

Study 10: Problems in Acts chapter 7

Introduction

Chapter 7 deals with a potted history of Israel. However Stephen introduces many anomalies.

Whilst it doesn't it really matter whether 70 people or 75 people went to Egypt, the problem is that sceptics are everywhere. They will make the claim that "The Bible is full of errors", and therefore we can't trust anything that it says.

This study looks at Acts 7 (whilst we are here) that has numerous examples of apparent discrepancies. There are explanations when we dig a bit deeper, and the discrepancies should not cause us to lose our confidence in the integrity of God's word, nor to lose our faith!

Body of the Study

- 1 **(7:4) Abraham and Terah**

- 2 **(7:6) How long was the captivity in Egypt?**

- 3 **(7:14) How many of Jacob's family came to Egypt?**

- 4 **(7:16) Who was buried in Shechem?**

- 5 **(7:16) Who purchased Abraham's tomb?**

- 6 **(7:43) Quotation of Amos**

Conclusion

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How can we solve apparent difficulties in the Bible when we find them?*
- *Sometimes history books (such as Josephus, or Eusebius) contradict what the Bible says – what do we do then?*

- *Read Acts chapter 8 in preparation for next week's study*

Notes for study 10: Difficulties in Acts chapter 7

Introduction

Chapter 7 deals with a potted history of Israel. However Stephen introduces many anomalies. These apparent discrepancies do have explanations when we dig a bit deeper, and they should not cause us to lose our faith, nor our confidence in the integrity of God's word!

As we study the scriptures, it is not uncommon to find apparent discrepancies. There are many reasons for them. Some come from our mis-understanding of what is said, some from the different perspective of the writers, some from our insufficient understanding of God and His nature, some from a mis-understanding of our interpretation of the passage, and some from textual and translation errors.

In Acts 7, there is a "collection" of passages that have such apparent discrepancies. These serve to illustrate how – when we dig a bit deeper – there are plausible explanations for the supposed objections. Importantly, some of the deeper and difficult issues are not "faith shakers" which are of significant consequences to our knowledge of God, of Jesus the Messiah, or what we must do to inherit eternal life.

Body of the Study

1 (7:4) Abraham and Terah

AC 7:4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. (NIV)

GE 11:26 After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. (NIV)

GE 12:4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. (NIV)

The problem:

Based on the above two statements, we would conclude that Abraham's father Terah was 145 when he died (the 70 years until Abram was born plus the 75 years until Abram left Ur of the Chaldees after Terah had died). However the OT tells us differently:

GE 11:32 Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran. (NIV)

So, the accusation is made that Stephen plainly got it wrong, and that Abraham left before his father died.

The solution:

Gen 11:26 does NOT say that Terah was 70 years old when Abraham was born. It says that he was 70 years old before he had any sons! Abraham was by far the most important, and was named first – but that is not to say that he was born first. (c/f Gen 5:32 where Shem, Ham, and Japeth are mentioned as the three sons of Noah, but Japeth was the oldest, and Shem is the youngest (Gen 10:23)).

There is some evidence that Abraham was not the eldest, since Haran's son Lot was about the same age as him (based on their later associations).

The author of Genesis therefore gives the age of Terah at the birth of his eldest son, and at the same time mentions the other two sons.

Relying on Stephen then, we find that Abraham (at 75 years old) left Haran when his father died at the age of 205, making Terah 130 when Abraham was born.

There is therefore no evidence to accuse Stephen of making a mistake.

2 (7:6) How long was the captivity in Egypt?

^{AC 7:6} God spoke to him in this way: `Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. (NIV)

^{EX 12:40} Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. ⁴¹ At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD's divisions left Egypt. (NIV)

There is considerable evidence that the captivity was only 215 years:

1 Josephus: Antiquities 2:15:2

“They left Egypt in the month Xanthicus, on the fifteenth day of the lunar month; four hundred and thirty years after our forefather Abraham came into Canaan, but two hundred and fifteen years only after Jacob removed into Egypt...”

2 Paul (Gal 3:17)

Paul says that it was 430 years from the time that the promise was made to Abraham, until the Exodus and the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai – which is consistent with Josephus.

Isaac was born 25 years after the promise was made (Gen 12:4, 21:5)

Jacob was born when Isaac was 60 years old (Gen 24:26)

Jacob was 130 when he entered Egypt (Gen 47:9)

[25 + 60 + 130 = 215, making another 215 years in Egypt for a total of 430 years]

3 Early manuscripts

The Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The translation of Ex 12:40 reads “The Israelite people lived in Egypt and in the land of Canaan 430 years”.

The Vatican Codex, and the Alexandrian Codex (and others) support this.

The problem:

Stephen says that the captivity in Egypt lasted for 400 years. The other evidence says that it was only 215 years.

