

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 6

6:1-7

This is the first time we hear about any kind of dispute among the believers. It is over the treatment of the widows in one part of the community. In those days, before the Gospel was taken to the Gentiles and they became integrated into the community, the only believers were Jews by birth or conversion. But there were still two factions present—what they called Hellenistic Jews and native Jews. That either meant Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking Jews or culturally Greek and culturally Hebrew Jews.

This much we know for certain—the language and culture of Greece had a great influence on the civilized world, including the land of Judea and the city of Jerusalem. We see this in the story of Hanukkah where the threat of Hellenization being imposed by the Syrian Seleucid Greeks was opposed by the Maccabees. But in spite of the reforms brought about by the Maccabees, eventually much of the Jewish way of life became Hellenized, including the adoption of the Greek language. That was true in those days described in Acts.

It is also apparent that the Hebrew-speaking believers looked down on their Hellenized brothers and sisters in the Lord, perhaps considering them to be sell-outs who failed to remain pure in their observance of the Hebrew language and culture. So it seems that their widows did not receive the same care as the native Hebrews. And that is an expression of there being two classes of believers in the community, which was never consistent with the message of Yeshua, or even the Torah, which called for “one law” for the native and the alien alike (Num 15:29).

It is not stated directly here, but the context shows that the Apostles wanted to correct this improper situation. In fact, they may not even have been aware of the situation because they were preoccupied with all the things that we have been reading about up to this point. So they appointed seven men to take on the service of caring for these women. All seven of them have Greek names, so it is reasonable to conclude that they were from the Hellenized Jewish community. Their role is the precursor for the more formal office of deacon (meaning “servant”) that would later be defined and developed by Paul (1 Tim 3:8-13).

This passage teaches that there should not be different classes of people within the believing community, where some are considered to be more worthy of respect or care than others. We need to resist the temptation to classify one another as less worthy of God’s favor because we fail to meet a certain standard of religious or cultural compliance. Instead we need to find room for everyone, and then to engage in natural conversations about our differences and convictions, just like a family does. Unfortunately, our convictions have the potential of moving us to break down the unity we need in the body, as this passage attests.

- v. 7 – also shows that when godly wisdom and grace prevails in our relationships, powerful results will happen—the Word of God will spread, the believing community will grow, and even people you least expect to believe, like the *cohanim*/priests of that day, will turn to Yeshua in faith.

6:8-15

Stephen, one of the seven men appointed to care for the widows, was doing a great work for the Lord. And he was opposed by a group of Jews who were associated with what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (KJV – Libertines). In those days people tended to gather for worship with people that they shared some kind of commonality, much like today. The term “freedmen” means people who were once slaves. It is likely a reference to Jews who were taken as slaves by the Romans led by Pompey in 63 BC when they gained control of Jerusalem (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 23). Those Jews were later released from slavery in Rome and they or their descendants made their way back to Jerusalem where they founded this synagogue. So they were substantially Hellenized and in this synagogue they were joined by other Jews from cities in the diaspora—Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia—all of which were Greek-speaking communities.

In spite of their Hellenistic orientation, their zeal for what they believed was no different from than that of the Sadducees and Pharisees. In this case they took out their aggression in defending their beliefs on Stephen. Like them, he was a Hellenized Jew. He may even have been a member of their synagogue at one time. Regardless, he was seen as a traitor. So they took him to appear before the Sanhedrin.

False witnesses testified that Stephen spoke in support of Yeshua’s statements that they considered to be blasphemous. The first charge was that Yeshua threatened to destroy the temple, which He never got a chance to do because they had Him killed. It is clear that Yeshua made statements that were reinterpreted into that kind of threat. He predicted that the temple would be destroyed (Mat 24:2). But that was not a threat of His own actions, it was a prophecy of what would come later at the hands of the Romans. He also used the word “temple” in a metaphorical manner, referring to His death and resurrection, but His audience misinterpreted it as a reference to the physical temple (Jn 2:19-21).

This issue informs us today that the things spoken to non-believers regarding spiritual issues will often be misinterpreted. So we need to be clear in how we communicate. But even so, many people will simply not understand because they do not want to understand, and they will intentionally twist our words.

The second charge was that Yeshua spoke against the Torah. But at no time did Yeshua ever contradict any aspect of the Torah as it was given by Moses. Without question it is true that He was highly critical of the burdensome additions and distortions of the Torah that the elders of Israel had created over the centuries. So if that was a capital offense in that society, His execution would be legally allowed. But legal does not mean just or godly. As the Apostles declared, “We must obey God rather than men.” In reality the society and its laws had become corrupted, and the testimony was based on lies. So that is an indicator that evil was dominating, even in a supposed religious setting.

Ironically many Christians today have adopted this hostile position and would agree that Yeshua spoke against the Torah. And if they hold Messianic believers guilty for living and worshiping in this manner, to be consistent, they need to hold Yeshua guilty as well. Ultimately, this battle is not over the pure Word of God, but about the words of men who have assumed unwarranted authority for themselves.

Lastly, it is important to note the distinction between the way that two very different groups addressed a similar issue. In the first part of this chapter a dispute involving Hellenized Jews was resolved graciously and peacefully. In the last part of the chapter, a dispute involving

Hellenized Jews produced lies and, as the subsequent chapters will show, a most tragic outcome. The former was guided by the Spirit of God, and the latter was guided by the religion of men.