

Acts 6:1-7:16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 6 verse 1 to chapter 7 verse 16. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

And what they said pleased the whole gathering. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

[1 : 31] And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him, and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, Are these things so?

And Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, Go out from your land and from your kindred, and go into the land that I will show you.

Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans, and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.

And God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God, and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.

[2 : 56] And he gave them 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.

And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him, and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt, and over all his household.

Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.

And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father, and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.

And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem, and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver, from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

[4 : 06] In Acts chapter 6, we're introduced to the characters of Stephen and Philip, who will be the most prominent figures in the immediately following chapters. We might see this as beginning a new section. It's loosely paralleled with what preceded it, and it moves on and outward.

Chapters 1 to 5 had Matthias being chosen. Now we have the seven being chosen. Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, and before the council. And now Stephen is preaching. The apostles were tried and beaten, and now Stephen is tried and killed. The spirit came in Jerusalem, the spirit will later come in Samaria. The greed of Ananias and Sapphira was judged, and later we will see the greed of Simon the sorcerer being judged.

We might also think back to the gospel account, where the twelve were chosen, and then alongside the twelve, seventy or seventy-two. Or maybe thinking back even further, to the selection of the seventy elders in Numbers chapter 11.

The numbers of the disciples are rapidly growing, and with this there needs to be a spread of the gift of the spirit for leadership within the church. There are tensions within the early church that arise in part from cultural and linguistic differences.

[5 : 14] There are Hellenists and there are Hebrews. These two groups seem to be divided primarily by language, and also to an extent by culture. Diaspora Jews would live in Jerusalem, but they would not be speaking Aramaic as their first language.

They probably had some Aramaic, but they would usually be speaking in Greek as their daily language. The Hebrews, on the other hand, while they would be able to speak in Greek, would generally be conversing in Aramaic.

In chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost, we read about a great number of Diaspora Jews who were in Jerusalem. Some may have been just there for the feast, but a great number actually lived in Jerusalem.

It is this group that is likely referred to by the term Hellenists here. Craig Keener notes that 10-20% of people in Jerusalem at the time would probably speak Greek as their primary language.

Almost 40% of inscriptions from Jerusalem in the period are in Greek. The numbers of Jews in the Diaspora greatly exceeded the number that actually lived in Palestine at the time, but many immigrants of the Diaspora would have returned to live in Jerusalem.

[6 : 13] These are the sorts of people mentioned in chapter 2. They would have been faithful Jews, but acculturated to Greek over Judean culture in various respects. In the early church, there seems to have been a special concern for widows and great honour given to them.

Without the support of a husband and perhaps lacking a family network, a widow was a very vulnerable character, and so having a community that would stand in and support such a person was very important.

Throughout the Old Testament, a lot is said about God's concern for the widows and the fatherless, for people who have no man to support them and could easily be victimised or denied justice, they were quite vulnerable to mistreatment.

It is possible that the Hellenist widows would have been more vulnerable than the Hebrew widows. As immigrants, they might not have had the same strong local kinship networks. Wider disparities in age between marriage partners in the Greek world might have meant that there were more widows of the Hellenist than of the Hebrews.

However, the task of overseeing the daily distribution was something that was distracting the apostles from their primary tasks, prayer and the ministry of the word. As we've seen to this point in the book of Acts, prayer was absolutely integral to what the apostles were doing.

[7 : 22] They prayed constantly in the temple. Their ministry was also driven by prayers for boldness, as we've seen in the preceding chapters. Beyond this, they have the task of proclamation. They are presumably teaching daily in the temple, in Solomon's portico, reasoning with others and trying to persuade them of the truth of the gospel of Christ.

Perhaps, as those who are entrusted with the word, they're also concerned to write things down at this point. They are the appointed witnesses, and if they're going to communicate their message, it's important to have it in a solid and enduring form.

They need people to oversee this process of administration. The seven need to be gifted administrators, people with a good reputation, people that would be trusted implicitly by those that they were ministering to.

It also is important that they have the spirit. They have to have the same anointing of the spirit that the apostles have, and they need wisdom. This isn't going to be a straightforward task. There are some tensions between these communities, elements of distrust that need to be addressed, and they need to act with the transparency and trustworthiness that places the process beyond reproach.

If the church is really going to have things in common, trustworthy administrators could not be more important. According to Josephus, councils of seven govern towns, and some commentators have seen a connection between this and the seven that are chosen here.

