judge all the nations of the earth. No nation is perfectly virtuous.

But in this case, it was both a nationalistic and a religious issue, because they thought that we are God's people. You can't be pronouncing judgment on the temple. Well, Jeremiah got in a lot of trouble for pronouncing judgment on the temple.

Jeremiah chapter 7, you treat this temple like a den of thieves, a text that Jesus quotes in Luke chapter 19, like a den of robbers. That's where robbers would store their loot because they thought it was a safe place for them. Jeremiah said, you see, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord is in our midst.

God wouldn't judge his own house, but I will do to this house, which is called by my name, as I did to Shiloh, declares the Lord. A place where apparently the tabernacle was even destroyed, or if it wasn't destroyed, if it survived. In any case, the ark was captured in battle, and Shiloh, the place where the Tabernacle had been, was destroyed.

Prophesying against the temple led to punishment. Jeremiah was put in the stocks, he was beaten. In the first century, he was also punished.

A prophet by the name of Joshua ben Hananiah, a generation after this, we don't know if he was a Christian or not, but he rightly said, judgment is coming on the temple, and he was going around pronouncing judgment on the temple. The chief priests, which was a defiance of their honor, had him arrested and handed him over to the Roman authorities. The governor had him beaten, Josephus says in Josephus' War, book six, paragraphs 300 and following, beaten until his bones showed, and then he was released because they thought he was insane.

They didn't think he was a further threat, and he didn't have a following, because most people didn't believe him. But prophesying against the temple could be punished. You saw what happened to Jesus when he overturned the tables in the temple.

So, speaking against the law in the temple was a punishable offense. Was Stephen speaking against the law? You look at his response, and Stephen affirms the law. He doesn't even answer that charge directly, he just cites the law all over the place and shows that he upholds the law.

In fact, in the end, he's going to turn charges against his accusers and call them, the people of those who resisted the law that was given through angels, he's going to

speak of them as those who climaxed the work of the prophets, resisting the Holy Spirit who speaks through the prophets, and he's going to call them stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, which means they're the ones not keeping the law. So, what about the charge, though, that Stephen challenged the temple? Well, you know, the Christians were worshiping in the temple. They weren't against the temple, per se, but Stephen is going to challenge the temple, sort of, in a way that maybe even the Jerusalem apostles would have been uncomfortable with because the future didn't lie with Jerusalem in the short run, and it didn't lie with the temple in the short run.

They see Stephen's face like an angel, and sometimes you can see somebody almost glowing with glory, still their face, but just the way their face is lit up with the Lord. But probably this is evoking Luke 9, the transfiguration when Jesus is glowing with glory. And the Old Testament model for that is when Moses was transfigured.

There were a lot of people in antiquity who talked about somebody glowing or God glowing or turning to lightning or whatever, but the account with which most Jewish people and most other people who knew the Torah at all would be familiar was the account of Moses being transfigured. And Moses also received the law via angels. So, you know, Stephen is going to talk about that, about Moses at the burning bush, the angel spoke with him.

And in verse 53, the law was given through angels. The angels also are with God's servants elsewhere in the book of Acts. An angel had just freed them from prison in chapter 5 and verse 19.

In chapter 8 and verse 26, an angel is going to send Philip on his way to bring the good news to the African court official. In chapter 10 and verse 3, an angel appears to Cornelius. In chapter 12, the angel of the Lord is going to release Peter from detention, from custody.

And also, later on in the chapter, this angel of the Lord is going to strike dead here at Agrippa for receiving divine honor as if he is divine. So angels play in the narrative, but here Stephen looks to them like an angel. It's probably not a transfiguration in the kind of level that you have in Luke chapter 9, but it gets their attention and it's something they can't refute.

Well, in chapter 7, Stephen's speech, the two charges against him are that he's against the law, he's against Moses, and he's against the temple, against this holy place. He gives two major responses to this. First of all, he's going to release Peter from detention and he's going to respond to the temple by showing that God is not really limited to the temple.

