

# Acts 7:35-43

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*Moses, who was rejected by his people, returned to Egypt as a deliverer. He performed wonders and signs to show God's power in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness. He prophesied that God would send a second prophet like him, which was Jesus. Moses received the Law from God on Mt. Sinai, while the Hebrews made a golden calf to worship down in the camp. This was the pattern of Israel. God sent them a savior, they rejected the savior, and worshipped false gods.*

Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of 70 Pharisees and Sadducees, and the High Priest. The charge against Stephen is that he is an enemy of the Temple and the Law of Moses. But Stephen is taking this opportunity, led by the Spirit, to confront these religious leaders. He gives a sermon that summarizes the relevant portions of the Old Testament, answering the accusations against him concerning the Temple and Moses.

Stephen's purpose in referencing these Old Testament heroes and forefathers of Israel is to show how the Israelites repeatedly rejected those who God sent to lead and deliver them. He reminds the council that *this Moses whom the Israelites disowned, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?', this man they sent into exile because they did not trust him, is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.*

Moses was *disowned* in a sense; the Israelites rejected his help and implied that he meant to kill them (v. 27-28). But God's plan for saving Israel will come about from this man rejected by his people. Moses had fled from Egypt where the Israelites were slaves, and had lived "as an alien" (v. 29) in the land of Midian for forty years. But God *sent* Moses back to the Israelites who had *disowned him* to be their *ruler* (or leader) and their *deliverer*. In spite of Israel's rejection of Moses, God continued to love them. They are His elect. They are still His children, even while enslaved in the land of Egypt. Thus He called Moses to return and redeem Israel from slavery. Stephen's thesis is clear: the one who is rejected by Israel becomes the Savior of Israel.

Stephen reminds the Sandhedrin that God spoke with the *help of the angel who had appeared to Moses in the thorn bush*, perhaps to draw their attention to the wondrous, supernatural way God makes Himself known. His intervention and revelation is accompanied by *signs* and marvelous spectacles that do not occur in normal life.

It was not up for debate between one party saying what they think God wills versus what their rivals might say. Moses didn't feel led by God in his heart, rather he saw the *angel* in the fiery *thorn bush* which did not burn up, and he heard the audible voice of God. There were real, amazing things happening when God spoke to and through His sent deliverers. Stephen has performed wonders from God, and the apostles have performed wonders, just as Jesus performed wonders. But the Council continues to reject, just as their fathers did.

Stephen highlights that Moses *led them out*, he delivered the Israelites from slavery (by God's power, but as an emissary sent by God) and all throughout this process and beyond, Moses was *performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years*. The *wonders and signs* which God accomplished through Moses probably came rushing to the minds of the council listening to Stephen. They were teachers and priests of the Law; they knew the seemingly impossible things God did through Moses. From his first confrontation with Pharaoh, where he changed his staff to a snake and back (Exodus 4:3-4), to the ten plagues of Egypt that persuaded Pharaoh to free the Israelites (Exodus 7-11). From there, Moses parted the Red Sea for Israel's safe passage (Exodus 14:1-31), drew water out of a rock (Exodus 17:1-7), stopped a plague from destroying the Israelites (Numbers 16:44-50), made a bronze snake for the people of Israel to look upon so that they might be healed from venomous snakebites (Numbers 21:5-9). And he did many other miraculous and supernatural things.

As did Jesus. Most of Jesus's attesting miracles were of healing (John 4:46-50, Mark 1:30-34, Matthew 8:14-17, Luke 7:1-10, Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48, John 5:1-9, Matthew 12:10-13, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5, Matthew 14:14, Mark 7:31-35, Luke 14:1-4, Luke 17:11-19, Luke 18:35-43, and more). He restored vision to blind men, he cured leprosy, He make paralytics walk. He cast out demons (Mark 1:23-26, Matthew 17:14-18). He fed His people (Matthew 14:15-21) and gave them drink (John 2:1-11). Of course, Jesus performed many other signs and wonders during His ministry. The Sanhedrin would have only heard of some of these, but they were witness to healings. Just prior to Jesus's crucifixion, He resurrected his dead friend Lazarus (John 11:38-44). News of this spread throughout Jerusalem, and the Pharisees doubtless heard of it.

Here in Stephen's defense, the Sanhedrin might have made a connection between Moses who performed *wonders and signs* and Jesus who performed *wonders and signs*. Even Stephen was performing *wonders and signs* just before his arrest (Acts 6:8). Further still, while he sits there on trial, Stephen is marked by a visible sign from God that He approves of Stephen. Just as Moses' face shone when he spoke with God, so much so that he had to put a veil over it so as not to blind the people (Exodus 34:29-35), at this trial while Stephen preaches against the Sanhedrin, his face is shining like an angel (Acts 6:15). The council could have seen the similarities of the men sent by God in the Old Testament and the men sent by God in their present day, but they clearly suppressed their own powers of reason rather than face the obvious truth, just as they would soon plug their ears to no longer hear Stephen speak (Acts 7:57).

They did not want to see. Stephen now makes the direct connection from Moses to Jesus Christ: *This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.'* He is quoting from Deuteronomy 18:18, where Moses prophesied, "The Messiah will be a second Moses." Jesus was this second Moses.

