

STEPHEN'S ACCUSATION, DEFENCE, AND MARTYRDOM

By

ROBERT GOVETT

Few readers, or even students of Scripture perceive much force in Stephen's defence, given at such length in the seventh chapter of the Acts. It appears to them only a rambling citation of portions of the patriarchal and Israelite history, having little, or no bearing on the accusations brought against him. They think too, that probably it was broken off, before it reached its intended completion, by violence apprehended or already begun. Hence they are unable to perceive, why his enemies were so exasperated with the speech.

With the Lord the Spirit's help, I think to be able to set the reader at such a point of view, that he shall perceive the martyr's defence to be full of force, strongly bearing against the views of his accusers, and a real and triumphant refutation of their charges.

Stephen was one of the seven Greek-speaking Jews appointed by the church at Jerusalem and by the apostles, to overtake the new emergency of labour, which arose out of the need of supplying the wants of the Hellenist widows of that day: Acts 6. Stephen was one of the new deacons; but beside that, he wrought many wonders and miracles. He was led into discussion with Jews of the party opposed to Christ. Probably the discussion was held in the synagogue of the Libertines; * and it would seem, that the challenge originated with them.

[*Meaning Jews, who were once Roman slaves, but had been made free by their masters.]

In the conflict he proved victorious, by the wisdom and grace of the Holy Spirit given him. This vexed the beaten party, and they sought to slay him. It is easier far to kill a man of God, than to refute the arguments he draws from Scripture.

They accuse him, then, of blasphemy against Moses and against God. They set him before the religious council of the nation, and bring against him false witnesses who affirm: -

"THIS MAN CEASETH NOT TO SPEAK BLASPHEMOUS WORDS AGAINST THIS HOLY PLACE [THE TEMPLE] AND THE LAW. FOR WE HAVE HEARD HIM SAY - THAT THIS JESUS THE NAZARITE SHALL DESTROY THIS PLACE, AND CHANGE THE CUSTOMS WHICH MOSES DELIVERED US."

Stephen's reply indirectly presents to us the arguments generally used by Jewish opponents of Messiah. We see in them the men of the flesh and of law, full of self-righteousness, confident that they were better than their fathers, and entitled to expect the fulfilment of the blessings promised to Israel by Moses and the prophets: Luke 18: 9; Matt. 23: 30. We see them here expecting a reigning Messiah, and refusing a suffering one. Among the accusers of Stephen too, were Sadducees, men who believed that

the only rewards and punishments were received in this life; the immortality of man being to them only a Pharisaic dogma. Such men would measure the criminality of each by his history. If trouble befell him, it would be a proof of guilt, and of his being refused by the Most High: Luke 13: 1-5.

The arguments, then, of the Jewish opponents of Stephen would take some such form as this:

1. 'How could he be the Messiah, who never received from God the throne and sceptre promised to the Son of David? Psa. 72, 89. Jesus often spoke about the kingdom of God, but it never came: Luke 17: 20. If he were the prophet like Moses, as his friends asserted, he would have had the confidence of Israel, and have proved the deliverer of Israel, as Moses did: Luke 24. Now on the contrary when He was seized and condemned, He never delivered even Himself from the cursed and cruel death of crucifixion. Did not God always deliver His beloved servants, when in trouble and danger of death? Was it not promised that Messiah should be covered by God's hand, rescued, and exalted? Psa. 91: 14, 15; 41.'
2. 'Did not Scripture promise, that Messiah's foes should be cut off? Psa. 89: 23; 72: 9; 97: 3. How came it to pass, then, if Jesus were Messiah, that the disciples of Moses who resisted His claims, and slew His people, were not destroyed by miraculous judgments, as the prophets foretold?'

That this argument was considered very powerful and satisfactory, we see, from the appeals made to Jesus upon the cross. Passengers, scribes, elders, chief priests, the spectators, the soldiers, the robbers, all, Jew and Gentile alike, joined to challenge Him to come down from the cross and deliver Himself, if He were indeed the Christ, the King of Israel, the Son of God: Matt. 27: 39-44; Luke 23: 35-46. It was supposed therefore, that His death was the destruction of His pretensions.

3. Another argument against the claims of our Lord, was founded on the judicial decision of His own nation against Him. 'The wise, the learned, the powerful, had rejected His claims, and given sentence of death against Him. The scribes and chief priests in their council had condemned Him as a blasphemer. Now the law said, that the decision of the priests and judges at Jerusalem should be held to be infallible: Deut. 17: 8-11. He was rightly put to death, then, as a deceiver: Matt. 27: 63; John 7: 48.'

This argument also was considered of great weight, as we see by the discourse of the two disciples going to Emmaus. 'Jesus,' they said, 'was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people. Yet the chief priests and rulers gave Him up to the Romans to be put to death and crucified Him. If His own nation refused Him as an impostor, how could He be the Messiah? The Messiah's people were to be His willing subjects, as the Psalmist declared: Psa. 110; Luke 24: 19-21.'

4. 'How again could He be the Messiah, if He threatened to destroy the temple, and change the customs of Moses? Were not all the godly kings of David's line, zealous for the maintenance of the whole law, restoring it when it had fallen into disuse?'
5. 'Lastly, how could Christians be 'the children of the kingdom' of Messiah, as they supposed, when they were despised, imprisoned, and robbed? Instead of being exalted, they were losing even the privileges which they had gained by the law of Moses. If Jesus were indeed their Head, how was it, that He did not defend them? Why did He not avenge them on those who ill-treated them? What had

become of Him? If He were risen, why did He not show Himself, that they might see and confess Him as risen indeed?’

