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ST. STEPHEN'S SPEECH (ACTS VII.)

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IT is not too much to say that many devout Bible-readers are conscious of a feeling of disappointment in reading the speech of the first Martyr. He was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost," "full of grace and power," one "who wrought wonders and signs," one "whose wisdom and spirit" his opponents could not withstand. At the opening of his speech all the Sanhedrin "saw his face as it had been the face of an angel"; at the conclusion of it, St. Stephen "being full of the Holy Ghost gazed up into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." The speech is given at great length. It occupies about one-twentieth of the Acts of the Apostles. It was undoubtedly one of those "goads" in the conscience of St. Paul against which he strove in vain. The opportunity was great. The Gospel was spreading in Jerusalem and already a great company of the priests was obedient to the faith. Taking all these points into account our anticipations lead us to look for an exceptionally powerful demonstration of the Messiahship of Jesus, or of the relation of the Mosaic law to the Kingdom of the Heavens, or a revelation such as is contained in the Apocalypse. But instead of these we have, at first sight, no more than an outline of Jewish history which, when the building of Solomon's temple is reached, abruptly turns into a denunciation of Jewish obstinacy and hardness of heart, and of the martyrdom of the prophets at Jewish hands. The only mention of Jesus is that He, "the just one," whose coming the prophets foretold, was one more of the victims of their unbelief. Both for what it makes its main theme, and what it omits, this speech is not that which the occasion and the known powers of the speaker would have led us to expect. It is such a fierce and apparently harsh invective against the whole people that we are not surprised to learn that it changed the attitude of the Jewish authorities from comparative toleration to active persecution.

On the other hand, these characteristics contribute to a firm conviction that we have an actual shorthand record of what St. Stephen said. No doubt, ancient historians took great liberty in the matter of speeches, using them as opportunities for expressing their own opinions on the situation that they were describing. That St. Luke composed some such speech for St. Stephen is really unthinkable. For the main purpose of the Acts is conciliatory. While it records the progress of the Gospel throughout the Roman world, it treats with the utmost respect the Church in Jerusalem, and shows the Apostle of the Gentiles repudiating the charge that he taught Jewish Christians to despise the law of Moses. Even when he comes to Rome as a prisoner, St. Paul has nothing whereof

to accuse his nation. He always preaches the Gospel to the Jew first. But St. Stephen has justly been described as "revolutionary." No historian working on St. Luke's lines would have composed this speech. This circumstance alone, and apart from all questions of inspiration, gives us the fullest confidence in its genuineness. It is hoped that other indications contained in this paper will greatly increase this confidence, and at the same time show that the speech exactly fits the moment of its delivery, with a preciseness which no one writing some twenty years later could have recaptured.

It will be useful first to analyse the speech. It falls into three natural divisions. The first of them (verses 12–17) recapitulates the story of Israel from Abraham to the birth of Moses. The object of this portion is to stress the slightness of the early connection of Israel with Canaan. The call of Abraham comes to him in Mesopotamia—not in Charran. Though Abraham settles in Canaan, his only landed property is in a burial place which St. Stephen fixes in Sichem, not in Hebron. For the greater part of the period Israel is a settler in Egypt. The note of this section is struck by the first words "the God of glory." These take us to the 29th Psalm in which the poet watches the course of God in the thunderstorm, sweeping over the far-off Mediterranean, crashing in fury on Lebanon, and pursuing its way into the wilderness of the East. "The Lord sat as King at the Flood, yea, the Lord sitteth as King for ever. The Lord will give strength unto His people; the Lord will give His people the blessing of peace." To appreciate fully this reference to the thunderstorm it is necessary to see a Jewish mob lashed into fury, and to watch the lightning flashing from their eyes, and to hear the thunderous roar of their voices. Such was the storm that raged round Stephen, while his face was as the face of an angel. "The God of glory" was present to him as to the Psalmist, and the remembrance of His world-wide dominion gave him confidence to say that never from the very earliest days had the presence of God been confined to Canaan.

The second division (verses 17–42), by far the longest part of the speech, contains the story of the preparation of Moses for his work in the court of Pharaoh, of his residence in Midian, of the appearance of God to him in the desert of Sinai, of his wondrous works in Egypt, and of the delivery of the law to him in Sinai. It concludes with an emphatic declamation on the person of the leader whom Israel rejected (verse 35, etc.). "This Moses whom they rejected . . ." "This is the Moses who said to the children of Israel . . ." "This Moses was he who was in the church in the wilderness . . ." all of which lead up to the contemptuous: "As for this Moses who brought us up." In this section we have a reply to the charge, "Jesus will change the laws which Moses delivered to us. . . ." But what a reply! "What do you care for Moses? The story of Moses is the story of his constant rejection by your fathers. From the day he first made himself known to them to the end of their wanderings in the wilderness, your fathers persistently rejected his leadership and authority. St. Stephen

mentions the "prophet like Moses who was to be raised up," but he does not, as we should have expected, say, "this prophet is Jesus." St. Stephen is in the full course of his denunciation and does not turn aside from it. "You have no right to bring up the name of Moses, for you never obeyed him."

