

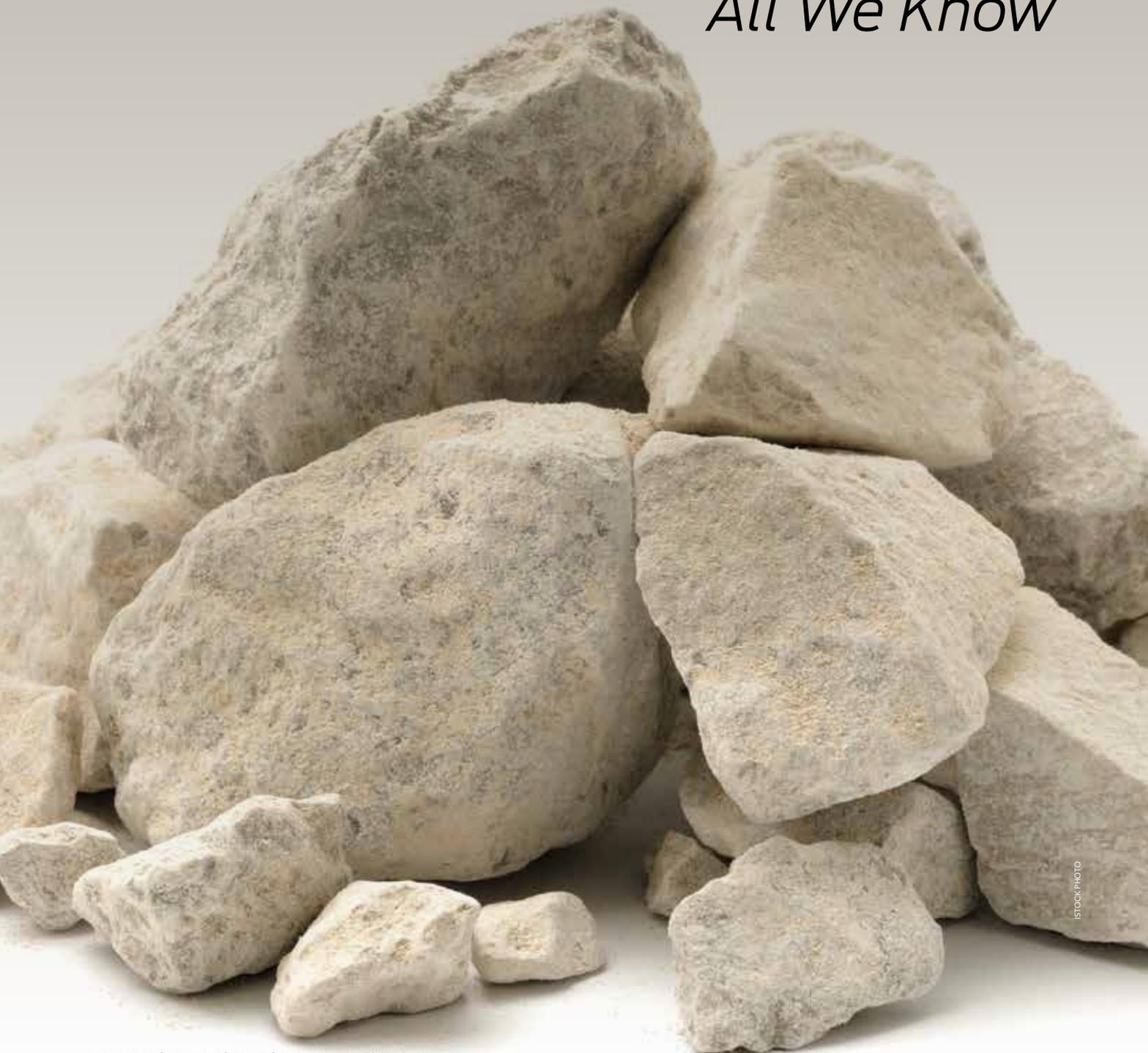


TGP: Acts 6:8-15; 7:44-60

By  
Steve W.  
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# STEPHEN

*All We Know*



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CROWN: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (7/14/19)