Now the speech of Stephen conveys, principally in the way of narrative, a reply to these and like arguments. Viewed from this point of view his defence is well-directed battery, every shot of which told, and irresistibly laid low his opponents.

The martyr takes the histories of ABRAHAM, JOSEPH, and MOSES, and by these two or three witnesses establishes every word.

Take first the case of ABRAHAM.

What did Israel think of him? That he was ‘the friend of God, the great and righteous head of their nation, their father, source of the promises to himself and their nation.’

If now we are to judge by circumstances, how would they prove their views by the life of Abraham?

The Most High began by stripping him of his country, his relations and friends. He was to leave them all for a foreign land, of which he knew nothing. He promised him that the (1) LAND should be his, and that a (2) POSTERITY numerous as the sands of earth, and as the stars of the sky, should be given him.

Had the Most High then fulfilled to him these promises?

(1.) Did He give him the land of Palestine as his possession? "HE GAVE HIM NONE INHERITANCE IN IT, NO, NOT SO MUCH AS TO SET HIS FOOT ON."

He promised the land to his SEED. Did Israel get it? Or Jacob? Or the twelve patriarchs?

(2.) Did he see the fulfillment of an innumerable SEED? For long years "HE HAD NO CHILD."

What did God say about his seed? That they should be strangers in a foreign land, enslaved and ill-treated, for four hundred years!

How then must they judge concerning Abraham, if they dealt out the same measure to him, that they did to Jesus Christ? They ought to say, ‘That it was clear, that Abraham was deluded, or an impostor; for he never yet had enjoyed the promises, which as he imagined the Almighty had made to him!’

But if the treatment of Abraham’s seed for four hundred years was to be so severe as foretold, then it was no proof that believers in Jesus as the Christ were deluded, because they were troubled and persecuted in their own land, and for as long a time.

Then too, it was no proof against Jesus being the Individual Heir, and the chief promised Seed of Abraham, that he was refused and rejected even unto death.

How would they reply? - ‘We admit all that; but another time is coming, in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, shall be raised from the dead, and their seed shall then enjoy the land, and become innumerable; while other promises will be fulfilled to them that are included in the reign of Messiah, the great Heir of

Abraham. Moreover God promised, at the very time that He ratified the covenant to Abraham, that He would judge the nation that persecuted them, and bring them out of their bondage to serve him in wealth and freedom.'

To this plea the reply was evident at a glance.

'We agree with you. But if the future time of retribution, and of the fulfilment of promises avails in the case of Abraham, it avails for us too. We also say, 'Judgment is coming on those who persecute Abraham's spiritual seed, the children of his faith. And Abraham's true sons shall have a greater deliverance, and better riches, than those which rescued Israel drew from Egypt. Then Jesus after all may be the heir of Abraham, the seed to whom the promise was made: Gen. 15: 18.

'Of the time of trouble which was to precede the deliverance, Jehovah gave an emblem, which ought to confirm our faith. When the covenant was ratified, a furnace of smoke preceded the torch of fire: v, 17. That is, the brick-kilns and rigour of Egypt were to take precedence of the glorious deliverance: Deut. 4: 20; Isa. 62: 1. Far then from present persecution furnishing the proof, that we and our Lord are not Abraham's seed, they are really proofs in our favour!'

Stephen's observation too, that the God of glory showed Himself to Abraham in Mesopotamia, long before he dwelt in Canaan, is a commencing refutation of their idea, that the service of Jehovah could only take place in the holy land and holy city.

The martyr then speaks of the covenant of circumcision, (Gen. 17,) which followed on the first covenant, (Gen. 15,) and then traces the line of the circumcised posterity of Abraham up to Joseph.

2. JOSEPH

'What think you, ye Hebrews, of Joseph?'

'He was great and wise, the favoured of his father and of his God, ruler of the world, and deliverer of Israel in time of sore need. He was beloved of God too, as witness the dreams which told of his great exaltation, and which as sent from heaven, were at last accomplished.'

But what of his earthly history, both amidst his own family, and the Gentiles?

"The patriarchs moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt." They hated him, and could not even speak peaceably to him. When in Egypt he is falsely accused, numbered with transgressors, and thrust into the dungeon by his Gentile master. What say you of him now? Do not troubles so repeated and so long continued, prove him to be rejected of God! When his brethren said, "Behold, this dreamer cometh! Come now therefore let us slay him: and we shall see what shall become of his dreams," which was the accepted party? Who was condemned by God, the eleven chiefs of the nation, or Joseph? "God WAS WITH HIM."

Man's rejected one was God's accepted one. The same conduct then on the part of Israel against Christ, the beloved Son of God: Matt. 27: 18; Mark 15: 19. Joseph was sold for twenty pieces of silver: Jesus for thirty. Joseph was delivered up to Midianites; Jesus to Romans.

Did affliction and humiliation prove Joseph to be forsaken of the Most High? If it did not, neither does the same affliction avail as an argument against Jesus. God was not only with him, but "delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and all his house."

Perhaps, then, it might be true that Jesus despised, sold, falsely accused by his brethren, might be not only delivered out of all his trials by resurrection, but promoted on high before the King of kings, to be ruler of the world, and Lord of God's household, whether angels or men! Joseph, rejected by his own family, and forgotten, found a home and glory in Egypt. Jesus despised as 'a dreamer' by Israel, might yet be reckoned supremely wise by the Ruler of earth and heaven!