It is obvious that this division might have contained some direct reference to the "Law" and its relation to the Gospel. St. Stephen barely alludes to it, saying that Moses "receiveth living oracles to give to you"—and in the last words of his speech adds "ye who received the law and the dispensation of angels and observed it not." It has been suggested that he had in his mind the tradition that the first law, the tables of which Moses broke into fragments, was superior to the second, and would, if kept, have turned the people into angels. In other words that it was, to use St. Paul's phrase (Gal. iii. 20), "a law that could have given life," Stephen's "living oracles." These are mere conjectures. The outstanding fact is that Stephen passed quite hurriedly over the law, and made no answer to the charge that he taught of its approaching abolition. On the other hand, by the designation "living oracles," he surely pointed to its Divine and abiding character, if it is admitted that he referred to it at all.

The third division (verses 42–end) presents at once the chief perplexity and the chief feature of interest. After reciting Aaron's making of the golden calf, Stephen quotes the well-known words of Amos: "Did ye bring sacrifices and offerings to me, those forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? Nay, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of your god Remphan, the images which ye made for to worship them: and I will remove you beyond Babylon." We note in passing that St. Stephen substitutes Babylon for Damascus, and so turns the prophecy against the Ten Tribes into a prophecy against the whole nation. On this point more hereafter. St. Stephen goes on to say that the tabernacle, "the tent of witness," was carried into Canaan, and remained with them till the days of David, who desired to build a tabernacle or tent, but Solomon built a *house*, though the God, whose throne is Heaven and earth His footstool, dwells not in hand-made houses. Then follows the fierce invective: "Ye stubborn-necked and uncircumcised in heart, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost. Which of the prophets did your fathers not slay—prophets who foretold the coming of the Just One whose betrayers and murderers ye became? Ye who received the law by dispensation of angels and observed it not."

As this position is the climax of Stephen's defence it requires the closest examination. These points especially arrest our attention: (1) the mention of the Tabernacle, (2) the allusion to Solomon's temple as the culmination of the Jewish sin, (3) the consequent bitter denunciation of his audience as murderers. No satisfactory account has yet been given of this daring re-interpretation of Bible history. It has been suggested that Stephen as a Hellenist would have a wider outlook than native Jews, that he may have

imbibed the Alexandrine love of insisting on the ideal, the heavenly original, as greater than the actual, and that he was but following the prophets in denouncing the idea that God lives in Temples. These suggestions do not carry us far enough. They do not explain why Stephen, following, up to the third division, the traditional treatment of Jewish history so closely that the two first parts of his speech are almost a précis of the LXX Pentateuch, in the words of the LXX itself, here suddenly revives the importance of the Tabernacle which so mysteriously fades out of the Old Testament, and treats the building of the Temple as a sin, a treatment which our Lord never adopted, and makes that sin the high-water mark of Jewish apostasy, the natural precursor of the slaying of the prophets. What is wanted is some outlook on Jewish history which flatly condemned the original building and the rebuilding of the Temple. This outlook will not be found in Alexandrine exegesis. The suggestion which follows resulted from reading Mr. Gaster's Schweich Lectures on the Samaritans. It seems to be at least worthy of consideration.

Mr. Gaster disputes the commonly accepted view that the Samaritans were a half-heathen race. The passage on which this idea is based refers, he contends, to the garrisons planted in Samaria by the Assyrians. He points out that the prophets before, and during, the Captivity constantly predicted the reunion of Israel and Judah, that a large Israelite population was left in the land, the true Samaritans, and that Ezekiel's Temple, clearly situate in the centre of the Holy Land, had it ever been erected must in fact have stood at Shechem. He traces also the consistent whole-hearted loyalty of the Samaritans to the Pentateuch, even to the present day. Now there is no doubt that the Samaritans regarded the building of Solomon's Temple as the *culminating act* of Jewish apostasy. "This is not the place" says Mr. Gaster (p. 11) "to discuss the reasons which prompted David to select Jerusalem as the religious as well as the political centre. The Samaritans say he conceived the idea of transferring, as it were, the holiness of Mount Gerizim to the Sanctuary on Mount Moriah. But whatever his motive may have been, it was deeply resented by the Samaritans, who saw in it a definite break and *a defiance of all God's ordinances.*" Here, at all events, we get what we were searching for, the building of Solomon's Temple regarded as the culmination of Jewish sin.

