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Some Difficulties in the Speech of Stephen, Acts 7.

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The interpretation of the magnificent speech — Bengel calls it *documentum Spiritus pretiosum* — delivered by Stephen before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem encounters a number of difficulties which at first sight appear somewhat formidable and, accordingly, have been used by critics of the negative school to impugn the inerrancy and credibility of the sacred narrative. To show that these difficulties are by no means insuperable, and that the poison fangs of criticism are not so dreadful as their possessors would make them out to be, is the purpose of this discussion.

1. Stephen's speech was made to disprove the accusation that he had been speaking blasphemous words against the Temple, etc.; chap. 6, 13f. To a superficial reader much of what Stephen says will seem to be beside the mark, having apparently no bearing at all on the point at issue. On this account there have been some who have declared the speech to be fictitious, an invention of St. Luke. But a careful study will reveal the pertinence of all of Stephen's statements. His account of the history of Israel, terminating so abruptly with the reference to the building of the Temple by Solomon, was intended to show that God's revelation in the golden period of Israel's past was not given in the Temple, this structure having not yet been erected, but here and there, wherever the fathers were sojourning, and that hence the teaching of Stephen, when he pointed to the abrogation of the Temple-worship, was not blasphemous, as true religion was by no means dependent on the existence of the Temple and on residing in the land of Canaan. Thus the speech was an effective rebuttal of the charge of blasphemy raised against him.

2. Stephen begins his speech with stating that God appeared to Abram when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran

(Haran). Comparing this with the account of Genesis, we find that in the latter book the appearance of God to Abram is said to have taken place in Haran (Gen. 12, 1). The translation of the Authorized Version in Gen. 12, 1: "Now the Lord had said unto Abram," (the pluperfect tense), which implies that God had communed with Abram prior to his stay in Haran, is not tenable. Still there is no real difficulty here. God spoke to Abram in Haran, says the Genesis account; God spoke to Abram in Ur, says Stephen. These are not contradictory, but supplementary statements. The silence of Genesis regarding God's revealing His will to Abram in Ur cannot in fairness be construed as a denial of such a revelation. It is interesting to note that even Genesis contains a hint of God's dealings with Abram in Ur, for it reports, Gen. 15, 7, that God said to Abram: "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees to give thee this land to inherit it."

3. A real difficulty crosses our path when Stephen says, v. 4 of our chapter: "And from thence, when his [Abram's] father was dead, he removed him unto this land wherein ye now dwell." The following words of Genesis have to be compared: Gen. 11, 26: "And Terah lived seventy years and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran"; Gen. 11, 32: "And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran"; Gen. 12, 4: "And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed out of Haran." From these data it seems to follow that Terah was still living at the time when Abram migrated from Haran to Canaan, his age being seventy plus seventy-five, that is, one hundred and forty-five years. Apparently he died sixty years after Abram had left Haran, namely, when the latter was one hundred and thirty-five years old. Here, then, there appears to exist a serious discrepancy between the statements of Genesis and that of Stephen. However, it will be observed that this view presupposes that Abram was the first-born son of Terah, while the sacred text does not designate him as such. He is mentioned first among the sons of Terah, it is true, but that may be due solely to his being the most prominent one of them. If we assume that Abram was the youngest son of Terah, and that he was born when Terah was one hundred and thirty years old, then the latter was two hundred and five years of age when Abram reached the age of seventy-five, and his death may well be dated before Abram's departure from Haran.

Several other solutions of this difficulty have been proposed which are worth considering. It has been suggested that Stephen,

when saying that Abram left Haran after the death of his father, is speaking of the *spiritual* death of Terah, alluding to Terah's lapse into idolatrous ways (cf. Josh. 24, 2). Some exegetes hold that the reading of the Massoretic text, Gen. 11, 32, giving the age of Terah at the time of his death as two hundred and five years, is wrong and must be exchanged for the reading of the Samaritan text, which has one hundred and forty-five years. Bengel and others take the view that Abram, while living in the land of Canaan before the death of his father, cannot be said to have fully left the paternal home and to have taken up a permanent abode in a foreign land until after his father had died. Thus there are various possible ways of overcoming the difficulty that interposes itself here, and if our knowledge of all the details that are involved were not so limited, we should without a doubt find the charge positively ridiculous that there is a discrepancy here.