The first half of Joseph's life is heavily laden with affliction. "Till the time came that his cause was known, the word of the Lord tried him." The second half of it was glorious beyond all former example, and without a break. Might it not be thus one day with the rejected Nazarite also!

Do you say, 'How should He be the Messiah and Deliverer of Israel, who could not deliver Himself from the degrading death of crucifixion?' Try the same reasoning on Joseph! Could he be the exalted of God, and the deliverer of his nation and of the world, who could not save himself from being put down into a pit, sold for less than a slave's price, and thrust as a malefactor into a dungeon under false accusation?

Soon there came judgment on his persecutors. Famine assailed them. Egypt was the only country where food was to be had. This threw them into Joseph's hands, unwittingly on their part. He was master of their lives and fortunes, and aware of it. Perhaps, then, that is typical of a day to come, the Day of Great Tribulation, when Israel will be thrown on their hopes of Messiah, and will ask for His aid and His coming; ignorant that Jesus is the Messiah.

The second time of the patriarchs seeking Joseph, he is discovered to them, and he makes known his kindred to Pharaoh.

So Jesus, the rejected at His first coming, may at His second coming make Himself known to His brethren of Israel, and forgive them; while He sets them on high above the nations of the world; and reassembles them to their own land.

Jacob and the other patriarchs died in Egypt, never receiving possession of the land of promise. They had a tomb in Canaan. * They were only pilgrims and strangers. Was it wonderful then, if Christians occupied the same place of faith? For Israel and Jerusalem had now become Egypt: Rev. 11: 8. Then God began to fulfill His prophecy to Abraham concerning their trouble and bondage in Egypt. Their increase beyond measure proved that God had not forgotten them. And yet this very increase was the occasion of their affliction. It made Egypt and its king very jealous of them. Perhaps, then, the rapid increase of Christians in those days was the proof that God was with them, and the afflictions which

they endured were no proof against them; but rather an evidence that they were the true seed of Abraham, blessed of God according to the promise, and about to be delivered.

[* "Our fathers died, and were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre, that Abraham bought for the sum of money of the sons of Emmor (the father) of Sychem." 'Has not Stephen's memory here tripped? Was not the sepulchre that Abraham bought purchased of Ephron the Hittite? Gen. 23. And was not the cave of Machpelah situated not in Sychem, but in Hebron?' Yes, if (1) the reading of the Greek is correct; and (2) if the martyr refers to the same transaction as is recorded in Gen. 23. (2) But that we may well doubt. Not all that Abraham or Jacob did is written: Gen. 48: 22. (1) The present reading is not to be accepted. Tregelles, on good manuscript authority gives - "which Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Emmor in Sychem."]

MOSES

3. We come now to the critical history of Moses.

What would Israel say of Moses? - That 'he was the chief and most trusty of God's servants, the greatest of men. God loved him and spoke face to face with him, and set his glory upon his countenance.'

'Apply now to Moses the same principle whereby you condemn Christ. What would you have thought of him, if judged by the circumstances of his life?'

'That he was rejected of God! Though he led on his nation with the hope of the land flowing with milk and honey, he was himself shut out of it by the judicial decision of God. Does not that overthrow your estimate of Moses? Neither let a like lot undo your view of Christ!'

1. Moses was born as the time of promised deliverance drew near, yet he was in peril from his birth. That Jesus then was born in like circumstances was no proof against him, but rather an evidence that He was the predicted prophet like unto Moses, whom he began to resemble, even from the time of His birth.

Moses was "fair to God." So the margin gives it, and so it ought to have been rendered. Much more, was not Jesus beautiful God-ward, as proved by the songs of angels glorifying the Most High at His birth? And what was Jehovah's testimony at His baptism? "This is my beloved Son; in whom I am well pleased."

Moses was taught in all Egypt's wisdom, mighty in words and deeds. Jesus was great in wisdom, so as to astonish all who knew Him, while yet He obtained it without human teaching: Matt. 13: 54. Jesus is described by the two going to Emmaus, as "a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people."

Moses, had he pleased, could have dwelt in a king's house, far above the afflictions which befell his people; and was a fair way to be next the throne of Egypt, if not on the throne itself. But his heart of compassion yearned over his oppressed brethren. He left therefore, voluntarily, his glory, to take part with the afflicted people of God, when he was forty years of age, and fully competent to weigh the

consequences of such a choice. Might not Jesus then be the Prophet like Moses, if He stooped from a loftier throne, moved by compassion for Israel and the world? Did they admire Moses for his disinterested condescension? Why not then admire Jesus also for the same reason?

Was not this His becoming 'a prophet like Moses,' while yet he was superior to him?

Moses bent on his people's welfare, on one occasion stepped forward, by overt act, to testify how fully he had taken the side of Israel. "Seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian." Was not the conduct of Jesus like to this, when He stepped forward to deliver His people from spiritual darkness, to rescue them from disease, and to show His power over Satan and death itself? "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and power, who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him:" Acts 10: 38. Jesus smote none to death,* but He delivered those oppressed by demons, and overcame their Prince.

[*That is, during the time of His first advent on earth, it does not apply now: "I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I WILL GIVE UNTO EACH ONE OF YOU ACCORDING TO YOUR WORKS" (Rev. 2: 23, R.V.) - Ed.]

