

Bible Study 8

Gospels Usage of Jewish Scripture

Aim: To examine how Jesus uses the Jewish Scriptures in the Gospels and how Christians may hear those texts today as a call to faithful and holy living.

Opening Prayer: Gracious God, open our hearts and minds as we study your Word. Help us to hear the Scriptures as Jesus taught them, to recognize your liberating work among us, and to respond with faith, humility, and holy living. Guide our conversation, deepen our understanding, and form us into a community that bears witness to your justice, mercy, and peace. Amen.

Learning Guide Questions

- What might Jewish Scripture have meant within its own historical and theological context?
- What should we understand about the imagination and hope of the First Testament?
- How does Jesus interpret Scripture in relation to his mission and message?
- How can Christians today hear Jesus' call to holy living?

Primary Texts

Opening Reflection Question: Is Stephen's understanding of the spiritual heritage of Israel condemnatory or liberating?

Readings: Acts 7: 1-53

Stephen's Sermon

Commentary:

Stephen is one of the seven leaders with exceptional wisdom who were Greek speaking disciples chosen by the Twelve. (Acts 6:1-5). Stephen was first among the Seven who being led by the Holy Spirit was doing "great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8) in confrontation with opposition Stephen was falsely accused of speaking against the Traditions and Heritage of Israel ("we heard him insult Moses and God"). Before the Sanhedrin or the Jerusalem Council (ruling authority) in Synagogue.

Stephen's speech displays popular cultural understanding of the story of the people of Israel. The usage of the scripture from the Greek translation of the Torah versus the Hebrew language Torah offered variations of seeing the Spirit of God shaping journey of the people.

Acts 7:2-8 reviews the story of Abraham

Abraham (no reference to Sarah) is the father of the faith. He was sent on a journey by the God of Glory (see verse 2 and compare with Psalm 29:3)

Some main points in the story about God's involvement:

1. Promise of heritage to Abraham and his descendants.
2. Bondage in Egypt is important to the fulfillment of the covenant promise (Exodus 12:40-41; Galatians 3:17).
3. Practice of Male circumcision as sign of generational covenant.
4. Issac and Jacob were vehicles of the covenant leading to the 12 Patriarchs and Joseph.

Consider the following question:

1. Could the "God of Glory or Glorious God" be connected with the operation of the Holy Spirit?

Joseph's Story (Acts 7:9-19)

Joseph's encounters is at the end segment of the book of Genesis. The experience of Joseph seem to mirror the experience of the diasporan Jews. The jealous brothers of Joseph (The Patriarchs) betrayed him and sold him to Egypt. In Egypt his hardships eventually was reversed as he became the vice-regent or second to the King of Egypt. From this vantage point he became savior of his people.

Some areas for consideration in the text include:

1. the statement, "But God was with..." (Gen 39:2) as divine presence.
2. Joseph having favor (grace) and wisdom (Sophia in Greek). Compare with Luke 2:40 and Genesis 39:4.
3. God's divine plan through saving earthly power
4. Tradition of 75 members of Jacob's family invited to Egypt in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament). The Hebrew traditions suggests 70.
5. Jacob died in Egypt.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

1. Why does the story of Joseph play such an important part of the spiritual journey of Israel and Christians?

Moses the misunderstood Reconciler – Acts 7:20-40

The Moses story is connected with the freedom of an enslaved nation (not individuals) who struggled to find meaning as migratory people. Look at the descriptions of people in bondage and who seek freedom.

1. Moses was "beautiful before God." He found favor with God.(20)
2. Early story of Moses about survival and the subversion of power in the role of women is to noted. (Acts 7:17-20)

3. Adopted as an abandoned child into upper levels of privilege in the society via Pharaoh's daughter (21-22).
4. At Forty his intentions as reconciler are misunderstood by his ethnic people and the Egyptians and fled (30).
5. At 80 years old encountered "burning bush" – he thought he had seen it all (30-34).
6. Change comes with great opposition (35-40). There is a parallel with Jesus being opposed by the Israel. Was Jesus the new Moses?
7. Forming patterns of independence from God can alienate truth to being an nation. Making of idols (41) and rejecting creature status (42).

Locating the Work of the Spirit – Acts 7: 44-53

Stephen calls for engagement with the ways God is engaging with life in community that is miraculous and meaningful.

1. "The most high does not dwell in houses made by human hands." [48-50]. Read Isaiah 66:1-2. What is Stephen saying about location of God?
2. Stephen points to the systemic betrayal of God's prophets that continued in the leadership and some people involved in the "murder of Jesus." Was this a statement too bold to state or simply reckless among hostile people?

Study Summary

Stephen defense offers an outline of the history of Israel and how aspects of the history that showed God's involvement was being ignored by the people.

Closing Prayer

Closing Prayer: God of our times. Lead us by the Holy Spirit into ways of being faithful witnesses of your love to the world. Open our eyes hearts to obediently walk new journeys that will transform lives for good.