

- b. The gathered assembly was accusing Stephen of speaking against the holy place, Moses and the Law by propagating Jesus' blasphemous and seditious teaching that He would destroy the holy place and alter the customs handed down by Moses (6:13-14). Stephen's rehearsal of Israel's history addressed the issue of the holy place, and so it did the charge regarding Moses and the Law.

Stephen answered each of the charges, but he did so in an organic fashion. That is, he answered them by considering the holy place, Moses, and the Law in their salvation-historical setting and interrelationships. Only in that way could he demonstrate the true meaning and function of those particular matters – not merely with respect to the nation of Israel, but, more importantly, in relation to Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's promised Messiah. By treating the charges in this organic, salvation-historical manner, Stephen was able to show his accusers what actually constitutes blasphemy and who the real blasphemers were.

In tracing Israel's history, Stephen began with God's call to and covenant with Abraham. But he didn't start there simply because it marked the beginning of Israel's history as a people and nation, but *because of the place and significance of Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant in God's salvation-history*. Stephen recognized that it's impossible to discern the meaning and relevance of Moses, the Law, and the holy place without understanding them in relation to Abraham and God's covenant with him.

- 1) Like the holy place, Moses and the Law had their origin in the Abrahamic Covenant. At the time God ratified His covenant with Abraham, He told the patriarch that his descendents' possession of Canaan awaited the conclusion of a long season of subjugation and oppression. When that season was complete, God would deliver the sons of the covenant and bring them to their promised inheritance.

So Stephen rehearsed the patriarchal period that found Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt and culminated with the covenant household departing the land of Canaan to reside with Joseph in Egypt. There God exalted His servant and blessed Abraham's descendents by granting them a good land and the favor of the Pharaoh himself. Jacob died in Egypt, as did Joseph, and, as time passed, the memory of Joseph faded in the minds of the Egyptians. The favor that had been shown to the sons of Israel by virtue of Joseph's greatness faded with it, and soon Egypt's rulers recognized that they had in their midst a people well suited to slave labor (7:9-19).

The season of preparation revealed to Abraham was drawing to a close; the time was at hand for the Lord to liberate the sons of the covenant and fulfill His covenant promises to them. Thus the Abrahamic Covenant was the backdrop for Moses' entrance onto the stage of salvation history. Moses was to be God's chosen instrument to fulfill the oath He made to Abraham five centuries earlier (7:20; cf. vv. 30-34).

The God who had been with Joseph in Egypt had also been with his covenant brethren – first in blessing, but then in hardship and oppression. To those who remembered the God of their patriarchal fathers, it seemed that He had forsaken them and left them to their misery. But the truth was that they had forsaken Him: When they cried out in their affliction, it wasn't to Him (Exodus 2:23), and yet He heard their cries and saw their affliction (Exodus 3:1-7). Abraham's God hadn't forsaken his children; what they were enduring was according to promise (ref. 7:17), that the blessings of the covenant – the inheritance of the kingdom pledged to the patriarchs – should come to them through a great work of deliverance.

- 2) The appointed time had come, and so Moses was born into the midst of Israel's enslavement and oppression – born not as merely one more Israelite, but as the Lord's chosen *deliverer*. And though the salvation-historical significance of the impending deliverance wouldn't be evident for some time, its preordained role as the great prototype of the final liberation of Yahweh's people indicates an intentional, prophetic connection between Moses as Israel's deliverer and the Deliverer to come:

First of all, Moses – with a view to his fulfilling his calling as God's liberator – was saved at birth from the destroying hand of the enemy, even as would be the case with his future counterpart (7:20-21; cf. Matthew 2:1-20 with Revelation 12:1-5). So also Moses prefigured the coming One by being distinguished from his brethren in wisdom and understanding and favor with God and men (7:22; cf. Luke 2:41-52). And like his counterpart, God appointed Moses to serve as His mediator and ruler in establishing and administering His covenant relationship with Abraham's sons (7:35-38; cf. Psalm 2; Isaiah 11:1-12; Acts 2:34-36; 1 Timothy 2:1ff). Fourthly, Moses was a prophetic prototype as God's appointed instrument for fulfilling His promise to Abraham of an everlasting kingdom to be ushered in by a great act of divine redemption (7:23-25; cf. Luke 4:14-21).