He's clarifying what he's actually been saying. And then secondly, he's going to return the charges, which was standard practice in antiquity. If somebody charged you with something, if you were able to at all, you would charge them with the same offense.

There was one orator who said he was beaten by the accusers and he said, they have the audacity to charge him because he was alive, which was not his fault. They liked to return it against the accused. Cicero was a master of this and he could be venomous.

This one woman who was part of the, one of the prosecution witnesses, Cicero says, and the reason she's a widow, I don't want to mention it, that she's the one who killed her husband, but he was just venomous. But anyway, returning the charges, you climaxed the rebellion of our ancestors. Our ancestors rejected Joseph, who was sent to be their deliverer.

They rejected Moses, who was sent to be their deliverer. And Moses was sent to be their deliverer. Cicero said that God would raise up a prophet like him.

Well, God has done that and guess what? One of the ways he would be like Moses, he was rejected. And you killed the prophets. And now you, the descendants of those who killed the prophets, you have killed the holy and righteous one.

You can see why he gets stoned at the end. I used to think when I first would read Acts chapter seven, they stoned him because he gave them a boring history lesson. But no, he was giving them a very important warning.

People often would, Jewish people often, and in many Jewish documents you have something about the history of Israel that would be used. Some of the Psalms do that. But you have a recounting of different people through history.

In the book of Sirach, you have that. You have that also in some Maccabean literature. You have that in Hebrews chapter 11, which is very exquisitely designed rhetorically.

Stephen does that here. But always it was history with a point. History in antiquity, as we mentioned in the introduction, was meant to be told with a point.

So, Stephen is doing here what Luke is doing in his two-volume work with the history of Jesus and the history of the early Christian mission. The point is that if we want to learn what Luke does, like when he's paralleling different characters, he's paralleling Jesus, Peter, and Paul, or paralleling Stephen in his execution with Jesus in his execution. Well, he's not doing that by making up things.

He's doing that the same way that Stephen does here with the Old Testament, linking different characters, showing common features, and how God works in certain ways in history. He's highlighting certain parallels that are there. Seeing how Stephen does it gives us a clue to Luke's own hermeneutic.

The outline of Stephen's message. Abraham is addressed in verses two through eight. We see that God doesn't speak just in the Holy Land.

God spoke in Mesopotamia to Abraham. And Joseph in verses nine through sixteen. Well, Joseph ends up being exalted in Egypt after being rejected by his own brothers.

Moses is not only exalted somewhere outside the Holy Land, but when Moses worships God on Mount Sinai, and when Moses is told to bring the people to worship at Mount Sinai, Stephen quotes the language of the Old Testament. And God says to Moses, take off your sandals, for this place is holy. Why is that so significant? Because Stephen was charged with blasphemy against this holy place.

So now Stephen responds, this holy place, this holy place, the temple is not the only holy place. A mountain in the midst of the Arabian desert can be a holy place. Any place where God is a holy place.

And it's God's presence that matters. It's the Holy Spirit that matters. It's not your traditional treatment, which was conventional throughout the ancient world, the ancient Mediterranean, and ancient Middle Eastern world, of saying, we have holy sites, we have holy places.

What really made a place most holy, and you have that in the Old Testament as well, but what really made a place most holy was it was sanctified by God's own presence. That's probably one reason why Canaanites, when you have one culture supplanting another culture, might destroy a place, but they would rebuild a temple on the same site. But when the Israelites came in, they destroyed that.

They smashed the temples, smashed the idols when they came in because their God was different and their holy place would be different. So anyway, Moses was rejected by his brothers who made you a ruler or judge over us. And Moses, the holy place was outside the Holy Land, even though in the Mekhilta from the early 2nd century, we read the Jewish tradition that God only spoke in the Holy Land.

Well, what about Ezekiel? Well, that was by the River Kebar. God can speak outside the Holy Land under certain conditions, so a holy place near water. And so they explained everything else away as exceptions.

When you have too many exceptions, there's probably something wrong with your rule. But this was a tradition. It was nationalistic.

