

## The Book of Acts Study Guide

### Chapters 7-8

#### 7:1-53

In the previous chapter, charges were brought against Stephen at the Sanhedrin, with specific accusations that he spoke against Moses, God (v. 11), the temple and the *Torah* (v. 13). Chapter 7 begins with his defense against those charges that is based on a recounting of the history of the Jewish people.

Since blasphemy means speaking evil against someone or something, the antidote to blasphemy is speaking good about someone. In that way, Stephen refutes the charge that he blasphemed God by calling Him “the God of Glory” (v. 2). The phrase “*El hakavod*—the God of Glory” appears only one place in the *Tanakh*. It is found in Psalm 29:3. So it is reasonable to conclude that it was intentional and it would be used as a *remez* (the Hebraic interpretive method using a hint) of a fuller concept that only someone familiar with that Psalm would recognize. In this *remez* Stephen is letting David the Psalmist speak good about God for him. The phrasing of the Psalm accentuates the voice of God affirming His own might. Thus it is as if God Himself is indirectly testifying on behalf of Stephen, which strongly disproves the accusation of blasphemy against God by Stephen.

He defended the charge of blasphemy against Moses in this manner:

- v. 20 – He called Moses “lovely in the sight of God.”
- v. 22 – He said that Moses “was a man of power and deeds.”
- v. 35 – He agreed that “God sent him to be both a ruler and a deliverer.”

He defended the charge of blasphemy against the Torah by stating his affirmation of it.

- v. 38 – He called it the “living oracles.”
- v. 44 – He said the portion of the Torah that is related to the tabernacle was spoken by God.
- v. 53 – He called the Torah ordained by angels. This statement is based on Deuteronomy 33:2 which gives the sense of “ten thousand holy ones” accompanying Adonai when the Torah was given. That fact is also confirmed in Galatians 3:19.

He defended the charge of blasphemy against the temple by giving a clear biblical position on it.

- v. 46 – He called it a “dwelling place for the God of Jacob.”
- v. 49 – He quoted Isaiah 66:1 in which God declared that His dwelling place is not limited to a building but encompasses heaven and earth.

In the midst of refuting the various charges of blasphemy, Stephen gave attention to those times in history when the people rejected persons whom God had raised up for His purposes:

- v. 9 – Joseph was rejected by his brothers.
- v. 25 – The people during the time of Moses did not understand that he was their deliverer.
- v. 35 – They disowned Moses
- v. 39 – They were unwilling to be obedient to Moses
- v. 52 – The people during the time of the prophets persecuted them for their message, including the one who “announced the coming of the righteous one” (Messiah Yeshua).

In the end, Stephen made two charges of his own.

- v. 52 – They were responsible for killing the Messiah.
- v. 53 – They did not keep the Torah.

This is what leads to his death, not the charges that were originally brought by false witnesses and refuted by his defense.

#### 7:54-60

- v. 55 – It is not coincidental that Stephen, who called Adonai the God of Glory at the beginning, of this chapter is allowed to behold the glory of God in the end, just prior to his death.

The character of Stephen and those who opposed him can be contrasted in this way:

- They were filled with anger (gnashing their teeth) – He was filled with the Holy Spirit.
  - They took His life – He released his life to God.
  - They accused him of being a sinner – He forgave them of their sin.
- v. 58 – This is the first mention of Saul and the beginning of a key story that would continue through the end of the book. The witnesses laying their coats at the feet of Saul is an acknowledgment of his influence in the community. According to Deuteronomy 17:7, the witnesses to a capital offense were required to begin the act of stoning. That is the case here in the stoning of Stephen.

#### 8:1-4

A great persecution of believers in Jerusalem broke out, headed by Saul (v. 3). But now, for the first time, it was not just those who were speaking out publicly, and it was not just men, but all believers who were being dragged into prison.

Most of the believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, but the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem. This may have been an act of courage to fight the battle in a spiritual way, emboldened by their unique ability to avoid severe consequences in previous chapters. It may also be an indicator that it was a specific persecution of the Hellenistic Jews like Stephen, so they were the ones who left Jerusalem.

#### 8:5-24

As a result of the persecution and scattering, the command of Yeshua in Acts 1:8 to be witnesses not just in Jerusalem, but in Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the earth was being carried out.

- v. 4 – They “went about preaching the Word.” This is a reminder that God often brings about His plan for this world through events that we would consider to be negative in nature. Just as the disciples would probably have stayed in Jerusalem indefinitely, believers today would probably remain in their comfort zone and not step out for the Lord without facing difficulties.