Moses was disappointed in his attempt to engage his people's afflictions. "But he supposed, that his brethren would understand, that God by his hand is giving them salvation; BUT THEY UNDERSTOOD NOT." (Greek.) Perhaps then the cause of Jesus was like this! God was giving a higher salvation to Israel and the world, and Jesus would let them know it; but they perceived it not! Perhaps, then, this was the foretold time of Israel's blindness, when they should see Messiah and His works, and not perceive; should hear His words of wisdom, and comprehend them not: Isa. 6.

We have next the crisis of Moses' effort depicted. His own people were divided among themselves; the unrighteous part prevailing. Their discords he would gladly have removed, as a first step towards their rescue. But the doer of wrong to his neighbour, refused him both by word and deed. He thrust him away, and denied his mission of deliverance, reproaching with his very act of favour towards his countryman. Might it not be then, that the kindness and grace of Jesus toward Israel, had been in like manner misunderstood by the nation, and His purpose of redeeming them refused by the proud and oppressing sect of the Pharisees? Not that, in one point, the reproach launched against Moses could be dealt against the Jews. When besought to divide an inheritance between two brothers at variance He refused, in words like this opposer of Moses. "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" Luke 12: 14. Moses in justice smote the Egyptian to death. Christ in grace delivered some from death, and healed the stricken ear of one of His persecutors. Was Moses reproached for his act of grace to Israel, an act which put his own life in peril? And was not Christ's death urged on, because of His raising Lazarus from the dead; while moreover He was taunted on the cross by His foes with - "He saved others: Himself He cannot save!"

Which of the two parties then would they say was right in word and deed on the occasion of old? Moses? Or Israel? 'Moses!' they would reply. Perhaps then the nation's rejection of Jesus was as evil in their day, as the refusal of Moses had been in the days of yore!

Could God love Moses, and be with him in spite of Israel's national refusal? So might it not be true of Jesus? It is the Rejected Stone, rejected by the blind builders of Israel, that is one day to be the Head of the corner.

Moses thus refused is in peril of life, and flees. For forty years he tarries in another land; and finds a wife, and has a family there. Jesus rejected might have fled, but would for others' sake give up His life. As Israel is not ready, he moves away to another region, where he is gladly welcomed. If Jesus should tarry away from His people for a longer time than Moses, he would still be only resembling His predecessor; and His absence from His blinded and oppressed people would be no proof against His mission of God, but rather in favour of it.

We come next to Moses' second and successful visitation of Israel. "After forty years were expired, there appeared unto him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush." The first appearance of God to Abraham originated the patriarchal dispensation. This appearing of Jehovah to Moses originated the Mosaic.

Of Moses it might be said, that his first attempt to deliver Israel was premature. He moved at the promptings of his natural feelings; un-endorsed by any supernatural commission of God. It was only on the second occasion, that miracle was given him, and then he proved successful.

But of the mission of Jesus this could not be said. God appeared to Jesus at His baptism. The new name of God, as Father, Son, and Spirit, was there displayed in act. Moses is obliged to ask the name of God which he is to bear to Israel: Jesus is aware of it; He is the Son. Moses is afraid, and is warned not to draw nigh without preparation. Jesus is not afraid; and over Him the heaven is opened, and the Spirit descends, and rests on Him. Is there not here a greater than Moses?

But if it be said, 'The appearance to Moses took place after his rejection and flight,' we still find new resemblances unfolding themselves, and new superiorities. At the intercession of the descended Christ, as Peter testifies, the Holy Spirit, as the angel (or sent One) of the Lord, descends in fire on the disciples of the rejected Christ. Might they not then be the bush that was burning, yet unconsumed? Moses wondered at the sight. And did not men of Israel out of all nations wonder, when the Spirit coming down in wind and fire, gave to the 120 to speak with new tongues, while tongues of fire that consumed not, stood on their heads? Out of the fire of the bush came forth the voice of Jehovah, testifying that He was the God of the fathers. Might not then the testimonies of the inspired apostles be true; that this new manifestation came from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Acts 3: 13, 25; 5: 30; 22: 14.

Where was it that this manifestation of God in Moses' day took place? In the holy land, and its temple? Nay, but before either tabernacle or temple were built, in the desert of Arabia! Why then should they imagine, that God's discovery of Himself was confined to the temple, or that He was bound to dwell there alone? Did not this appearance of God in the desert to Moses, set aside any former places of

God's abode, if there were such? Might it not be true, then, that the Church of God, His house of living stones was the place of His then abode, to the setting aside of the temple of Herod?

While Moses was refused, Israel continued under Gentile oppression. Might it not be true, then, if Jesus were the prophet like Moses, but superior to him, that Israel might continue blind toward God, and oppressed by men, so long as they refused Jesus, however long that might be?

"Now come, I will send thee into Egypt."

"THIS MOSES whom they denied, saying, 'Who made thee a ruler and a judge?' THE SAME did God send to be a ruler and deliverer with the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush." * [*Moses said: "Take my life": "Jesus gave His life."]

