

“And he said: The Lord has come from Sina and appeared to us from Seir and hasted from Mount Pharan with myriads of Kades; at his right, angels with him [*ek dexiōn autou angeloi met’ autou, ἐκ δεξιῶν αὐτοῦ ἄγγελοι μετ’ αὐτοῦ*]” (NETS).

Of course, that angels would be present with the Lord at the giving of the Torah to Moses, as Divine functionaries, is hardly surprising. The presence of a singular angel or messenger, as is seen in Acts 7, should indicate to readers how further investigation into the identity of this figure in the Torah and Tanach, is warranted. While there are commentators of the Book of Acts who have indicated doubts about the *malakh YHWH* or the “messenger/angel of the LORD” being a pre-Incarnate manifestation of Yeshua the Messiah,²²⁸ there are surely others who would take Stephen’s defense as a prompt that further review of the Tanach record is needed.

Acts 7:54-60

“Stephen Sees the Son of Man in Heaven”

“Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Yeshua standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, ‘Lord Yeshua, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep.”

The Sanhedrin was not receptive to the defense or apology offered by Stephen, because of his professed faith in Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel. Much of what is seen in Stephen’s testimony, recalling the history of Ancient Israel and a pattern of widescale rebellion and obstinance against God (Acts 7:39-53), was not received well by those listening on. *If the ancestors of the current generation rejected and killed many of the Prophets who were sent to them—then it is hardly a surprise why Yeshua the Messiah was killed as well.* Luke’s narrative indicates, “On hearing these things, they were cut to their hearts and ground their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54, CJB/CJSB), as Stephen’s speech definitely worked in revealing their spiritual shortcomings.

Immediately, it is recorded how “Stephen, full of the *Ruach ha-Kodesh*, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God—and *Yeshua* standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55, TLV). Stephen’s perception changes from this corporeal dimension, to that of Heaven. And so Stephen declares, “Look!...I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56, CJB/CJSB). The response of a crowd that had gathered against him is one of total revulsion: “But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him” (Acts 7:57, NRSV). As defined by *BDAG*, the verb *hormaō* (ὁρμάω) means, “**to make a rapid movement from one place to another, rush (headlong).**”²²⁹ This was an impulsive action, and not one which was guided by any sort of reason, legal deliberation, or measured jurisprudence. While Stephen delivered an impassioned message before the Sanhedrin in defense of his beliefs, the mob has now taken over.

Luke records how they “threw him outside the city and began stoning him. And the witnesses laid down their coats at the feet of a young man named Sha’ul” (Acts 7:58, CJB/CJSB). Why was the crowd stoning Stephen? Because they obviously considered him guilty of some

²²⁸ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 376.

²²⁹ *BDAG*, 724.

The Nature of Yeshua in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

kind of blasphemy against the God of Israel. As specified in Leviticus 24:14, “Bring the one who has cursed outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; then let all the congregation stone him.” This figure named Saul, who we know from future reading has a dynamic encounter with Yeshua on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), was approving of Stephen’s mob execution. It is detailed, however, “They went on stoning Stephen as he was calling out, ‘Lord Yeshua, receive my spirit!’” (Acts 7:59, TLV). Having seen Yeshua exalted in Heaven, Stephen was now preparing to depart this Earth to join his Lord.²³⁰ And in a manner similar to his Master, as He was being humiliated, Stephen said, “Lord! Don’t hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60, CJB/CJSB; cf. Luke 23:34).

Why was this tumultuous crowd—which obviously disagreed with the conclusions of Stephen’s defense—permitted to just stone him, mercilessly in cold blood? Unlike the trial of Yeshua before the Sanhedrin, where not only a definitive judgment of execution was declared—but even Roman approval for an execution was given—Stephen’s words inflamed the mob, and they went out and murdered him. Certainly, Stephen’s claims that the killing of Yeshua was the culmination of a repetitive pattern witnessed throughout the Tanach, of important figures and prophets being rejected and killed, would be bad enough. The claim that Stephen’s Jewish contemporaries did not keep the Torah or Law they had received, would also have been considered insulting. *But these are the kinds of things any reforming person in Second Temple Judaism would have said in railing against the proverbial “system.”*

It is at Stephen’s declaration, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56), that the mob is then compelled to stone him to death. Stephen has employed concepts from Psalm 110:1-2 and Daniel 7:13-14 (both discussed previously), affirming the supremacy of Yeshua, where He sits at the right hand and shares the same authority as, the One God of Israel. In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Darrell L. Bock observes how “The remarks send the crowd into a frenzy. When Stephen declares that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, he is stoned for blasphemy because, in the view of these Jews, no one has the right to be at the side of God’s heavenly presence.”²³¹