We further read (p. 9), "At that time when Uzzi was the" (Samaritan) "High Priest, according to the Samaritan chronology 260 years after the entry of the children of Israel into the Holy Land, the Tabernacle containing the Ark with the Holy of Holies suddenly disappeared. Legend tells us that it was taken by Uzzi and placed in a cave in Mount Gerizim, after which the cave suddenly closed. This was declared to be the sign of God's displeasure at the rebellious action of Eli." (Eli represented the Ithamar branch of the sons of Aaron and transferred the Tabernacle from Samaritan Gerizim to Judaic Shiloh; the Samaritan High Priests claim descent from Phinehas, Aaron's other son.) Stephen evidently does not

accept this tradition, for he speaks of the Tabernacle as continuing to the time of David. This is, at all events, the most natural construction of his words. We note, however, the unexpected mention of the Tabernacle, and the conviction that its replacement by the Temple in spite of David's favour with the God of Jacob was displeasing to God.

There remains, however, the problem of connecting Stephen with the Samaritans. It may well be asked whether there is any ground for supposing that Stephen ever had thought of them, or paid the slightest attention to them. Now our Lord had charged His disciples to be His " witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth " (Acts i. 8). It is only natural that the Hellenists should have pressed on the Jerusalem Church the necessity of prompt obedience to this command and should have found fault with delay in obeying it. It is equally certain that to the pure Jews evangelization of the Samaritans would be more distasteful than evangelization of the heathen. There must have been believers in our Lord in Samaria, but there is no mention of them in the early pages of the Acts. Jerusalem seems to be the sole home of the Church. Even Galilee is not named. That Stephen, " full of the Holy Ghost," should have pressed a mission to Samaria, is not unlikely. Then came a Samaritan outbreak, the appearance of a Samaritan Messiah, who attracted multitudes of followers, and promised to find for them in Mount Gerizim the golden vessels which disappeared with the Tabernacle in the days of Uzzi. The departure of Pilate with his troops to suppress this Messiah actually gave the opportunity for the *emeute* which led to the martyrdom of Stephen. Had Pilate been in Jerusalem Stephen could not have been stoned to death. In fact the bazaars and synagogues of Jerusalem must have been buzzing with talk about the Samaritans, with discussion of their doctrines, with questions of the reunion of the Twelve Tribes as a necessary preliminary to the return of the Messiah, with fierce debates on the rival claims of Moriah and Gerizim. These contentions may well have inclined Stephen to see in the Temple the principal obstacle to the conversion of the world, and may have led, not to sympathy with the Samaritan claims, but to sympathy with their belief that the Temple at Jerusalem must disappear before the favour of God could be restored to the world. It is certainly significant that the first-fruit and immediate consequence of Stephen's martyrdom was the preaching of Christ by his brother-deacon Philip in Samaria.

This suggestion goes some way towards explaining the otherwise inexplicable mention of Sichem as the burial-place of the Patriarchs. Joseph was buried there (not Jacob, as Stephen says), and on this point, the burial-place of a Patriarch in Sichem, Stephen was insisting. It may be that we have here some scribal error, or some confusion of his notes. In any case Israel had no possession in Canaan before the conquest except two burial-places, one of which was *Sichem*. The same tendency appears in the substitution of Babylon for Damascus in the prophecy quoted from Amos (verse

43). Stephen there deliberately turns a prophecy of a Judah prophet against the Ten Tribes into a prophecy against the Two. Nor is it quite without significance that he breaks off his *resumé* of history at the point where the sin of the Northern Kingdom comes in. Thus the sins of Jeroboam and of the house of Omri form no part of Stephen's indictment. He turns aside from these to fix the guilt of murdering the prophets on the Jewish race as represented by the remnants of the Two Tribes, whose descendants were thirsting for his blood. No native of Judea could have treated Jewish history as Stephen treated it. There is nothing really parallel to it in the rest of the Bible, except possibly the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the Tabernacle and Melchizedek priesthood obliterate the Temple and the House of Aaron. But that Epistle is in full sympathy with the Hebrews, and has none of the fierce antagonism of the first Martyr.

If there is any solid foundation for the view here advanced the genuineness of the speech seems to be beyond question. No historian writing some twenty years after the event could have reconstructed a speech so unique, so singularly appropriate to the moment of its delivery. We have, if this view is correct, one more proof of the exactness of St. Luke as an historian.

But we have much more. We have a vivid portrait of the combination of intense religious earnestness with flagrant disobedience to the will of God. We see a whole nation inspired with furious zeal for its faith and yet for centuries in the sight of God "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart." It is the fashion today, especially among Anglo-Catholics, to insist that the Church is the direct heir of Israel, and by the Church they mean not the whole company of the faithful known only to God, but the external organization, which does indeed in its lust for worldly gain and power, in its exclusiveness, and even in its bloody persecutions, strongly resemble the nation whom Stephen denounced. Stephen's speech stands for all time as a warning to all Churches that their own history may prove to be the most serious accusation that can be brought against them at the tribunal of God, and that their very zeal for the faith may be the greatest of their sins. The most wonderful, the most searching of all epitomes of St. Stephen's speech is found in the question, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" But the speech is directly appropriate to our present position, and to the controversy over Reservation of the Sacrament, since the climax of the Martyr's indictment is, that the localizing of God in hand-made houses is the death of spiritual religion. This localizing of God is nothing short of apostasy.