- 3) Moses was God's deliverer, sent to the sons of Israel at the appointed time to proclaim to them their liberation and inheritance of the kingdom pledged to Abraham centuries earlier. But though Moses came in the name of Abraham's God (ref. Exodus 3:1-17), Abraham's sons didn't *recognize* him as their deliverer (7:23-25). They had cried out in their bondage, but didn't discern God's answer to their cries; then, as in Stephen's day, they were "tone deaf," having their hearts attuned to a different voice.

And not recognizing Moses as their deliverer, the sons of Israel *rejected* him. While they were willing to embrace him for a short season when he returned to Egypt to lead them out of their slavery, their true disposition toward him had been prophetically attested years before when his Hebrew brother spurned him as a meddler (7:26-27). Moses fled from Egypt a rejected man, and forty years in Midian wouldn't change that.

Abraham's covenant children happily allowed Moses to deliver them from their bondage, but they wouldn't have him as their ruler and judge. But God's purpose and determination aren't subject to human agreement and compliance: His word to Abraham would stand, and Moses went on to fulfill his calling, leading Israel out of Egypt and guiding them through the wilderness for forty years in Yahweh's name and power (7:35-36).

- 4) Moses was Israel's deliverer and ruler, but those functions had their focal point in his role as *mediator*. Moses mediated the relationship between God and Abraham's covenant sons, and it is in that arena that one discovers his connection with the Law.

The Law of Moses was the covenant by which Yahweh entered into formal relationship with the children of Israel. The Abrahamic Covenant established Abraham's descendents (through Isaac and Jacob) as God's chosen people, but that relationship wasn't ratified until Sinai following the Exodus; there Yahweh formalized by direct covenant commitment and prescription what He had pledged to Abraham. That earlier covenant identified God's Abrahamic "son" in promise; the Sinai Covenant – the Law of Moses – fulfilled that promise at the level of the nation of Israel.

If Moses himself had his origin in the Abrahamic Covenant, so also did the Law he mediated. The Law served to formalize, define and govern the relationship between Yahweh and Abraham's descendents, and Moses was the appointed instrument to bring that covenant into material form and bind the sons of Israel to it. God gave him the words of the covenant on Mount Sinai and Moses brought those words to the people. He then wrote all of them (in distinction from the "Ten Words" written by God Himself) in a book and ratified the covenant by sprinkling sacrificial blood on the sons of Israel and charging them with obedience to it (Exodus 24:1-13).

It was in this sense that "the Law was given through Moses" (John 1:17), but his relationship to it didn't end there; Moses was also responsible for *administering* the covenant during his lifetime, whether in settling disputes or interpreting and enforcing its demands (ref. Exodus 18:1-16; Numbers 15:32-41). As mediator, Moses was effectively God's presence among the covenant people. He spoke God's words and revealed His mind, being the only man with whom God spoke "mouth to mouth" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

In a very real sense, Moses was the tangible manifestation of the covenant: The covenant bound Yahweh and Israel to each other, but Moses fulfilled this role in its practical outworking. *He was as God to the people* (attested by the presence of Yahweh's angel with him on the mountain and throughout the years in the wilderness – 7:30, 38; cf. Exodus 3:1-2, 14:19, 23:20-23) *and as the people to God*; he spoke to them in Yahweh's name with His words and interceded on their behalf in Yahweh's presence.

It is in this respect that Moses enjoyed his most important typological role, as the Lord pledged to Israel through him that He was one day going to raise up another prophet like him to lead His people (7:37; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-19 with Exodus 20:18-19). This prophet was to be heeded in all his words; whoever refused to obey him would be cut off. So it was to be with Moses, and yet the sons of Israel refused to listen to him, actively rebelling against his authority and repudiating him in their hearts.

- 5) The sons of Israel rejected the mouthpiece of the covenant, and so rejected the God of the covenant. This was evident immediately and explicitly in the episode of the golden calf (Exodus 32). It wasn't that the sons of Israel were renouncing Yahweh outrightly; *they were simply "reinventing" Him in a form and manner that would serve their own desires and sensibilities.* Moses had served as their mediatorial interface with God, and now it appeared he was not going to return from the mountain. The people needed Yahweh to lead them on to Canaan, and, without Moses, some other means of interface with Him was required. Israel found that device in the golden calf – a tangible image of Yahweh through which they hoped to petition Him and secure His continued favor and help (ref. esp. 32:1-4).

