

Acts 7:17-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 7 verses 17 to 34. But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph.

He dealt shrewdly with our race, and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God's sight, and he was brought up for three months in his father's house, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him, and brought him up as her own son.

And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man, and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.

And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarrelling, and tried to reconcile them, saying, Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other? But the man who was wronging his neighbour thrust him aside, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?

[1 : 18] Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort Moses fled, and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord, I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.

And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, In the middle of Acts chapter 7, Stephen continues to tell the story of Israel as part of his defence before the council. The primary figures in Stephen's retelling of the Old Testament narrative are Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, with references to David and Solomon at the end. However, by far the most important of these characters is Moses.

Moses and the Exodus narrative offer Stephen a paradigm for thinking about the coming and the work of Christ, and are the backbone of his speech. Stephen's telling of the story of the patriarchs was purposefully moving towards and focusing upon the event of their going down into Egypt.

[2 : 45] In the promises of the Exodus given to Abraham, in the selling of Joseph into slavery, and in the carrying back of the bodies of Jacob, and later Joseph to Canaan for burial. As he turns to treat the Exodus, Stephen also casts a look back.

He refers to the time of the promise given to Abraham drawing near, and also to the king's forgetting of Joseph. Pharaoh commanded that the infants of the Hebrews, the baby boys as we see in Exodus chapter 1, be killed.

Moses, however, was spared. Moses is described as beautiful in God's sight. He is well favoured by the Lord. On a number of occasions in scripture, we have descriptions of future leaders that speak of them as noticeably marked out from early on as persons favoured by the Lord.

That there was something unusual about Moses that marked him out from other infants is suggested in Exodus chapter 2 verse 2. We have a similar statement in chapter 11 verse 23 of the book of Hebrews.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

[3 : 57] Moses was exposed next to the Nile in a basket, but was adopted and raised by Pharaoh's daughter, receiving education in all of the wisdom of Egypt, and being distinguished in his words

and deeds.

A number of these details from Stephen's account are achieved by joining the dots of the biblical narrative, by reading between some lines, and perhaps also rest in part on some extra-biblical tellings of the story, much as modern tellings of the nativity's story might involve the donkey, and somewhat more questionably, an innkeeper.

Here one of the details is the suggestion that the infant boys were to be killed by means of exposure, a common form of infanticide in the ancient world, infants being abandoned to die from the harshness of the elements.

As commentators commonly note, another of these details that Stephen likely derives from extra-biblical rabbinic tradition is the notion that Moses' life could be divided into three blocks of 40 years.

Moses appeared before Pharaoh at the age of 80, in Exodus chapter 7 verse 7, and he led Israel for 40 years in the wilderness, before his death at the age of 120.

[5 : 04] 40 is a significant period of time in scripture. It is the length of the reigns of David and Solomon, for instance. It was the age at which Joshua was sent as a spy.

It was the length of time in the wilderness. When he had attained to maturity, Moses intervened to defend a Hebrew who was being beaten by an Egyptian, avenging him by killing the Egyptian. While many have regarded Moses' actions as sinful, Stephen presents his action as one expressive of being commissioned by God as a deliverer of his people. Moses was sent by God to deliver Israel, and they did not recognize him.

He was rejected by his people as a mediator, who tried to get his brothers to be at peace with each other. Stephen's description of the event portrays Moses more as a reconciler and peacemaker than the account of Exodus does, for which Moses is more a man opposing injustice.

Stephen's Moses is a ruler and a judge, as Christ is. Moses leaving Egypt is portrayed more as a result of the rejection of his people than due to the fear of Pharaoh, as it is in Exodus chapter 2, verses 13 to 15.

[6 : 11] When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together, and he said to the man in the wrong, why do you strike your companion? He answered, who made you a prince and a judge over us?

Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? Then Moses was afraid and thought, surely the thing is known. When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian.

Moses had been sent by God to his people, but he was rejected by his own, and he fled to Midian. Like Joseph, who would also be the saviour of his family, Moses was forced away from his brothers, becoming an exile.

His brothers or his own people have not acknowledged him. Stephen mentions some interesting details in his account. For instance, here he notes that Moses had two sons. If we were to read of an exile who had two sons, our minds might first go to Joseph, who fathered Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis chapter 41, verses 50 to 52.

That Moses had two sons is not actually mentioned in the account of Exodus chapter 2. Only Gershom is mentioned there. Eliezer, his second son, is not mentioned until Exodus chapter 18, when Jethro, his father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to meet him in Sinai.

[7 : 28] Perhaps part of Stephen's purpose here is to highlight resemblances between Joseph and Moses. Stephen also telescopes events on occasions, as he does in his description of the purchase of the tomb and the burial of the patriarchs in Shechem.

After 40 years passed, an angel appeared to Moses in a burning bush. The symmetry of the passing of two periods of 40 years parallels the two visitations, the first time when he visited his brothers, the children of Israel, but was rejected, in verse 23 and following, and the second when the angel appears to him in the burning bush, initiating the story of the Exodus.

The commissioning of Moses to lead the Exodus at the burning bush displays the fact of the Lord's calling of him. Even though Israel might earlier have rejected him. A question to consider.

What parallels and contrasts can you recognize between Moses and Joseph?