The rest of the chapter centers around the ministry of Philip. This was not the Philip who was one of the Twelve Apostles, but was one of the seven Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews appointed in 6:5 to minister to the widows. So he was especially equipped to reach out to the people we read about here in chapter 8. It begins with his travels in Samaria.

The Samaritans were people with a mixed heritage. Most of the northern tribes of Israel were

taken captive by Assyria in 722 B.C. But some remained, even though the kingdom was no more. The Assyrians replaced the deported Israelites with people that they brought from other lands that they controlled, mostly in and around Babylon (2 Ki 17:24). Those transplants intermarried with the Jews who were left behind. That resulted in a people group with a mixed heritage and mixed religious practices. They built their own temple on top of Mt Gerizim. And thus they remained in a state of animosity with Judah after their own return from Babylonian captivity.

But just as Yeshua had done previously in Jn 4, Philip intentionally enters the land of Samaria and proclaims the Good News. And v. 6 tells us that the people gave attention to what he was saying. Philip was also given the power to cast out demons (v. 7).

It is apparent that there are certain areas where demons have a stronghold. In the Bible, that was the case in Persia (Dan 10:20) as well as the region to the east of the Sea of Galilee. That was where Yeshua cast out demons from a man and sent them into swine (Mat 8:28-34). And that area is not far from where Philip was ministering in Samaria. So it seems to be a special equipping for this region.

- v. 9 – It also served as a way to get the attention of a man named Simon who practiced magic (KJV sorcery). That means he was able to do some miraculous things, although apparently not to the extent of Philip. It would be equivalent to the things that the Egyptian sorcerers could do that were almost as powerful as Moses and Aaron. And once again, notice that this is taking place in a region where demons have a stronghold. So we can conclude that Simon's power was demonic in nature.
- vv. 12-13 – Among the many Samaritans who believed Philip's message was Simon. And like the others, he was also baptized, and continued following Philip.
- v. 14 – Meanwhile the Apostles hear about this remarkable revival and Peter and John go to Samaria to see for themselves.
- v. 17 – And when they arrived, they exercised their apostolic authority and laid hands on the people and the Holy Spirit came upon them.
- vv. 18-19 – But Simon did not receive the Spirit and instead offered money to get the apostolic authority for himself. And that results with a strong rebuke from Peter.

It is noteworthy that the Holy Spirit did not come upon the Samaritans immediately upon belief. Back in 2:38, when Peter gave his first witnessing sermon after the Spirit came on Shavuot/Pentecost, the Spirit came upon new believers at the time of their repentance and forgiveness of sins. The same is true later in chapter 10 regarding the salvation of Cornelius (10:44-46) and also in Paul's declaration in 19:2. So the normal way of receiving the Spirit is at the time of one's spiritual conversion.

But here we have an exception. There was probably much skepticism among the Apostles regarding this Samaritan revival. Otherwise they would not have sent Peter and John to verify it. And the verification they sought came in the form of seeing the Spirit coming upon the people with their own eyes. This was an important realization that would give them confidence as the Good News would soon be going to other people groups who might also be unlikely believers. It is the timing of this event here in chapter. 8 that makes it a one-of-a-kind occurrence. The norm would be a concurrent indwelling of the Spirit along with the transformation of the soul, or becoming born again.

The spiritual state of Simon can be ascertained from the evidence. It is true that he believed in Yeshua and was baptized. But he was not indwelt by the Spirit, and Peter declared that Simon's heart was "not right before God" (v. 21), he was engaged in "wickedness" (v. 22) and he was "in the bondage of iniquity" (v. 23). When we consider the greater context of Scripture, we see that mere belief that Yeshua is the Messiah is insufficient. For example, James (2:19) observes that even the demons believe. And in Yeshua's parable of the sower, He tells about two different kinds of soil representing initial belief that never becomes permanent and fruitful (Mat 13:3-8, 18-23). In the same way, religious ceremonial acts are never sufficient in and of themselves for producing inner spiritual transformation.

We all can think of people who profess some kind of belief in Yeshua and have been baptized, yet have no evidence of ever having been transformed spiritually. That is what we see here in the case of Simon. He said the right words and did the right religious acts, but his heart remained unchanged. And that is shown in his attempt to use unrighteous means of getting power in the spiritual realm that would benefit his magic. As confirmation of that fact, Simon is mentioned in a number of historical writings that describe him in various settings continuing to engage in magic and he is called the first heretic.

#### 8:25-40

The Apostles returned to Jerusalem and Philip heads toward Gaza. In v. 27 he encounters an Ethiopian man who was a eunuch in service of the queen of Ethiopia. Moreover, we observe that he had been in Jerusalem to worship. There is no coincidence to these details. As a eunuch, he may or may not have been castrated, but what is certain is that he had an important position, and thus had the means to travel.