By constructing the calf and using it as a point of mediation, the sons of Israel had retreated back to the pagan, magical practices of the nations. They had broken the covenant – not because of a mere transgression of a formal commandment, but because of what the commandment and their violation signified. Israel had effectively redefined itself and Yahweh as the two parties to the covenant. The episode of the golden calf revealed Israel's **unbelief**: *The covenant son was disbelieving and mistrusting its covenant Father, in that way demonstrating its failure under the covenant both to love Yahweh and to live as His devoted and submissive son.*

The true nature and significance of Israel's covenant breaking is highlighted especially in its rejection of God's kingdom and sanctuary land. Though the people fabricated the calf with the intent of continuing on to Canaan, that act revealed that, in their hearts, they had already returned to Egypt (7:39-41). Later, that inward disposition would become externalized, first in their longing for Egypt's abundance (Numbers 11:4ff), and then in actually seeking to return there (Numbers 13:25-14:4).

That determination was the turning point for Israel: Yahweh would fulfill His oath to give Abraham's descendents the land of Canaan, but the whole adult generation that had disbelieved Him – in spite of their triumphal liberation, their deliverance through the Red Sea, and their miraculous provision in a hostile and brutal wilderness – would perish without obtaining that inheritance. God's retribution was severe but fully justified: His "son" wasn't simply choosing one country over another; *Israel was renouncing Yahweh's own dwelling place, and therefore Yahweh Himself.*

The people understood from the day they departed Egypt that, by bringing them to Canaan, God was bringing them to His sanctuary to dwell with Him there (ref. again Exodus 15:17). By resolving to return to Egypt, they were doing much more than doubting His ability to drive out Canaan's inhabitants and give them that land; *they were disbelieving and even renouncing His commitment to them and the Father-son relationship He had formalized with them at Sinai*. The jubilant faith Israel had expressed in worshipful song on the shore of the Red Sea had evaporated, leaving in its place the sin of fear, mistrust and even resentment.

- 6) And when the children of Abraham rejected their father's God, He turned away from them (7:42). Yahweh would, for many more centuries, continue as a faithful "husband" to Israel, nurturing His covenant "wife" and seeking to secure her fidelity and devotion. He did so through His goodness and lovingkindness, but to no avail (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7 with Ezekiel 16:1ff, 23:1ff and Hosea 1:2-2:13). Nevertheless, Yahweh continued to plead with Israel to return to Him, sending them His servants the prophets, "*daily rising early and sending them,*" but they only hardened their hearts against Him, even seeking to destroy those He sent (Jeremiah 7:20-26).

Eventually, the day of the Lord's patience and petition ended; the people who had refused to listen to Him when He spoke in their own language through His prophets would know that He had forsaken them when they heard men speak in indiscernible tongues far away from His sanctuary land (7:42-43; cf. Isaiah 28:1-13). What Moses had warned Israel of on the plains of Moab had at last come to pass (Deuteronomy 28:49-57).

Stephen's rehearsal of Israel's relationship with Moses and the Sinai Covenant was intended to press upon his accusers a painful truth their willful delusions had inoculated them from. These rulers and elders were well aware of Israel's woeful history and sought to distance themselves from their forefathers' unbelief and rebellion. They openly honored God's prophets and holy men by building monuments to them, congratulating themselves that they did not share in the sin of their fathers (Matthew 23:29-30). Doubtless Stephen's words caused them to wince and bristle with righteous indignation at their ancestors' folly and high-handed defiance. But, like his Master before him, Stephen compelled them to recognize that they were no different from those they scorned; they were no more disciples of Moses and sons of the Law than their fathers had been.

To be a disciple of Moses, one must *listen* to him, and Moses spoke of and directed the sons of Israel toward the One to come (cf. John 5:45-47; 1:43-45); by rejecting the "prophet like Moses," Stephen's accusers testified that they were indeed sons of their fathers. This shocking truth was further reinforced by their *lawlessness*: The Law had prophesied and guided as a pedagogue, serving the promise until the coming of Abraham's Seed. Now that that One had come, lawlessness consists in refusing to believe in Him (cf. Matthew 11:13 with Galatians 3:15-29, 4:21-31; also Matthew 7:21-23). Those who serve the Law – not Stephen or Jesus – are the ones guilty of opposing it.