[8 : 41] Others have seen connections with the seven that were appointed to oversee the almsgiving of particular towns. Once again, as in the case of the apostles in chapter 1, it seems to be presumed, if not required, that the candidates will be males.

The task of these men seems to go beyond what is traditionally thought of as diaconal. They are not just responsible for works of mercy in a very narrow sense. As we see in the cases of Philip and of Stephen, these are ministers of the word, and they seem to oversee the congregation in a broader sense.

I think it is appropriate to see these not as deacons, but as elders. And their ministry differs from that of the apostles. The church is formed around the table, and those who are administering the table are overseeing something central to the life of the church.

The apostles themselves explicitly deny that this is their task, it's not their responsibility. The apostles are not actually appointing the seven. They oversee the appointment, but the congregation are the ones that appoint them.

It's because the congregation's task is to engage in this daily distribution, that they need to be the ones that appoint representatives to perform it for them. The laying on of hands confers a task that belongs to one party or group, to a person or group of persons who will act on their behalf.

[9 : 55] Laying on of hands is used in sacrifices, it's used in ordinations, and it has a similar meaning. Numbers chapter 27 verses 22 to 23 is a very good example of this.

And Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eliezer the priest and the whole congregation. And he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses.

Moses then confers his own authority to Joshua. Moses makes Joshua his representative before the whole congregation. Israel has representatives of the congregation within itself, but Joshua is a representative of Moses.

As Matthew Colvin observes in his discussion of this passage, the apostles are the plenipotentiary representatives of Christ. They represent Christ himself. We might notice the differences between this appointment and the appointment of a replacement for Judas.

Many people come to this passage looking for an absolute system of church government, but church government in the New Testament seems to be a lot more organic than people tend to think. It arises out of natural problems that the churches face to which responses are given from the natural structures that exist within human communities.

[11 : 06] Church government is more a matter of wisdom and prudence than a matter of absolute law. However, as in the book of Exodus, where elders are appointed in Exodus chapter 18 and in chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, the overseeing and administration of the life of the people of God in a way that's just and wise is a matter of great importance and of interest to the text on its own terms.

One of the results of this response to this problem within the early church is that the church grows. It's fruitful. It multiplies. It's like the growth of the infant Christ that's described in the book of Luke.

Many priests are converted. Luke begins his gospel with a priestly family and here we still see a number of people who are associated with priestly backgrounds who are drawn to the gospel.

Priests were dependent upon the support of the people and perhaps, as many of them might have lived in poverty, what we have in the support of the church in this community of goods is something that is of great appeal to them, a sign of the way things really ought to be, where the Levite and the priest are welcomed in and supported by a community that's faithful to the word of God.

Immediately we see Stephen standing out as someone who's faithful and powerful in his witness to the word of God. He has great wisdom and no one can withstand it. In Luke chapter 21 verse 15, Christ has spoken to his disciples saying, I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

[12 : 31] He has this argument with those of the synagogue of the freedmen and they cannot withstand his wisdom or the spirit with which he is speaking. Perhaps we should imagine a public dispute in which Stephen clearly outwits and outmatches his opponents, demonstrating from the scriptures that Jesus really is the Christ.

Accusations are brought against Stephen, accusations that might remind us of those that were made against Jesus. Accusations are instigated, then the people are stirred up and the elders and the scribes with them, and then there's the setting up of false witnesses.

It's very similar to the story of Christ. Stephen is walking in the path of his master. In Matthew chapter 26 verses 59 to 61, Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.

At last two came forward and said, This man said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days. There is some measure of truth to the accusations of the false witnesses. The accusations have enough resemblance to the message of Christ and the early Christians that it would seem that they were based on some measure of truth. The temple, in Jesus' indictment of it, had been treated as a den of robbers, a place for wicked people to retreat to, to find refuge, rather than as a house of prayer for the nations.

[13 : 53] Jesus has spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. And so these false witnesses still had some element of truth to what they were saying. The people of the council gaze upon Stephen and they see his face like the face of an angel.

This is, of course, reminiscent of the story of Moses, whose face shone when he had been with the Lord. It's another sign of having been with Jesus. Stephen also goes on to reference angels on several occasions in his speech that follows.

Throughout Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts, an important emphasis is the continuity of Christ, the Gospel, and the Church with that which has preceded it. Stephen here gives the longest speech of the Book of Acts.

Its rhetorical structure is worth noting. As Daryl Bach observes, it begins with a call to hear, it has a preparatory discourse, it presents a proposition, then it moves to argument application, and then concludes with a polemical application.