And so, he goes on after talking about Moses and the prophet like Moses. He says, your ancestors rebelled against Moses in the wilderness. Our ancestors, but he's going to focus on your ancestors because he's going to identify with Moses and the prophets.

They're identified with the other side in Israel's history. In the Ancestors' Rebellion, Chapter 7, verses 38 to 50, he does this at length. Now, you don't want to get to the controversial things at the beginning of your message, because if you get stoned at the very beginning, you won't get to talk about Abraham, Joseph, and Moses.

He wants to make enough of his case. It's said of Thomas Cranmer that he managed to say a few things before they actually pulled him off and decided he needed to be executed because they weren't expecting it. So, you can get away with a few things for a while, but you don't want to put your most controversial things up front.

You want to get at least some hearing. Did anybody there ever convert? Well, we do hear of somebody later on. But anyway, he charges his accusers in verses 51 to 53.

That's when they cut him off. He reverses the charges, which was the common method. Now, Stephen's parallels in history that he makes, some of these parallels already existed in the Torah, in the Pentateuch, between Joseph and Moses.

It's not surprising that Stephen would link figures in history because you have some of these literary links already between the end of Genesis and the early part of Exodus. These stories were undoubtedly told together. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery.

Moses' family, who were slaves, saved him from slavery. The Midianites sold Joseph into Egypt. Midianites welcomed Moses when he left Egypt, when he fled Egypt.

Joseph became Pharaoh's father. He became a father to Pharaoh, which was actually a title sometimes used by Egyptians. Moses became a son to Pharaoh's daughter.

Joseph was abruptly exalted from slavery and made a prince over Egypt. Moses abruptly lost his Egyptian princehood, his royalty, by defending slaves. Joseph made all of Egypt Pharaoh's slaves.

Through Moses, God freed the slaves. Through Joseph, God delivered Egypt during the famine. Through Moses, God devastated Egypt's economy.

Joseph, exiled in Egypt, marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Moses, exiled from Egypt, marries the daughter of a Midianite priest. The name of Joseph's first

son, of two of his sons who were named, there seem to have been others, evokes Joseph's sojourn in a foreign land.

The name of the first of two named sons of Moses evokes Moses' sojourn in a foreign land. The future deliverer's leadership in the case of Joseph was initially rejected by his brothers, who sold him into slavery. The future deliverer's leadership in the case of Moses was initially rejected by his brothers when they said, who made you a ruler or a judge over us? So what Stephen is doing with the Old Testament is following a pattern that's already there in the Old Testament, including the pattern of the rejected deliverer, which he's going to highlight in these different cases.

The judge, the high priest, who was the officiating leader of the Sanhedrin, offers Stephen the opportunity to deny the charge. Well, that's a merciful thing to do. But Stephen goes ahead and builds this case.

And Stephen takes certain liberties as he's following the Old Testament. And these were liberties that were normally taken by Jewish teachers. Actually, he takes far less liberties than Jewish teachers normally do as he retells these stories.

The parallels, you already see that kind of patterning in the narratives that Stephen is following. The fact that he spent so much time in the Pentateuch, well, remember the Sadducees especially liked the Pentateuch. In fact, Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher, basically, in Alexandria, almost always keeps things just to the Pentateuch, which might make sense if you're an Eastern Jew.

But in any case, Stephen's liberties. He usually follows the Septuagint, the most common Greek version of the Old Testament in his day. He summarizes.

He's not going to be speaking this for hours like maybe Acts 3 is a summary of a speech for hours. But Stephen probably isn't going to have that much time. So, Stephen summarizes.

So occasionally he telescopes some events, and blends some events together. Most of his speech is just biblical quotation from the Septuagint. Occasionally he gives an inference like Moses' Egyptian education.

He was educated in all the wisdom and learning of the Egyptians. Well, that's what you would expect if Moses was a member of the royal court. He would have gotten that kind of education, just like Daniel did, and Daniel wasn't even a member of the royal court.

