

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Were there Errors in Stephen's Message?**

by Dana L. Goodnough

Stephen was an outstanding and outspoken member of the early church and eventually became the church's first martyr. At his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Stephen presented his defense in the form of a lengthy review of God's dealings with His people in the Old Testament era (Acts 7:1-53). This masterful message, however, has come under critical attack. Several of Stephen's statements appear to contradict the Old Testament record. Were there errors in Stephen's message, or are there reasonable explanations for some of the difficulties his message contains?

### ***The Timing of Abraham's Call (Acts 7:2-4)***

Stephen stated that God called Abraham while Abraham was still living in the southern region of Mesopotamia called the land of the Chaldeans. Abraham then traveled north to Haran, where his father Terah died. The description in Genesis 11:26—12:1 seems, however, to indicate that Abraham received his call from God after Terah's death while Abraham was living in Haran. Furthermore, the chronological data in Genesis 11:26 says that Terah was 70 years old when he became the father of Abraham and his brothers and Genesis 11:32 says that Terah died at the age of 205. This would make Abraham 135 when he left

Haran, but Genesis 12:4 says that Abraham was only 75 when he left Haran. And Stephen plainly stated that Abraham did not leave Haran until after the death of his father.

However, Genesis 11:26 merely states that Terah was 70 years old when he began to have sons, and Abraham may well have been the youngest son. "Abraham was not Terah's oldest son, even though he was named first. It is far more likely that Haran was Terah's oldest, since he was the first to die (Genesis 11:28)."<sup>1</sup> If Terah was 130 when Abraham was born, then Terah would have died when Abraham was 75. Regarding the timing of God's call to Abraham, the New International Version translates Genesis 12:1, "The Lord *had* said to Abram . . ." (emphasis added), indicating that the call came earlier than Terah's death. God first spoke to Abraham while Abraham was living in Ur of the Chaldees.

### ***The Duration of the Egyptian Bondage (Acts 7:6)***

Stephen accurately quoted Genesis 15:13 where God warned Abraham that his descendants would be in bondage in Egypt for 400 years. However, Exodus 12:40 says that the Israelites lived in Egypt for 430 years. Harold W. Hoehner suggests that the 430 years refers to the time period between the last confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob before he entered Egypt, and the 400 years refers to the actual time of arrival of Jacob in Egypt until the Exodus. "Therefore, it seems that if one will take the 430 years as the period from the last recorded confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant to Israel (Jacob) before going into Egypt (Gen. 35:9-15) until the time of the Exodus, the 400 years would be that period of time when the nation Israel was in Egypt, that is, from the time when Jacob and his family entered Egypt (Gen. 46) until the Exodus."<sup>2</sup> According to this explanation, there is no real contradiction between Stephen's statement and the Old Testament record.

### ***The Size of Jacob's Family (Acts 7:14)***

In his message recounting Israel's history, Stephen says that Joseph sent for Jacob and the entire family to come to Egypt. The number of family members, according to Stephen, was 75.

But both Genesis 46:26-27 and Exodus 1:5 state that the family numbered 70 members.

Genesis 46:26-27 is the most specific of these references to the size of Jacob's family. This passage indicates that the total number of Jacob's direct descendants, excluding the wives of his sons and excluding Joseph and his sons who were already in Egypt, was 66. Adding Joseph, Joseph's two sons, and Jacob himself, the number of Israelites in Egypt totaled 70.

But the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, identifies 75 members of Jacob's family in Genesis 46:26-27. It does so by taking the original number of 66 descendants of Jacob, excluding Joseph, and identifying nine descendants of Joseph born in Egypt, making the total 75. "One of the most widely accepted solutions is to recognize that the Hebrew text includes Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (a total of 70), but that the Septuagint omits Jacob and Joseph but includes Joseph's seven grandchildren (mentioned in 1 Chron. 7:14-15, 20-25)."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, both totals accurately reflect the number of descendants of Jacob who were in Egypt. Stephen was not in error in quoting from the Septuagint.

### ***The Tomb of the Patriarchs (Acts 7:15-16)***

Stephen states that Jacob was buried with the other patriarchs in Shechem, in the tomb Abraham bought from the sons of Hamor. But Genesis 50:12-14 says that Jacob was buried in the family tomb at Machpelah (Hebron), which Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite (compare Genesis 23:17-20). Shechem was the place purchased by Jacob, and became the burial place of Joseph (Joshua 24:32-33). Everett F. Harrison suggests, "Possibly, in the rapidity of his summary of the patriarch's demise, Stephen ran together two events which were separated in time and place—the burial of Jacob in the Hebron area, and that of Joseph at Shechem."<sup>4</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint indicates that the phrase "their bodies" in Acts 7:16 points back, not to the burial of Jacob but to the burial of Joseph and his brothers.<sup>5</sup> Stephen was accurate in describing the burial of

Joseph as taking place at Shechem, and did not state where Jacob was buried.

But who purchased the burial ground at Shechem? According to Stephen, Abraham made the purchase. But Genesis 33:18-20 clearly states that Jacob purchased the plot of ground at Shechem. Toussaint resolves the problem as a vicarious act. Abraham purchased the field through his descendant, Jacob. "This may be explained by saying that Abraham in a sense did purchase the property in the person of his grandson. Abraham would be given title to Shechem through Jacob."<sup>6</sup> More satisfying is Gleason L. Archer's explanation. Archer says that Abraham may have made the purchase in his lifetime, and later Jacob repurchased the same land to clear up any questions regarding the proper title to the land: ". . . there is a good possibility that what Jacob did when he made that purchase was to obtain once again for his family that which had originally been bought by Abraham."<sup>7</sup>

Stephen's message was accurate. Though there appear to be discrepancies in some of his statements, these alleged discrepancies find ready, reasonable solutions. God's Word is reliable and accurate.

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<sup>1</sup> Archer, Gleason L. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> Hoehner, Harold W. "The Duration of the Egyptian Bondage." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October 1969, p.316.

<sup>3</sup> Toussaint, Stanley D. "Acts." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*. Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983, p. 370.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, Everett F. *Acts: The Expanding Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1975, p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> Toussaint, p. 370.

<sup>6</sup> Toussaint, p. 371.

<sup>7</sup> Archer, p. 379.

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