**S**CRIPTURE SPOTLIGHTS  
 Stephen in Acts 6–7. Stephen appears initially as part of the solution to a problem in the early church in Jerusalem. The problem regarded fairness in ministering effectively to widows in the church, particularly those who were “Grecians” (KJV) or “Hellenists” (ESV, Acts 6:1). At this point the church had not yet accepted Gentile Greeks into the body. The acceptance began in Acts 10 with the conversion of Cornelius. These Greek-speaking widows, then, were “Hellenistic Jews” (CSB) who had lived in the Gentile world as a result of the Jews being scattered—an occurrence known as “the Diaspora.” Widows in that day could not own property and had no support systems such as Social Security or life insurance. Many did not hold paying jobs. Just as Naomi, who without any means of support in the Gentile world, returned to her hometown after losing her husband and sons (Ruth 1:1–22), these widows returned to Jerusalem hoping for support from their family or fellow believers. The synagogues followed the Old Testament instruction to care

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for widows (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 14:29; 24:19–21; 26:12–13; Isa. 1:17,23). The early Christian church likewise provided them food and financial assistance (Acts 6:1–2; 1 Tim. 5:3–10). Perhaps the language barrier, though, heightened the problem between the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews and the local Aramaic-speaking Jews. At any rate, these Hellenistic Jewish widows received inadequate support.<sup>1</sup>

The apostles asked the congregation to set aside seven men who could address the Hellenistic Jewish widows’ need (Acts 6:1–5). All seven of the men, including Stephen, had Greek names (v. 5), indicating they were also Greek speakers who had

**Top: Scene showing the stoning of Stephen is on one of the walls of the chapel at Beit Jamal, outside of Jerusalem. The monastery at Beit Jamal commemorates the spot where, according to tradition, both Gamliel**

**and Stephen were buried.**

**Above: Diadem (crown) with an embossed decoration; from Santa Eufemia, Italy, and dated about 300 BC. The Greek name *Stephanos* translates “crown.”**

most likely lived in the Gentile world. Stephen’s name (Greek, *Stephanos*) means “crown,”<sup>2</sup> the same word that describes the crown faithful believers receive (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4). Stephen’s name appearing first in the list probably indicates he led the group.

Although the seven were not labeled “deacons” as a noun in Acts 6, verse 2 uses the verb form of the word when describing the role of these the men to “serve tables” (ESV). These men were apparently precursors to those the New Testament later called “deacons” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). The apostles listed three qualifications for these men—they were to be men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit, and wise (Acts 6:3).

Acts 6 describes Stephen as being “full” of the Spirit and of wisdom (v. 3), and full of faith (v. 5), grace (v. 8), and power (v. 8). Luke’s threefold repetition that Stephen was filled with the Spirit (vv. 3,5; 7:55) underscores that he exemplified a life consistently permeated with the Holy Spirit. Spiritual wisdom, faith, grace, and power flow from the fullness of the Spirit. In fact, Scripture specifically credits Stephen’s wisdom to the work of the Spirit (6:10). Stephen’s face is described as glowing like that of an angel, similar to Jesus’s face shining at His transfiguration (v. 15; see Matt. 17:2).

The apostles “laid their hands on” these seven men (Acts 6:6, ESV), language the New Testament uses to describe ordaining or setting apart persons for God’s special service (13:1-3; 1 Tim. 4:14). While these men’s initial assignment was to minister to widows in the church, Acts states Stephen and Philip also preached, taught, and performed miracles (6:8-10; 8:6-8,26-40).

Stephen spoke to groups of fellow Greek-speaking Jews in synagogues. One was the “Freedmen’s Synagogue” (6:9), a designation that indicated the Jews who attended there had been enslaved in the Greek world and had then been given or earned their freedom. Acts mentions several other national groups of Diaspora Jews—Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians, and Asians (v. 9). These may have been part of the Freedmen’s Synagogue, or possibly up to five separate synagogues existed, one for each group. Since Saul, who appears in Scripture first during the stoning of Stephen, hailed from Tarsus in Cilicia (22:3), he possibly heard Stephen speak first in a synagogue of Cilicians.

