

# A Study in Acts

Lesson 7: Acts 6:1 – 7:60

## Descention In the Church

Act 6:1 KJV

- (1) And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.

After the story of Ananias and his wife, we come to the second bit of controversy in the early church. The term “the Hebrews” refers to the Jews that dwelt in Judea, and were the inhabitants of that country, and chiefly of Jerusalem, who spoke the Hebrew, or rather the Syriac language. By “the Grecians”, or Hellenists, are meant, not the Greeks that were proselyted to the Jewish religion, though there might be some few among them; but Jews who were born, and had dwelt, in some parts of Greece, and spoke the Greek language, and used the Septuagint version of the Bible.

It was a custom among the Jewish people to take up a collection for the poor everyday and distribute it. It is no surprise that the Apostles continued this custom. The complaint was that the Grecian widows were not receiving as much (or none) of this daily distribution as the Jewish widows.

## Helpers are Chosen

Act 6:2-6 KJV

- (2) Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.
- (3) Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.
- (4) But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.
- (5) And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:
- (6) Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them.

This conflict came to the Apostles attention and they called the church together. The Apostles felt that their time would be better spent studying and preaching the word of God (and of course, witnessing the resurrection of Christ) rather than serving the poor. So they empowered the church members to put forward seven men a decision that pleased the entire church and ended the dispute.

The men put forward were:

**Stephen:** was a man eminent for his faith in Christ, and his faithfulness to him, and in everything he was concerned, and for his courage and boldness in the cause of Christ and for other gifts and graces of the Spirit, with which he was filled; he was, it is very likely, the most eminent person of all the seven, and is therefore named first; he is afterwards taken notice of, and was the first that suffered martyrdom for Christ, with which he was crowned, answerable to his name, which signifies a crown:

**Philip:** Who was also an evangelist, and had four daughters that prophesied; and perhaps is the same that went down to Samaria, and preached Christ there with great success, and after that baptized the Ethiopian eunuch;

**Prochorus:** Of this and the rest, no other mention is made in the bible. He is said by some to be a nephew of Stephen's, and first bishop of Nicomedia; but these are things not certain. There is an ancient manuscript said to be written by him concerning the life of the Apostle John. Most historians discount this writing because of its outlandish nature.

**Nicanor:** There are written stories of this man being martyred with Stephen. But these accounts cannot be depended on. Beyond this we have no certain accounts of this man. His name is Grecian and there is an account in the Apocrypha (1 Mac 7:26) where one of this name who was a general in Demetrius's army, who was sent by him against the Jews,

"Then the king sent Nicanor, one of his honourable princes, a man that bare deadly hate unto Israel, with commandment to destroy the people." (1Mac 7:26)

There was a gate of the temple which was called the gate of Nicanor.

**Timon:** There are conflicting stories that claim he was later a bishop of Bersea; though others make him a bishop of Bostra; but neither of these stories can be confirmed.

**Parmenus:** There are Roman documents (of doubtful accuracy) that claim Parmenus was martyred under Trajan. Other than this, we have no record of him beyond this point.

**Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch:** Who was first a Greek or Gentile, and then became a Jew, a proselyte of righteousness, and then a Christian. Some think, that from this man sprung the sect of the Nicolaitanes, spoken of in the Revelations:

[Rev 2:6 KJV](#)

(6) But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

[Rev 2:15 KJV](#)

(15) So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

It is observable, that the names of all these deacons are Greek names; from whence, it seems, that they were of the Grecian or Hellenistic Jews; so that the church thought fit to chose men out of that part of them which made the complaint, in order to make them easy; which is an instance of prudence and condescension, and shows of what excellent spirits they were of.

### ***The Church Grows More***

[Act 6:7 KJV](#)

(7) And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

The resolution of the dispute had the desired effect. The Apostles went on preaching and conversions continued, even among the priests of the temple. That these men were converted speaks volumes since they were some of the most inveterate enemies of the Gospel. You can imagine the despair within the temple as they saw many of their own numbers converting to Christianity.

### **Stephen's Story**

[Act 6:8 KJV](#)

(8) And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

Stephen was obviously considered a leader among the seven chosen to serve the Apostles. Many call these seven the first deacons, as their purpose was similar to a deacon's relationship to an elder. Stephen clearly had an abundance of faith and power.

### **Stephen Stirs Up the Jews**

Act 6:9-15 KJV

- (9) Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called *the synagogue* of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.
- (10) And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.
- (11) Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and *against* God.
- (12) And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon *him*, and caught him, and brought *him* to the council,
- (13) And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:
- (14) For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

Several sects of the Jews were opposed to Stephen's teaching.

**Libertines:** "Libertine" is a Roman word for "free man". These were either the sons of Jews, who were servants, or slaves, and had been made "free men"; or rather Jews whose parents were born free, or had obtained their freedom at Rome, or in some free city under the Roman government. Paul would be such a Jew at Tarsus. This group likely had its own synagogue because they did not speak Hebrew and would have used the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. It should be noted that the estimated number of synagogues in Jerusalem at the time ranges from 460 to 480.

**Cyrenians:** People from the region of Cyrene who either had their own synagogue or might have used the same synagoge as the Libertines.