The nation denied Moses, and drove him away. Denied him in those very aspects, in which, as he saw, the God of Israel meant to use him. Was the nation right in its denial? They would say, No! Might not the nation then be wrong in another denial before Pilate? The Holy Spirit had charged it upon them. "The God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers glorified His servant* Jesus whom ye delivered up, and DENIED † in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But ye DENIED the Holy One and the Righteous, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; but ye killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from among the dead:" Acts 3: 13-15. May not Jesus, then, though the rejected of Israel, be yet God's chosen One? Though ye, O men of Israel, before Pilate refused Jesus as your king, may He not still be God's King elect? Have not God's good pleasure and His counsel for the future, been more fully declared in Jesus' resurrection from among the dead, than in the prolongation of Moses' life? Yes! He is thus declared to be the Judge of all: Acts 10: 42; 17: 31. Perhaps, then, Jesus is the long-expected deliverer of Israel! His refusal by Israel's great men staggered the two on their way to Emmaus. But the Saviour speedily set them right. "Ought not the Christ to suffer [first] and [then] to enter into His glory?" Must not the Stone that was to be the Head of the corner be first rejected by the wise builders of Israel? The rejection of Moses by Israel - whom did it condemn? Moses? Or Israel? Perhaps, then, their condemnation of Jesus was but Israel's fighting against God's chosen One, and a condemnation of themselves!

[† Same word as in Acts 7.]

Moses in the work of deliverance, was not alone. A Divine Person attended with His divine command to arrange all, and to put down all human power with divine force. And had not the same been in part shown, when the Divine Spirit, at Jesus' baptism, descended on Him? Then He began publically to act in the wisdom of God, and the power of God. Was that not something higher than Moses' commission in the desert? And what had come to pass since then? Had not all Jerusalem heard of the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost, in wind and fire? And of the divine wisdom and power of miracle which then gave its attestation to Jesus as the ascended deliverer?

"The same (Moses) brought them out and showed wonders and signs in Egypt, and at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years."

Again and again does the speaker thrust upon his unwilling audience the identity of the chosen One of God, with the denied One of their fathers! They spoke of Moses in that olden day with contempt. "This Moses!" So were men of Stephen's day with like contempt treating the Lord of glory. "This Jesus the Nazarite!" In Stephen's day the whole nation stood up to avenge on the martyr a supposed slight against Moses, even though but an uttered word! Perhaps, then, one day the tables might so turn with regard to Jesus, and the nation might worship and rejoice in Him as their deliverer whom their fathers persecuted and slew!

Did Moses, who at the first appearing to Israel wrought no miracle, on the second occasion come armed with the power of working signs and wonders? How then should it be incredible, that Jesus, who at His first appeal to Israel showed signs and wonders greater and more numerous far than Moses, work still greater prodigies in the yet future deliverance of Israel?

For a period of forty years miracles in Egypt, the Red Sea, and the desert, occurred. May there not be then a period when according to the covenant of marvels made with Moses, (Ex. 34,) the hand of God to smite and to rescue by the might of Jesus, shall be seen?

"This is the Moses which said unto the children of Israel, 'A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren like unto me, unto him shall ye hearken.'"

Moses, the once rejected of Israel, foretold by prophet who was to be like himself. He might be like Moses in power, in character, and in history. Perhaps, then, Moses hinted, that the Prophet who was to follow and resemble him was to be like him, in being rejected by Israel at His first appearing! If so, this rejection of Jesus by His nation was no proof against His mission by God, but rather a witness in His favour! Moses could testify of his people that they had been rebellious against the Lord ever since he knew them : Deut. 9: 7. Perhaps the prophet who was foretold would have the same testimony to give; a testimony availing not to his own condemnation, but to Israel's!

"To him shall ye hearken."

O then, this new Prophet is also to be a law-giver, an issuer of divine commands! Perhaps those commands may be a repeal of some, or of all of those of Moses! Then it would be no blasphemy against Moses to testify, that the prophet he foretold had come; and that the new prophet was to be listened to, in preference to the old. Did not Moses change the fathers' customs? To be like Moses, then, Jesus should change theirs!

Was Moses meek? Jesus was meeker still. Moses once, under strong provocation prayed against his opponents. Jesus allowed them to proceed to scourging, spitting, gibes, and crucifixion!

Here, then, the martyr turns on his accusers with immense force. 'You accuse me of blasphemy against Moses. Do you yourselves obey him? Are you not in conspicuous opposition to him? He foretold a successor to himself, who was to be guide to Israel and legislator. Him you refused; nay more, you denied and slew. You speak of Him with contempt. Now in all this, are you not witnesses against yourselves? Did not your fathers hurl at Moses the very taunts you launch against Jesus? Jesus, then, is

the prophet like Moses; like him in history, and in commission by God; like him in character, like him also in his refusal by Israel.

"This is he who was with the congregation in the wilderness, with the angel that spake to him in Mount Sinai, and (with) our fathers, who received living oracles to give unto us."

Moses' glory was seen not only in the deliverance out of Egypt, but in his presence with God's assembly during the forty years in the desert. Had not Jesus also an assembly, whom He was leading, as truly as Moses? If they taunted Jesus' followers with their rejection, and their loss of their heritage and sufferings, could they not reply - 'Yes, this Jesus who had led us out from the world, has appointed to us a burial beneath the waters, and a resurrection therefrom, which answers to Israel's passage through the Red Sea. Our deliverance is far greater than that of old, and if we find trouble now, it does but answer to the trials of God's former assembly (or 'congregation') in the desert. Christ is with us still, as Moses was with Israel, in spite of their desert trials.'

