
Preliminary remarks:

The long standing identification of Stephen as “the evangelist” is unhelpful. Stephens’s speech is not an evangelistic Gospel presentation. There is an implied call to accept the Christian message, in the presentation of Jesus as the prophesied one like Moses; but an implied call to accept the Christian message is not the same as an evangelistic Gospel presentation. Stephen does not outline the fundamental tenants of the Gospel: Stephen’s topic is not the Gospel.

Stephen’s topic is national Israel. First, Stephen does not begin with Adam, the first man, and walk through the whole account of God’s dealings with humanity; Stephen begins with Abraham, national Israel’s patriarchal originator, and walks through God’s dealings with national Israel. Second, Stephen does not refer to the promise to Abraham concerning all humanity, “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3); Stephen refers to the promise to Abraham that concerns national Israel, “To your descendants I have given this land” (Gen. 15:18, cf. Acts7:5). Third, Stephen deals with the covenant of circumcision (v.8a) which is quintessentially about national Israel. Fourth, the reference to “the God of Jacob” in v. 46 indicates a focus on national Israel.

To understand Stephens’s speech it is crucial to keep in mind who the speaker is, who the speaker is addressing, and what the situation is: in the case of Stephens’s speech in Acts 7:1-53; first, the speaker is Stephen; second, the addresses are the Sanhedrin; and third, the situation is in Jerusalem in the weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. First, Stephen is a Hellenistic Jewish Jesus-follower. A Jew from the diaspora. He is a man of good reputation who had been chosen by the Apostles to be a deacon of the early Church. Second, the Sanhedrin is the ruling religious body in national Israel. It consists of members from the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were responsible for making rulings on religious matters, negotiating with the Roman governors, and were the keepers of Jewish cultural identity and tradition. Third, at that time, shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus, Jerusalem was still full with many visitor from around the Roman Empire, who had witnessed the events of the passion first hand.

Chapter outline:

1-16 God does not owe national Israel anything
   1-8a God’s obligations regarding national Israel
   8b-16 God fulfills His obligations regarding national Israel

17-37 A closer look at the promise fulfillment: God saves through a representative
   17-36 Moses narrative: promise fulfilled through a representative
   37 prophecy of one like Moses: Jesus

38-53 Judaism is rejected
   38-43 national Israel’s need for a savior
   44-53 as for the Temple and the Law
Detailed chapter outline:

1-16 God does not owe national Israel anything
   1-8a God’s obligations regarding national Israel
      1-5a the context of the promise to national Israel
      5b the promise to national Israel
   6-7 prophecies surrounding the promise to national Israel
      6 descendants will be mistreated in foreign land
      7 God will judge foreign nation for mistreatment of national Israel
   8a the covenant sign of the promise to national Israel
   8b-16 God fulfills His obligations regarding national Israel
      8b Abrahams family line
   9-15 Abraham’s descendants go to Egypt
   15-16 Abraham’s descendants receive the land: the promise is fulfilled

17-37 A closer look at the promise fulfillment: God saves through a representative
   17-36 Moses narrative: promise fulfilled through a representative
      17-19 fulfillment of the prophecy of mistreatment in foreign land
      20-22 Moses: power in word and deed
      23-28 Moses: rejected by Israel
      29-34 Moses: sent from God
      35-36 fulfillment of the prophecy of judgment on foreign nation
   37 prophecy of one like Moses (word and deed, rejected by Israel, sent from God): Jesus

38-53 Judaism is rejected
   38-43 national Israel’s need for a savior
      38 national Israel received living oracles
      39-42 national Israel disobedient
      43 prophetic judgment on national Israel
   44-53 as for the Temple and the Law
      44-50 the temple cannot save
      51-53 the Law cannot save
Exegesis:

Stephen’s speech is a prophetic pronouncement of judgement upon national Israel. Stephen first details God’s obligations to national Israel (vv. 1-8a), and demonstrates that God has fulfilled His obligations (vv. 8b-16). Stephen then takes a closer look at the way God works to fulfill His obligations to national Israel, as a demonstration of the characteristic way that God operates in the world (vv. 17-37). This second section concludes with the prophecy of one like Moses (v. 37) that implies Jesus to be the one in whom salvation is now found. Stephen then demonstrates that national Israel is guilty of sin and so in need of a savior (vv. 43), and that the temple (44-50) and the Law (51-53) cannot be relied upon to save.