Eckhard J. Schnabel details in his commentary, “Jesus is the messianic Son of Man, the exalted figure of Daniel’s prophecy (Dan 7:13-14) ‘standing’ at the right hand of God (vv. 55e, 56e). The expression ‘Son of Man’ (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου [*ho huios tou anthrōpou*]), frequent in the Gospels as a self-designation of Jesus, occurs only here in Acts. The sayings about the earthly activity of the Son of Man in the Gospels emphasize Jesus’ claim to full authority and majesty.”²³² Noting how the crowd covered their ears (Acts 7:57), Schnabel further adds, “The fact that they cover their ears suggests that in their view a blasphemy has been uttered, for to them no human being has the right to share the glory of God at God’s right hand.”²³³

Why was Stephen stoned to death when he associated Yeshua as being the Lord who sat at the right hand of the LORD (YHWH), and being the Son of Man who is given supreme power by the Ancient of Days? *Notice that the crowd did not give Stephen any time to explain himself, nor did the crowd simply dismiss Stephen as being misguided, crazy, or mad.* Much of what is communicated in Acts 7, and in how many of Stephen’s Jewish contemporaries reacted to the presence of Yeshua of Nazareth, would have been considered insulting enough; but to claim that Yeshua shared the same power and authority as the One God of Israel, being set alongside Him, was to them a blasphemy deserving of death. The crowd which stoned Stephen recognized his claims

²³⁰ Consult the examination on Acts 7:56-60 in the author’s publication *To Be Absent From the Body*.

²³¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 312.

²³² Schnabel, 389.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 390.

of Yeshua as affirming of a being integrated into the Divine Identity, as Yeshua was regarded as being far, far more than a created supernatural force of God.

Acts 9:1-6

“Saul Encounters Yeshua on the Damascus Road”

“Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Yeshua whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.’”

Many Bible readers are surely familiar with the supernatural encounter of Saul, the enemy of the Believers, with the Living Yeshua on the road to Damascus, and the complete turnaround that he experienced. The great travesty of Saul’s activities, in persecuting the Believers, is not just seen in him condemning many of them to blasphemy—but also how Saul, as a Pharisaical zealot (Galatians 1:14), sought support from the Saddusaical high priest, for religious-political approval to condemn the Messiah followers (Acts 9:1). And if this were not enough, not being content in searching out for the Believers in the environs of Jerusalem and Judea, Saul expanded his vendetta to the Jewish community in Damascus (Acts 9:2).

We all know the narrative quite well, “As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him” (Acts 9:3, NIV). From Saul’s vantage point, he was surely experiencing powers beyond his terrestrial control. As Luke narrates, “And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him...” (Acts 9:4a, RSV). Here, the verb used to describe Saul’s action is *piptō* (πίπτω), “to fall, fall down” (LS),²³⁴ and while it can be used in various instances of veneration,²³⁵ here the reaction was probably one of fearing the unknown. The voice speaks out, “Sha’ul! Sha’ul! Why do you keep persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4b, CJB/CJSB).

The response as seen in most English versions is, “Who are You, Lord?” (Acts 9:5a, TLV), the source text having *tis ei? Kurie* (τίς εἶ, κύριε). Not all versions render the title *Kurios* (κύριος) by the proper “Lord,” though, with some having the lowercase “lord” (NLT), and others either “Master” (The Message) or “sir” (CJB/CJSB, New American Bible). While these latter three renderings are not lexically incorrect—as the title *Kurios* can indeed mean either “Master” or “sir”—once Saul came to a fuller understanding of who was speaking to him (cf. Acts 9:20, 22), did he simply consider this Yeshua to have been just another one to be extended the courtesy of being called “sir”?

While there tends to be no discussion on this among Acts commentaries, the source text, of Yeshua’s self-identification to Saul in Acts 9:5b, bears something important: *egō eimi Iēsous hon su diōkeis* (ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις).²³⁶ It would have been entirely normal for Luke to have simply written *egō Iēsous* as a part of Yeshua’s self-identification. In Stephen’s dialogue in Acts 7:32 preceding, where he quotes from Exodus 3:6, “I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS” (Acts 7:32), the source text only says *egō ho Theos tōn paterōn sou* (ἐγώ ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων σου), whereas the

²³⁴ LS, 641.

²³⁵ One definition available is indeed, “fall down, throw oneself to the ground as a sign of devotion or humility, before high-ranking persons or divine beings, esp. when one approaches w. a petition” (BDAG, 815).

²³⁶ This also appears in the paralleling records of Acts 22:8, *egō eimi Iēsous ho Nazōraios* (ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος), “I AM Yeshua of Nazareth” (PME), and Acts 26:15, *egō eimi Iēsous hon su diōkeis* (ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις), “I AM Yeshua whom You are persecuting” (PME).