However, Stephen lacks most of the legendary embellishments that you find even in Josephus, the Jewish historian, that Moses went and fought Ethiopia. That's where

he got his Ethiopian wife and so forth. We have a lot of legends about Moses and Artepanis, who's writing from Alexandria, and Josephus and so forth.

Stephen doesn't waste time with those kinds of embellishments. Pretty much he stays close to the text. I'm not going to do this in detail, but I'm going to give you some details on some background observations in Acts 7. Verse 25 talks about deliverance through Moses.

The Greek word here is *soteria*. It's the same word used back in chapter 4 and verse 12, where Peter and John say there is *soteria*, there is salvation through no one other than the name of Jesus. God had granted deliverance before, not on the level of Jesus, but God had granted deliverance before.

He granted deliverance through Joseph and here explicitly through Moses, and yet these were rejected deliverers. So why do you think that just because our leaders rejected Jesus, that means Jesus is not the Messiah? It fits the pattern. It also fits Isaiah 53, although that doesn't get quoted here the way it gets quoted in the next chapter.

In chapter 7, verse 29, he doesn't have to mention this, but he mentions Moses' inter-ethnic marriage. Moses marries a Nubian and crosses cultures with this marriage, as mentioned in Numbers 12. The Nubians were particularly known, and in the Old Testament too, can an Ethiopian change his skin, or kushite, kushi in Hebrew.

They were particularly known for their very dark skin. They were known that way by everybody to the north of them. However, some people in the far north were known for their very white skin.

Everybody always considered themselves normal and people to the north as light and people to the south as dark, no matter where they were on the spectrum. We find that all over the place in ancient literature, Greeks calling Egyptians black sometimes, but Greeks in Egypt called Nubians black, but not themselves. In any case, Moses' inter-ethnic marriage.

Joseph also had one, as we saw. This is something beginning to push beyond the culture because this was something that was highly despised by the conservative Jewish community. You're not supposed to marry a non-Jew.

That's already in Deuteronomy and so on, in terms of you need to not intermarry with those who worship other people's gods, but it wasn't an ethnic issue, biblically. 735-38, you may not catch this in the English translation, but in Greek, the term that's translated this one comes five times. This one, this.

This one, this. It drives home the point. It was used in rhetoric for emphasis, to drive home a point.

This rejected deliverer, this one whom you rejected. In 741, he speaks of the calf idol. Now, Greeks, even Greeks, despised Egyptians for worshipping, among other things, animal figures and part animal figures, like Anubis, who has a human body and a cat, and a canine head.

Greeks and Romans despised Egyptians for having any kind of animal worship. So, you know, Jewish people would not be happy with this. This was often considered the most embarrassing episode in all of Israel's history.

Jewish people were ashamed of it. Later rabbis tried to explain it as well. You know, it was the foreigners who came among us who really led the way in all this, and it was their fault.

But Israel was ashamed of this, so much so that Josephus, who's tracking along following a lot of the Old Testament, actually omits the scene. It was just too embarrassing. 742, he talks about how they worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Well, Greeks thought that the sun, the moon, and the stars were gods. Jewish people normally thought that they were angels, and astrology was very highly respected in this era. In fact, it was so highly respected that actually by the time you get to the 6th century, you know, we've excavated a number of synagogues from Galilee.

There's this Galilean synagogue with the mosaic of the zodiac as the central floor of the synagogue with a picture of Helios, the sun god, in the middle. Well, it was meant to symbolize that God is over the sun and over all the stars, but the imagery that they used, even in the first century, Josephus and Philo compare certain things in the temple to constellations. Astrological symbolism was pervasive by this period.

Rulers were paranoid about astrologers predicting their deaths, stirring unrest. It had spread from Babylonia to Parthia, and it was considered the science of the day. So, you know, Gentiles followed it increasingly.

It became more and more as time went on. Jewish people often would say, well, maybe it can predict the future for the Gentiles, but it doesn't control the future. The stars don't control the future, and they don't control our future.