4. A well-known difficulty arises in connection with v. 14, where Stephen states that the family of Jacob, on coming to Egypt, numbered seventy-five souls, while Gen. 46, 27 speaks of seventy. The discrepancy vanishes when we compare the Septuagint text of the latter passage. Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, and presumably he had learned the Holy Scriptures in the Greek version, the Septuagint. In the Septuagint the number of souls belonging to the family of Jacob is computed as seventy-five. Which text is right, that of the Hebrew Bible or that of the Septuagint? They are both right. The figure 70 in the Hebrew text, which is followed in our English Bible, is arrived at by including Joseph, his two sons, and Jacob himself. The figure 75 in the Septuagint version is due to the inclusion of some further descendants of Joseph. In Gen. 46, 20 the Hebrew text reads: "And unto Joseph, in the land of Egypt, were born Manasseh and Ephraim, which Asenath, the daughter of Potipherah, priest of On, bare unto him." The Septuagint has these same words and then makes the following addition: "Manasseh had sons, whom his Syrian concubine bare him, namely, Machir. Machir begat Galaad. The sons of Ephraim, the brother of Manasseh, were Sutalaam and Taam. The son of Sutalaam was Edom." Thus three grandsons and two great-grandsons of Joseph are mentioned in the Septuagint account, who are not named in the Hebrew text, and in the summary of the Septuagint they are counted with the others. It may seem strange that these descendants of Joseph, some of whom had not yet been born at the time of Jacob's removal to Egypt, are enumerated in this list. Perhaps the explanation is that Joseph lived to see these

descendants, and that they became prominent afterwards as the heads of families. Cf. Gen. 50, 23. But whatever the reasons may have been for drawing up the list in the form in which it has been handed down, it clearly is not justifiable to speak of a discrepancy between Genesis and Acts at this point.

5. In verses 15 and 16 we are confronted with a problem which at first sight is extremely vexing. Stephen says: "So Jacob went down into Egypt and died, he and our fathers, and were carried over into Sychem and laid in the sepulcher that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Emmor, the father of Sychem." The Genesis account says that Abraham bought a field and cave from Ephron, the Hittite (Gen. 23), and that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried in that cave. It relates, furthermore, that Jacob bought a parcel of field at the hands of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of money. Gen. 33, 19. The differences between the narrative of Genesis and that of Stephen are at once apparent. The impression is made that Stephen has mixed the purchases of Abraham and Jacob and thus become involved in several errors. A number of solutions have been proposed. Perhaps the one given in Smith's *Bible Dictionary* will be found most satisfactory. Abraham, so the writer of the respective article points out, came to Sichem immediately after he had emigrated from Haran, and built an altar there. Gen. 12, 6. 7. Considering the scrupulousness of Abraham, it is quite likely that he bought the land on which he built the altar. The Canaanite who made the sale may have been the son of a certain Hamor. When Jacob settled at Sichem, 185 years had elapsed since Abraham's purchase, and the field in question may well have been reoccupied by descendants of Hamor, one of whom bore the name of his ancestor. From him Jacob may have bought anew the field which Abraham had acquired. If we take this view, which has strong probability on its side, only one difficulty remains, namely, the account in the speech of Stephen of the burial of Jacob and the patriarchs in the field at Sychem. But it will be noticed that the words of Stephen do not necessarily imply that Jacob was buried at Sychem. The construction of the sentence is such that burial in Sychem may be predicated of the sons of Jacob only, and thus the words must be interpreted. That the sons of Jacob found their last resting-place at Sychem is not recorded in the Scriptures excepting in the case of Joseph (Josh. 24, 32), but there is no argument against it. If we then assume that Stephen alludes to two facts here not mentioned directly or at all in the Old

Testament, namely, the purchase of land at Sychem by Abraham and the burial of the brothers of Joseph on this land, assumptions which are not far-fetched, but altogether within the range of probability, the passage contains no more obstacles for the exegete.

6. Let one more point be mentioned. The statement in v. 22 that Moses was mighty in words is said by unbelieving commentators to contradict Ex. 4, 10f., where he is described as "slow of speech and of a slow tongue," and Aaron is assigned to him as spokesman. But that is surely carping criticism. Moses may have had an impediment in his speech or have lacked the fluency and readiness which characterized Aaron in speaking, and still, when under the influence of a strong emotion or when thoroughly prepared, he may have proved an effective orator. Demosthenes has the reputation of having been the mightiest orator of antiquity, and yet, according to Plutarch, his contemporary Demades far surpassed him when unpremeditated addresses were required. —

In the above, the major difficulties in the speech of Stephen have been treated. May the reader have been confirmed in his belief in the inerrancy of the Sacred Volume! The writer asks for permission to close the discussion with some beautiful words from the preface of Neander's *Life of Christ*, quoted by Haley in his valuable work, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*: —

"God reveals Himself in His Word as He does in His works. In both we see a self-revealing, self-concealing God, who makes Himself known only to those who earnestly seek Him; in both we find stimulants to faith and occasions for unbelief; in both we find contradictions whose higher harmony is hidden, except from him who gives up his whole mind in reverence; in both, in a word, it is a law of revelation that the heart of man should be tested in receiving it; and that in the spiritual life, as well as in the bodily, man must eat his bread in the sweat of his brow."