1-16 God does not owe national Israel anything

The major point of the first section is that God does not owe national Israel anything. Stephen traces the history of God’s dealing with national Israel from its earliest times with the patriarch Abraham, “when he was in Mesopotamia” (v.2) through to the fulfillment of God’s obligations to national Israel (v.16). In the first section of his speech, Stephen highlights only the most significant aspects of the story of national Israel in order to show that God’s obligations have been fulfilled and ergo God does not owe national Israel anything.

1-8a God’s promise regarding national Israel

The first half of section one (vv. 1-8a) traces quickly through Abraham’s movements from Mesopotamia to the promised land, in which national Israel is “now living” (7:4). This historical narrative serves as context for the promise to national Israel. Stephen points out that Abraham was not given any portion of the land (v. 5); instead God gave Abraham the promise regarding national Israel: that God will give the land “to his decedents after him” (7:5).

Stephen then elaborates in verses 6-7 with the prophecies surrounding the promise. The NASV’s “but,” at the beginning of verse 6, is too strong for the weak δε to carry in this context. Stephen does not mean a strong break or contrast at this point, but simply an elaboration consisting of the prophecies surrounding the promise. The purpose of providing the details of the prophecies at this point is twofold. Firstly, Stephen is at pains to show that God’s obligations have been fully met and so all the details of the prophecies surrounding the promise will be covered. Secondly, it will serve as a foil for the Moses narrative to come, the Moses narrative section (vv. 17-34) being itself a more detailed look at the promise fulfillment in the way that the prophecies are a more detailed look at the promise.

Stephen closes this section with a recounting of the covenant of circumcision (v. 8a). The covenant of circumcision is quintessentially about God’s dealings with national Israel. The promises outlined in v.5 and the surrounding prophecies in vv. 6-7 are ratified between God and Abraham, the representative of national Israel, by the covenant of circumcision. If there was any mistake about Stephen’s topic before this verse, there can be none after it. Stephen speech is dealing with the topic national Israel.

8b-16 God fulfills His obligations regarding national Israel

Having established what God’s obligations to national Israel are (v.5-8a), Stephen now moves to tracing the historical events in which God fulfills His obligation to national Israel (v.8b-16). Stephen moves quickly through the history of Abraham’s family down to the patriarchs (8b), then focuses the narrative on Joseph. Detail is given of the events surrounding Joseph’s life (vv. 9-14), as these are the means by
which God brings about the fulfilment of His promise. With the burial of Jacob and the patriarchs in Shechem (v.15-16), God’s obligations regarding national Israel are fulfilled. The decedents of Abraham have possessed the land of Canaan, the patriarchs are permanently planted in the land, and their decedents (as has already been mentioned in v. 4) are still living in the land. Therefore, as God’s promise regarding national Israel have been kept, God does not owe national Israel anything. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Stephen refers to the events of the Exodus as “the time of the promise” in verse 17.

**17-37 A closer look at the promise fulfillment: God saves through a representative.**

Just as Stephen had moved from the basic promise in verse 5 to a detailed elaboration of the prophecies surrounding the promise in verses 6-8a, so now he moves from the basic fulfillment of the promise in verses 8b-16 to a more detailed look at the events that fulfill the promise in verses 17-37.

The Moses narrative that runs from verse 17 to verse 37 is book ended by the fulfillment of the prophecies that surround the promise, given in verses 6-8a. The prophecy given in v. 6, that the decedents of Abraham will be enslaved and mistreated in a foreign land, is fulfilled vv.17-19 when Stephen recounts the suffering of national Israel in Egypt. The prophecy given in verse 7-8a, that God will judge the nation that had mistreated Abrahams decedents, is fulfilled in verse 35-36 when Stephen recounts Moses work as “judge” in Egypt. The evil predicted in v. 6 is fulfilled in v. 18-19, before the arrival of God’s representative in v.20. The promise of God that He will Judge the evil doers, give in v. 7-8a, is fulfilled by God’s representative in v. 35-36.

