

THE CHARGES AGAINST ISRAEL

ACTS 07:42–53

Introduction

Stephen was on trial for his life. The charges had been made: he was accused of insurrection, of preaching that the sacred institutions of the nation were to be destroyed, that is, the land, the temple, the law and the customs (v. 11-15).

Stephen defended himself, but not by offering a legal defence. He defended himself by proclaiming the glorious mercy and grace of God throughout Israel's history. He showed how Israel rejected God time and time again; nevertheless, God reached out to deliver the nation after each rejection.

Stephen defended himself by reviewing Israel's history and making the following points. (Note that Stephen's defence was a sermon; he preached the gospel to the court.)

1. The nation and its sacred institutions (the land, the law and the temple) were being destroyed, but not by Christ. They were being destroyed by the people themselves. From the beginning they had always misunderstood and rejected God's plan. (See outline points 2-4.)
2. God loved Israel — He loved Israel so much that in every instance of misunderstanding and rejection, He had worked out a deliverance. (See outline points 2-4.)
3. God's final plan of deliverance was Jesus Christ, His own Son. But as in the past, the present generation had misunderstood and rejected Him. (See v. 52.)

Acts 07:42–53 The Charges Against the People, Israel

The charges against Israel or against the people. The charges are a real eye-opener as to how God saw Israel in the Old Testament.

1. **Charge 1:** the people (Israel) did not worship God, but worshipped false gods (v. 42). They worshipped the "heavenly bodies," that is, the sun, moon and stars (for example, the Zodiac, astrology, cosmic forces. See Deu. 17:3; Kng. 17:16; 21:3; 2 Chr. 33:3; Job. 31:26-28; Jer. 8:2; 19:13.) Again this was a carryover of Egyptian idolatry. Note: the charge was dramatic. When Israel was making offerings and sacrifices to God, they were really worshipping false gods. That is, their hearts and thoughts were upon the world (Egypt) and its idols.

God's response was the same as the people's act. What they had sown, they were to reap.

=> Just as they had turned away from God, He had turned away from them.

=> Just as they had given themselves up to worship false gods, God had given them up to do as they pleased. God had given them up to their own lusts.

Rom 1:21-22 *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.*

Rom 1:24 *Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.*

Rom 1:26-28 *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.*

2. **Charge 2:** the people (Israel) did not carry the tabernacle of God, but of false gods (v. 43). Publicly and outwardly they were carrying the tabernacle of God wherever they went, but again, their hearts and thoughts were upon false gods. (See *Molech* and *Rephan*, Acts 7:43.)

God's response was *to give them up* to their lusts. Just as they had *carried* the tabernacle with their hearts focused upon false gods, so God had *carried* them and given them up to the captivity of a heathen nation who worshipped false gods (see 2 Kng. 17:6).

3. **Charge 3:** the people were inexcusable. Why? Because they were greatly blessed (vv. 44-47). God had blessed them with three particular things.
 - a. God had blessed the people with the tabernacle of His presence and testimony. Note that God had shown Moses a *pattern* (tupon), that is, a figure, a picture of the tabernacle; and Moses had constructed it after the picture God had shown him.
 - b. God had blessed the people with His presence and favour in leaders. Joshua. David, and Solomon are mentioned. All three had the favour and blessings of God upon their lives. Therefore, the people were greatly blessed through these leaders.

Mat 21:43 *“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”*

- c. God had blessed the people with the temple. David had desired to build the temple, a dwelling place for God, but it was Solomon whom God appointed to construct it. (See 1 Kings, chapters 6-8.) When the Jews returned from captivity to Jerusalem, Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple (516 B.C.). Herod the Great rebuilt the temple and made it one of the wonders of the world around 20 B.C. It was this temple in which the Jews gloried.

The point is this: by being so blessed, the people (Israel) were inexcusable in their rejection of God. They had every opportunity available, yet they still chose the world instead of God.

4. **Charge 4:** the people did not understand the temple. God is not limited to only one particular place (vv. 48-50. See Isa. 66:1-2.) Now note a significant point: Solomon, the builder of the great temple, had proclaimed this truth.

1 Kng 8:27 “*But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*” (see 2 Chr. 6:18)

What Solomon said was true: God never intended for men to think that His presence was limited to the temple nor to any of the houses made by man. Stephen’s point struck home, for Jesus had taught that men must worship God in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24). Note also that Jesus had spoken these words to a Samaritan. Anyone of any race or land could worship God just so they approached Him in Spirit and truth. A particular land or temple was not necessary.

John 4:24 “*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*”

5. **Charge 5:** the people of the present generation were resisting the Holy Spirit (v. 51). Stephen turned to the present generation and charged them with the *very same* resistance and rejection as their forefathers. Note the words, “*You always resist.*” He was identifying them with their fathers. He called them...

- *stiff-necked* (sklerotracheloi): hard necked, obstinate, stubborn.
- people with *uncircumcised hearts* (aperitmetoi kardiais): heathens, pagans, lost, aliens, idolaters, false worshippers, ungodly.
- resisters: persons who *resist* God; who deliberately oppose or rush against God; who actively struggle and fight against God.

Acts 7:51 “*You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!*”

Psa 32:9-10 *Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.*

Isa 46:12-13 *Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from righteousness. I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel.*

Jer 32:33 *They turned their backs to me and not their faces; though I taught them again and again, they would not listen or respond to discipline.*

Mal 2:2 “*If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,*” says the Lord Almighty, “*I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honour me.*”

6. **Charge 6:** the people persecuted *all* the prophets — the very servants who predicted the coming (offered the hope) of the Righteous One (the Messiah) (v. 52. See Acts 3:14; 22:14; Isa. 11:4-5; 53:11.) Jesus Christ was the One to whom all the prophets looked, the One who was to secure perfect righteousness for man. He was the One who was to bring righteousness to man. Yet the people rejected, persecuted and killed the prophets who proclaimed the glorious message of His coming.

Mat 23:29-31 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.”

Luke 11:47 “Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them.”

7. **Charge 7:** the people, the present generation, fulfilled the prophecies. The present generation betrayed and murdered the Righteous One (v. 52. See v. 38). (See outline and note, Acts 3:13-15.)

Heb 10:28-31 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

8. **Charge 8:** the people, the present generation, have not kept the law (v. 53). The law had been given to them *through* angels. Yet, they had not obeyed it. They boasted in the law, but violated it just as much as their forefathers (see vv. 38-43, 52: Rom. 2:23).

Mark 7:9 And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!”

Eph 5:6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

1 Sam. 12:15 “But if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors.”

Heb 2:2-3 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ■

ACTS 07: 43 MOLECH

You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Acts 07:43

This was the sun god to whom children were often sacrificed. The idol had the head of an ox and arms that stretched out. There was a hollow place underneath the arms where a fire was built. The fire consumed the sacrifices lying in the outstretched arms above. Molech was the god of the Amorites. (See Lev. 18:21; 20:2; 1 Kng. 11:7; 2 Kng. 23:10; Jer. 32:35.) □

ACTS 07:43 REPHAN

This was a god of the Egyptians, Arabs and Phoenicians. It is thought to have been the worship of the planet Saturn. □