The Ethiopian connection to Jerusalem was strong. 1 Kings 10 tells about tight bond between King Solomon and the queen of Sheba, which refers to Ethiopia. She acknowledged the reality of Adonai as God, as well as His love for Israel (v. 9). Ethiopian historical sources add further details, saying that when she returned to Ethiopia, she gave birth to a son named Menelik who had been fathered by Solomon. Menelik later visited his father, and when he returned home, Solomon sent with him representatives from the twelve tribes of Israel. They introduced the Jewish way of worship to the Ethiopian people. That way of worship persisted until modern times.

The people known as Beta Israel observe *Shabbat*, keep the kosher dietary laws, and observe the biblical feasts. Their Holy Scriptures are called the *Orit*, consisting of the *Torah* (books of Moses), Joshua and Ruth. So that suggests that it was established before the rest of the *Tanakh* was written and compiled, including the Prophets. And their community then developed in isolation. That is consistent with the story told in 1 Kings 10. In Ethiopia, when the Beta Israel pray, they stand facing north, in the direction of Jerusalem. They recite this prayer: "The hungry go to food. The thirsty go to water, but I shall go to Jerusalem." That is also consistent with the story of Solomon and the queen of Sheba.

It should also be noted that they have genetic markers that confirm their Jewish heritage. And recently the nation of Israel has granted them full citizenship as Jews, and has airlifted most of them to Israel. But it is their passion for Jerusalem that stands out. And it was also evident in the life of this eunuch in the book of Acts who had traveled nearly 2,000 miles to get there.

This particular story in Acts adds to the chronicle of the spreading of the Good News to various people groups. It started with native born and fully cultural Jews, then went to Hellenistic Jews

who were physically Jewish but culturally Greek, and then Samaritans with a partial Jewish heritage and culture, and now the Ethiopians who, with their dark skin, had a very different appearance but a similar mixed heritage and culture. The final step, reaching out to people with no Jewish heritage and culture at all, will come shortly in chapter 10. So this particular story is another step in the fulfillment of Yeshua's commandment to make disciples ultimately at the ends of the earth and to demonstrate God's love for all people.

In order to do that, believers in Yeshua have to go out of their comfort zone of familiarity and reach out cross-culturally. In this case Philip had to approach an Ethiopian man that had a very different culture than his own. And it seems that the Spirit had to motivate Philip to go over to him.

The issue at hand is the eunuch's inability to comprehend the 53rd chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. It is an example of how easy it is to misunderstand God's Word unless someone with that understanding guides us, as the eunuch says in v. 31.

- v. 34 – He especially wants to know who the subject of Isaiah 53 is—the prophet himself or someone else. Notice how Philip provided the answer. The eunuch quoted verses 7-8 of Isaiah 53.
- v. 35 – Philip hopped on the chariot and went along for a ride while preaching Yeshua to him “beginning from this Scripture.” That means he had to explain how Yeshua was like a lamb led to slaughter and did not open His mouth, and was humiliated and removed from this earth. But if that was just the beginning, Philip had to cover the rest of the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which brings out the suffering servant:
  - Being despised and forsaken by men (v. 2).
  - Being “pierced through for our transgressions” (v. 5).
  - Bearing the “iniquities” (vv. 6,11) and “sin” (v. 12) of people, so that they can be justified, meaning their sins being forgiven and people being made righteous before God (v. 11).
  - Being put to death (v. 12) and buried in a rich man's tomb (v. 9), yet living again (v. 10).
- v. 36 – No doubt that took some time as they talked while driving down the road. But clearly the eunuch got his answer that Isaiah could not be talking about himself. And, he could not be talking about the nation of Israel as the leaders of Judaism over 1,000 years later, starting with Rashi, would suggest. Without question, there is only one subject that satisfies the incredibly detailed set of attributes foretold by Isaiah long before this day in the book of Acts, and that is Yeshua.
- v. 37 – This verse is not included in all versions of the Bible. The most reliable manuscripts do not include it. It may be a scribal clarification in later manuscripts that confirms the belief of the eunuch, but it really isn't needed since it is implied by the text, especially since Philip baptized him in v. 38.
- v. 39 – At that point they went their separate ways. The eunuch returned to Ethiopia rejoicing, and no doubt he would have been a witness to his own countrymen when he got home. And Philip went to Azotus, which is the modern city of Ashdod on Israel's Mediterranean coast north of Gaza. Then he works his way up the coast, preaching as he went, finally reaching Caesarea. And we are told in 21:8 that is where he settled down.