Although all of these groups of Hellenistic Jews argued with Stephen’s teaching, the Freedmen’s Synagogue actually brought accusations against

**Below: King Herod’s hippodrome at Caesarea Maritima overlooks the Mediterranean and was one of Herod the Great’s most famous building projects. According to Acts 10, Simon Peter came to the home of Cornelius at Caesarea and shared the gospel with him. Upon entering Cornelius’s home, Simon Peter explained that he was there—in spite of the Jewish law**

**that prohibited Jews from associating with Gentiles (v. 28). As Peter proclaimed the gospel, the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, much to the astonishment of the Jews who were there.**

**Right: Roman soldiers, members of the imperial guard in full armor. Behind is the raised standard, which depicts an eagle with thunderbolts in its claws.**

**Right: This scene that decorated the tomb/temple of Arbinas at Xanthos in Lycia depicts young men rushing forward with food and drink for a feast. The original structure dates to the 4th cent. BC. Stephen was selected as one of those who were to serve the Hellenistic Jews.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JERRY VARDAMAN COLLECTION (2/16/8)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/47/49)





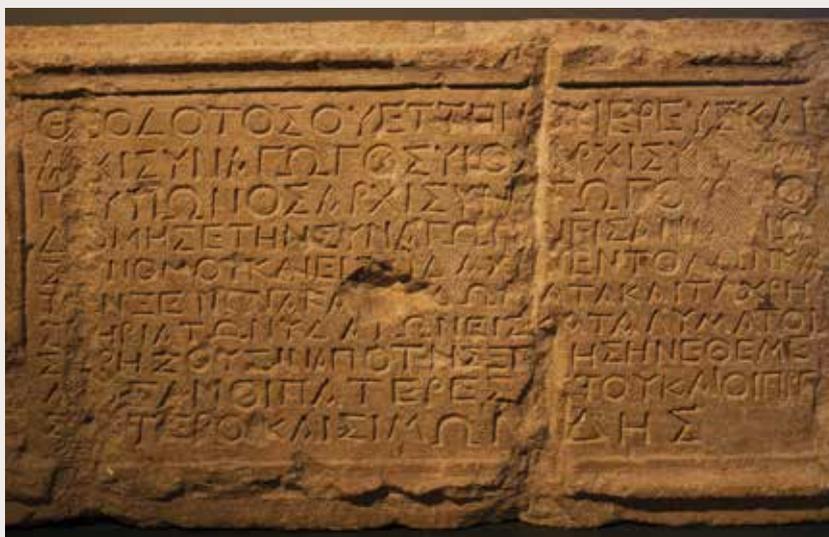
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/4/43)

him. Specifically, they accused Stephen of blasphemy because he reportedly spoke against the Jerusalem Temple and the Law of Moses (6:11,13).

Stephen responded to these charges, giving the longest speech recorded in the Book of Acts (7:2-53). He did not specifically defend himself against the charges, but he did address the concerns the Freedmen's Synagogue raised. Stephen revealed a profound knowledge of and appreciation for the Old Testament throughout his speech. His speech traced key events in Hebrew history from the lives of Abraham (vv. 2-8), Isaac and Jacob (v. 8), Joseph (vv. 9-19), Moses and Aaron (vv. 20-34,40), and David and Solomon (vv. 45-47). In all, Stephen's speech alluded to twenty-two different verses from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Amos, reflecting an excellent comprehension of the Old Testament. Although Scripture does not confirm this assertion, church tradition claims Stephen was a close associate of Gamaliel, the same rabbi who trained Saul (22:3). According to tradition, even though Gamaliel disagreed with Stephen's claims, he honored him by providing a burial place for Stephen after his martyrdom.

Stephen addressed the charge of discounting the Old Testament Law by turning the tables on his accusers. He cited Scripture as evidence that the

## THE THEODOTOS SYNAGOGUE INSCRIPTION



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ JERUSALEM (139-B-2031)

**T**HIS INSCRIPTION IS the only remnant of the many synagogues in Jerusalem built prior to the AD 70 destruction of Herod's Temple:

*Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and synagogue leader, son of a synagogue leader, grandson of a synagogue leader, built this synagogue for the reading of the law (Torah) and the teaching of the commandments, and the hostel, and the rooms, and the water installations for lodging for those needing them from abroad, which his fathers, the elders and Simonides founded.*

The French excavator Raimond Weill discovered the inscription in 1913 at Mount Ophel in Jerusalem's city of David. The inscription measures about 30 x 16 inches.