But Moses was not alone in his work in the wilderness. With him went the angel of the Lord, the angel of the covenant, the One who spoke to him in Mount Sinai. So can we say of Jesus, "Lo, I am with you all the days unto the end of the age:" (Greek) Matt. 28. And could not Stephen boast of the Holy Spirit still abiding with the Church of Christ? Was not He too a speaking angel? Were there not prophets everywhere whose word was, "Thus saith the Holy Ghost"? Moses would have been glad to have had all the Lord's people signalized by the Spirit put upon them. Stephen could assert, that Moses' wish was fulfilled in all believers of that day. The Lord had visibly given to all that obeyed Jesus, the Spirit in power. They had gifts either of word, or of deed. To this as a mighty testimony on their behalf, Peter had already appealed to Israel: Acts 5: 32.

Did God of old speak in the wilderness? He was at that moment speaking to Israel in their land. Did the Lord distribute of the Spirit that was on Moses to seventy elders? Was not He a greater than Moses, who bestowed prophecy, or tongues, or healing, on every one who accepted Him?

Were Moses' oracles "living"? The oracles of Christ by the Holy Ghost were life-giving. They witness to One who is Resurrection and Life.

"To whom our fathers were unwilling to become obedient, but thrust him away, and turned back in the hearts unto Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us! For as for THIS Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we know not what has become of him.'"

The parallel and its force still continues, and deepens. Even after Israel had seen the wonders wrought by God through Moses, and had confessed him their deliverer, they loved not to obey. They were not pleased at the restraints under which he had led them; and refused him with contempt, even when speaking of him to Aaron his brother. They wished to be not God's separate people, but like the nations. Already too, in Stephen's day, the Herodians, men who glorified the Romans, and adopted their practices, were giving tokens of the awful unbelief of Israel in the last days.

Moses, because of his absence, invisible on high, but appearing in the presence of the Lord for their sakes, was despised and thrust aside by the tribes, and with him his God. But what said the men of Stephen's day tauntingly of Jesus? 'What is become of your Christ?' The same taunt did their father's launch at Moses. The same reply was to be given concerning Moses, as Jesus' disciples gave concerning Christ. 'He is on high in the presence of God for us.' But Aaron's mouth was stopped from bearing that witness; for he with the other elders had, in unbelief left the height which Moses had assigned him: Ex. 24: 14.

The contempt which the Jews of that day were expressing for Jesus - 'This Jesus the Nazarite will destroy this place' - their fathers had uttered in the same manner against Moses, "As for this Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him." This was particularly stinging. Some six or seven times does the martyr make use of their word of contempt to glorify Moses, and to discover to them the opposition between God's thoughts of Moses and the nation's. "This Moses whom they refused, the same did God send:" 35. "This (Moses) brought them out:" 36. "This is that Moses that said:" 37. "This is he that was in the church in the wilderness:" 38.

41. "And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their hands."

The result of Israel's unbelief of Moses' return from the Mount, was idolatry. Moses and his God are set aside together. It is coming to pass thus even now in our day. With the ceasing of the expectation of Christ's return, there is increasingly a leaning towards images. And Israel, though in Stephen's day they were opposed to idols, will yet, in the latter days fall into idolatry. This is hinted in the Saviour's parable of the return of the evil spirit to the house which it had voluntarily left for awhile. It will return with the seven spirits worse than itself: Matt. 12.

This is shown us in Rev. 9: 20, 21. In Moses' day they worshipped a calf. In the last days it will be the worship of Satan and his Wild-Beast-King: Rev. 13. With the refusal of the Lamb and his Father, Satan and his blaspheming king and false prophet, step in.

"Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'Did ye offer me slain beasts and sacrifices for forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? But ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your God Remphan, the figures which ye made to worship them, and I will carry you captive beyond Babylon.'"

With that act of idolatry in Moses' day God was displeased, that He judicially gave them over to worship the starry host. And answerably thereto arose a system of false worship, mocking the promises and hopes given by Jehovah. They carried in the wilderness a rival tabernacle, dedicated to Moloch (king), the king of heaven. They carried also the star of Remphan. Remphan means 'Healer.' Then in place of "Jehovah the Healer," (Ex. 15: 26, Jehovah Ropha,) and the star to come out of Jacob, with the scepter to rise out of Israel, they had framed a false scheme of their own devising: Num. 24: 17. Jesus, at whose birth appeared the true star, Jesus the real King of heaven, and King of the Jews, in His former life had displayed Himself as the "Healer of every sickness, and every disease among the people." On His being refused, God's judgment upon Israel could be but more severe, and His abandonment more complete in

the day to come, than in the former case. Amos had predicted a captivity yet to come. And when that should take effect, could it be otherwise than that the temple rebuilt of Herod should be again destroyed, as it had been of old?

This passage of the speech, then, is directed against certain fallacious pleas and ideas of Israel - to this effect. 'God cannot move us again from our land. For we are no idolaters, as our fathers were. We are obedient to Moses, zealous for his laws, haters of idols. To us then, and to our day belong the promises of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, that Jerusalem, and its temple, and its nation, shall not be plucked up, or thrown down forever.'

Not so. God has never forgiven Israel the sin of the calf: Ex. 32: 35. Idolatry broke out again in the land, and under the kings: 1 Kings 12. Its third and last aspect has yet to come. That will be Israel's day of captivity, the day of great tribulation.

The part of Stephen's speech which ensues, refers to the charge of his blaspheming the temple.