The solution:

^{GE 15:12} As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.

¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

God's promises to Abraham was that there would be a period of 400 years that his children would be enslaved and mistreated.

Stephen is simply quoting this passage. But that begs the question, as to why the disagreement from what Paul said.

The most likely answer is that Gen 15 spoke of an approximate period of 400 years, and Stephen merely quoted this time, whereas Paul spoke of the actual period of 430 years, 215 of which were in the Canaan, and 215 in Egypt.

3 (7:14) How many of Jacob's family came to Egypt?

^{AC 7:14} After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.

^{GE 46:26} All those who went to Egypt with Jacob--those who were his direct descendants, not counting his sons' wives--numbered sixty-six persons. ²⁷ With the two sons who had been born to Joseph in Egypt, the members of Jacob's family, which went to Egypt, were seventy in all.

The problem:

There is a clear discrepancy between the number of people who came to Egypt between that recorded in Genesis, and that recorded by Stephen.

The solution:

The simplest solution is that Stephen was of Greek origin, and the version of the scriptures that he was familiar with was the LXX. (Like when I preach, I often quote the King James Version, although I use the NIV and the NKJV when I read from the text – the KJV is what I grew up with, and have learned “in my head”).

The LXX at Gen 46 has “...*all of the souls of the house of Jacob who went with Jacob into Egypt, were 75 souls...*”

The extra five in the LXX include the names of two sons of Manasseh, two of Ephraim, and one grandson of Ephraim.

Josephus (Antiq 2:7:4) gives the number as 70, but Philo gives the number as 75.

The simple answer is that Stephen was quoting the LXX, which gives the number as 75, and he is exactly consistent with that text with which he was no doubt familiar. Both of these numbers are correct, as they are counted on a different basis.

4 (7:16) Who was buried in Shechem?

Acts 7: 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. ¹⁶ **Their bodies were brought back to Shechem** and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

GE 50:12 So Jacob's sons did as he had commanded them: ¹³ They **carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him** in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field. ¹⁴ After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father.

[Shechem was in central Palestine, Machpelah was in the area of Hebron, and was the highest town in Palestine and somewhat South of Jerusalem.]

The problem:

Stephen appears to say that Jacob was carried into Shechem and buried there, which is clearly in contradiction of the account in Genesis where he is said to be buried in the cave in Machpelah. Further, it is expressly stated in Joshua that *Joseph's* bones (not Jacob's) were carried out of Egypt with the exodus and buried in Shechem.

JOS 24:32 And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants.

The solution:

McGarvey¹ argues that the verb (7:16) “*were carried*” applies to “our fathers” and not to Jacob, and that there is no reference to Jacob being carried into Shechem. He argues that the proper punctuation of the sentence is “...*Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he died; and our fathers died, and were carried over into Shechem...*”

5 (7:16) Who purchased Abraham's tomb?

Acts 7: 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. ¹⁶ Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb **that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem** for a certain sum of money.



¹ McGarvey (2) p 121

GE 33:18 After **Jacob** came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. ¹⁹ For a hundred pieces of silver, **he bought from the sons of Hamor**, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent.

JOS 24:32 And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land **that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver** from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants.

The problem:

Stephen speaks of the tomb that **Abraham** had bought, which appears to be in conflict with the other passages that say **Jacob** (not Abraham) had purchased the plot of ground.

The solution:

One possible explanation is that Abraham first bought the land (Gen 12:6), and due to his nomadic nature, he lost the rights to it. Jacob bought it back many years later, and the land included the cave.

6 (7:43) Quotation of Amos

AC 7:43 You have lifted up the shrine of Molech
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.
Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

AM 5:26 You have lifted up the shrine of your king,
the pedestal of your idols,
the star of your god--
which you made for yourselves.

The problem:

Does Stephen misquote Amos? Where do the names of Molech and Rephan come from?

The solution:

The LXX reads almost the same as Acts 7, and Stephen quotes the Greek version of the old Testament that he was familiar with.

Conclusion

In each of these examples, we have been able to show that there is a rational explanation for something that looks like a discrepancy. None of these things are critical to our understanding of the message of the scriptures, and generally we should not “chase after” alleged fallacies and discrepancies, as to do so is mostly unprofitable.

It should be remembered that Stephen was appearing before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish scholars of the day. None of them argue with Stephen about the facts that he has presented. In fact, the only accusation that they make against Stephen is that he has accused them of killing Jesus, and as a consequence take him out and stone him.

On the other hand, we should have enough confidence in God's word to know and to trust that the things that it says are reliable, and that where apparent discrepancies appear there is always a logical explanation.

Sometimes people compare discrepancies between the bible and secular writers, and conclude that the bible got it wrong, rarely attributing the error to the secular writer. In many of these cases there is a discrepancy, but it is not the bible that is wrong!