Some biblical scholars think Theodotus's family name came from the Roman family of Vettieni, which would indicate this was a family of Jewish freedmen from Italy. The inscription may refer, therefore, to the Freedmen's Synagogue of Acts 6:9. Members of this synagogue expressed strong opposition to the preaching of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Jewish people had consistently rejected the Law (7:35-43), citing Moses' repeated charge that the Hebrews were a "stiff-necked people" (v. 51; see Ex. 32:9; 33:3,5; Deut. 9:6,13; 10:16; 31:27). Even when God was giving the Law to Moses, the Hebrew people were worshipping a golden calf (Acts 7:40-41). Israel's rejection of the Law continued throughout their history (vv. 42-43,53; see Ex. 33:3; Lev. 26:41; Jer. 6:10). Further, the Jews had resisted the Holy Spirit by rejecting the promised

Messiah, Jesus (Acts 7:51-52).

Regarding the charge that Stephen disregarded the value of the Temple, the Jews had made a similar allegation against Jesus (Mark 14:57-58). Stephen again turned to Scripture to refute their accusations. God instructed Israel to build a tabernacle during the exodus, but David and Solomon initiated building the Temple. Even Solomon recognized that a building could not contain God (1 Kings 8:27). Stephen cited Isaiah 66:1-2 as evidence



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JUSTIN VENEMAN (35/68/78)

**Left: The Church of St. Stephen, north of the Kidron Valley, commemorates the traditional site of the stoning of Stephen.**

**Above: Near the Church of St. Stephen is St. Stephen's Gate so named because Stephen was supposedly stoned in this area.**

that God does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands (Acts 7:48-50). Furthermore, surveying Hebrew history, Stephen gave examples of God not being limited to a holy place in Jerusalem. Abraham experienced God's call in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2; see Gen. 11:31), Joseph experienced the intervention of God in Egypt (Acts 7:9-10), the Lord rescued the Hebrews from Egypt (vv. 30-36), and Moses experienced his call from God in the Sinai wilderness (vv. 30-34) and received God's Law at Mount Sinai (v. 38). "Holy ground" was not limited to the Jerusalem Temple (v. 33).

Stephen's message enraged both the Sanhedrin and the Jews of the Freedmen's Synagogue, but the final straw came when he described seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God (vv. 55-56). For the Jews, this claim confirmed their allegation of blasphemy, since Stephen was claiming Jesus was equal with God (6:11-15; 7:57-58). The Jewish Law prescribed stoning as punishment for blasphemy (Lev. 24:14,16;

Mark 14:64; John 19:7), giving the Jews grounds to stone Stephen.

The Jewish Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 6:1-4 described the procedure for stoning.<sup>3</sup> First, at least two witnesses had to confirm the blasphemy; the freedmen did so before the court of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Acts 6:8-16; see Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt. 18:16). The accused blasphemer was then taken outside the city for execution (Lev. 24:14; Acts 7:58). After giving the victim an opportunity to confess his sin, his clothes were stripped off and he was thrown down from a height of at least a dozen feet. Then the first witness threw a heavy stone on him, followed by the second witness. If the victim was still alive, the entire group could join in the stoning (Deut. 17:7). The young Saul held their robes so their arms would be free to throw the stones with lethal force (Acts 7:58).

Stephen's execution had remarkable similarities to Jesus' crucifixion. False witnesses accused both men of blasphemy before the Sanhedrin

(Mark 14:57-58; 14:55-64; Acts 6:11,13-14), the threat of mob violence colored their trials (Matt. 27:22-25; John 19:6-16; Acts 6:12; 7:1,54-59), both men were sentenced to execution outside the city (John 19:17; Acts 7:58), and both prayed for their executioners' forgiveness (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). Further, each prayed that God would receive his spirit (Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59).

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1. John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 179-80.

2. Clinton E. Arnold, "Acts" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 264.

3. *Ibid.*, 276.

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