

3. The witnesses presented before the Sanhedrin asserted that Stephen had been continually and publicly speaking against Moses, the Law, and the holy place. Most importantly, they argued he had done so as a faithful follower of the crucified man Jesus; he was promoting the Nazarene's poisonous teachings concerning the destruction of the sanctuary and the alteration of the Law. By choosing to propagate Jesus' blasphemous ideas, Stephen had incurred the same guilt and deserved to suffer the same fate.

Though the men of the Council had likely already concluded what should be done with Stephen (their prior deference to Gamaliel had clearly proven to be a miscalculation; this messianic movement was only gaining momentum with each passing day), the presiding high priest gave him the opportunity to speak in his own defense (7:1). Like His Master before him, Stephen was challenged to either confirm or deny the charges leveled at him; following His lead, Stephen's response was to confront his accusers with their own unbelief: They – not Jesus or His followers – were guilty of opposing Moses, the Law and the sanctuary; *they opposed them, not by attempting to overthrow them, but by seeking to preserve them intact*. True blasphemy consists in the refusal to acknowledge the fulfillment and transformation of all things in Jesus the Messiah.

From the outset, the God of Israel had revealed the significance and role of Moses, the Sinai Covenant and the sanctuary. Their meaning and purpose in God's scheme – as indeed every aspect and feature of the Israelite theocracy – are disclosed in the Hebrew Scriptures, so that the Scriptures are the arbiter in any charge of opposing or seeking to alter a divine institution. Not human witnesses and councils, but God's revealed truth must answer the charge of blasphemy. Stephen understood this, and so allowed the Scriptures to make his defense for him. They would show who the blasphemers were.

In that regard, it's significant that Stephen began at the beginning – not the beginning of the world or of human history, but the beginning of Israel's history.

- The charges against him pertained ultimately to fundamental issues of Israel's existence, calling and purpose as Yahweh's covenant people; determining his guilt or innocence – or that of the men accusing him – depended therefore upon rightly understanding those issues.
- Stephen could address the accusation of his opposition to Moses, the law, and the sanctuary (the "holy place") only by careful demonstration of their role and purpose in Israel's history, specifically as that history prophesied of and prepared for the coming messianic kingdom.

To properly and effectively answer his accusers, Stephen needed to begin at the inception of Israel's history, and that meant opening his defense with a consideration of Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant (7:2-8). Abraham was the fountainhead of the Hebrew people and the nation of Israel; before God established His covenant with him, there was no such thing as a *Jew* (let alone an *Israelite*). The holy place, the law, and even Moses himself were features of Israel's identity and history; answering his opponents' charge of antagonism toward them required that Stephen rehearse that history with them.

a. Stephen was accused of speaking against the holy place, *but he understood that what makes a place holy is the presence of God* – the tangible manifestation of His glory. So God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai and later to the children of Israel in the fire and smoke covering that same mountain. After that, God established His Shekinah (“glory-presence”) in the Holy of Holies and led Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. From the beginning, God had testified that a thing’s holiness has nothing to do with the thing itself; objects, places, occasions, and even people are holy because of His presence and connection with them.

- 1) So Stephen noted at the outset of his defense that, long before there was a temple in Jerusalem – indeed, long before there was a “holy nation” or a “holy land,” *there existed a holy place in pagan Babylon* when the glory of God (the “God of glory”) first appeared to Abram, the Chaldean.
- 2) At that time, God called Abram to leave his family and country and go to a land He would show him (7:2-3). God’s call would take the form of a covenant (Genesis 12:1-3), the heart of which was the promise of a land, descendants, and everlasting blessing. Ultimately, God’s covenant with Abram concerned a *kingdom* – a kingdom in which He Himself is King.

Though well advanced in years, Abram was to have a son of his own flesh (Genesis 15:1-4). Furthermore, Sarah – Abram’s aged and life-long barren wife – was to be the covenant matriarch (Genesis 17:15-21). Through that “child of promise,” God was going to fulfill His oath to Abram that he would have a vast multitude of descendants (Genesis 15:4-5).

But Abram’s destiny was far greater: God’s eternal purpose decreed that Abram (“father of a people”) was now *Abraham* – “father of a multitude of nations.” And lest he think that this implied only an ever-widening line of descent, God revealed to Abraham that his fatherhood was henceforth determined, not by blood as such, but by participation in the covenant: Every member of Abraham’s household was to be circumcised; any who weren’t were to be cut off from his house (Genesis 17:1-14).

God pledged to Abraham a multitude of descendants – covenant sons by virtue of participation in the covenant. These were to be “kingdom sons,” and so a people possessing royal stature and power (cf. Genesis 14:1-24 with 17:1-6, 15-16; also 22:14-17 with 24:50-60). But royal sons must preside over a kingdom *land*, and thus the Lord declared to Abraham that He was going to give him the whole territory to which He had called him – the land of Canaan (Genesis 13:12-18, 15:12-21).

- 3) Abraham arrived in Canaan (7:4) and the Lord brought forth the heir He promised. Later, Isaac’s wife Rebecca gave birth to the next covenant son Jacob, who in turn became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel (7:8).

