

Acts 7:1-8

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-7/acts-71-8/>

The Sanhedrin asks Stephen if he is an enemy against the Temple and Moses. He begins his defense by teaching the history of Israel to the Jewish leaders. God appeared to Abraham and told him to go to a land which He would give him. God told Abraham that before his descendants would inherit the land, they would be enslaved for 400 years. As commanded, Abraham circumcised his son, Isaac, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of 70 Pharisees and Sadducees and the High Priest. Leading up to his arrest, Stephen was performing wonders and attesting miracles, most likely healing the sick or disabled, since this was the most common miracle performed by believers, and by Jesus (Acts 6:8). Men from a certain Synagogue who called themselves the Freedmen started debating Stephen (Acts 6:9). He spoke from wisdom and the Spirit's leading and frustrated their efforts to discredit him, so the Freedmen paid men to spread slander. The slanderers spread a false narrative that Stephen preached blasphemy against Moses and God. As a result, Stephen is brought before the governing Pharisees and Sadducees and put on trial (Acts 7:8-12).

The charges against him are:

“This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

(Acts 6:13-14)

Naturally, the *high priest* asks Stephen, “*Are these things so?*” Do you deny these accusations?

The charge against Stephen is that he is an enemy of the Temple and the Law of Moses. In this moment, Stephen is led by the Spirit to confront these religious leaders. He gives a sermon that summarizes relevant sections of the Old Testament, answering the accusations against him concerning the Temple and Moses. In this sermon, Stephen will demonstrate a command of the scriptures, refuting the allegation that he opposed Moses (who authored the first five books of the Bible, often called the Law of Moses). He will also put the Temple into context, showing that he does not oppose the Temple. But instead of seeking his own release, Stephen confronts the Sanhedrin and demonstrates that Jesus is their deliverer whom they have rejected. In doing so, Stephen will turn the accusation 180 degrees, and demonstrate that it is actually these Jewish leaders who are rejecting Moses and God's word.

By the end, his basic message will be, “Moses was your deliverer, and you rejected him and he went into exile, and he saved you anyway. Joseph was your deliverer, and you rejected him, and he went into exile, and God delivered you through Joseph anyway. God Himself tabernacled with you in the wilderness, and He brought His presence to dwell with you, and that wasn't good

enough for you to follow Him. He didn't behave the way you wanted Him to, so you tabernacled with false gods like Moloch to rationalize your evil ways, and you left your guide (God). You've been unfaithful to all of your deliverers. You've rejected them all, and here comes Jesus, who is the second Joseph, the second Moses, and God come down as man to dwell among you and tabernacle among you, and you've rejected Him as well. You are just like your fathers, who reject God time after time." This is not well received by the Sanhedrin, who have stopped listening, refuse to acknowledge the works of God, and have become a law unto themselves.

Stephen begins his defense, *Hear me, brethren and fathers!* He calls for close listening to what he will say, his unfolding history lesson and sermon. He addresses the Sanhedrin as both *brethren*, fellow Israelites, and *fathers*, a term of respect to the men in the Council, who are both spiritual and political leaders of Israel.

Stephen begins his sermon, which will become an indictment against the Pharisees and Sadducees, by going all the way back to *Abraham*, the father, the first Patriarch of the Hebrew people: *The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.'*

Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq, is where Abraham was born and grew up, specifically in the city of Ur. In Genesis 12, Abraham is already in *Haran* when *God* calls him to leave his family and go to the land which *God* will *show* him (Genesis 12:1). Here, in Acts 7, Stephen notes that *before Abraham lived in Haran, God* had already called him. So apparently Abraham was called by *God* first out of Ur in *Mesopotamia*, but he brought his family with him. This is significant because it means that Abraham believed *God* while still in Ur. Therefore the verse in Genesis 15:6 that states Abraham "believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" while Abraham is in Canaan is likely not the first time Abraham has believed *God* and had it reckoned as righteousness. According to this sermon of Stephen's, the first time Abraham believed *God* and was reckoned as righteous in the sight of *God* was likely while he was in Ur .

Then, in obedience to *God's* command, Abraham *left the land of the Chaldeans*, the city of Ur in *Mesopotamia*, which Genesis calls "Ur of the *Chaldeans*" (Genesis 11:28). The *Chaldeans* are associated with Babylon throughout the Bible. Their army serves King Nebuchadnezzar when he conquers Jerusalem and starts the Exile (Kings 25:5). Ur is believed to have been on or near the Euphrates and roughly 140 miles from Babylon. Abraham was told to *leave your country and your relatives* in order to go to a land he did not know. Abraham obeyed in part, leaving his *country* but not his *relatives*.