The context of this prophecy is that the Israelites were gathered at Mt. Sinai, and God spoke directly to them in a terrifying display: smoke came from the mountain, thunder boomed, lightning flashed, and a trumpet sounded. The people said to Moses, "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die." (Deuteronomy 18:16). God's presence and presentation nearly scared them to death. And God approves of this fear, saying, "They have spoken well. I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like

you [Moses], and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deuteronomy 18:17-18).

It is a messianic promise. Moses was sent as a savior to Israel, just as the promised *prophet like him* would be, Jesus, whom Israel rejected just as they rejected Moses. Stephen continues to highlight the ways which Moses was sent by God and how Israel spurned him, how the people continually turned away from God. Moses was *the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai*. It was Moses who climbed *Mount Sinai* to speak with God, because the Israelites were afraid of the voice of God. *Moses was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you*. Moses spoke with God face to face (Exodus 33:11), he heard from *the angel* (a heavenly messenger from God), he *received living oracles*, the Law of God, to *pass on* to the Jewish people. Everything came directly from God through His chosen sent one, Moses. The accusation against Stephen was that he

“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)

So here Stephen is teaching the Sanhedrin perfectly about the history of Moses and where the Law/customs of Moses came from. The lie was that Stephen did not believe in the Law and sought to destroy it. His response is, “I actually do believe in the Law. The Law is the *living oracles* that were given to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. The pattern in our nation is that we have the Law, but we don't follow it.” The first Moses received the Mosaic Law, which was rejected. The second Moses, Jesus, came to fulfill that Law, and was rejected (Matthew 5:17).

Even though God was faithful, they were faithless.

Though Moses gave the Law from God to the people, *Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt*.

The Israelites did not want to follow God. They remembered the ways of *Egypt* which they had known during their slavery, a culture that thrived on exploitation and sacrifice to idols. So while Moses was on *Mount Sinai* hearing from the living God, the Israelites said *to Aaron*, the brother of Moses, ‘*Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what happened to him.*’ They grew impatient waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain, and immediately reverted to the paganism they had observed while living in Egypt.

Despite all that they had witnessed up until that point—the ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of Pharaoh's army, God's presence guiding them through the wilderness, the voice of God speaking to them from the *Mount* amidst smoke and lightning—the Israelites ignored all these amazing *wonders and signs* and chose to craft a *calves* of gold. They wanted an idol that they could control, so they *brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands*. They were afraid of the living God, who spoke to them from *Mount Sinai*,

who was clearly very real and had freed them from captivity. They rejected Him and chose to worship something they had made by the *work of their hands*. Ultimately, idol worship is the worship of self, because idols are made of earthly materials, for the purpose of justifying sinful desires.

With Moses gone, the Israelites believed themselves out from under scrutiny, out from under accountability. Like children when parents leave the room, or teenagers when parents leave for the weekend, the natural sinful impulse is, “What can I get away with now that the authority figure is gone?” It is human nature. After making an *idol* with their own *hands*, they *were rejoicing* and bringing *sacrifice* to it. This is the ultimate point of paganism: idols are gods we control. They are gods that give us moral justification to do whatever we want to do. When God, or God’s chosen (Moses), did not meet the Israelites’ expectation, they got a god that would. Going forward, this becomes a pattern. This culminates into Stephen’s condemnation of the leaders of Israel, that they are just a part of a pattern repeated throughout the history of God’s people.

Stephen quotes from the prophet Amos, *But God turned away and delivered Israel up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel?’* Israel sometimes sacrificed and made grain offerings to God during her exile of *forty years* in the *wilderness*. But they also served other gods, idols, *You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon’* (Amos 5:25-27). This showed that they were not serving God, but rather seeking a god that would serve them.

*Moloch* was a pagan deity to whom children were sacrificed to guarantee a desired result (Jeremiah 32:35). It was a very detestable religion. In spite of God’s covenant with Israel, that He would be their God and they would be His people, they kept alternate *tabernacles* (houses, temples) for other gods in hopes of getting what they wanted. Indeed, there were shrines permitted to be raised by King Solomon himself to *Moloch* and the false god Chemosh (1 Kings 11:7). This history of idolatry among the Israelites began with the golden *calf*. There was a constant struggle in Israel to serve other gods, such as Baal, *Moloch*, and Ashera (Numbers 25:1-2, Judges 2:11-12, Judges 3:7, 1 Kings 15:13).

For these gods and others, the Israelites made *images*, statues of wood, stone, or precious materials (such as the golden *calf*), which were only *made* so that Israel could *worship* them. Israel rejected God, so He promised to *remove* them from Promised Land, which happened when He allowed *Babylon* to conquer Jerusalem and take the Israelites away from their country into a 70-year captivity.

Now Stephen has brought his listeners to the time of the Babylonian exile. The people had rejected God and they suffered the consequences for it by being exiled from the land, just as God told them would be the case in His covenant: obedience would result in blessings, disobedience in punishment (Deuteronomy 28:1-2,15).

## **Biblical Text**

**35 “This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. 36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.’ 38 This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. 39 Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what happened to him.’ 41 At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? 43 You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.’**