So, this would again be something that they would not appreciate, being reminded that their ancestors worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars. That had been done again by Manasseh and others but in the wilderness. So, then he speaks of houses made with human hands.

Well, he's already used this language of made with hands back in verse 41. It was often used by Jewish people for idols. Idols aren't real gods.

They're not the God who made us. They're gods that are made by us, made by human hands. But now he uses that language to describe the temple.

And the worst thing of all, the most offensive thing of all is, he's not just making it up. He's got biblical precedent for it. He, in verses 49 and 50, he quotes the book of Isaiah.

And often an argument would conclude with a maxim, in this case with a scripture text, or a clinching point that drives the point. He's been talking about the temple. Well, now he's got his text about the temple.

Isaiah 66, verses 1 and 2. This doesn't come from the time of the Tabernacle when God had earlier told David, don't build a house for him. Although Stephen mentions that as well. But Isaiah 66, verses 1 and 2. Heaven is my throne.

Earth is my footstool. What house will you build me? So, in a sense, he confirms their suspicion that he's against the temple. But he's not really against using the temple.

He's simply against centralizing the worship of God only in the temple, in a way that God isn't working elsewhere. And now with the coming of the Messiah, it's not even like, you know, in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, in the place that God will choose. And then later on, you know, it has to be Jerusalem.

That's the place that God has chosen. There was scripture for that. But with the coming of the Messiah, now the law is going to go forth from Jerusalem, as Isaiah 2 says.

The message was to go forth. It wasn't to remain centered in one place. Stephen had the right theological vision.

He lays the theological groundwork. He doesn't live to see it. He doesn't live to carry it out fully.

But he lays theological groundwork, which is developed in the rest of the book of Acts, and ironically, carried out by one of the very people who was responsible for his execution. Chapter 7, verses 51 to 53. Well, he's come to the climax of his speech.

Now he gives what ancient orators sometimes called, and what we often call today, the peroration. In Latin, it was the peroratio. The closing of the speech was often the most emotionally rousing part of the speech.

He returns charges against his accusers. He didn't dare explicitly do that earlier in the speech, but he's been building towards it throughout the speech, and now he comes to it. It was customary to return charges against your accusers, but not to return charges against your judges, which he does here.

Because you return charges against your judges, you know what's going to happen. There was a philosopher, a Stoic philosopher by the name of Epictetus, and he complained about this one guy. He says, you know, you don't have to make trouble for yourself.

The guy goes before the court, and he says, I'm like Socrates, and you are like Socrates' judges. Well, of course, the judges condemned him. Epictetus says, you know, that's not being bold, that's being stupid.

Well, in Stephen's case, I don't think he's being stupid, but he does know what's coming. He returns charges against the judges. Verse 51, he's going to have to get this out quickly.

Verse 51, you're stiff-necked and spiritually uncircumcised, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You don't hear or heed the word of the Lord. Well, these terms often appear with regard to Israel, prophetic language in the Old Testament, but they appear together in Deuteronomy 10.

Where Israel is in Moses' day, he complains that they're stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart. Then in verse 52, your ancestors persecuted the prophets. Well, 1 Kings 18:4, in Elijah's day, Jezebel had murdered many of the prophets.

Nehemiah 9:26 also gives a summary of how our ancestors killed the prophets. Jeremiah 26, we have one of them named in Jeremiah 26:20-23, Uriah the prophet. Jeremiah survives, but not all prophets did.

Uriah was a true prophet, and he fled to Egypt, and they brought him back and put him to death. So, in other words, Jeremiah was in real risk of being put to death too, but God protected him, including through the African court official, Ebed-Melech, the eunuch Ebed-Melech. And your ancestors persecuted the prophets.

Jewish tradition had developed this even further. So, for example, it was said that Isaiah had hidden in a tree, and a tree opened and protected him, but Manasseh knew that he was in the tree because the fringes of his... well, later Rabbi said the fringes of his prayer shawl were hanging out of the tree. So, Manasseh had the tree sawn in half and killed Isaiah that way.