The main point of vv.17-37 is that the details of how God fulfills prophecies are worked out through a representative. This is indicated by the way Stephen gives his account of God’s work through his representative Moses in verses 20-34 - between the fulfillments of the details of the prophecies that surround the promise in vv. 17-19, and vv. 35-36. By putting the Moses narrative (vv. 20-34) between the fulfillment of the prophesies (vv.17-19, and vv. 35-36), and then finishing the section with the prophecy about another one like Moses, Stephen is effectively saying *here are the details of how the prophecy about one like Moses will be fulfilled*. The key details of the Moses narrative are that God was offering deliverance through Moses (v. 25, 34), but national Israel at that time “did not understand” this (v. 25) and so reject Moses (v. 27), who is God’s representative (v.34). The prophesy of another like Moses (v.37), therefore, is to be fulfilled in one who is powerful in word and deed, rejected by the national Israel, and sent from God.

It is at this point that the context of Acts 17 makes all the difference in interpretation. When Stephen says that Moses prophesied another like himself, the Sanhedrin knew that Jesus ministry consisted of powerful words and deeds just like Moses ministry, and that national Israel had rejected Jesus just as it had rejected Moses. The Sanhedrin knew that Stephen meant Jesus to be the prophesied one like Moses. And, as such, Jesus is the representative through whom God is working to save His people.

**38-53 Judaism is rejected**

The final section of Stephen’s speech makes his major point: a prophetic pronouncement of judgment upon national Israel. Having established that God has no lasting obligations to national Israel (vv.1-16), and that the Jesus movement is the fulfillment of the prophecy of one like Moses, Stephen now turns to explain the situation of national Israel in this state of affairs.
38-43 national Israel’s disobedience

Moses gave national Israel the commands of God, “living oracle” (v. 38). But national Israel has been disobedient (v.39-42). Their hearts turned back to Egypt (v. 39): it could be said that they were a nation after Egypt’s heart. They made idols just like the idol worshiping gentiles (v. 40-41). Stephen may even mean to suggest that the “house of Israel” became murderers when he says they offered “victims” (v. 42). God has judged national Israel to be guilty and condemned them to exile “beyond Babylon” (v. 43). National Israel has sinned in the likeness of the Gentiles, as such, national Israel is in need of a savior just as the Gentiles.

44-53 as for the Temple and the Law

At last Stephen turns to answer the question he was asked regarding the temple and the Law (see Acts 6:13, 7:1a).

44-50 the temple cannot save

The tabernacle was the predecessor for the temple and in many was superior to it. It was made according to God’s design (v.44), while the temple was designed by David (v.46), the tabernacle was built by Moses the Lawgiver (v.44), while the temple was built by Solomon the Law breaker (v.47). The tabernacle was mobile (v.45), better reflecting the nature of God than the stationary temple. Regardless, “the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands” (v. 48), as the prophets have said (v. 49-50). Ergo, the temple is of no account, and cannot be relied upon to provide any advantage to national Israel.

51-53 the Law cannot save

Stephens accuses national Israel of doing “just as your fathers did” (v. 51). Their fathers are those who persecuted and killed the prophets (v. 52). And in Stephens day national Israel have murdered “the Righteous One” whom the prophets “announced” (v.52). Their actions show that they are “uncircumcised in heart” (v.51). National Israel had been given the Law but has not kept it (v. 53), so the Law cannot be relied upon to provide any advantage to national Israel.

Conclusion:

Stephen’s speech is best understood as a prophetic pronouncement of judgment upon national Israel and Judaism as a means of approaching God. Stephen’s focus is on national Israel and God’s dealings with national Israel. First Stephen outlines God’s obligations to national Israel (vv. 1-8a), and establishes that God has fulfilled these obligations (vv. 8b-16). Then Stephen gives a detailed presentation of God’s actions in fulfilling these obligations, which serves to demonstrate the God’s characteristic method of operating (vv. 17-37). The second section culminates in the prophecy of one like Moses (v. 37), implying that Jesus is the one in whom salvation is now found. Finally Stephen shows national Israel to be guilty of sin and in need of a savior (vv. 43), and that the temple (44-50) and the Law (51-53) afford no advantage to national Israel as regards salvation.