Stephen tells the story of Israel here in a very particular way, and by telling the story in the way that he does, the characters are reframed. The ways that stories are told are of great importance.

[14 : 58] By telling stories in different ways, certain characters can be brought to the foreground and others placed in the background. Certain themes can be foregrounded. Heroes and villains can be switched. This is especially true when you're telling a story of a nation.

For instance, you can tell the story of America in a number of different ways. You can tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of faith and religious liberty, with the Mayflower pilgrims coming to America in 1620.

Or maybe you could tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of oppression and slavery, with the story of 1619 being foregrounded. Or perhaps the story is to be told as a story of nation-building, focusing upon 1776 and the founding of a new nation.

Or maybe it's a story of empowerment of the marginalised, the story of Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall. While they can work with the same historical material, these different ways of telling the story can lead to very different understandings of who the heroes are, who the villains are, how contemporary Americans fit into the story, and how to continue the story appropriately.

When reading Stephen's speech then, we need to be very alert to the themes that he has bringing to the foreground, who his heroes are, what his emphases are, what events he misses out, what events he brings to the foreground.

[16 : 12] All of these will help us to understand how he sees the different parties in the current conflicts fitting into the story, and how he believes people should move forward. Stephen, in the way that he tells the story, presents himself and other Christians as being fundamentally loyal to the story of Israel, and his opponents as being disloyal to it.

The early Christians also read the scriptures in the light of Christ, and what Stephen provides here is a typological and Christological reading of the Old Testament. We're supposed to see resemblances between the characters presented here and the character of Christ.

The story begins with Abraham. Jeff Myers remarks upon the relationship between the leader and their kindred. Each one of the great leaders that Stephen picks out is set apart from or has to leave their kindred in some sense.

The story of Israel begins with a promise, a promise given to Abraham, and it also begins promisingly. This is common ground also with a typical Jewish reading. One can imagine that many of Stephen's readers will be tracking with him, agreeing with him, and then as the speech progresses, subtle themes that Stephen has introduced and highlighted, things that they can agree with in principle in their original context, will be brought to bear upon the current situation in a manner that will put them in a difficult position.

Stephen is reading the tension of the present time back into the narrative. The narrative of Israel, as Stephen tells it, is a narrative of rejection of those appointed by the Lord. It is also a narrative of outsiders.

[17:40] Abraham must leave his inheritance. He is dislodged from his kindred. He is a man without inheritance who must operate by promise. From an initial focus upon Abraham, he moves to the character of Joseph.

Joseph was initially rejected by his brothers, but later he was raised up by God and had influence with the Gentiles. One can also imagine that the character of Joseph would have invited comparisons with the story of Christ.

Joseph was betrayed for silver by his brother Judah. Jesus was betrayed for silver by Judas. Both Jesus and Joseph were cast into a pit. Both of them were associated with two criminals.

Both of them give bread and wine. Both of them were raised up to the height of power. In both cases, their brothers must bow before them. Looking through Stephen's speech, we'll also see a double visitation paradigm, as Luke Timothy Johnson has identified.

Within this double visitation paradigm, the leader comes the first time and he is rejected. And then the second time he comes, he is rejected either to the doom of those who reject him or he is accepted to their salvation.

[18:46] Stephen includes a number of surprising details in the way that he tells the story. He's clearly joining the dots of the narrative in various ways. And some of these might initially give the impression of carelessness.

For instance, he seems to alide the purchase of the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, which was bought by Abraham in chapter 23 of Genesis, with the purchase of the land near Shechem that was bought by Jacob in chapter 33.

Jacob was buried in the cave of Machpelah, but Joseph was buried in Shechem at the end of the book of Joshua. Stephen, however, seems to conflate these two things, apparently confusing them. However, I think that this sort of elision is a thoughtful one. Stephen is very aware of the fact that it is the burial of Joseph that truly leads to the people being brought back to the land.

At the end of the book of Genesis, it's Joseph's bones that must be brought up. In the book of Exodus, it's Joseph's bones that they carry back with them. And then at the very end of the story of the Exodus, at the very end of the book of Joshua, it's Joseph's bones that are buried at the same time as Joshua is buried.

[19:49] While Jacob and others are brought back to the land and buried there prior to the Exodus, the true restoration to the land, the true carrying back to the land, occurs when Joseph is buried, and that occurs in the burial plot in Shechem.

A question to consider, how might this way of telling the story have helped the early Christians in thinking about their relationship with Jerusalem and Palestine?