But that's also in the lives of the prophets and other Jewish works. So, this tradition has been amplified of our ancestors killed the prophets, and they are not going to deny that tradition. It's in scripture, it's part of the history of Israel, and it was actually amplified in this period.

Another tradition mentioned in verse 53, something that they wouldn't deny, is that the law was mediated through angels. He said, you know, you received this law mediated through angels, and that was meant as a way of exalting the law. Same as in Hebrews chapter 2. Galatians 3, it's kind of saying, okay, it was mediated, it wasn't as direct as something else.

But angels mediated the law. You know, the angels spoke to Moses in the bush. And Deuteronomy also speaks of many, probably angels, present at Mount Sinai.

It was certainly interpreted that way by Jewish interpreters. I think Deuteronomy 32. So, Psalm 68 might imply something about that, the way it was interpreted by Jewish people as a reading on the day of Pentecost, later on in any case.

So, he cites this tradition, the law was given through angels, and yet you have rejected it. You have disobeyed the law. And the Holy Spirit, as we mentioned earlier, was associated especially with the prophets, with speaking the prophetic message.

He said, your ancestors killed the prophets, and you climaxed that by killing the holy and righteous one. He said, you always resist the Holy Spirit. Present tense, they're still resisting the Holy Spirit.

Stephen is speaking to them just like an Old Testament prophet. And Stephen knows what's coming because, look, this is what they've been doing. This is what they did to the Messiah.

They're going to do it to him too. And they prove his criticism by killing him. Stephen's death, we see parallels with Jesus in Stephen's death in Acts 7, 54 to 60.

At Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus declares that he is the exalted Son of Man. Well, at his trial before the Sanhedrin, Stephen declares that he sees the exalted Son of Man. Earlier they saw Stephen as an angel.

Now he sees into heaven, he sees Jesus. Jesus in Luke 23:46 says, Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. Stephen in Acts 7, 59 says, Lord, I commit my spirit to you.

Jesus in Luke 23:34 prays, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. Stephen in Acts 7:60 says, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.

Well, remember what we said earlier about parallel biographies. And also remember the disciples imitate teachers. So, it's natural, knowing that Jesus did that, Stephen would want to do that at his death too.

We also see something else in this narrative, and that's the ironic way that Luke narrates this. Who's really guilty? Jesus is standing in heaven in verse 56. Normally you would expect him to be seated at the Father's right hand, just like it says back in Acts chapter 2. But a witness or a judge could stand.

The witness would stand when giving testimony. The judge could stand when rendering the verdict. Jesus is either Stephen's witness, or Jesus is portrayed here as the true judge.

And it's his accusers, the false accusers, who merit what they are saying he merits in this capital trial. It's his accusers who are really on trial. Normally a person who was going to be executed should be stripped.

And maybe they did strip Stephen, but it's not mentioned here. Luke mentioned something else instead. They stripped themselves.

Well, normally Hellenists would strip for exercise. It might not have stripped all the way down, but when it was warm they would strip themselves. You see the same thing with Paul's accusers.

The crowd in Acts chapter 22, when they're throwing their cloaks in the air. An executed person was to confess their sins. But in verse 60, Stephen confesses not his sins, but theirs.

Sometimes ancient writers would say explicitly that unjust judges were the ones really on trial, before the truth or before God. Gentiles often said that with Socrates. He wasn't the one that was on trial.

It was his accusers who were on trial. Or they were trying the truth and therefore they were the ones condemned. Some background on Stephen's stoning.

It's done outside the city. They drag him outside the city. Well, you don't want to desecrate the holy city.

And normally executions and burials were done outside the city. Customs. If Mishnah and Hedron 7 and so on, if Mishnah and Hedron was being followed in this case, Mishnah and Hedron hadn't been written yet, but if it reflects rules that go back this far, they may have followed these rules.

Then again, since it's a lynch mob, and they're just killing him because they're angry, they may not have been thinking too much about rules anyway. The Sadducees wouldn't, and the Hellenists wouldn't be concerned with pharisaic regulations in any case. But this may give us at least a sense of how it would have been done.