44. "The tabernacle of witness was (intended) for our fathers in the desert, as He commanded who spake to Moses, that he should make it after the pattern which he had seen."

They boasted of the temple and of Moses. But Moses and their fathers had only a moving temple. That alone was suited to their frequent change of place. It was also "the tabernacle of witness," or of testimony, not "the temple of fulfilment." This edifice bore testimony in several directions.

(1) Against their idolatry. Was not Jehovah's tabernacle a testimony against that of Moloch's? As Jehovah's tabernacle that bore His ark of the covenant, was a witness of the better things to come according to His promises; so the tabernacle of Moloch could but be a token of the dark days of God's judgment yet to be. As the one proclaimed, that the land should be entered, and the enemies of the tribes scattered; so the other betokened the triumph of Israel's foes, and the tribes being swept off from Jehovah's land of promise.

(2) But the tabernacle of witness made by Moses, was also a testimony to a system of things yet to come, far superior to itself. For Moses as mediator of Israel went up to God, stood amidst the heavenly tabernacle, and saw the originals above; which when he came down he was to imitate. The earthly tabernacle then, and the temple which followed it, were witnesses to the heavenly tabernacle to which Stephen bore witness, as the one where into Jesus had entered. 'You boast of the earthly tabernacle. But its vessels and furniture are only copies of those amidst which our ascended Mediator and Priest, the Lord Jesus, is ministering: Heb. 9. There God is now, and Jesus is, like Moses, Mediator of a covenant, only of a better covenant; even as the heavenly things are superior to those of earth.'

"Which (tabernacle) also our fathers with Jesus (Joshua) having received, brought in (to the land) at the time of taking possession of the nations, whom God drove out from before our fathers, up to the days of David; who found favour before God, and asked to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built him a house."

The place of worship under Moses, and even for four hundred years was only a tent, removed from place to place. David desired to build a house for the Lord, yet though he found great favour with Jehovah, he was not permitted. It was very significant, that Moses could not lead his people into the land of promise. He must give way to Jesus. (Joshua, in Hebrew). Might it not be then, that the Jesus whom they despised might be the conqueror, who should give them possession of their land in a day to come, and overthrow the Gentile enemies of Israel, as the prophets foretold?

48. "But the Most High is not dwelling in houses made with hands, as the prophet saith, 'The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool, what kind of a house will ye build me? Or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?'"

While, then, the Lord has promised one day [of 1.000 years, - Ed.] to dwell in Jerusalem, and in her temple, (Psa. 68: 16; 132: 14; Ezek. 43: 7,) yet it was not then to be fulfilled. He had left the earth for the heaven, as Ezekiel showed: Ez. 8: 4; 9: 3; 10: 3, 4, 18, 19; 11: 22, 23. Thither Jesus had gone up, as apostles had testified to the nation of Israel: Acts 2; 3. In Israel's devotion, then, to the earthly temple, as the place of God's residence at that time, they were really fighting against God.

Thus the martyr has shown, that Jehovah was not tied to any one place of manifestation. He had discovered Himself to Abraham in Mesopotamia, to Moses in the desert bush, and on the mountain top. Then He moved from place to place, with the wanderings of His people. Even when the land were entered, there was still the tent only, for long years. While God promised to dwell in Solomon's temple, it was only on conditions; on the breaking of which the Lord deserted the abode man had made. It was no blasphemy then against God to say, as Jesus had said, that the temple rebuilt by Herod should be destroyed.

"Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they slew those who beforehand spoke of the coming of the Righteous One, of whom ye have now become betrayers and murderers: Ye who received the law at the command of angels, and observed it not!"

Their circumcision was the boast of Israelites. This boast the martyr takes away from them. They had circumcision in the flesh, but not in the spirit; the sign, not the thing signified. Their own Moses had reproached them, as the stiff-necked, rebellious against God, and blind. They refused to be turned from evil by any testimony: Lev. 26: 41; Deut. 10: 16. Their hearts refused God's commands. Nay, they refused even to hear the Lord's words, uttered by Stephen the inspired, as they presently afterwards show.

Were the men before him better than their fathers? By no means! They refused the Son of God. After the Spirit's descent to bear witness to the Son, they refused the Spirit too. They had rejected the prophets, and persecuted them. Even those into whose mouth God had put messages of hope, concerning the Deliverer to come, were maltreated and slain. How then could they imagine, that their national and official condemnation of Christ, really disproved His claims? It only condemned themselves. It only showed, that the spirit of Israel all through, was of the same kind. If they slew the forerunners of Messiah, men inspired by the Holy Spirit, what wonder if they slew Messiah Himself?

Jesus here is signalized by a particular title, "The Just One," or "Righteous One." The Psalms frequently speak of the afflictions of "the Righteous One." They testify to plottings against Him, proud speeches against Him, and to His being sold. But the Psalms and Prophets both bear witness to His future glory. "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied: by His knowledge shall My Righteous Servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities:" Isa. 53: 11. "I will raise unto David a righteous branch, and a king shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth:" Jer. 23: 5; Zech. 9: 9.

There was one distinguished above the world of sinners as "Jesus Christ the righteous." How had they served Him? They had betrayed Him to the Romans, and put Him to death.

But were they not strict observers of law? No! Though angels spoke it, they and their fathers had all along disobeyed it, specially in their refusal of the prophet foretold by Moses, and the crucifixion of the Righteous One.