So Abraham and his family travelled north and *settled in Haran*, which is about halfway up the Euphrates River on the route to travel to Israel (see map on sidebar). Abraham was called by *God* while in Ur to leave all of his relatives, which he did not initially do. His *father* Terah and nephew Lot, and presumably other relatives, went with him (Genesis 11:31). So halfway to Israel, Abraham stalled out and stayed in Haran with his *father*. It appears Abraham deferred to his father, which was according to custom, rather than deferring to *God*. Interestingly enough, the Genesis account starts in *Haran* after Abraham had only obeyed partially. The part about

Abraham being called while in Ur was likely part of oral tradition, which now becomes written as a part of scripture for our edification (2 Timothy 3:6).

The story of Abraham is a story of partial obedience, where God keeps working with Abraham even though he obeys only a little at a time. (This is unlike the current rulers of Israel hearing Stephen's sermon, who are in wholesale rebellion.) *From there*, that is, the city of *Haran*, *after* Abraham's *father* Terah *died*, Abraham obeyed *God's* calling further and left behind all his relatives save one, his nephew Lot. Abraham's nephew Lot journeys with him for many years afterward. It will be after Abraham finally parts company with Lot, and fully obeys the command to *leave* Ur as well as his *relatives* that God grants the land to Abraham (Genesis 13:14-15).

When Abraham leaves all of his relatives as he was asked to do, and when he does all that God has asked him to do, that is when God grants him the land. After Abraham parts ways with Lot, he has finally fully obeyed God's calling. Only then does God give him the land. When Abraham asks for assurance that he will receive the land (Genesis 15:8), God enacts a blood covenant, cutting animals in half and passing between them in the form of a torch, which was an ancient ceremony of signing an agreement between two parties. In this case, God makes a commitment to grant the land, "This land is granted to you" (Genesis 15:12-21). Two images pass between the animals, an oven (in which bread was baked) and a torch of fire. This may represent God the Father and Jesus, the Living Word, who will descend from Abraham. Jesus was making the blood covenant both on behalf of God as well as Abraham, as His promised descendant, in whom all the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

In short, *God had* Abraham *move* from Haran and complete his journey *to this country in which you* (the Sadducees and Pharisees) *are now living*: Israel.

But Stephen notes that God had other plans for Abraham. After he moved to Israel (then called Canaan), *God gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground*. Abraham lived as a nomad, not owning any piece of property. And *yet*, Stephen says, *even when Abraham had no child*, *God promised that He would give the land to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him*.

Despite having no actual property or heirs, *God promised* to give the entire country to Abraham as his *possession* and to his *descendants*.

While making the blood covenant with Abraham, God explains to Abraham what will happen to the nation born from him:

But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.

God will grant the land. However, there will be a time delay, as there often is with God's promises. He gives responsibilities to His followers, and then eventually rewards them. God spoke in this way that Abraham's descendants would dwell in a *foreign land*, and that they would be brought into bondage and oppression for *four hundred years*.

In Genesis 15, it speaks of the 400 years specifically, but does not say which land it will be (Genesis 15:12-16). We know in hindsight that it is Egypt. The Jewish people were in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40) and apparently as slaves for 400 of those years, presumably after Joseph's influence waned. God also promises to judge the nation that enslaves the Jewish people: *'And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge,' said God.* His judgement toward Egypt arrived as the 10 plagues and the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exodus 7:14-12:30).

Stephen continues with his sermon. After these promises to Abraham are fulfilled, after the bondage of his *descendants* was ended and He judged the nation which enslaved them, Stephen notes that God told Abraham, *'and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place,* in Canaan/Israel. Abraham's descendants would return to the land God has given him.

And so God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision; the act of removing the foreskin of all male children eight days after birth, to set them apart physically from all other tribes. This *covenant* was made before Abraham had any children, but ultimately *Abraham became the father of Isaac*, the Son of Promise, and he obeyed God *and circumcised him on the eighth day.* The Jewish forefathers descended from *Isaac*, who *became the father of Jacob*, who was later renamed Israel by God (Genesis 32:38), *and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.*

This is the origin of the 12 tribes of Israel, the *twelve* sons of Jacob.

Stephen is talking to people who probably knew the Old Testament by heart, word for word, so they're filling in the blanks as he speaks.

It bears remembering that part of the accusation waged by the Sadducees and Pharisees against Stephen is, "You don't believe the Bible." So Stephen is rooting in here, "Yes, I actually do believe the Bible. This is our history." He is not intending to inform them of something they did not know, but rather to answer the baseless allegations, and lay the groundwork for the message calling his accusers to repentance, which he will work up to.

Biblical Text

The high priest said, "Are these things so?" And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.' 4 Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him. 6 But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. 7 'And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge,' said God, 'and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.' 8 And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised

him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.