

Title: Acts 6:8 - 8:4: Stephen's Witness and the Scattering of the Church

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Session 10

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Abstract

This lecture focuses on Acts chapter 6, verse 8 through chapter 8, verse 4, detailing the accusation, trial, speech, and martyrdom of Stephen. Dr. Craig Keener provides cultural and historical background on the Synagogue of the Freedpersons, the nature of ancient speech-writing, and the charges of blasphemy against the temple and the law. He analyzes how Stephen's theological defense uses the histories of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses to show that God's presence is not restricted to the physical temple. Finally, the lecture explores the tragic stoning of Stephen, introducing the zealous persecutor Saul of Tarsus and showing how the resulting scattering of believers ironically catalyzed the spread of the gospel.

Outline

I. Introduction to Acts 6:8 - 8:4

- A. Stephen is hauled before the Jewish authorities (Acts 6:8 - 7:1).
- B. Initial conflict arises within the Hellenistic Jewish community, specifically the Synagogue of the Freedpersons (Acts 6:9).

II. The Synagogue of the Freedpersons (Acts 6:9)

- A. Nature and Functions of First-Century Synagogues:
 - 1. Functioned as community centers, places of communal prayer, and study of the Torah.
 - 2. Attested by first-century writers Josephus and Philo, as well as archaeological excavations.
- B. Identity and Origin of the Freedpersons (Latin: Libertini):
 - 1. Comprised Jewish Roman citizens who had been enslaved during the conquests of Roman general Pompey in the first century B.C.
 - 2. Brought to Rome, where established Jewish communities purchased their freedom, thereby granting them Roman citizen status under normal Roman legal practice.

3. Many of these freedpersons and their descendants eventually migrated back to Jerusalem.
4. The Synagogue of the Freedpersons was a high-status institution because its members possessed Roman citizenship.

C. Archaeological Corroboration: The Theodotus Inscription:

1. Found in Jerusalem, dedicating a synagogue built by Theodotus, son of Vitenas (a Latin name), a Jewish Roman citizen.
2. Features nice facilities, including a place for ritual baths (mikvaot) and quarters to accommodate travelers.

D. Opposition and Debate within the Hellenistic Community:

1. The Hellenist community in Jerusalem was internally divided between those who believed in Jesus and those who did not.
2. Non-believing Hellenists initiated debate with Stephen, who consistently defeated them due to being full of the Spirit, wisdom, and power.
3. Stephen's unrefutable debates fulfill Jesus' promise in Luke 21:15 to provide wisdom that no adversary could resist.
4. Socio-political dynamics of the opposition:
 - a. Diaspora Jews returning to Jerusalem often overcompensated for their foreignness by aligning with ultra-conservative, nationalistic factions.
 - b. Pharisaic social hierarchies ranked first-generation freed slaves just below proselytes, adding social pressure on them to prove their orthodoxy.
5. Geographic composition: Members of the synagogue included Jews from Alexandria (largest Jewish community outside Judea), Cyrene, Cilicia, and Asia.
 - a. Since the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus, Saul of Tarsus was highly likely a prominent member of this synagogue.

III. The Trial and Charges of Blasphemy (Acts 6:11-15)

A. The Nature of Blasphemy Charges:

1. Later rabbinic definition strictly required explicit abuse of the divine name.
2. The Greek term blasphemeo carried a broader, non-technical meaning of reviling, mocking, or showing disrespect toward God or divine institutions.

B. The Irony of False Witnesses:

1. The accusers hired false witnesses to lie under oath, which historically constituted the prototypical desecration of the divine name.
2. Ancient pre-Christian rhetorical manuals (such as the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, sometimes falsely attributed to Aristotle) taught public speakers how to lie persuasively under oath.
3. Serious legal consequences: Both the Torah (Deuteronomy 19:18-19) and Roman law mandated the death penalty for false witnesses in capital cases.

C. The Specific Accusations against Stephen:

1. Charged with speaking against the holy Temple and the Law of Moses.

2. These charges stirred intense nationalistic and religious passions, as the two were closely intertwined in first-century Judea.
3. Historical precedents: Speaking against the temple was a highly punishable offense.
 - a. Jeremiah was beaten and put in the stocks for prophesying the destruction of the temple (Jeremiah 7, 26).
 - b. Jesus was arrested after overturning the tables in the temple courts (Luke 19).
 - c. In the first century, the prophet Joshua ben Hananiah was arrested by chief priests for pronouncing judgment on the temple and beaten by the Romans until his bones showed.

D. Stephen's Angelic Countenance (Acts 6:15):

1. Stephen's face glowing like an angel evokes Moses' transfigured face upon receiving the Law (Exodus 34) and Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9).
2. Signifies divine endorsement of Stephen, directly contradicting the charge that he was speaking against Moses and the Law.

IV. Stephen's Speech: The True Holy Places (Acts 7:1-50)

A. Rhetorical Strategy of Retelling Israel's History:

1. Standard practice in ancient Jewish and early Christian literature to recount history with a specific theological point (e.g., Sirach, Maccabees, Hebrews 11, and some Psalms).
2. History with a point: Retelling the history to highlight patterns of how God operates and how human leaders have resisted Him.
3. Stephen builds his case slowly, starting with universally accepted history before addressing controversial claims.