Normally you throw the person over a cliff or a large hill. The fall may not be enough to kill them. Sometimes it was.

But you throw them over a hill or a rocky ledge. That may not be that far down. Then ideally, you'd have large stones.

It's not like throwing these little stones. But there would be large stones. Technically, later rabbis said you aim for the chest, but I don't think people could aim that well with these large stones.

It would land where it would land. And they'd keep throwing the stones until the person died. According to Deuteronomy 17.7, the witnesses were to be the first to throw the stones.

That probably was meant to be a deterrent against false witnesses because you knew you had to kill the person yourself. But the false witness was here. Go ahead and do it.

The governor was in Jerusalem only during festivals. And we do know that mobs did stone people. That happened throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

But the stoning is significant here for some other reasons. Stoning, according to Leviticus 24.16, was a penalty for blasphemy. But also in the Old Testament, a number of times, we see that people sought to stone God's servants.

Exodus 17, Numbers 14, where people were ready to stone Moses, or ready to stone Joshua and Caleb. 2 Chronicles 24, Zechariah was stoned. In 2 Samuel, actually, David's own men almost were ready to stone him, although the circumstances there were a little bit different.

And it says, because of their own anguish over their families. David strengthened himself in God and was able to talk them out of it. But anyway, Saul is a young man.

They lay their robes at Saul's feet. Now, keep in mind the contrast here. Because earlier, when people had been bringing resources, bringing their money, they were laying it at the feet of the apostles.

In Chapter 5. They were kind of in charge. Well, Stephen, at his stoning, Saul is now sort of in charge. And you say, how could he have been in charge? He was a young man.

The terminology that's used here for young man could be used for anybody from their teens to their thirties. Most often, it was used for somebody in their twenties. So, he's probably no longer a student of Gamaliel at this point.

Most people finished their tertiary education before they were 20. Although there were exceptions, especially if you had enough money, you could keep going. But usually, they finished by the time they were 20.

But he would have still been in Gamaliel's circle. Now, being a young man throughout ancient writings was associated with a couple of things. Positively, it was associated with strength.

Negatively, it was associated with rashness and susceptibility to sexual temptation. That's why 2 Timothy talks about fleeing youthful lusts. And 1 Timothy 4 says, don't let anybody despise your youth, but be an example of godliness.

It was sexual, also anger. They couldn't control their anger. And there's some truth with when you're an adolescent and your hormones are changing, sometimes you have that.

But you also can have a strength and a zeal that can be devoted to God, which is probably how Saul viewed it. But in this case, it wasn't being used in the right way. And sometimes in the New Testament, it's positive, but in this case, it's used in the wrong way.

Galatians 1 tells us that Paul was advancing beyond many of his age peers, which is how the Greek wording probably should be understood. So even though he was a young man, in his zeal, his proficiency in the Torah, and so on, he had become a leader. You say, well, how could he have gone as a young man before the high priest? He was probably still a young man when he got letters from the high priest.

His family probably also had a good bit of money. He probably wasn't part of the elite, maybe as high as Gamaliel. But if he could even study under Gamaliel, probably his family would have a lot of money.

So, we'll talk about that more in Acts 22. But in any case, he was a leader in the movement. And he was a leader, the text goes on to say in Chapter 8, he was a leader in stirring up persecution against the Christian movement.

And this was one of the ways that he was excelling. That's when in Chapter 9, after Paul becomes a follower of Jesus and after he's no longer preaching in that area, it says in 9.31 that the church had rest. Paul was a major orchestrator of persecution, although he wasn't the only one, and he himself tells us that in 1 Thessalonians 2. Well, Acts 6 and verse 5 introduced Stephen, then Philip, and then others.

Acts 7 addresses Stephen, who lays the theological groundwork for this movement. Acts 8 addresses Philip. Well, here's an outline of Acts 8. We have Saul in 7:58-60 and also 8:1-4. And here, through Saul, persecution scatters the believers.