**Alexandrians:** It known for sure that these people had their own synagogue. It is mentioned in many ancient Jewish texts. Many workmen were brought from Alexandria, Egypt to perform tasks such as manufacturing incense, fixing a cracked cymbal in the temple, and making better mortar. Alexandria, along with Athens, was one of the intellectual centers of the day.

**Cilicia:** The country of which Tarsus was a city. There is no doubt that Saul of Tarsus was among these people.

**Asia:** This is a way of saying "and many other places". Asia, at this time, was a vast and mysterious place.

This large group of Jews began to scheme against Stephen much in the same way the schemed against Jesus. The brought false witnesses, told lies, and accused him of blasphemy. Ultimately, Stephen is brought before the council.

### **Stephen's Sermon**

Act 6:15-Acts 7:1KJV

- (15) And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.
- (1) Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

Again, the entire Sanhedrin is together. Stephen is brought before them, and they looked closely at him, I would think, to see if they could read anything about his guilt or innocence. What they saw is not told us in detail. His face might have glowed as Moses did, or he may simply of appeared completely innocent. It is clear from the story of Lot in Sodom that angels could be recognized on site:

Gen 19:1 KJV

- (1) And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing *them* rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground;

Like Peter before, Stephen saw an opportunity to preach and seized it. He began with a somewhat detailed account of Jewish history:

Act 7:2-8 KJV

- (2) And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,  
(3) And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.  
(4) Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.  
(5) And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not *so much as* to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when *as yet* he had no child.  
(6) And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat *them* evil four hundred years.  
(7) And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.  
(8) And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so *Abraham* begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac *begat* Jacob; and Jacob *begat* the twelve patriarchs.

Act 7:9-17 KJV

- (9) And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,  
(10) And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.  
(11) Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance.  
(12) But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.  
(13) And at the second *time* Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh.  
(14) Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to *him*, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.  
(15) So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers,  
(16) And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor *the father* of Sychem.  
(17) But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,

Act 7:18-29 KJV

- (18) Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph.  
(19) The same dealt subtly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.  
(20) In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months:  
(21) And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son.

- (22) And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.
- (23) And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel.
- (24) And seeing one *of them* suffer wrong, he defended *him*, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian:
- (25) For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.
- (26) And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?
- (27) But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?
- (28) Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?
- (29) Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons.

#### Act 7:30-34 KJV

- (30) And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.
- (31) When Moses saw *it*, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold *it*, the voice of the Lord came unto him,
- (32) *Saying*, I *am* the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold.
- (33) Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.
- (34) I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.

#### Act 7:35-43 KJV

- (35) This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send *to be* a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush.
- (36) He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years.
- (37) This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.
- (38) This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:
- (39) To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust *him* from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,
- (40) Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for *as for* this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.
- (41) And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.
- (42) Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices *by the space of* forty years in the wilderness?
- (43) Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.

#### Act 7:44-50 KJV

- (44) Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen.
- (45) Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David;

- (46) Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.
- (47) But Solomon built him an house.
- (48) Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet,
- (49) Heaven *is* my throne, and earth *is* my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what *is* the place of my rest?
- (50) Hath not my hand made all these things?

To this point, Stephen has hit on just about every major story in the Old Testament since the flood. Now, he draws his conclusion.

- (51) Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do* ye.
- (52) Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:
- (53) Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept *it*.

As we can see, this sermon follows a now familiar pattern. Use the Old Testament teaching to establish that it is these men that continue in the ways of the fathers. That is, persecuting those that God sends to them. He then finishes by accusing THEM of breaking the law.

### **Reaction to Stephen's Sermon**

Act 7:54-56 KJV

- (54) When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with *their* teeth.
- (55) But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,
- (56) And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

So let's see: Stephen had just called them out on how that Abraham, the father of them, was called before he was circumcised, or the law was given to Moses, or the temple was built, which they were so bigoted to, and charged with speaking blasphemously of; and how that Joseph and Moses were very ill treated by the Jewish fathers, which seemed to resemble the usage Christ and his apostles met with from them; and how their ancestors behaved in the wilderness when they had received the law, and what idolatry they fell into there, and in after times; and how that though there was a temple built by Solomon, yet the Lord was not confined to it, nor would he dwell in it always; and especially when they heard him calling them a stiffnecked people, and uncircumcised in heart and ears; saying, that they persecuted and slew the prophets, and were the betrayers and murderers of an innocent person; and notwithstanding all their zeal for the law, and even though it was ministered to them by angels, yet they did not observe it themselves:

Once again it's "cut to the heart", not "pricked in their hearts". They were angry, not sad.

Stephen probably had a good idea he was about to be killed. He looked up into heaven, and was granted a vision of heaven, including God and Jesus.

### **Stephen is Martyred**

Act 7:57-60 KJV

- (57) Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,
- (58) And cast *him* out of the city, and stoned *him*: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.
- (59) And they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

(60) And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

That was it for the Sanhedrin council, and, no doubt all those that had falsely accused Stephen.

I'm sure most of us realize that this Saul is the same Saul of Tarsus who would later be referred to as Paul, the Apostle, the most prolific writer of the New Testament.

Notice Stephen's reaction: Not hatred towards those that were killing him. But compassion, and a wish that God forgive them for what they were doing.