B. Theme 1: God Speaks and Acts Outside the Holy Land:

1. God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia before he ever lived in Canaan (Acts 7:2-8).
2. God was with Joseph when he was in Egypt, not in the Holy Land (Acts 7:9-16).
3. God spoke to Moses at the burning bush on Mount Sinai, in the Arabian desert (Acts 7:30-34).
 - a. God commanded Moses to take off his sandals because the ground was holy.
 - b. Stephen uses this to show that a physical building in Jerusalem is not the only holy place; any place sanctified by God's presence is holy.
4. Directly challenges contemporary nationalistic traditions (e.g., later codified in the Mekhilta) claiming God only spoke within the boundaries of Israel.

C. Theme 2: The Rejected Deliverer:

1. Stephen highlights the structural parallelisms between Joseph and Moses:
 - a. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers; Moses' family saved him from slavery.
 - b. Midianites sold Joseph into Egypt; Midianites welcomed Moses when he fled Egypt.
 - c. Joseph became a 'father' to Pharaoh; Moses became a son to Pharaoh's daughter.
 - d. Joseph was abruptly exalted from slavery to princehood; Moses lost his princehood to defend Hebrew slaves.

- e. Joseph delivered Egypt from famine; Moses devastated Egypt's economy.
- f. Both married daughters of foreign priests (Egyptian and Midianite).
- g. Both had firstborn sons whose names evoke sojourning in a foreign land.
- h. Both were initially rejected by their own brothers ('Who made you a ruler or judge over us?').

2. Stephen uses this pattern of the 'rejected deliverer' to explain that the chief priests' rejection of Jesus does not invalidate His messianic claim but actually validates it.

D. Theme 3: The Threat of Idolatry in Israel's History:

- 1. The Golden Calf (Acts 7:41) was Israel's most embarrassing historical episode.
 - a. First-century historian Josephus omitted this story from his Antiquities out of nationalistic embarrassment.
 - b. Later rabbinic traditions tried to blame the incident entirely on foreign tag-alongs.
- 2. Israel's subsequent worship of the host of heaven (sun, moon, and stars) in the wilderness.
 - a. Astrology was highly respected as the science of the day in the Greco-Roman world, even influencing later synagogue designs (e.g., Galilean zodiac mosaics).
 - b. Stephen stresses that the worship of stars was a rejection of the true God.

E. Theme 4: The Temple as 'Made with Human Hands':

- 1. The Greek term cheiropoiotos ('made with hands') was a standard term used by Jewish apologists to describe pagan idols.
- 2. Stephen shockingly applies cheiropoiotos to describe the physical Temple (Acts 7:48).
- 3. Clinches his argument with Isaiah 66:1-2: 'Heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool; what house will you build for me?'
- 4. Stephen is not against the Temple, but opposes localized centralization that limits God's work, paving the theological path for the global mission.

V. The Climax and Peroration: Reversing the Charges (Acts 7:51-53)

A. The Peroration (Peroratio):

- 1. The closing of the speech was conventionally the most emotionally rousing and direct part.
- 2. Stephen reverses the charges, accusing his judges of being the true lawbreakers.

B. Specific Charges and Old Testament Backgrounds:

- 1. 'Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears': Prophetic language direct from Deuteronomy 10:16.
- 2. 'Your ancestors killed the prophets': Attested in scripture (e.g., Jezebel executing prophets in 1 Kings 18:4; Uriah's death in Jeremiah 26:20-23) and Jewish traditions (e.g., Manasseh sawing Isaiah in half inside a tree).
- 3. 'You always resist the Holy Spirit': Present-tense accusation of ongoing rebellion.
- 4. 'You received the law... but did not keep it': Rebuttal of their self-righteous legalism.

VI. The Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60)

A. Parallels with the Death of Jesus (Imitating the Teacher):

1. Stephen sees the exalted Son of Man standing in heaven, mirroring Jesus' testimony before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:69).
 - a. Jesus is standing: functions either as Stephen's defense witness or as the true divine Judge.
2. Stephen commits his spirit to Jesus ('Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'), mirroring Jesus committing His spirit to the Father (Luke 23:46).
3. Stephen prays for his executioners' forgiveness ('Lord, do not hold this sin against them'), mirroring Jesus' prayer on the cross (Luke 23:34).

B. Ironic Narrative Inversions:

1. The accusers strip themselves of their outer garments (Hellenistic custom), while usually the condemned person is stripped.
2. Stephen confesses their sins rather than his own.

C. The Mechanics of the Stoning:

1. Carried out outside the city limits to avoid desecrating the holy city (Leviticus 24:16).
2. Reflects a violent lynch mob but follows some ancient protocols: throwing the victim off a ledge, then dropping large heavy stones on the chest until death.
3. Witnesses were legally required to throw the first stone as a moral deterrent against false testimony (Deuteronomy 17:7).
4. Introduction of Saul of Tarsus as a 'young man' (usually indicating twenties, completed education but still in Gamaliel's circle) who supervised the execution by holding the outer garments.

VII. The Aftermath: Persecution and Expansion (Acts 8:1-4)**A. Stephen's Burial (Acts 8:2):**

1. Dying unburied was the ultimate ancient dishonor (e.g., Sophocles' Antigone, apocryphal book of Tobit).
2. Public mourning for executed criminals was strictly forbidden.
3. Pious believers boldly defied the authorities by risking their lives to bury Stephen and mourning him loudly.

B. The Scattering and Expansion of the Church (Acts 8:1-4):

1. Saul orchestrates a major persecution campaign, arresting both men and women.
2. Ironic result: Persecution scatters the Hellenist believers, who carry the gospel message with them wherever they flee.
3. Demonstrates God's sovereignty: Using a tragedy to force the church to expand beyond Jerusalem and fulfill Acts 1:8.
4. Organic spread: Most of the ancient mission was carried out by displaced ordinary travelers and refugees rather than formal apostles, who stayed behind in Jerusalem.