The Chaldean city of Ur had been a holy place at the start of Israel's history, and God later testified to Canaan's sanctity by the altars Abraham built from north to south in Shechem, Hebron, and Beersheba. But God's presence, not geography, rendered Canaan holy, a point the Lord made clear to Jacob at Bethel when He promised that He would be with him and bless him *wherever he went* (ref. Genesis 28:10-22). Jacob recognized Bethel ("house of God") to be a holy place because the Lord had met him there, but he had also come to realize that the God of his fathers is no tribal deity; heaven is His throne and the earth is His footstool (7:48-50).

- 4) Like Ur, Haran – another Upper Mesopotamian city – also became a holy place by virtue of Yahweh's presence with Jacob during his long sojourn there. In this way God had gone "full circle": He had made the unholy city of Haran "holy ground" years earlier when He spoke a second time to Abraham (Genesis 11:31-12:3); now He was, in a sense, *dwelling* in Haran in His abiding presence with Abraham's covenant grandson.
- 5) Throughout their lifetimes, the Lord gave the patriarchs no inheritance in the land (7:5), having determined that that inheritance would follow four centuries of subjugation and oppression outside Canaan (7:6-7; ref. also Genesis 15:13-21). They lived out their lives as transient sojourners in the covenant land, having only a minimal foothold in it (ref. Genesis 21:22ff, 23:1-20, 26:15ff, 33:18-20; cf. Hebrews 11:8-10) and moving in and out of it until Yahweh's word was fulfilled and the man Israel, his twelve sons, and their families found themselves departing Canaan for Egypt. Those who had been set apart to God as a "holy people" by circumcision were now immersed in the ungodly world of ancient Egypt (7:8-16). *But as it had been with the cities of Ur and Haran, the land of Goshen in Egypt was a holy place – not because of what it was or where it was located, but because the Lord was there in the midst of His people* (cf. 7:17 with Exodus 1:1-21; also Exodus 3:15-18, 6:1-8, 8:20-23, 9:22-26).
- 6) At the appointed time, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham to give his descendents the land of Canaan as their inheritance. He raised up Moses to be their deliverer and entered into covenant with them at Sinai. Once again, Mount Sinai – a place in Arabia well outside of Canaan – was "holy ground" (Exodus 3:1-8, 19:1-25). For the next forty years, the Arabian wilderness would be "sacred space" as Yahweh dwelled in the Holy of Holies in His Shekinah and led Israel by His glory-presence.
- 7) At last God brought Israel into the promised land. Like Ur, Haran, and Egypt, Canaan was a land of pagan darkness and wickedness, populated by seven primary tribes and other lesser groups (cf. Genesis 15:18-19; Deuteronomy 7:1-2). But for all their diversity, Canaan's inhabitants were unified by their worship of quasi-Babylonian deities introduced and inculcated through the centuries when Canaan was a part of Babylonia.

Canaan was also a rich and fertile land – a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:1-8; Numbers 13:17-27), but, like all other holy places, *its true value as an inheritance lay in the Lord’s determination to make it the place of His habitation together with the covenant people*. Abraham’s God had covenanted to dwell with his covenant descendents, and this was to be in the place He was giving them as their inheritance. Canaan as divine inheritance was Canaan as *sanctuary land*:

- 8) Though the sons of Israel had largely forgotten Yahweh and grown distant from the patriarchs over four long centuries, Moses’ ministry to them reminded them of the covenant promise of Canaan and the fact that its holiness lay in God’s determination to make it the place of His sanctuary (Exodus 15:16-17). Canaan was Yahweh’s designated “holy place,” but the tabernacle met the need for a more concrete expression of His presence in the midst of His people (cf. Exodus 25:1-8; Joshua 3:1-4:11).
- 9) God’s plan for Canaan as His holy place was further revealed by His prescription of a central sanctuary (Deuteronomy 12:1-14). Before the sons of Israel had even entered the promised land, Yahweh already announced to them that He would identify a particular place in it where He would cause His “name” to dwell permanently.
- 10) Centuries later, David became convinced that Jerusalem – the newly captured, final Canaanite stronghold – was that place, and so brought the Lord’s ark there and erected a tabernacle for it (2 Samuel 5-6). In that way, Jerusalem (the “city of David”) became *Zion*, the city of the great God. But a permanent habitation called for a permanent sanctuary, and David became increasingly burdened to construct just such a sanctuary. This burden was of the Lord, but He had determined that David’s son Solomon would be the one to erect His holy house (2 Samuel 7).

By rehearsing this history of Israel, Stephen was reminding his accusers of the crucial truth that, from the beginning, numerous places throughout the Middle East had served as the Lord’s “holy place.” Moreover, “sacred space” had been a transitory phenomenon for the first millennium of that history. Not until Solomon’s reign had there been such a thing as a permanent sanctuary, and yet even that “holy place” was impermanent: For all its glory, Solomon’s temple was destroyed and replaced with a less glorious successor. So it had been with Jerusalem itself – the site of Yahweh’s throne and the place He had pledged to put His name forever. And though Stephen’s audience could not bring themselves to believe it, God had appointed Jerusalem and its sanctuary for another desolation.

These holy places were obsolete, being only symbols of sacred space: prophetic, preparatory shadows of the substance to come. Jesus is Yahweh’s true sanctuary, set forever in the midst of the “holy place” that is the true Zion – the mother above who is bearing true children for Him (Isaiah 54:1ff; Galatians 4:21-31).