Such was the Holy Spirit's testimony against these self-righteous ones. Such the breaking up of all their arguments! A quiet statement of undeniable facts given of God, scattered all their objections of confidence. The effect of the speech is strikingly given: more so in the original, than in the translation.

54. "Now while they were hearing these things they were being sawn through in their hearts, and gnashed their teeth at him."

They refused to accept the testimony. Hence they were troubled by the truth. It could not be denied. It was stronger than their hearts. They might resist like wood; but the truth was strong as iron, sharp with many teeth like the saw. Each statement was a new point to pierce them. It was delivered with power of the Holy Ghost. They would not yield. But they displayed their hatred of the truth, by rage. They were like the damned themselves. "Gnashing of teeth" is one of the characteristics of the lost. Here the transgressors gnash their teeth at the inspired of the Holy Ghost, the man who was righteous through faith. For so it was written. "The wicked plotteth against the righteous, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him, for he seeth that his day is coming:*" "Psa. 37: 12, 13; 112: 10; 35: 16.

[* That is, the unrighteous acted wickedly against Stephen - the righteous one. Those who imply like behaviour could only from the unconverted need to think again: "Put away the wicked man from among yourselves . . ." (1 Cor. 5: 13).- Ed.]

The Lord's messenger was hated with a malice that could not restrain even its visible expression. This shows how completely the whole speech told against their feelings and their arguments.

They lacked but one more point.

"But he being full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'Behold, I contemplate the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' "

He had proved the argument, that God was not bound to any place on earth. He had adduced the testimony of Moses, that there was a better sanctuary of God, than the one of man's building on earth. He had cited from the prophet a proof, that in this dispensation, God is not dwelling in temples made by hands upon earth. But now he is further to be made an eye-witness of the true temple, and of the glory of God in heaven. There he beholds the Jesus whom they rejected, stationed in the place of the highest honour with God, neither Moses nor Elijah being seen there.

The speech had showed, that despite their condemnation of Jesus, He might have gone up into the heaven. But now Stephen, his eyes opened by the Spirit of God, can testify - 'He is in heaven, I see Him.'

He calls Jesus "the Son of Man." This is His title in Dan. 7: 13, 14. It was of Him, then, that Daniel spoke, as the Ruler of all the earth. That is the title of the Governor of all things in heaven and earth, (Psa. 8,) in the promised day of glory.

This was not to be endured. Like the deaf adder, they stop their ears; refusing to listen to the truth: Psa. 58: 4. They rush on him with feet swift to shed blood. They cast stones, and in this way many could take part in his death.

They cast him out of the city, as they did our Lord: for the disciple that is perfect shall be as his Master.

He prays to Jesus, as the Saviour when departing prayed to His Father - "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The Redeemer, then, is 'the Lord' of Psalm 110. The Father hath made the rejected Jesus both Lord and Christ. Stephen, therefore, owns him as Adonai, or 'Lord.' 'Lord Jesus.' 'Lord lay not this sin to their charge.' The old High Priest is against him, but the new High Priest in heaven is on his side; a Divine Help. With the blood of the new covenant is come a new spirit also, far beyond that of the old. When the Spirit of God inspired the son of Jehoiada to testify against the idolatry of Israel - "They conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king, in the court of the house of the Lord." And when he died, he said, "THE LORD LOOK UPON IT, AND REQUITE IT!" 2 Chron. 24: 18-22. Accordingly, the same year, enemies entered into the land, spoiled it, and slew the princes of the people; while the murderous king was conspired against, and slain by his own servants.

In the present martyr's case, earth closed against the man of faith, the inspired by the Spirit of Christ. But heaven opened to him, and in the vision of the glories there, he can overlook the storm of earth. Death to him is robbed of its sting. He only "falls asleep." At the first and blessed resurrection he shall reign with his Master.

From the whole argument, then, we see, that a new dispensation must arise in order to fulfil the promises made to the patriarchs, to Israel, and to the Church of Christ. For the time of the fulfilment of the hopes of the patriarchs has never yet arrived. They are waiting. The banquet cannot begin, till all the guests are assembled, and the King has set each in his true place: Matt. 22: 1-14. To us, if accepted by Christ, the higher place in the age that is coming, is to be assigned: Heb. 11: 39, 40.

Now is the time of God's patience, calling on an evil world to repent; calling to the men of faith to come out from the world, and to work and suffer for, and with, a rejected Christ. The kingdom of glory to come is set before us, as our comfort under trial for Christ, and as the reward and prize of our calling: Phil. 3. Soon "the days of vengeance" for the martyrs' blood will fall on the earth; and the watchful disciples will be caught out of the hour of temptation which is coming upon all the inhabitable earth, to test its dwellers, and to exhibit their sinfulness: Matt. 23; 24; Rev. 16. In that day the glory of Jesus will fill heaven and earth, and Israel shall mourn their blindness, and transgressions against Him. Then they that wrought for Christ and suffered with Him, shall with Him be exalted, and reign a thousand years: Rev. 20: 4-6.

Courage, then, Christians who suffer for Christ! The inferior seed of Abraham was left in bondage and trials four hundred years. What wonder, if the superior seed of Abraham's faith are called to suffer too, and for a longer period? It is not our calling to set the world right, and to find our portion here below, in this fleeting life. But we are to wait till the Redeemer comes, till the dead in Christ awake, and the Saviour dispenses His rewards to His faithful servants. May we meet in joy "IN THAT DAY"!