Now this is an irony. He's trying to stop the movement and persecution just scatters it and spreads it so that ironically you can't fight against the goads. Ironically, Saul is responsible in a way for spreading the movement even before he becomes a follower of Jesus.

Acts 8:5-25 narrate Philip's ministry in Samaria. Acts 8.26-40 narrate his ministry to an African court official. You say, why? He has this big revival in this whole city.

Why would God then lead him to one person afterward? Isn't that anticlimactic? Actually, it's not anticlimactic at all. It's a foretaste of going to the ends of the earth. God knows.

We don't always know. But to the ends of the earth. Ethiopia was considered the southern end of the earth.

And so already it's giving us a foretaste of where the mission is going. There's a careful structuring in a literary sense in Acts 8. Acts 8.4, those who were scattered preached, and made proclamation wherever they went. Acts 8.5, Philip, who was one of them, preached in Samaria.

Acts 8:25, Peter and John preached the good news in Samaritan villages on their route back to Jerusalem. And then we have the next section with the African court official. And in 8.40, Philip is carried away.

And then Philip is preaching good news as he goes along his way in coastal towns until he gets to Caesarea. Now, at this point, I need to say something about chapter 8 verses 1-4 before we talk more about Philip, which will be in the next session. But in 8:1-4, notice it took persecution to get the church to begin to do what Jesus had commanded them back in chapter 1 and verse 8. And yet God is sovereign.

God can use even things that to us look like disasters. God can sometimes use those things to spread his gospel to people who don't have it. And sometimes they're suffering.

People are more likely to listen to us because they know that we've been through what they've been through or something like that, or they see our integrity through suffering. In any case, ironically, Saul spreads the church before his conversion by persecuting them. Those who suffer for Christ often are those who count the cost and are more radical.

You see that with the seven churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation. The two persecuted churches, the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, are the ones who aren't reprov'd by the Lord for anything. The other churches, one of them, Thyatira, Pergamum, has at least a little bit of persecution in 2.13. But most of these other churches are compromising with the values of the world system.

You see it often today, too, that those who suffer for Christ and the places in the world where the church is suffering for Christ or with Christ, in those places the church is often more committed. It doesn't mean nobody in other places is, but you don't have something else stirring you up. You better stir yourself up for the Lord.

Stephen's burial, verse 2, dying unburied was a great dishonor. And risking one's life to bury people was considered honorable and heroic to the extent that you have Sophocles talking about this woman who was so intent in burying her deceased brother that she was willing to die to make sure it happened. On the Jewish side, you have this popular apocryphal story of Tobit where he was burying people against the king's decree.

And, of course, Tobias, his son, buries him when Tobit dies. So, it was considered honorable and heroic to do this. Adult sons or those closest to the deceased normally would bury the person.

Public mourning, however, for condemned criminals was prohibited. Sometimes they didn't want them to be buried, but Jewish people would have to allow burial in any case. The Torah commanded it.

But public mourning for condemned criminals was prohibited. But these pious people got together, Stephen's pious friends, ignored the illegal ruling, and they mourned for him. In verse 3, we read about Saul's zeal.

He was detaining even women as well as men. And in verse 4, as the church is scattered, the believers take the message with them wherever they go. Most ancient religions actually were spread by travelers.

Some places had something like missionaries, but for the most part, it was just people as they traveled. They took the message with them. Sometimes it was a merchant and they might think that they had a dream they were supposed to start a temple somewhere.

And they would do it as they traveled. But the focus in the Book of Acts is on the apostles. But we have clues like this that show it wasn't just the apostles.

It was all the believers. The apostles were leading this. But the apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

Most of the other believers were scattered. And that would probably include not just, but perhaps most prominently, the Hellenists, Stephen's peers, who were particular objects of hatred to the Hellenist synagogue.

This is Dr. Craig Keener in his teaching on the book of Acts. This is session 10, Acts chapter 6, verse 8 through chapter 8, verse 4.